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First and second language acquisition: Complexities, confusions, and clarifications

Stephen Newman

13 September 2017

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

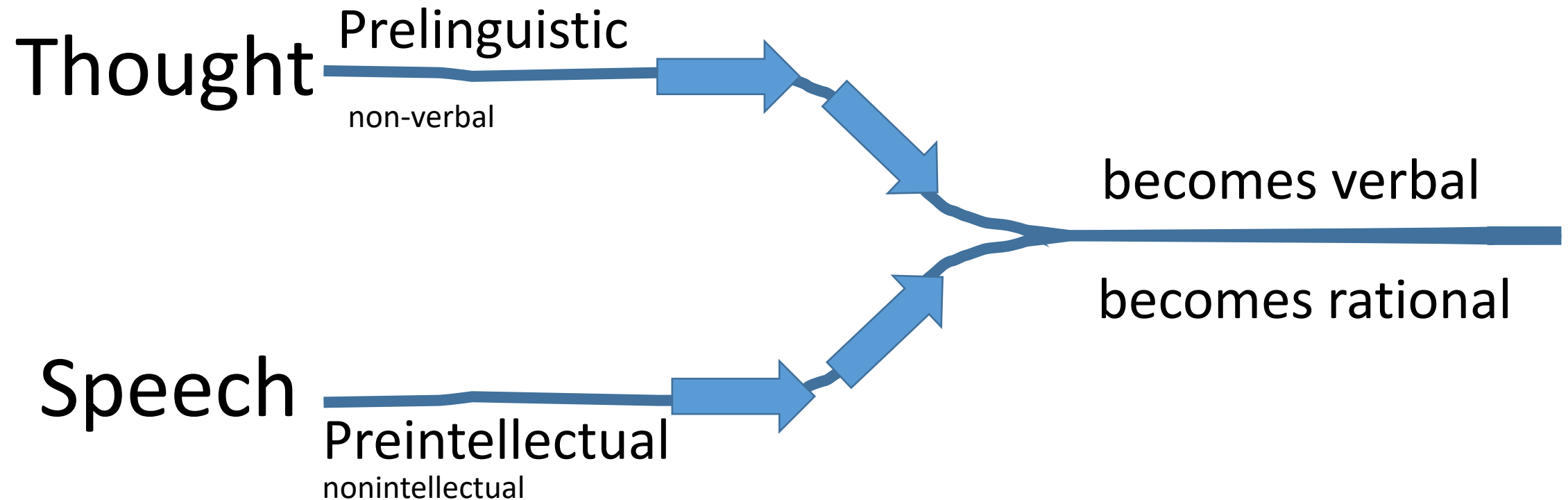
“It is well known that to learn a foreign language at school and to develop one's native language involve two entirely different processes... And yet, in spite of all these differences, the acquisition of the foreign and the native languages belongs to one general class of the processes of speech development”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

Confusion: One student writes:

- “Over the course of the semester, I have been exposed to many theories about children and how they learn and process information.... From Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences to the Montessori way of teaching.... While all of the theories and principles are very valid the one that resonates the most with me is Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory”
- <https://www.slideshare.net/mferranti/vygotskys-sociocultural-theory-of-learning>

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

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

Private Speech (egocentric speech)

Inner Speech

Thought

Motivation

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)

- However, Vygotsky continues, after about two years, the child comes to have “the first dim realization of the purpose of speech” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 82), and (quoting Stern 1914), that “each thing has its name” (Stern, 1914, p. 108, cited by Vygotsky 1986, p.82). Thus the child has moved onto the developmental continuum and is participating in External speech (Berducci, 2004, p.337)

- “He seems to have discovered the symbolic function of words. Speech, which in the earlier stage was affective-conative, now, as was shown by Meumann, enters the intellectual phase” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.82).
- Notions of internalisation and abbreviation.

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?

What is the evidence for it?

- According to Vygotsky, in his Preface to *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1986) a large part of his analysis is based on “fact-finding experiments” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. lix).

