

Goffman versus Vygotsky on 'egocentric' ('private') speech

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Summary

The paper builds on a previous critical re-interpretation (Jones, 2009) of the spoken language phenomena used by Lev Vygotsky in the construction and presentation of his developmental approach to 'verbal thinking' based on a theory of speech internalization', as I will refer to it here, (or 'differentiation') (see Vygotsky, 1986, Chapter 7). Vygotsky had argued that the child's verbal thinking activity, primarily and initially developed in linguistic interaction with others ('social speech'), is progressively 'turned inward' as a means of 'self-regulation' and cognitive self-guidance. Ultimately, the child is capable of such communicative self-direction in 'inner speech', a form of verbal thinking taking place silently 'in the head'. However, this process of 'inwardization' passes through a transitional phase in the form of a kind of speech activity Vygotsky refers to as 'egocentric speech' (or 'private speech' as it is now more commonly known). 'Egocentric speech' utterances are said out loud when in company but are apparently addressed 'to no-one'. Vygotsky argues that such utterances mark the beginning of the functional shift from 'social speech' to 'inner speech' as they express the child's task-related verbal thinking activity in a form which still reflects the social origins and functions of social speech. As the 'self-regulative' function of 'egocentric speech' develops, 'egocentric' utterances undergo systematic changes in structural-semantic properties, in particular acquiring an elliptical quality Vygotsky referred to as 'predicativity' (see also Wertsch, 1979). By following the line of travel from 'social speech' to 'egocentric speech' one can, Vygotsky argues, extrapolate the further stages of that 'inwardization' process and thereby arrive at a characterization of the peculiar properties that 'inner speech' must have as a purely private and self-directed form of verbal thinking.

In Jones (2009), I argued that Vygotsky's theory of speech 'internalization' was vulnerable to a number of potent challenges. There were insuperable problems in trying to take the 'brief' utterances of 'egocentric speech' as 'abbreviated' in the sense of deriving in some way (either developmentally or in real time) from hypothetical 'complete' or 'more complete' sentence structures. Indeed, it was more plausible to consider the 'abbreviation' position as reflecting a prejudice of the western grammatical tradition than as an empirically based account of contextualized language use (in either children or adults). Secondly, I argued that the theoretical motivation for the 'internalization' approach needed to be understood in the context of key Vygotskian assumptions about the role of language in interaction and cognition. In particular, Vygotsky had assumed (following Janet) that the child's voluntary and purposeful behaviour was to be explained as originating in the power of the adult verbal command to produce automatic cognitive or behavioural compliance by the child. The alleged 'self-regulating' function of utterances was due,

therefore, to the child's ability to apply the interpersonally functioning verbal command to himself/herself in the form of a self-addressed command. I try to show that this assumption, itself ultimately rooted in the reflexological (stimulus-response) traditions which Vygotsky originally followed, is communicationally implausible and should be discounted. I concluded that it was time to set the 'internalization' model aside and offered an alternative perspective on self-communication grounded in the 'integrationist' approach of Roy Harris (Harris, 1996).

This new paper focuses on the alternative interpretation of 'egocentric' speech utterances proposed by Erving Goffman in his paper 'Response cries' (Goffman, 1978, 1981). In appealing to aspects of the social situation in his account of the child's use of 'egocentric speech', Vygotsky opens up a territory which Goffman would later make his own – the 'interaction order' of face-to-face communication. Goffman looks in detail at how we behave when in the company of others and shows the mutual awareness and attention that individuals, even in 'unfocussed gatherings', demonstrate towards one another as they go about their business. Referring directly to the treatments of self-talk proposed by Vygotsky and Piaget, Goffman rejects both developmental accounts and argues that self-talk (in both children and adults) is constructed situationally (not ontogenetically) under quite specific interactional conditions and with quite specific interactional functions. He argues that the apparently 'self-directed' utterances of 'egocentric speech' are not occasioned by cognitive difficulties or task-planning requirements on the part of the speaking subject; they are not the expression of (or 'externalization' of) a 'verbal thinking' process necessary to purposeful action. Rather, our self-talk (at least of the kind that Vygotsky is considering) helps to contextualize, for others co-present, our current behaviours, most strikingly when we need to make what might seem to others to be abrupt or possibly unpredictable changes to our current line of action. Egocentric utterances, then, are not self-directed means of cognitive self-regulation guiding *us* in our actions, rather they are fitted to the interactional circumstances of the 'unfocused gathering', designed for the people who are co-present as a guide *for them* as to what we are about, rendering our behaviour intelligible in their eyes (to the extent that they are interested) as well as offering them the chance to engage with us in response.

On the basis of Goffman's insights, we could therefore re-work Vygotsky's 'internalization' theory in the following way:

1. a. self-talk is not performed as means of cognitive self-guidance or self-regulation; it does not constitute or betoken 'this process of conscious reflection' (Vygotsky); rather;
1. b. it is designed to allow the gathering to draw the conclusion that it *is* 'this process of conscious reflection' by giving a dramatic display of 'a presumed inner state' (Goffman).
2. a. self-talk does not occur at transition points in activity as a result of the cognitive difficulties or impediments that the child is dealing with; rather
2. b. self-talk gives a display for the gathering of the reasons and motivations that they should impute to the child in departing from the previously projected 'line of action' (Goffman);

3. a. 'collective monologue' (Piaget) is not occasioned by 'the illusion of understanding' (Vygotsky after Grünbaum);
rather
- 3.b. self-talk is occasioned by the mutuality of co-presence within the gathering
4. a. the structural or vocal characteristics said to be distinctive of utterances in self-talk are not the result of a developmental process of internalization of social speech;
rather
4. b. such utterances are designed to be audibly distinguishable from direct dialogic speech
5. a. self-talk is not psychologically essential to voluntary and rational individual action;
rather
5. b. the self-talker is already at a stage when he or she is aware of what degree of rationality and purpose his or her behaviour should 'give off' to co-present others and is able to design and produce (voluntarily and rationally) a whole series of monitorable behaviours to guide and confirm others' expectations;
6. a. self-addressed utterances are not a necessary cognitive means of designing future purposeful action;
rather
6. b. they are designed to give a display of apparently inner planning and intention to the gathering;
7. a. the 'source' of (or occasion for) egocentric speech is not 'the inadequate individualization of speech for oneself, the failure to differentiate it from speech for others' (Vygotsky); egocentric speech is not a sign of 'the insufficient separation of the child's individual psyche from the social whole' (Vygotsky in Kozulin translation);
rather
7. b. it is a sign of the child's highly developed interactional intelligence, a keen awareness of his or her responsibility as an individual to the gathering, and his or her ability to design apparently 'naturalistic' expressions of inner states for public interactional consumption: exactly the opposite of Vygotsky's view (and Piaget's)

While Goffman's claims about the interactional function of self-talk have occasionally been noted and discussed in the Vygotskian and socio-cultural traditions (e.g., Steinbach Kohler and Thorne, 2011), the more far-reaching implications of Goffman's perspective for Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology have rarely, if ever, been explored. The paper argues that Goffman's insights provide the basis of a strong challenge not only to Vygotsky's theory of speech 'internalization' but to the 'genetic law' of psychological development (from interpersonal to intrapersonal) which the 'internalization' position (ultimately rooted in reflex assumptions) appears to both exemplify and confirm.

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