

CHILDREN'S USES OF CULTURAL OBJECTS IN THEIR LIFE TRAJECTORIES

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Before I started going to school, Mother read to me every night at bedtime, to help me fall asleep. She would turn on the coloured glass lamp by my bed, put on her pince-nez and read fairy-tales. I really hated sleeping, but I liked listening to the stories: there was a wicked witch who ate children and a rotten stepmother who poked out her stepchildren's eyes and then when the prince was betrothed to the prettiest of the children, she (the heroine) chopped off both her stepmother's arms and also one leg. Those fairy tales frightened me so much that I couldn't fall asleep, which was why Mother had to keep reading on and on, until she fell asleep.

But alas, those wonderful times were soon to be no more. I had to start grade one at the elementary school for boys. I didn't want to, but they made me. Our teacher, Mrs Rehakova, taught us reading and now, as Mother was turning on the lamp she would say to me: "Soon I won't have to read you any longer, Joey, because in no time you'll learn how and then you'll be able to read quietly to yourself." But I liked having Mother read to me, because she was pretty and had a scratchy voice that helped me to stay awake when she read the story about Budulinek, the boy who gobbled everything he could find in the pantry, but was still hungry and then became a cannibal. So I decided not to learn how to read, so that Mother would have to go on reading bedtimes stories to me every night.

(Skvorecky, 2000)

Abstract. In this paper, I reflect upon two case studies of children's progressive mastery of semiotic means, by Srivastava, Budwig and Narashiman (this volume) and Pinto, Accorti and Cameron (this volume). I first highlight their shared meta-theoretical assumptions – primacy of semiosphere, non linearity of development and social origin of psychological processes. I then identify three theoretical issues raised by the case studies and their analysis: the danger of a rigid understanding of socialisation, the possible limits of ternary analyses and the disconnection between analysis of micro-processes of development and of life trajectories. To overcome these issues, I finally propose a *mîdrange* model, which highlights the emotional nature of interactions and the sense-making in the construction of semiotic mastery.

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Introduction

In the introduction to this Yearbook, the editors raise a series of issues which set the frame in which the papers collected in the section should be read. The goal of this publication is thus to contribute to a general theory of development. Expanding through abduction, this theory would draw from the one hand on a reflection on the rules of psychological development and on the other from a reflection on the phenomenon (Salvatore & Valsiner, this volume). However, theoretical advances require not only that one articulates general assumptions with local cases, but also to develop midrange descriptions and analyses that enable one to establish links between the empirical cases, and to circulate from data to general principles and back again to data. The different levels of description have for example been articulated in hierarchical systems (Valsiner, 2007).

This section of the yearbook has been specifically named "Life Trajectories." It is based on two case studies on children's progressive mastery of the semiotic means offered by their environment. These two papers have been strongly theoretically informed. The challenge for a discussant is thus to offer a midrange explanation that enables both to articulate two case studies of micro-interactions to a more general understanding of life trajectories and through this, to relate the two papers.

Case studies for a developmental psychology

One way to start an abductive reasoning based on two case studies is to highlight a few general theoretical assumptions. These define the sort of objects at stake. They must also find a translation in the two case studies; without such principles, the case studies become incommensurable. I highlight here principles formulated by Vygotsky and recalled by Salvatore and Valsiner (this volume), which define the specificity of the sort of developmental psychology done here.

Shared theoretical assumption

First, a primordial attention is given to the semiosphere – the circulation of signs that mediate the relationship between humans and their environment and that enable the elaboration of meaning both within the person, and among people and groups of people, in time and space. In the two studies, this priority is actualized as an attention to the dynamics of communication between children and adults, to their verbal and non verbal modes of expressing their ideas and to their progressive mastery of culturally established forms of uses of semiotics systems (using transitive verbs and using a book to read a story).

Secondly, these papers admit the non linearity of development: a given ability – e.g. reading – can be acquired through different pathways, in different moments of a person's life. For example, in some families, an adult reading a book to a child em-

phases the actual narrative, while in others, the adult emphasises the correspondence between represented images and words (Pinto, Accorti & Cameron, this volume). Yet in both cases the children eventually learn to read the story written and depicted in a book. Similarly, through different pathways, partly depending on parental patterns of communication, children eventually all learn to master transitive and intransitive Hindi grammatical constructions (Srivastava, Budwig & Narasimhan, this volume).

