

THEORETICAL STUDIES

Research Article

<https://doi.org/10.11621/LPJ-24-42>

UDC 159.9

Bridges or Walls: Remarks on Translating the Concepts of Cultural-historical Theory¹

Elizabeth Tunes¹, Zoia Ribeiro Prestes² ✉

¹ University of Brasilia, Brasilia, Brazil

² Fluminense Federal University, Niteroy, Brazil

✉ zoiaprestes@yahoo.com.br

Abstract

Background. The problem of translating scientific articles into other languages affects not only translators but also psychologists, since the accuracy of translation determines the adequacy of understanding and transferring of scientific concepts.

Objectives. The article focuses on the critical discussion of different variants in translating some concepts of L.S. Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory into Portuguese.

Study Materials. This article discusses the concepts of the “zona blijaichego razvitia”, “learning”, and “speech”.

Results. The paper considers variations in the translations of L.S. Vygotsky's concept of the cultural-historical theory into Portuguese. Insufficient attention of translators to the theoretical and methodological foundations of the original scientific text, which generates substantive errors in translation and distorts (simplifies) the content of the original approach, is critically discussed.

Conclusions. Both literary and scientific translation should be understood as an unfinished process that requires constant revision and improvement. The philosophical, ethical and historical ideas of the translated author should be the basis for this. Only in this case will translation contribute to the communication and connection of people speaking different languages.

Keywords: zona blijaichego razvitia, cultural-historical approach, learning, translation, speech

¹ This article was published in Portuguese in the Journal Revista Educativa. Reference: Prestes, Z.R., Tunes, E. (2022). Pontes ou Muralhas: Exame Crítico de Traduções de Conceitos da Teoria Histórico-cultural. *Revista Educativa — Revista de Educação*, 25(1), 19 páginas. <https://doi.org/10.18224/educ.v25i1.12439>



For citation: Tunes, E., Prestes, Z. (2024). Bridges or walls: remarks on translating the concepts of cultural-historical theory. *Lomonosov Psychology Journal*, 47(4), 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.11621/LPJ-24-42>

Introduction

Translating scientific texts involves great responsibility and gives rise to various difficulties, which can make this process almost impossible. Social, historical, linguistic and other cultural features inevitably influence the translator, predetermining choices in transferring concepts and translating terms. In this regard, the words chosen for translation and their meanings in the language reflect the way of thinking and cultural characteristics of both the translator and the country of origin. This inevitable circumstance gives rise to inaccuracies in the transmission of meanings and content of concepts, facts and scientific theories. It can be said that translation is “a way of thinking that explores the everyday processes of one language; ... to translate means to compete with the untranslatable, ... to create equivalents of communication..., to jump over abysses; to understand that there are different ways to say something; to give the opportunity to expand the horizons of one’s own language, ... it is a reflection, an internalisation of someone else’s thinking in search of a way to say something in a different way, to return to communication with an approximate solution. In general, translation is a reflexive activity” (Oliveira, 2017, p. 48).

This article critically discusses translations of concepts used in the works of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky into Portuguese. We assume that some terms of the cultural-historical approach, when translated, become a reflection of a specific Western way of thinking, the foundations of which do not fully correspond to those that L.S. Vygotsky had in mind when developing the cultural-historical theory. The following concepts were chosen for analysis: “zona blijaichego razvitiya”, “learning” and “speech”. The article also discusses the widely held view that Vygotsky understands the function of the teacher as a mediator. The popularity of this interpretation may be due to the fact that the main task of the teacher seems to be the organisation of sign-based mediation. This approach distorts Vygotsky’s understanding of the role of the teacher and knowledge in the relationship between learning and development.

On the possibility and legitimacy of translation

Let us start this section with a quote from Vilém Flusser: “Society is the basis of reality <...>, a person is real only as a member of society <...>,”

intelligence is not real, it is real only in the process of thinking in any language” (Flusser, 2004, p. 25).

