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# Rethinking Vygotsky and language acquisition

Stephen Newman

Vygotsky  
1896-1934

Wittgenstein  
1889-1951

# Complexities

- Links between FLA and SLA
- Theory proliferation
- Theory incompatibility

• Theory of mind

Chomsky

Vygotsky

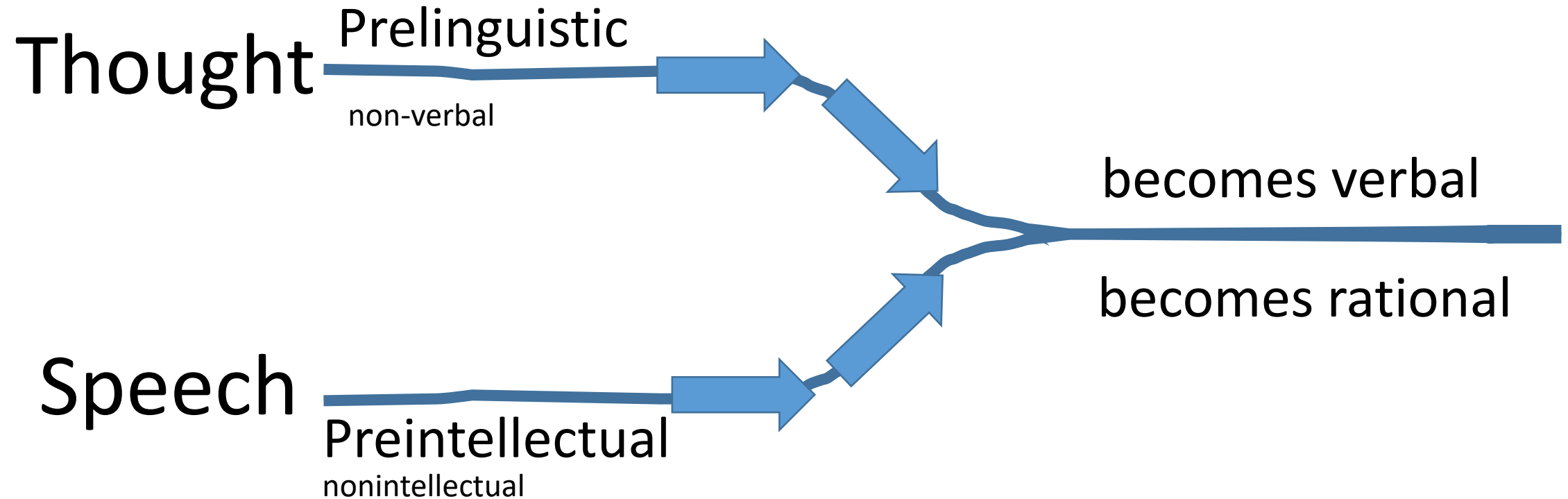
# Confusion: First language acquisition and second language acquisition

“It is well known that to learn a foreign language at school and to develop one's native language involve two entirely different processes... And yet, in spite of all these differences, the acquisition of the foreign and the native languages belongs to one general class of the processes of speech development” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.159).

Vygotsky's account...

# Vygotsky: Thought and speech

See Vygotsky, 1986, pp.86-93



Primitive  
or natural  
stage

Naïve  
psychological  
stage – “a period  
of mastering the  
external  
structure of the  
sign” (p.93)

Stage  
distinguished  
by external  
signs

“Ingrowth” stage

Earliest stages of thought and speech are biological based on an “innate, natural form of behaviour”.

Pre-intellectual.  
Pre-linguistic.  
Reactions.

Aged about 2, the child has moved on to the developmental continuum.

The developmental continuum

Written speech

External speech

Private Speech (egocentric speech)

Inner Speech

Thought

Motivation

Vygotsky dubs external speech as the source of all of the continuum's components

External

Internal

“Inner speech develops through a slow accumulation of functional and structural changes. that it branches off from the child's external speech simultaneously with the differentiation of the social and the egocentric functions of speech, and finally that the speech structures mastered by the child become the basic structures of his thinking” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.94)



# Examining Vygotsky's account...

What is the evidence for it?

Is it a socio-cultural theory of language acquisition?

Does it have a coherent theory of meaning?

“The answer to "Would you like a cup of tea?" is never 'No, I don't want a cup of tea,' but a simple "No."  
Obviously, such a sentence is possible only because its subject is tacitly understood by both parties.”  
(Vygotsky, 1986, p. 236).