Thirdly, these cases very clearly illustrate the social origin of psychological processes. These two studies explore how children learn to master a form of verb in one case, or to read books in the other, in interactions with adults. Through interactions, they come to progressively master the socially shared ways of using words to construct grammatically admitted sentences, or to use books and words written in them in a manner which resembles reading. Hence the authors seem to assume that children learn through their exposure to, imitation and exploration of ways of using semiotic means. These interactions appear oriented towards an implicit goal: the mastery of a shared semiotic system and its appropriate use together with an understanding of this shared meaning.

Theoretical issues

Because these studies share a set of meta-theoretical rules, they can be brought together. We then work with the idea that they can be seen as actualizations of some more general principles yet to be identified. These principles can be inferred through comparisons of case studies, but also, they can be highlighted thanks to pre-existing theoretical reflections and studies. Drawing on such work, I propose to highlight three issues raised by the two papers, issues that will bring me to a further elaboration.

First, these two case studies rely on observations of mediated interactions. Researchers in developmental psychology might have two main reasons to observe interactions. One is methodological: since it is impossible to observe thinking as it occurs "in the head" of people, observing discourse gives access to externalizations of these contents. The other reason to observe interaction is theoretical: according to the assumption that psychological processes are initially social, observing interactions is a way to observe ontogenetic phenomenon as they occur, during their micro-genetic actualization. The two studies in this section seem to be in the second case – assuming that the phenomena observed are actually sequences within the developmental trajectory of the person (the child, but it might be added, also the parent). Even more, the authors seem to assume that the nature of the interaction is a constituent of the modalities of the mastery of the semiotic system observed. In Pinto, Accorti and Cameron (this volume), children are observed as interacting with the book in the same way their parents do. Because parents have different modes of relating to books – emphasizing narratives vs. images, for example – we might think that children in different families acquire specific modes of relating to books, or more generally, specific social or cultural *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). Similarly, Srivastava, Budwig and Narasimhan (this volume) indicate that children develop different relationship to verbs according to the grammatical mode preferentially promoted by the adults that interact with them. Accord-

ing to such observations, interfamily or inter-cultural variations are likely to affect the modality of acquisitions or display of a specific skill. In other words, the researchers seem to assume that there is a strong correspondence between the modalities of a social interaction and the modalities of an intrapersonal use of a semiotic tool.

This raises the traditional question of whether or not this promotes a rigid version of socialization as transmission. One way to refute such a view is to recall the non linearity of development: although the ways differ, these children will all eventually develop a relative mastery of a given aspect of a semiotic system. Another view that refutes this assumption is to emphasize that, through socialization, there is also internalization – which is largely invisible, yet demands a transformation of the structure of understanding (Toomela, 1996; Valsiner 1998 for a debate). A third way to answer is to show one of the limits of the model of interaction suggested so far.

Therefore, the second issue regards the underlying implicit model of an interaction used by these two case studies. They seem to be based on a triadic description: a child, an adult and a book or verbal structure are united in an interaction; the adult uses the book or the structure and so does the child; the adult incites or canalizes the child's relationship to the semiotic object and so on. However, in a triadic relationship, the object at stake seems to be "the same" for the child and the adult; the model emphasises shared intersubjectivity, not the fact that the child's perspective might largely differ from the adult's. This also hides the fact that the child and parents' perspectives might differ from that of the researcher. The confusion of perspectives has been identified by William James long time ago as the "psychologists' fallacy" (James, 1890, p. 196) – and a triadic model does not necessarily helps avoiding it. How can we avoid such confusion and account for the child's perspective on the object?

The third issue concerns the place of the developmental dynamics identified by Srivastava, Budwig and Narasimhan and Pinto, Accorti and Cameron (this volume) in the overall trajectory of a person. The underlying epistemological question is, how can the micro-analysis of interactions of two-and-half years old children with their caregivers be part of a general understanding of development in the life trajectory?

Extending the implicit midrange model

The sequence of the Skvorecky autobiography at the head of this paper has the merit to depict the vividness of a scene of storytelling between a mother and a child. The scene emphasizes a few aspects generally lost in psychological accounts: the emotional quality of the situation (the child is terrified and so happy), the sense it has for the child (which is not the one it has for the adult) and the importance, for the child, to have an exclusive relationship to an adult – the mother seems to respect and feed her son's love for stories and need for exclusive company...