In the search for order, man transforms the world from chaos into cosmos. As Vilém Flusser puts it, this act is realised through language. In his opinion, there is a structural identity between language and the cosmos: most of the information that our intellect has, the original raw material of our thinking, is words: “The intellect *sensu stricto* (in the strict sense) is a weaver that uses words as threads. The intellect *sensu lato* (in the broad sense) has an antechamber where they work and transform raw cotton (data of meaning) into threads (words). But a large amount of raw material is already ready in the form of threads” (ibid., p. 40).

According to this author, words are the product of thinking, and thinking itself is realised only in words, in communication, which transforms chaos into cosmos: “Thinking in a conversation preserves and increases the territory of reality. By being realised, it realises itself” (ibid., p. 50). Thus, we can say that the intellect held captive by language. If the realisation of intelligence is conditioned by its embodiment in language, then we are forced to conclude that there are as many ways of realising intelligence as there are languages. These statements are followed by important reflections on translation and scientific knowledge. In this regard, several key aspects that relevant to the central issues of this article are noted below.

The first question that arises regarding the translation is: is it legitimate in principle? If we take as a starting point Flusser’s position that every system of thought is the result of the language in which it was formulated, then, when translated into another language, words and concepts automatically acquire a meaning different from the original and from what the author intended. In this case, we would have to admit that the translation is not legitimate, and that there are as many sciences about the same thing as there are languages into which the original scientific ideas are translated. In other words, the world would become a huge Tower of Babel made up of small autochthonous worlds that do not communicate with one another. However, Flusser offers a solution to this problem.

By comparing Portuguese, German and English, that is, three languages with an inflectional structure and therefore “constituting the resulting discourse in Western civilization” (ibid., p. 128), Flusser demonstrated that, even with differences in words, concepts, norms and types, phrases in these languages are composed of words that are relatively fixed, inflected and hierarchically organised. In this way, words that differ between two languages can be compared, ensuring the possibility of translation and transition from one language to another. This led to the beginning of Western civilization.

At the same time, this possibility indicates the existence of another cosmos, corresponding to the individual structure of each language.

Each language is its own special world, different from any other language. Moreover, each language includes all other languages through translation. The intellect, realised in translation from one language to another, perceives, understands and articulates the specific reality of its language. Thus, translation makes existence in different realities possible (*ibid.*).

Speaking about the significance and value of the art of translation, we agree with the words of Bernardo in the preface to the already cited work of Flusser: “Translation, forcing the language to submit and accompany the bends of foreign thought, is probably the most refined method of spiritual communication between nations” (Bernardo, 2004, p. 15).

Thus, despite the fact that a language is an integral system, it is not a closed system. This allows different worlds to exchange information. Therefore, translation is an opportunity (Flusser, 2004). But is it legitimate? The examples analysed by Flusser suggest that translation is only approximately legitimate, and that this legitimacy is a function of the degree of relatedness between languages: the lower the degree of relatedness, the less legitimate the translation will be.

There are many positives that come from translation. During translation, the intellect is momentarily freed from the “captivity” of language and is quickly introduced into the “body” of another language, thus being born again. Translation is the constant death and resurrection of the intellect. We believe that languages are “open systems that intersect with great ease” (Flusser, 2004, p. 60).

On the psychological sciences and translation

If, as previously mentioned, when translated from one language into another, phrases acquire a meaning different from the original, since the translation is only a legitimate approximation, then there are as many sciences about the same subject matter as there are languages into which the original scientific wording can be translated. However, as Flusser points out, this does not happen, since the results obtained in scientific research are reliable in all languages. This happens because science itself is a language, albeit a fairly new one that has not yet been fully formed. Due to this incompleteness, there is a need for continuous translation from one scientific language into Portuguese, English, French and other languages. Despite the debatability of this approach, we accept Flusser’s position as a premise, continuing our reflections in accordance with the purpose of this article.

