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Language and social determinism in the Vygotskian tradition: a response to Carl Ratner¹

Peter E Jones

'[Starbucks baristas] live for the moment in the immediate, circumscribed, visible, here and now ... This catalyzes the fragmented, disorganized, non-descriptive, non-systematic, illogical, limited speech (and thinking) of these individuals' (Ratner, 2015: 68).

'In a little less than three years, I've been on strike 10 times. I've watched as the movement spread to Chicago, St. Louis, and then all around the country and the world. I traveled to Denmark, where I visited with fast-food workers who are paid more than \$21 an hour, and it gave me hope that winning higher pay was actually possible.' (*Winning \$15 an hour means everything to me*: <http://www.cnbc.com/2015/07/23/winning-the-15-minimum-wage-fight-commentary.html>).

Carl Ratner (2015) puts me in a group of Vygotsky's followers who have 'radically revised his theory – sometimes tacitly' (2015: 52) for my critique of Basil Bernstein's theory of linguistic codes (Jones, 2013). Ratner has probably undermined his own case better than any critic could by setting out what he calls 'classic Sociocultural Theory' ('SCT') in such crude and dogmatic terms, his 'hermeneutic interpretation' (53) of Michaels' (1986) data verging on self-parody. However, while I feel obliged to respond to the implied slight on my personal integrity, the important thing is to clarify our differences. To that end, I can make things easier by saying that it would be more accurate to call me an opponent of the theoretical amalgam he advocates, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, his claim that the 'classic theory' was 'a coherent "school" with a shared core of parsimonious principles' (52) oversimplifies the intellectual complexities and conflicts surrounding the origins and development of cultural-historical psychology. And secondly, because I think many of the principles he alludes to are simply untenable.

We do actually have some common ground. Ratner is right to seek to clarify the perspectives on language around which Vygotskian psychology was built and to raise the more general question of what kind of linguistics is compatible with progressive social and political commitments. As he shows, this is intimately bound up with the difficult problem of how we might best conceive and account for the social or cultural 'determination' (for want of a better word) of the communicative behaviour of individual people and the relevance of Marxism in particular to that problem. In looking for answers, however, we have gone in diametrically opposite directions, as is clear from our incompatible positions on Bernstein. My Bernstein paper was dedicated to 'the rejection of the idea that the ordinary language or languages of home, family and community for some children are deficient or inadequate as a foundation for cognitive development and learning in school' (Grainger and Jones, 2013: 96). I argued that Bernstein's distinction between 'restricted' and 'elaborated' codes did not carve socio(linguistic) reality at its joints but was derived by hitching a particular sociological framework to a flawed linguistic ideology built on 'scriptism', aka 'the written language bias in linguistics' (see Harris, 2009), I tried to show the role of this ideology in providing cover for the socially stratifying communicative practices of the school and, in particular, in attributing the relative lack of scholarly achievement of poor and working class children to cognitive weaknesses transmitted through family speech styles. This is not about whether

¹ My thanks to Chik Collins for comments on an earlier draft but I am wholly responsible for the position I advance here.

there are differences in the ways that poor, working class, middle class and upper class families and groups communicate. It is about the narrow, ethno-centric and class-centric assumptions involved in identifying the communicative practices said to be typical of (some) middle class families with general cognitive potential or 'educability'. Readers can judge for themselves the success of the paper in making that argument. But Ratner attacks it for its 'strong revisionist SCT view' (62) of discourse. What are the deeper issues at stake here?

No psychological theory is more explicitly dependent on ideas about language and communication than Vygotsky's. And yet, in my view 'language is the weakest link in the chain of cultural-historical argument' (Jones, 2007: 57). A preliminary review of the eclectic appeal to incompatible linguistic and semiotic principles current in Cultural-historical and Activity Theory (CHAT) research led me to argue that CHAT 'has failed thus far to develop a conception of language which is equal to and in harmony with its distinctive and radical theoretical premises, principles, and methodology' (2007: 57) and to propose what I thought looked like a promising way forward in terms of an activity-oriented semiology. To that extent, Ratner is justified in pinning the 'revisionist' label on me. But, unlike Ratner, I felt that a re-think on language should extend to an unflinching critical look at the linguistic and semiological concepts and tenets which Vygotsky himself professed or assumed, a task I hope to complete soon (Jones, in prep.). In the interim, I have been quite explicit about my disagreements with the positions of Vygotsky and Luria (e.g., Jones, 2007, 2009). Frankly, I don't believe that the linguistic perspectives that inspired and informed Vygotsky's psychological principles stand up well to scrutiny today, with all that follows from that for the principles themselves.