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"]

And, as regards abbreviation...

- In arguing that private speech shows “a tendency toward an altogether specific form of abbreviation, namely: omitting the subject of a sentence and all words connected with it, while preserving the predicate” (Vygotsky, 1986, p.236), seems to suggest that the child has a fully formed sentence worked out as it would appear in social speech, and then decides to drop some particular parts of it (Jones, 2009, p. 169). Does the child have to work out the fully fledged version of social speech before dropping some of it?

So, does the evidence support Vygotsky's argument?

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

Is it socio-cultural?

- “For Vygotsky, development involves the internalisation of signs acquired by an individual from others so that he can solve problems by him/herself” (Gardenas and Astom 2011).
- “A child’s intellectual development is crucial to his language development. By interacting with his environment, a child develops the ability to develop private, inner speech. “Inner speech is thinking in pure meanings; it is the link between the second signal system of the social world and the thought of the individual”” (Vaäzkz 2012).

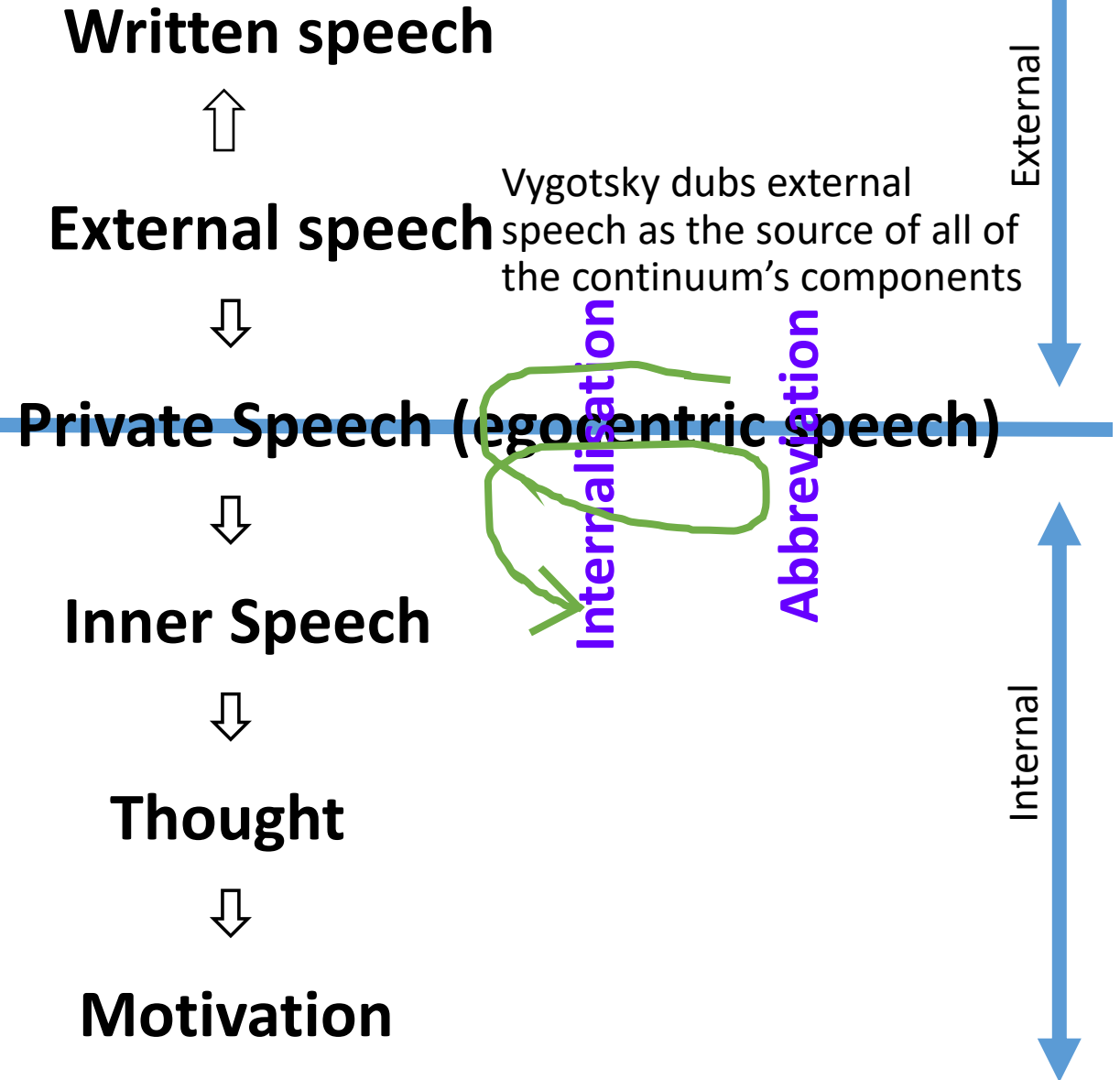
In a curious way, then, if Vygotsky’s account is correct, it is not a socio-cultural theory at all.