“To "Has your brother read this book?" no one ever replies, "Yes, my brother has read this book." The answer is a short "Yes," or "Yes, he has." (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 236)

- Now let us imagine that several people are waiting for a bus. No one will say, on seeing the bus approach, "The bus for which we are waiting is coming." The sentence is likely to be an abbreviated "Coming," or some such expression, because the subject is plain from the situation" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 236).

# But...

- It is quite easy to imagine when the replies that Vygotsky says would never be given, would be given.

# Abbreviation

Is the bus for which we are waiting,  
full-up or empty?

Is the bus for which we are  
waiting, an old or a new  
Routemaster?

**“Is the bus for which we are waiting, coming?”**

**“Coming”** [as an abbreviation for "The bus for which we are waiting is coming"]

- Clearly then, as Jones puts it, “if you cannot decide or cannot find good reasons for starting with one ‘expanded’ form rather than another, then the whole abbreviation hypothesis is in some trouble” (Jones, 2009, p. 171).

# So, does the evidence support Vygotsky's argument?

- No
- No evidence of the continuum, abbreviation, and internalisation
- The whole continuum is inferred, not observed.



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# In summary...

For these reasons

- There is no evidence of Vygotsky's notions of a continuum, of internalisation and of abbreviation.
- It is not a sociocultural theory
- Its theory of meaning is incoherent

# Clarifications: Wittgenstein

## What's the evidence?

- Conceptual not empirical, but...
- Real and imagined examples
- Look; don't think.
- 'it disperses the fog to study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of application in which one can command a clear view of the aim and functioning of the words' (*PI*, §5). The many and diverse examples thus counteract our tendency to ask questions and make statements which ignore our actual uses of language (*PI*, §§23-27):
- A main cause of philosophical disease—a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example (*PI*, §593, p.155e).
- "I'll teach you differences" (Shakespeare: *King Lear*, Act 1; Scene 4)

# Language games

- We need to pay attention to the language-game in which such expressions occur.
- Socio-cultural.

Earliest stages of thought and speech are biological based on an “innate, natural form of behaviour”.

Pre-intellectual.  
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Reactions.



**SOCIAL**  
**LOOK**  
**OBSERVATIONS**



**Written speech**  
**Verbal and non-verbal behaviour**  
**Language-games**

**Private Speech**

**Nothing is hidden**



“Inner speech develops through a slow accumulation of functional and structural changes. that it branches off from the child's external speech simultaneously with the differentiation of the social and the egocentric functions of speech, and finally that the speech structures mastered by the child become the basic structures of his thinking” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.94)

The developmental continuum

**Inner Speech**



**Thought**



**Motivation**

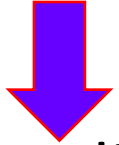
# Moreover

- Articles which claim support for Vygotsky show no evidence of the continuum etc., nor could they. The only things they do show are the early bits and all that can be explained with Wittgensteinian reminders.