The incompleteness Flusser speaks of is the incompleteness of the language of science as we have known it since the Renaissance. It is most evident in psychology, the blossoming of which as a field of scientific knowledge has only recently occurred. Psychology is the last discipline to separate from philosophy. Has this happened adequately? Or, rather, as with the Portuguese language in the words of this poet?

Last flower of Latium, wild, uncultured, fair,
You are, at once, both splendor and the grave:
Pure gold, the gangue's impurities don't bare
A mine that 's veiled 'mid rocks and graveled.

I love you thus, unknown, obscure and hidden,
A blaring trumpet, lyre of guilelessness,
Whose fury's like the sea that's tempest ridden,
Whose lullabies are love and tenderness!

I love your lush green woods and perfume wrung,
From virgin jungles and expansive sea!
I love you, rude and sorrowful native tongue,

In which my mother said: "dear son of mine!"
In which Camões bemoaned, grieved exile he,
His luckless genius and love's tarnished shine!²

Any comparison has its limitations. Of course, it cannot be said that psychology "ruined" philosophy. Philosophy is not dead but is often ignored by its youngest daughter. In an important text written in 1927, L.S. Vygotsky drew attention to this neglect in the epigraph by quoting a phrase from the Gospel of Matthew: "The stone that the builders despised has become the cornerstone..." (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 291). In the very first paragraph, he highlights the curious fact that it was not philosophers or theorists who worried about the lack of foundations constituting the unity of psychological science, but rather practitioners involved in applied psychology. Vygotsky writes: "Further progress in a straight line, simple continuation of the same work, gradual accumulation of material turn out to be fruitless or even impossible. To go further, you need to outline the path" (*ibid.*, p. 292). A little further he adds, based on K. Marx: "Having the

² Olavo Bilac, "The Portuguese Language", translated into English by William, Frederic G.

end of the path, one can most easily understand both the entire path as a whole and the meaning of the individual stages” (ibid., p. 295).

Defending the unity of psychological science, Vygotsky paid great attention to its foundations and methods, including the issues of creating a unified conceptual apparatus of psychology or, as Flusser would say, its language. Vygotsky understood that the system of concepts in psychology should be based on clear principles and specific empirical methods, as in biology, chemistry and physics. At the same time, this task should not be solved in a formal way; it is necessary to decide on the method, which for Vygotsky consisted in a cultural-historical approach to the study of psychological reality: “From here, as a politician derives from the analysis of events, a rule for action, for organising scientific research, a methodological research that makes use of the historical consideration of specific forms of science and the theoretical analysis of these forms in order to arrive at generalised, tested and suitable principles for guidance — such, in our opinion, is the grain of that general psychology, the concept of which we are trying to clarify in this chapter” (ibid., p. 296).

At the time of Vygotsky’s writing, psychology as a science was just beginning to define itself among the abundance of different schools and directions, often incompatible with one another. Based on a historical study of the principles and methods of the main trends in psychology, developing critical and comparative analysis, Vygotsky established some important foundations and provisions that formed the basis of his theory. He strove for unity in psychology and looked for a way to unite various directions so that psychology would become an independent direction of scientific knowledge, and the term “psychology” itself could be used without the adjective “scientific”. In this regard, using the term “scientific psychology” is as meaningless as calling biology Darwinian.

It is also incorrect, according to Vygotsky, to call psychology Marxist, for example. This is almost the same as if a historian refers to Russian history as the “Marxist history of Russia”. As Vygotsky wrote: “Marxist psychology is not a school among schools, but the only true psychology as a science; there cannot be any psychology other than this. And vice versa: everything that has existed in truly scientific psychology is included in Marxist psychology: this concept is broader than the concept of a school or even an approach. It coincides with the concept of scientific psychology in general, no matter where and by whom it is being developed. <...> After all, “psychology” is the name of a science, and not of a theatrical play or a movie. It can only be scientific. No one would think of calling a description of the sky in a novel astronomy; the term “psychology” is just as ill-suited

to describe Raskolnikov's thoughts and Lady Macbeth's delirium. Everything that does not scientifically describe psyche is not psychology, but something else: advertising, reviews, chronicles, fiction, lyrics, philosophy, philistinism, gossip and a thousand other things" (ibid., p. 435).