There are also good reasons for challenging Ratner's view of the unequivocally Marxist roots of SCT. While having clearly stated Marxist aspirations, Vygotsky was cautious about claiming progress toward that goal. All the more reason, then, to look sceptically at the relationship between so-called 'Soviet Marxism', the immediate intellectual inspiration for Vygotsky's scientific orientation, and Marx's own views. A case in point is Ratner's unqualified and uncritical approval of Vygotsky's account of 'the depth of the social conditioning of psychology' (54), from *The Psychology of Art*, published in 1925: 'the social environment,' Vygotsky explains, 'refracts and directs the stimuli acting upon the individual and *guides all the reactions that emanate from the individual*' (Ratner's emphasis). At that time, as his terminology implied, Vygotsky considered himself 'more of a reflexologist than Pavlov', in tune with the prevailing enthusiasm for Pavlov in Bolshevik circles. Naturally aware of Marxism's emphasis on the social, Vygotsky nevertheless conceived sociality at this point in terms of a simple analogical extrapolation from reflex theory: the social environment is to human behaviour as Pavlov's laboratory is to canine salivation. No Marxism here. As he revised his position in search of a more plausible account of distinctively human thinking and behaviour, he did not completely transcend the mechanistic reflex conception (of Cartesian origin) but cemented it into his theoretical system as an account of the putative 'lower' ('natural') foundation for the development of 'higher' ('cultural') mental functions. This 'natural' foundation was purely *reactive, responsive* to external stimuli or, in the case of 'practical intellect', at best capable of supporting rudimentary actions in the here and now. To explain the *active, purposefully transformative and creative* character of 'cultural' thinking and behaviour, Vygotsky found a 'new regulatory principle' in 'the social determination of behavior carried out with the help of signs' (1997: 56). But note Vygotsky's definition of signs (including

words) as 'artificial stimuli ... for controlling one's own reactions' (1997: 54). Words, and other signs, then, were distinctively *social* stimuli (affecting people not things), regulating and transforming 'natural' functions for social ends. Consequently, the interactional process in which the individual's cognitive powers were seen to be formed was conceived as an *internalization* of the linguistic resources used in interaction, leading to personal self-regulation and thinking proper. The mechanism Vygotsky took as 'the basis of higher mental functions' is, as he put it 'a copy [Russian *slepok*, 'cast', PEJ] from the social' (1997: 106, my emphasis). Thus, this entire perspective on the relationship between social and individual behaviour, revolving around the concept of internalization, grew from an accommodation to the mechanistic assumptions of reflexology. The cost of this accommodation was an endlessly problematic and unresolved dualism of 'natural' and 'cultural' psychological functions at the heart of the approach. Moreover, Vygotsky's attribution of what Marx had called the 'active side' of human thinking and behaviour to the power of *signs* was seen as an idealist throwback by both the Rubinsteinians and some of his former associates who tried instead to take notions of practical or 'objective' activity as their starting point.