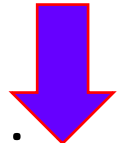
# Structure

## Vygotsky's account

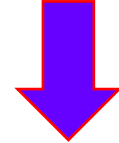
Continuum



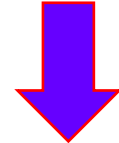
Internalisation / abbreviation



Empirical observations



Socio-cultural aspects



Theory of meaning



## Wittgenstein's account

Continuum



Internalisation / abbreviation



Empirical observations



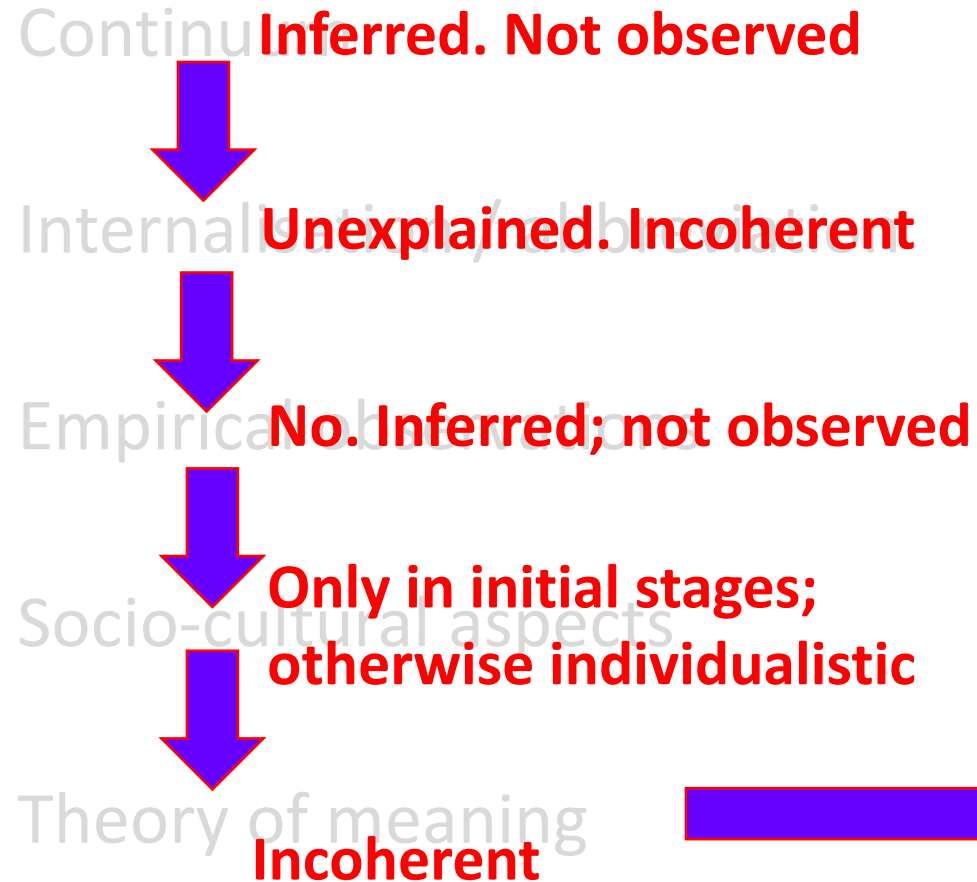
Socio-cultural aspects



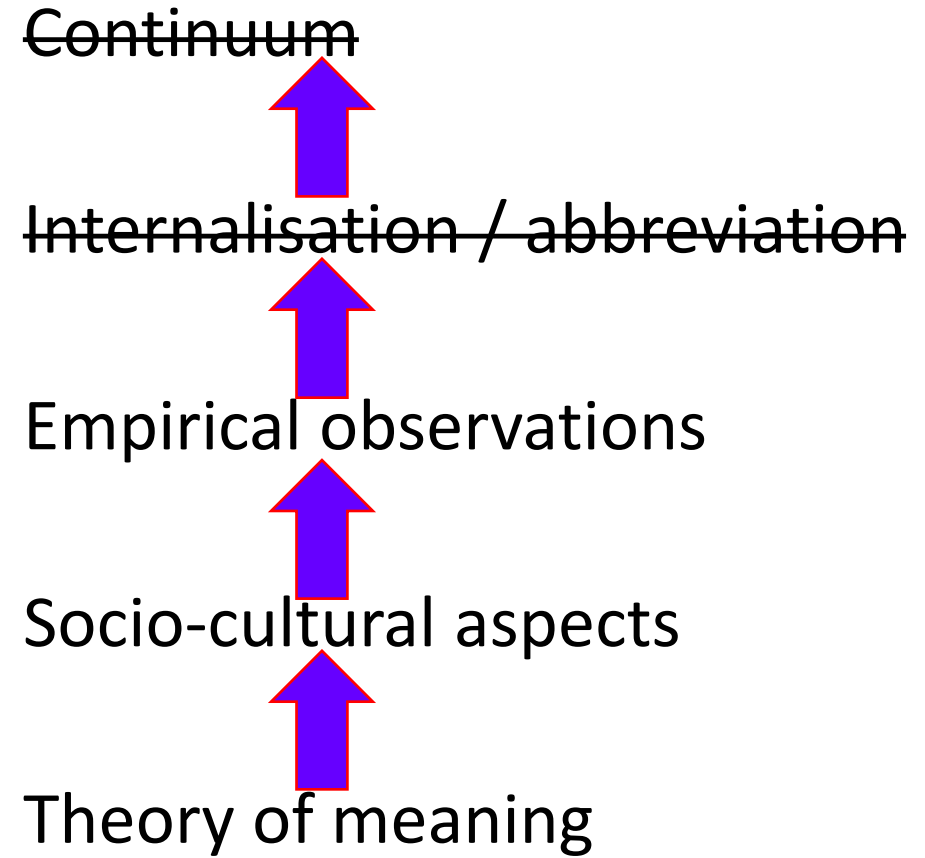
Theory of meaning

# Structure

## Vygotsky's account



## Wittgenstein's account





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