L.S. Vygotsky wanted to contribute to the formation of scientific psychology and establish clear differences between science and non-science; psychology and non-psychology. He did not strive to create a new psychological school, believing that the creation of a real scientific psychology would be a task of many years. Therefore, he admitted that the psychology he was talking about did not yet exist and was only beginning to manifest itself on the verge of the new society, since its development was impossible in the old society. For Vygotsky, it is impossible to reveal truth about the individual and personality without revealing truth about society. Only in a new society can psychology take a central place: "The leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom will inevitably raise the question of mastering our own being, of subordinating it to ourselves. In this sense, Pavlov is right in calling our science the last science about man himself. It will indeed be the last science in the historical period of mankind or in the prehistory of mankind. A new society will create a new person" (ibid., p. 436).

Thus, by analogy with the last flower of Lazio, psychology will become the tomb not of philosophy, but of history. This was Vygotsky's prediction. Almost a hundred years later, this remains a desirable prediction. Psychology is still mentioned in the plural and in combination with many adjectives. The mere fact that Vygotsky's psychology itself is called cultural-historical is an illustration of this. Thus, to this day psychology exists only in the plural; its unification has not yet occurred. Strictly speaking, in Vygotsky's terminology, it has not yet turned into a science *stricto*.³ Will this ever happen? One fact is certain: if Vygotsky's predictions are correct, this will only be possible in a new society. Interestingly, this perspective makes Vygotsky's theoretical proposals at least a century ahead of their time. This is a theory of the future. But will this future arrive? There is at least evidence of the desire for it. The powerful and broad spread of Vygotsky's theory is one of them; it is no coincidence that it has been widely distorted.

Since this theory became widespread in the western part of the world, it has undergone reconstructions and distortions that, at times, turn it into a pale memory of what it used to be in the works of its author. There are many ways to distort it, for example, through comparing its concepts with the

³ *Sensu stricto* (lat.) — in the strict sense.

concepts of other theories, finding connections where there are impassable abysses. However, the most powerful, easiest and fastest way to weaken and make it equal in importance to other theories is through mistranslation.

When L. S. Vygotsky's core concepts are translated, they are often taken from different contexts with a new language being imposed on them. As a result, most often, the translated concept differs very significantly from the one formulated in the original language. This happens for various reasons, most of which are not realised by the translator, so it is not a case of deliberate distortion. Haste, poor understanding of the theory and of its philosophical and methodological foundations, and shallow study of the theory most commonly underlie poor translations.

As for the works of L.S. Vygotsky, additional difficulties are created by the specifics of the Russian language in which they are written. It is certainly more complex than other languages such as Spanish, English, French, Italian, etc. In addition, few translators speak Russian as a second language. An additional difficulty is created by the fact that foreign readers still do not have access to the complete works of L. S. Vygotsky, which could facilitate a more in-depth study, understanding and interpretation of his ideas. However, none of this can serve as an excuse for persistent translation errors. They must be corrected immediately upon discovery, since the longer and more repeatedly they occur, the more vulnerable the author's theory becomes. The likelihood of introducing strange ideas that are incompatible with the author's thoughts increases.

Translating means taking risks. However, running the risks should not hamper the initiative to translate scientific texts. The translator should be aware of the risks and be prepared to admit and correct mistakes. As Flusser puts it, translation implies the suppression of one's self at least at a short moment of transition from one language to another. Translation requires an ethical compromise between the translator and the author of the translated text (Prestes, 2021).

There are huge differences between translators who build bridges and translators who build walls. The first type of translator is always in search of the foundations to the construction of a scientific theory, trying to create conditions for possible and genuine spiritual communication between the author and the reader in the foreign language. The second type of translator neglects the basic concepts, ignores them and, as a result, builds walls that make it impossible or at least significantly difficult to achieve this much desired and saving communication.