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



“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)

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.

Theory of meaning

Wittgenstein: “In philosophy, one is in constant danger of producing a myth of symbolism, or a myth of mental processes. Instead of simply saying what anyone knows and must admit” (Z, 211).

Examples of someone’s understanding or meaning something, of obeying an order, following a rule, remembering, deciding, knowing what one was about to say or do, etc.

Anyone who reflects on these examples and similar ones ‘knows and must admit’ that commonly, little if any thinking occurs and that when it does occur it is fragmentary.

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.
Pre-linguistic.
Reactions.



SOCIAL
LOOK
OBSERVATIONS



Nothing is hidden

Written speech
Verbal and non-verbal behaviour
Language-games

Private Speech

Inner Speech



Thought



Motivation



“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

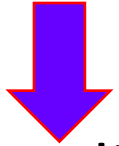
Moreover

- 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.

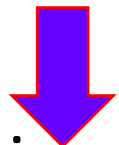
Structure

Vygotsky's account

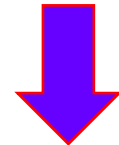
Continuum



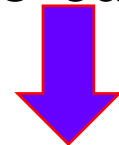
Internalisation / abbreviation



Empirical observations



Socio-cultural aspects



Theory of meaning



Wittgenstein's account

Continuum



Internalisation / abbreviation



Empirical observations



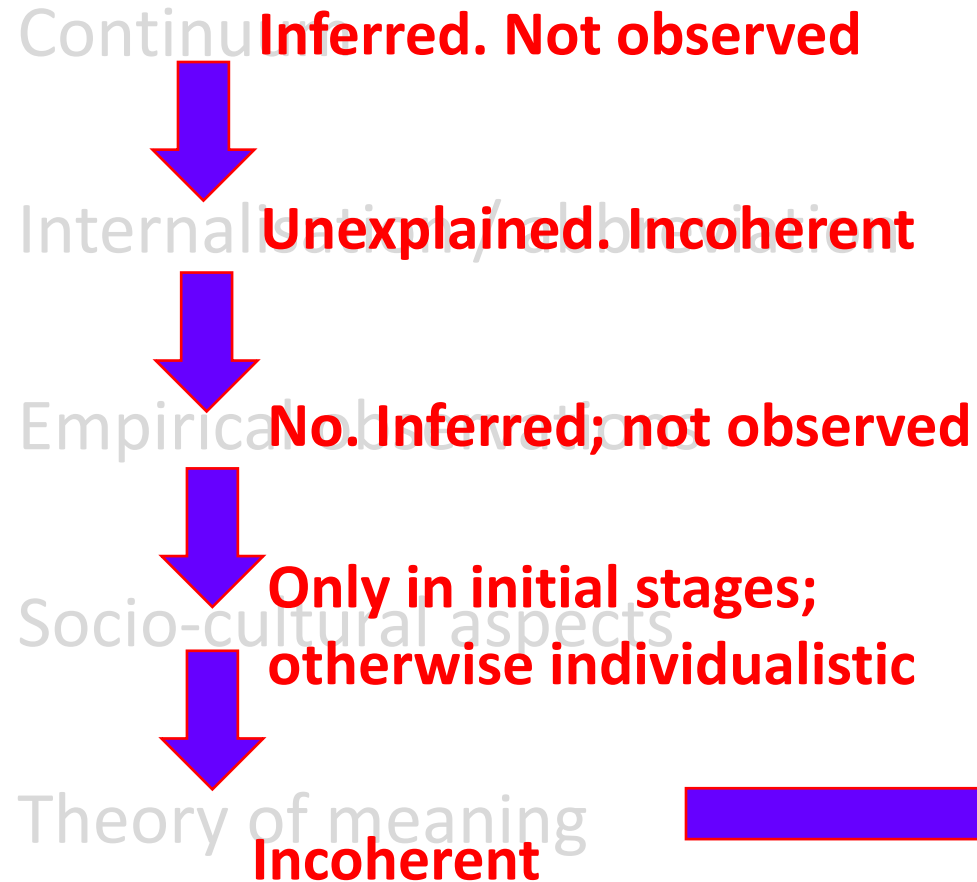
Socio-cultural aspects



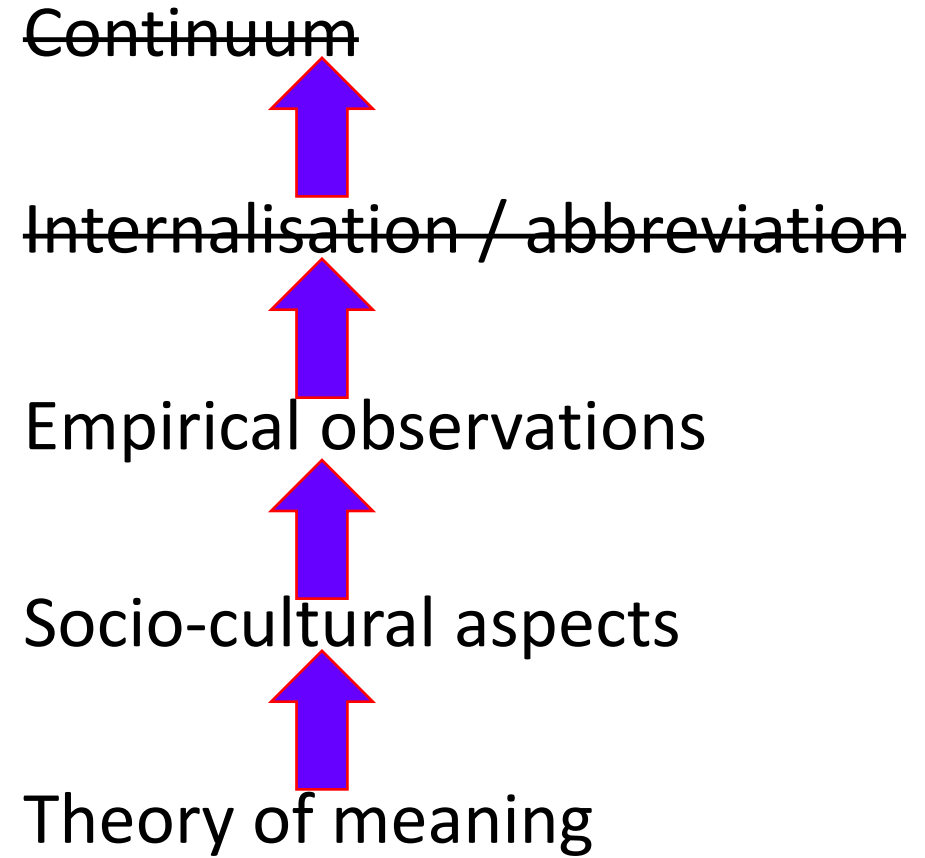
Theory of meaning

Structure

Vygotsky's account



Wittgenstein's account



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