Ratner (76, Fn 6) also defends the so-called 'cross cultural' research on language and thinking carried out by Luria with Vygotsky's approval and support. My own view is that this work is the most serious blemish on the record of cultural-historical psychology. Furthermore, I do not consider this work as a theoretical aberration since it appears to flow consistently from the dualistic premises of the overarching theory. For Vygotsky, the initial, 'natural' psychological functions were causally captured by the play of 'stimuli' coming from the immediate environment. In contrast, voluntary and consciously planned action, free of the irresistible pull of immediately perceptible stimuli, depended on the generalizing power of words. Hence, in research on word meaning, a new dichotomy was projected between the 'concrete' image of particular objects tied to immediate circumstances and the 'abstract' conceptual content of linguistically-enabled thinking. Vygotsky's notion of 'the concept' and its role in advanced, 'cultural' thinking therefore expanded into the psychological space that reflex-based mechanisms could not reach. If 'natural' thinking and perception had to do with images of particular things in their 'concrete' context of appearance and use, then 'cultural' thinking tore itself away from empirical detail to trade in 'abstract' generalizations. In practice, this meant the denigration of 'primitive' classifications, calculations and judgements imbued with the wisdom of experience in contrast with properly 'conceptual' thinking in which objects were categorized independently of their real-life practical utility or connections. The philosophical and scientific bases of this conception of 'concrete' and 'abstract' would later be comprehensively demolished by Ilyenkov (1982). The methodology of its application in cultural research was refuted most clearly perhaps by Cole (1999). The flawed linguistics behind it was exposed most recently by Harris (2009). In effect, Vygotsky and Luria had mistaken the categories of the western tradition of logical analysis, intimately connected with particular culture-centric assumptions about *written language*, for universal stages of 'cultural' psychological development. In sum, despite its insights and sophistication and the many countervailing tendencies (to do with interactional context, sense, personality and personal experience and the semiotic creativity of play), Vygotsky's psychological theory remains marked by a mechanistic social determinism stemming from a dualism of 'natural' versus 'cultural' informed by reflexological assumptions.

As for Bernstein, I concede that there is a relationship to be explored between his work and the CHAT tradition. Bernstein himself acknowledged that his core thesis 'rests on the work of Vygotsky and Luria' (1973: 143). I also concede that many eminent contemporary scholars (see, e.g., Daniels, 2012) consider Bernstein as an important contributor to CHAT and share Ratner's enthusiasm for his codes. But I think it is a mistake to pursue a melding of Bernstein and Vygotsky and disagree on the value of Bernstein's codes. Bernstein's code theory drew on the two ingredients of Vygotsky's and Luria's approach which I believe are the most problematic: their dichotomy of concrete and abstract concepts (or meanings) and the idea of language as a social means of regulating individual thinking and behaviour. The first informed a series of attempts to identify 'restricted' and 'elaborated' linguistic codes in terms of 'implicit'/'explicit', 'context-dependent'/'decontextualized' or 'particularistic'/'universalistic' meanings. I tried to show how flimsy and incoherent is the alleged linguistic evidence for such a monumental socio-cultural distinction and to expose its scriptist roots. Ratner defends the codes, but his raid on Michaels' data, I'm afraid, backfires badly. For instance, he claims that 'Mindy's middle class discourse refers to the objects, and the characters, by name, not by the indefinite *he, she, it, they*' (66). But when we look at Mindy's second turn we find an abundance of such supposedly absent elements: 'And I tried *it* with different colors, with both of *them* but *one* just came out; *this one* just came out blue, and I don't know what *this* color is' (52). The influence of the second idea can be detected in Bernstein's 'core thesis': 'the form of the social relation or, more generally, the social structure generates distinct linguistic forms or codes and *these codes essentially transmit the culture and so constrain behaviour*' (1973: 143, my emphasis).

This formulation is reminiscent of Vygotsky's internalization model, although it is by no means identical: there is nothing corresponding to Bernstein's 'codes' in Vygotsky. However, it is also important to understand the theoretical context of this formulation which owes more to Durkheim's sociological commitments than Marx's revolutionary ones. (The authors arguing, in Daniels (2012), for a Vygotsky-Durkheim-Bernstein connection might have begun with Vygotsky's (1987: 85) own critical remarks on Durkheim). This difference is perhaps clearest in Bernstein's view that 'it is reasonable to argue that *the genes of social class may well be carried in a communication code that social class itself promotes*' (1971: 143, my emphasis). It appears to be this conception of social class that informs Ratner's 'culture-centric' interpretation of Michaels' transcriptions of talk. Thus, Ratner describes the speech of Deena, 'a black (evidently lower-class) girl' (52), as:

'suited to lower-class work – e.g., to working as a sales clerk at McDonald's where she merely informs a customer that a Big Mac contains lettuce, tomatoes, onions, and cheese. This kind of work and speech only requires stringing words together in a list. Logic, coherence, and descriptiveness are not required from the clerks because the information is organized and displayed by management on overhead screens, and the customer knows what the words denote' (67).