Some examples of the "bridges" the authors of this article have been trying to build when translating important concepts of L.S. Vygotsky's

theory starting from the beginning of the first decade of this century are given below.

“Zona blijaichego razvitia”: time and development

The theory developed by L.S. Vygotsky has already had several different names. In his scientific autobiography “Stages of the Path Traveled,” A.R. Luria states: “L.S. Vygotsky liked to call his theory “instrumental,” “cultural,” or “historical” psychology. Each of these terms reflected different features of the new approach to psychology he proposed. Each of them emphasised different sources of the general mechanism by which society and its history create the structure of those forms of activity that distinguish man from animal” (Luria, 2001, p. 31).

In 2003, a version of the preface to A. N. Leontiev’s book “The Development of Memory” written by Vygotsky became accessible. In it, Vygotsky gives the name of the theory that he began to develop: “The main idea of this book and at the same time the main idea of all research, in the series of which it acquires its true meaning and significance, is the recognition of the *historical* development of human personality and its *psychological* functions. In essence, the so-called theory of historical (or cultural-historical) development in psychology means the theory of *higher psychological functions* (logical memory, voluntary attention, verbal thinking, volitional processes, etc.) — *no more and no less*” (Vygotsky, 2003, p. 200, emphasis added).

Thus, both authors make it clear that history and culture are the basic and defining concepts of L.S. Vygotsky’s theory. This has important implications for the discussion of the concept of the “zona blijaichego razvitia”, a term that became widely known among teachers when translated into Portuguese as “zona de desenvolvimento proximal”. Teachers understand this concept as doing something together with students, so that later they can do it independently.

Did Vygotsky really put so much effort in developing a theoretical concept that became so simple in this definition? During his short life, L.S. Vygotsky carried out extensive intellectual work on the understanding of the relationship between human activity and development. What did the author want to emphasize using the term “proximal”? Does the word “proximal” translated in Portuguese convey the meaning that was most important for the author with scientific accuracy?

Vygotsky was a man of his time and continues to challenge the scientific community with his ideas to this day. It is not surprising that in the turbulent years following the October Revolution, he devoted himself to

educational issues, conducting research in the field of human development, presenting original and unprecedented findings that contrasted with Western theoretical findings of the time. His main task was, on the basis of dialectical and historical materialism, to explore and understand the social nature of higher, purely human, mental functions and to reject, first of all, views based on biological determinism.

In this sense, the results of research conducted by Vygotsky in the field of child development in accordance with the theoretical and methodological principles necessary for science can contribute to the organisation of the social situation of development in the learning process. The concept of the “zona blijaichego razvitia” has enormous weight, especially because it emphasises the category of time.

In various works published over 10 years ago, the authors of the current article have attempted to analyse and discuss this concept, criticising the choice of terms made by some translators (Prestes, 2021). Since we are talking about scientific constructs, and, as already mentioned, accuracy in translating concepts is extremely important, our criticism is not based on personal preferences and certainly not on the desire to compete with the popularity of the options chosen by translators of Vygotsky’s works into Portuguese. The defense of translating the concept of “zona blijaichego razvitia” into Portuguese as “zona de desenvolvimento iminente⁴” (not proximal or imediato, which means “immediate”) is based on the understanding that development for Vygotsky is the possibility of the emergence of something new through cooperation and social connections established between people in the process of activity. In other words, it is not enough to do something together to do it autonomously later.