In order to account for the progressive mastery of a semiotic system by a child, we need to consider not only the child, the adult and the object (triadic description) but we also have to take in account the particular value that this object has for that child, in that occasion. A more complex figure than a triangle is required (Zittoun *et al.*,

2007) if we want to account for her personal reconstruction of the object. One possible solution is to create a prism-like figure (Zittoun, 2006) with, as poles, the *child* (as the centre of attention), the *adult*, the *object* about which it is discussed together with its socially shared meaning, and as a fourth pole, the *sense that the object* (or the other or the situation) has for the child. This figure can account for the child's perspective – and for the fact that his experience of the situation is not identical to the one intended by the adult, or assumed by the researcher. The *sense for child* pole designates the personal reading, echo, emotions, values, biographical anchorage, of the situation. The way the adult's words or usages are going to be internalized is always mediated by this "internal" resonance of the object. In this figure, the *child – adult* side designates the interpersonal relationship taking place and the *child – sense for child* side designates the intrapersonal dynamics taking place. Note that the intrapersonal phase does not simply follow the interpersonal *child-other* phase of the interaction; rather, any relationship to an *object* is doubly mediated by these two relationships. Thus, an object is never straightforwardly internalized as intended by the adults (if it would be the case, children raised by the same teacher in the same classroom would all acquire the same skills...).

Personal sense and emotion

Through this model, other aspects of the case studies come to the fore. This personal sense can be described as value or emotion laden. In the Skvorecky case, it is not because Joey does not have the ability to understand the meaning of written words that he does not learn to read: it is because he does want to preserve the very special moment during which his beloved mother is there only for him. Learning to read – the mastery of a semiotic system – is an experience located in the flow of life. It is never fully detached from conscious and unconscious motives. Emotional processes are also part of the constitution of sign use, as Salvatore and Valsiner emphasise (this volume).

In Pinto, Accorti and Cameron (this volume), the little girl who is read a story by her grandmother follows it with excitement and asks for the story to be reread again: it seems indeed that the story has "caught" the girl, has some particular sense for her. These aspects are ignored if the situation is read through the lenses of a triadic mode which emphasizes the mastery of the *shared meaning* of the object, which is somehow seen as equivalent to the object. A prism model sees these manifestations as part of the more *personal sense* that the object have for the child.

Similarly, in Srivastava, Budwig and Narasimhan (this volume), meaning making is described in pragmatic and semantic terms. Children thus seem to use transitive constructions mostly to describe animate subjects in control acts (e.g., child says to mother, "you hold it (the doll)") and intransitive construction to speak about the environment blocking the achievement of some goal set by them (e.g., a child that cannot open a box says, "it doesn't open"). Of course, both the pragmatic function (the function of the verb in the sentence) and the semantic function of the transitive and intransitive constructions differ. Yet one might also wonder how it feels for a child to meet a world that obeys to one's desire, or at the contrary, that resists. In that perspective, a transitive verb marks one's own potency and ability to achieve goals, while intransitive forms pro-

fects self narcissistically: for a child, they might enable to preserve the idea that it is not I who failed achieving a goal, it is the world that resisted. Such construction could thus be another form of what Piaget called “magical thinking” (Piaget, 2003) - conferring a quasi-intentionality to things. More simply, without inferring that the child thinks that the box has an intention, the child might thus be expressing that his intention has been frustrated, *as-if* the objects had wanted it. What this tentative analysis suggests is that a semantic and pragmatist description of the progressive mastery of a semiotic system might gain from an analysis of the sense that the sign acquire for a child in a particular situation.

In other words, analysing such cases with an attention to dynamics of sense might enable to identify the emotional component of sense, that is, of the child’s active negotiation and reconstruction of shared uses and meaning of semiotic systems.

The configuration of mediated interactions

Modelled though a prism, mediated interactions can then be observed in their various configurations. More specifically, it becomes possible to distinguish these situations along their emotional qualities, or according to the importance that adults give to the child’s perspective.