'Lower-class people', he concludes, 'are not prohibited from upward mobility, they are psychologically incapacitated from achieving it' (68). So the idea that working class people are stupid and have poor speech is not class prejudice - it's 'classic SCT'. They really are stupid; they really can't speak coherently; a job at McDonald's is about the most they can hope for but that's because capitalism makes them that

way. The 'cast' of exploitative social relations in the fast food joint becomes the prison house of language and thought for the fast food worker. In that connection, there is an interesting contrast between Ratner's views of the linguistic and cognitive capacities of Starbucks baristas (64, cited above) with the words, ideas and actions of fast food workers currently leading the momentous global 'fight for \$15' (see quote above).

Does it really need to be said that this Bernsteinian, 'culture-centric' view of social class *is completely opposed to Marx's*? Marx's view was not that the class structure of capitalist society was endlessly reproduced as a result of, and in harmony with, the (poor) linguistic and cognitive 'culture' of working class families, any more than he thought that slavery in the southern states of the US was maintained and promoted by the 'communication code' of the slaves. The existence of the working class as a class is not merely the outcome of people having to work, *by force of circumstance and in degrading conditions*, for the advantage of others but is also due *to their organized resistance to this enforced exploitation*. Their thinking capacities are not imprisoned in a symbolic 'cast' of their exploited and disadvantaged status, which they are consequently fated to reproduce. On the contrary, for Marx, such exploitation would foster alienation from work and provoke practical and intellectual revolt. Marx's entire mission in life was therefore based on confidence in the 'psychological capacities' of working people to make a new world. While I respect Ratner's radical political principles, then, I believe the view of language he espouses is saturated with a mechanical social determinism which leads him, in the name of 'classic SCT', to a 'discourse analysis' involving little more than applying the most unsubtle, pessimistic and, indeed, outrageously prejudicial, social stereotypes to particular communicative episodes.

In giving due recognition to the social nature of language I think we must avoid a picture in which our linguistic and cognitive capacities are seen as due to our ingesting, as it were, abstract symbolic proxies of the structures of experienced social relations, in which the social frames in which we are 'contained' (the family, school, work), often against our will or in the absence of realistic choice, fatally frame our personalities, our mental horizons and scope for future action. On this picture, the individual inevitably reduces to a linguistic cipher, a generic and disposable exemplar of some reified construct (such as 'discourse'). We need a different view of language and a different view of sociality (and *I don't mean CDA* - see Jones and Collins, 2010).

Communication is born of interpersonal *difference*, of the *interdependence* of self-acting individuals. Learning to communicate is not about adults taming the child's 'reactions' but 'infant experiments with cooperation' (Sennett, 2012: 9). Communicational (including linguistic) contributions are *reciprocal acts* – they are ways in which *these* people (as opposed to others) relate to one another practically, emotionally and ethically in particular circumstances, learning what the boundaries are for expected behaviour across an open-ended range of settings and challenges, and how to respect them, as well as how to skirt or push the boundaries. While our communicational powers, then, are always nurtured and exercised in particular contexts, these contexts are never fixed in advance, however regularly and habitually they may be constructed or entered. Consequently, these powers presuppose a creative and generative communicative intelligence for actively and self-consciously joining and 'fitting' with others in situations that are always unique,

though not always of our own making or within our control. The circumstances of life may hem us in and limit drastically the opportunities we may have; they may damage us physically and psychologically, as Ratner shows. But it is a mistake to straightforwardly equate our communicative and cognitive skills and potential with the social 'frames' to which we may have to conform and submit for longer or shorter periods of time, but which we can also dissolve, destroy and reconstruct as we re-make ourselves in creative and transformative action.

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