For the formation and individual development of higher mental functions that can transform human behavior, it is necessary to establish communication, a genuine dialogue with another, to understand his way of acting and thinking. After all, the transfer of behaviour patterns to the internal individual level does not occur mechanically or automatically. Rather, it is associated with changes in the structure and functioning of the entire developmental process, which is represented as a certain stage of higher forms of behaviour (Vygotsky, 1984). The “zona blijaichego razvitia” means the possibility of an extremely important psychological process: mastering cultural ways of one’s own behaviour in collaboration with other people (in collective activities), which can give rise to a new, much more complex psychological system. These are new formations that

⁴ iminente (port.) — imminent, impending.

become the “property” of a person, his personality and “turn into social means of behaviour applied to himself” (ibid., p. 71).

The words proximal or close, although they carry some sense of temporal proximity, easily lead to an understanding of spatial proximity (Lalande, 1999). In other words, they are more related to the category of space. The word iminente, on the other hand, refers to something that is about to happen, and therefore connects thought more strongly with the category of time. Therefore, it is more appropriate and more accurately denotes what Vygotsky conceptualizes.

“Obuchenie” and development

Many psychologists who studied the phenomenon of learning were contemporaries of Vygotsky and conducted important research during his lifetime. For example, E. L. Thorndike published his work in 1898 and, in 1928, the book “Adult learning” was published by Macmillan in New York. Another researcher, Edwin Ray Guthrie, known as the author of one of the theories of learning (Contiguous Conditioning Theory), published the article “Conditioning as a principle of learning” in 1930 in the authoritative journal *Psychological Review*. In 1920, Clark L. Hull, also known as one of the learning theorists, published an article in the journal *Psychological Monographs* entitled “Quantitative aspects of the evolution of concepts: an experimental study.” Another learning theorist, Edward C. Tolman, also published a paper in *Psychological Monographs* in 1917 entitled “Retroactive inhibition as affected by conditions of learning” (a detailed review of learning theories is presented in Hilgard, 1966). It is interesting that some of the mentioned articles are cited in the works of L.S. Vygotsky.

In this regard, a question of particular urgency arises: is it really possible that such a prominent theorist as L.S. Vygotsky, who developed a complex theory of the cultural development of the child, who knew and cited various concepts of learning, who followed carefully and rigorously the fundamental approach to the concept of “development,” would have used the concept of “obuchenie”, connecting it with development, without presenting a single theoretical justification for this? How did the people who translated the Russian term “obuchenie” used by L.S. Vygotsky not feel the slightest need to understand what the author meant? Considering the lack of such thoroughness in the work of L.S. Vygotsky, who valued accuracy and a methodical approach, how did the translators not doubt that their version might be erroneous? Have not they read or at least looked at the English version of the book “Thinking and Speech” (Vygotsky, 1987)? It clearly states the following:

“The term that is translated here as “instruction” (obuchenie) has been translated in other texts as “learning”. Neither of these English glosses are an entirely adequate translation of the Russian term. Obuchenie is the nominal form associated with the active verb *uchit*, (“to teach”) and the reflexive verb *uchit’sia* (“to be taught”, “to learn through instruction”, “to study”). Thus, the term *obuchenie* seems to us to imply the teaching/learning process involved in instruction, not merely the action of the instructor or the learner. We use the term instruction here because, like the term *obuchenie*, it implies an intentional transmission of knowledge while the term “learning” does not seem to” (Rieber, Carton, 1987, p. 388).

For Vygotsky, instruction is, of course, intentional, but it is not the transfer of knowledge. This remark is necessary to illustrate his idea of the role of the teacher, who is not only a transmitter of knowledge, but an organiser of the social situation of development. According to L.S. Vygotsky, during this process of organising, the teacher must remember that it is not enough for the student to simply master the content of the material, he is to use the acquired knowledge as a “tool” for himself, as a means that allows him to master his own thinking (Vygotsky, 2003).

It is clear that this is not said of learning, but rather of self-development. For this reason, it would be incorrect to say that the teacher plays the role of a mediator who takes the content of the material and transfers it into the student’s head. The role of the teacher is much more complex: it is to organise the student’s social situation in such a way as to create conditions for self-development, that is, the emergence of forms of mastering one’s own mental functions, be it thinking, attention, memory, imagination, etc. This is not the same as mediation. This is, first and foremost, action, influencing the environment, organising it in such a way that the student receives maximum benefit.