In the observations by Pinto, Accorti and Cameron (this volume), indications regarding physical distances and emotional attunement are reported. A child is thus said to sit on her grandmother’s lap, another sits next to the adult on a sofa, while another child stands in front of the adult who tells her a story; some children maintain eye contact with the adult, the others share attention on the book, sometimes using fingers to point at a specific aspect. This means that the physical experience of these three children is different and that the mediating role of the book is different as well. In some other cases the adult tells narrative sequences of the story, completed by the child (“and here arrives”...“the badger”...), while in others, the adult asks questions answered by the child (“where is the cow?”, “here.”) (this has been shown to be highly dependent on culture-specific narrative styles, Heath 1994; Ochs & Capps, 2002). Finally, in some cases the adult seems available to the child’s desire to hear the same story over and over again (see Miller *et al.*, 1993), while in other cases the adult seems more in position of deciding what story should be read and when.

Thus, in relational terms, while there is in some cases a shared attention on an object (child and adult develop the same perspective on the object), in other cases there are complementary perspectives: what the sitting adult sees is not what the standing child sees. In the case of physical proximity or contact, emotional empathy might be stronger than when the bodies are in a distal position. Then, when the child is being asked to answer a question, he is not in the same agentic position than when he participates to the construction of the narration. Also, when the child can choose to hear again a story she knows by heart, she experiences the special attention that the adult confers to her needs. Thus, we suggest, by expanding our observation of the interactive structure taking place into a prism-like figure, we come to realise that these situations

can be understood as very different configurations: in some cases, the adult acknowledges and gives a space for the “sense for the child” that the situation or the object has, while in others, this is not the case.

Research in early development (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002) child’s acquisition of semiotic systems (Nelson, 2007), or clinical psychology (Tisseron, 2000) suggest that that particular dimension – the acknowledgement by the adult of the children’s sense and emotion – play a capital role in their progressive mastery of semiotic systems.

Micro-interactions in life trajectories

If one admits the importance of emotionally laden events in the constitution of a memory in the flux of experience, as well as the fact that learning requires the constant evolution of similar but not identical patterns through time (van Geert, 2003), then analysis in terms of these prism-like configurations might contribute to identify emotionally laden situations which might have a long-time canalising role in the development of the person.

Incidentally, as Skvorecky’s biography suggests, the special emotional quality of reading a book with an adult brought him to develop a long-standing privileged, socially situated relationship with books, as a writer and then as a professor of literature. In a more systematic manner, reconstructive case stories (Zittoun, 2006; *in press*) suggest that the space given to children’s personal sense in an interactive situation might have long term consequences in the persons’ later uses of semiotic objects and systems. For example, a person that develops a privileged relationship to paintings through her mother’s shared passion, can have this basic configuration evolve into a privileged relationship to paintings with a teacher and eventually, with that teacher, into an interest for etching.

One way to reconnect micro-interactions to a lifelong trajectory is thus to describe them with the help of a midrange model which enables to compare moments disjoint in time, while accounting for change and continuity in a life trajectory.

How can case studies of interactions participate to an understanding of life trajectories?

Three main ways of addressing the links between local descriptions and lifelong trajectories can be recalled.

A classical way is to see local situations as they take place among a diversity of comparable situations captured over the lifetime. These situations can be reduced to simple dimensions that can be compared; on the basis of average configurations, local situations give rise to predictions of possible development. Linking microanalysis to life trajectories through predictive reasoning based on average trajectories raises many theoretical and methodological problems (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005; Valsiner, 2006). I

will highlight only one. If we admit the plurality of life trajectories, than we have to reject predictions to avoid internal contradiction. It is thus not possible to assume that some people showing greater vivacity as young children (e.g., “healthy children” in Pinto, Accorti & Cameron, this volume) will develop “better” than others – after all, more than one sickly, unpromising child did develop in a great scientist.

A second way to articulate microgenesis and life-long development is to admit that local situations are connected to general development, as any local situation is an instantiation of a general meta-theoretical developmental principle. For example, any interaction requires semiotic elaboration, and semiotic elaboration is one of the main process through which changes take place. This might enable to see what is developing in a given situation; it does not enable to timely connect the present situation to a future situation in the same life trajectory.

The third way is the one followed here: it is to identify midrange models, which connect a close description of case-study data with general theoretical principles that are robust enough to account for two situations distant in time in the same life trajectory and that can highlight aspects both of continuity and change. Thus, this commentary ends with a call: that for using and developing midrange models to articulate and connect a diversity of empirical cases – which is the only way through which these might develop and through which general theoretical models might acquire some heuristic power. As children, scientists develop their mastery of semiotic tools - that are theories - through local practices...

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Biosketch

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