Thinking and speaking are actions

To conclude this brief examination of several concepts that seem to be important for understanding the foundations of cultural-historical theory, we turn to an analysis of the Russian word “speech” (“*rech*”). We do not want to repeat the arguments from our previous works (Prestes, 2021), but the aim is to dispel the doubts that seem to persist among Brazilian researchers who insist on using the word “language” to translate “speech”.

In his work “Tool and Sign in the Development of the Child,” Vygotsky says: “A person, subordinating the process of his own reaction to his power, thereby enters into a fundamentally new relationship with the external environment, comes to a new functional use of elements of the external

environment as stimulus-signs, with the help of which he, relying on external means, directs and regulates his own behaviour, and takes control of himself from the outside, forcing stimulus-signs to influence him and cause the reactions he desires. Internal regulation of purposeful activity arises initially from external regulation. A reactive action caused and organised by the person himself, ceases to be reactive and becomes rational.

In this sense, the phylogenetic history of practical intelligence is closely connected not only with the mastery of nature, but also with the mastery of oneself. The history of labour and the history of speech can hardly be understood one without the other. Man created not only the tools with which he subordinated the forces of nature to his power, but also incentives that prompted and regulated his own behaviour, subordinating his own forces to his power. This is noticeable at the earliest stages of human development” (Vygotsky, 1984, pp. 83–84).

From this passage it is clear that speech (the highest form of which is the word) arises simultaneously with the tools that help a person in his labour activity. In other words, if, according to Engels, “labour created man,” for Vygotsky, labour gave rise to higher mental functions that distinguish man from animals (*ibid.*, p. 85). Speech is one of the exclusively human functions, and, if it were independent and separated from action, it would not have the power to change human behaviour. Therefore, it should be recognised that speech has activity as its basis, that is, it is an action.

Finally, it is worth noting again that the Russian word “speech”, used by Vygotsky in various works, especially in his last work, *Thinking and Speech* (1934), should not be translated as *linguagem* (language).

A number of studies by L.S. Vygotsky were aimed at revealing the genetic roots of thinking and speech. At the same time, he paid special attention to the fact that these phenomena have different roots both in phylogenesis and in ontogenesis. At the very beginning of a child’s development, thinking is non-verbal, and speech is non-intellectual, while both processes occur independently. At a certain point, around the age of two years, according to Vygotsky (1934), these two lines of development intersect, giving rise to verbal thinking or intellectual speech. This is not just a change in the course of development, but a radical restructuring of the human psyche. In other words, the process of development of human consciousness begins here. That is, the connection between thought and word is a cultural and historical organisation that is not given at birth (Kravtsov, 2001). Vygotsky suggests reading the words of Goethe’s *Faust* “In the beginning was action” (a reference to the Gospel saying “In the beginning was the Word”) “with a different emphasis, if you look at it from the

point of view of the history of development: in the beginning was action” (Vygotsky, 1934, pp. 317–318, emphasis added). In other words, when we talk about a child, we mean the action of speech, not the language function (Lalande, 1999, p.627).

In the same way, thought is action. In the first chapter of the book “Thinking and Speech,” when discussing the problem and method of research, Vygotsky makes an explanation that leaves no doubt: “(...) every word is a hidden generalisation, every word generalises, and from a psychological point of view, the meaning of the word is primarily a generalisation. However, a generalisation, as it is easy to see, is an extraordinary verbal act of thought, reflecting reality in a completely different way than it is reflected in immediate sensations and perceptions” (Vygotsky, 1934, p. 10).

Considering speech and thinking only as a function, and not as an action, inevitably implies a denial of the main foundation on which Vygotsky’s theory is built, namely, the ideas of movement, development and history: in the beginning was action.

In Brazilian editions of translations by Russian authors, inconsistencies that arise due to the inaccuracies of the translators are often found. For example, in the title of M. M. Bakhtin’s book “Marxism and the Philosophy of Language,” the Russian word “language” is translated as *linguagem*, and the same word is used to translate the word “speech” in Vygotsky’s book “Thinking and Speech.” In defense of this choice, it can be said that language is one thing in literary theory and another in psychology. However, without going into a detailed analysis of the choice of translators, let us consider whether language and speech are really the same thing in Vygotsky’s theory.

The purpose of this article is to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that any translation, be it literary or scientific, is an unfinished process that needs to be constantly revised, improved and, above all, it must be faithful to the philosophical, ethical, and historical foundations of the ideas of the author whose works are translated, building bridges, not walls.

References

Bernardo, G. (2004). Preface. In: Flusser, Vilém. *Language and reality*. São Paulo: Annablume Publ.

Flusser, V. (2004). *Language and reality*. São Paulo: Annablume Publ.

Hilgard, E.R. (1966). *Theories of learning*. Translated by Nilce Pinheiro Mejias, Hilda de Almeida Guedes and Clea Abdon Rameh. São Paulo: Editora Herder/EDUSP.

Kravtsov, G.G. (2001). *Psychological means of personality*. In: *Cultural-historical psychology of development*. Moscow: Russian State University, Vygotsky Institute Publ. (In Russ.)

Lalande, A. (1999). *Technical and critical vocabulary of philosophy*. Translated by Fátima Sá Correia, Maria Emília V. Aguiar, José Eduardo Torres and Maria Gorete de Souza. São Paulo: Martins Fonte Publ.

Luria, A.R. (2001). *Stapi passed way, scientific autobiography*. Moscow: Moscow Univ. Press. (In Russ.)

Oliveira, E.A.L. (2017). *Technical images and their echo chambers: where does education resonate?* Thesis (PhD) University of Brasília, Brasília, 2017. URL: https://repositorio.unb.br/bitstream/10482/23694/1/2017_EricAlbertoLimadeOliveira.pdf (accessed: 03.04.2024).

Prestes, Z. (2021). *When it's not almost the same: translations of Lev Semionovich Vygotsky in Brazil*. 2 ed. Campinas, SP: Autores Associados.

Rieber, R.W., Carton, A.S. (ed.) (1987). *The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky. V. 1. Problems of general psychology (including the volume Thinking and Speech)*. Translated by Norris Minick. New York: Plenum Press Publ.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1934). *Thinking and speech*. Moscow, Leningrad: State Socio-Economic Publ. (In Russ.)

Vygotsky, L.S. (1982). *Collected works in 6 vol. Vol.1. Issues in the theory and history of psychology*. Moscow: Pedagogika Publ. (In Russ.)

Vygotsky, L.S. (1984). *Collected works in 6 vol. Vol.6. Scientific heritage*. Moscow: Pedagogika Publ. (In Russ.)

Vygotsky, L.S. (1987). *The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky. Vol.1. Problems of general psychology (including the volume Thinking and Speech)*. Tradução de Norris Minick, Robert W. Rieber e Aaron S. Carton (ed.). New York: Plenum Press Publ.

Vygotsky, L.S. (2003). *Pedagogical psychology*. Translated by Claudia Schilling. Porto Alegre: Artmed Publ.

Vygotsky, L.S. (2003). *Preface to A.N. Leontiev's book "The Development of Memory"*. In: Leontiev, A.N. *Becoming the psychology of activity*. Moscow: Smysl Publ. (In Russ.)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elizabeth Tunes, PhD in Psychology, Professor, University of Brasília, Brasília, Brazil, bethhtunes@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6884-8521>

Zoia Ribeiro Prestes, Doctor of Education, Professor, Federal University of Fluminense, Niteroi, Brazil, zoiaprestes@yahoo.com.br, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1347-3195>

Received: 12.03.2024; revised: 01.03.2024; accepted: 10.05.2024.