



## Both dialogic and dialectic: “Translation at the crossroads”

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### ABSTRACT

Wertsch's sociocultural anthropology, grounded in a theory of mind which owes much to the ideas of Vygotsky and Bakhtin, has enabled a rich understanding of classroom learning in terms of 'growing semiotic control' and 'mastery of the mediational means'. This paper evaluates a recent argument by Wegerif that Wertsch's approach cannot do full justice to the theorising of creative emergence. Through examination of moments of creativity in two secondary school poetry lessons, it is suggested that Wegerif's critique is based on a one-sided view of the dialectic as “a dynamic form of logic leading all apparent differences to be subsumed into identity” and an underestimation of its analytic value. Post-modernist focus on the quality of dialogue at the expense of dialectical models of analysis could tend to undervalue important forms of extended classroom ‘talk for learning’ whose dialectic and dialogic functions are closely intertwined.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Sociocultural theory of mind

In a series of influential books and articles, the American academic, James Wertsch, has argued that human thinking is embedded in mediated socio-cultural activity and is fundamentally heterogeneous. He compares our capacity for thinking to a ‘tool kit’ which contains psychological tools including speech genres and social languages (Wertsch, 1991). In his first major work, *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind*, he explained internalization as a process of ‘growing semiotic control’ (Wertsch, 1985). In later books, he shifted to a broader understanding of learning as ‘mastery of the mediational means’ and dropped the term ‘internalization’ which he had come to regard as a metaphor with unhelpful ‘spatial’ connotations (Wertsch, 1991, 1998). By ‘mediational means’, he meant the tools and artifacts, including language, which shape human action.

Wertsch (1991) concluded that it is not fruitful to consider thinking in relation to internal structures and mental processes at all. Thinking is a social process rather than an internal essence and he adopted the Bakhtinian term ‘appropriation’ as a metaphor which could avoid the *impasse* of inner-outer dualism. Wertsch (1993) also conceded that some of his earlier formulations of learning in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) tended to represent the child too much as “a passive recipient of socialization influences” (p.170) and was now more inclined to regard such learning as an active process of constructive transformation rather than as a passive acceptance of cultural transmission from teacher to learner. He saw learning in the ZPD as a series of mutual transformations between person and culture, which both expert and novice initiate, involving mediation processes which can be effectively explained in terms of Bakhtin's categories, for example, appropriation, ventriloquation and echoing. Through such semiotic devices, learners actively reconstruct and transform culturally and historically ‘given’ materials.

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This is not therefore the 'unidirectional teleology' of the ZPD, which many scholars have seen as a weakness in Vygotsky's writing, where novices are expected to mechanically adopt the situation definitions of experts (e.g. Elbers, Maier, Hoekstra, & Hoogsteder, 1992; Valsiner & Van der Veer, 1993). It is a more open, non-transmissive view of cognitive development and enculturation. A particular feature of Wertsch's account which has inspired many students and scholars lies in his synthesizing of ideas from Bakhtin and Vygotsky. In the introduction to *Voices of the Mind*, he explains that his approach is based on principles shared by both, for example, that individual mental functioning originates in social communicative processes and that mental action can only be understood semiotically (Wertsch, 1991, pp.12–13). He also explains that, methodologically, he intends to start with study of Vygotsky's writings and then incorporate "some of Bakhtin's ideas, in particular, *utterance, voice, social language and dialogue*, to extend Vygotsky's claims about the mediation of human activity by signs" (Wertsch, 1991, p.17).

Underpinning Wertsch's socio-cultural analysis, therefore, is a belief that the views of Bakhtin and Vygotsky, while formulated from different standpoints, can enhance each other; although different, they are not in conflict. Bakhtin's sociological account of discourse can serve to illuminate the semiotic processes of human interaction. A Bakhtinian explanation of learning as the reaccentuation of the meanings of other 'social voices' is rich with analytical possibility. There is a fundamental consistency between many of the concepts in Bakhtin's writing and Vygotsky's theory of mediated action, that through semiotic encounters with adults and more able peers in the ZPD, we appropriate new ideas. In highlighting the active, responsive role of dialogical participants and, consequently, the active nature of internalization, Bakhtin's conceptual framework can enrich Vygotsky's own view of the role of sign systems, including language, in psychological functioning.

## 1.2. From dialectic to dialogic

As one of a thought-provoking collection of papers on the dialogic theory of learning (Koschmann, 2011), Wegerif, however, seeks to challenge what he regards as a mistaken assumption in Wertsch's version of sociocultural theory that Vygotsky's 'dialectic' and Bakhtin's 'dialogic' are somehow compatible (Wegerif, 2011). From the standpoint of 'dialogue as an end in itself', he offers a critique of Wertsch's vision of education as 'learning to use cultural tools'. He also rejects the view that Vygotsky's dialectical account of the mediation of thinking and learning through tool-use is compatible with Bakhtin's account of thinking as 'mediated' by the perspectives of others. He argues that dialectic and dialogic methods reflect two different paradigms with distinctive ontological assumptions. Whereas Bakhtin's dialogic method "refers to the interanimation of real voices where there is no necessary 'overcoming' or 'synthesis'", Vygotsky's dialectic, while giving a role to dialogue,

"attempts to integrate real dialogues and struggles into a logical story of development leading to unity either in the 'Absolute Notion' of Hegel or the rational society under global communism of Marx" (Wegerif, 2011, p.202).

Wegerif's postmodernist analysis follows Bakhtin (1986, p.147) in construing the dialectic as disguised monologue:

"The argument is that the 'other' which often appears in the dialectic algorithm, is not genuinely other at all but merely a prop for the development and expansion of the 'self', in the form of a totalising system of explanation and control" (Wegerif, 2011, p.203).

Wegerif's critique of the dialectic is ethically driven and consonant with Lévinas's rejection of the 'totalising systems' of western rationalism. He embraces Lévinas's assertion of the infinity of the ethical relationship which grounds morality in our responsibility for the other and which is inherent in our subjective being-in-the-world (Lévinas, 1989). There is a resonance between Lévinas's argument that ethics originates in our subjective experience of the encounter with the 'other' and Bakhtin's linking of the ethical with the prosaic (Morson & Emerson, 1990, pp.25–26).

From the standpoint of this ethical understanding of dialogue as an end in itself and the dialogic as an ontological principle, Wegerif proceeds to evaluate the Vygotskian arguments of Wertsch and Kazak (2011a) in their position paper. He views as one-sided the claim that a key goal of classroom instruction should be to help students to become fluent users of sign systems and questions the suggestion that this amounts to "a sort of "taming" or "domestication" of novices' interpretations of the world" (p.155). Contrasting classroom case studies in the position paper show how small groups of young students learn to use graph paper as a 'thinking device' to understand the effect of light on the growth of plants. Wertsch and Kazak conclude from their analysis of a series of interactions within these case studies that collective engagement with such cultural tools, initially beyond their understanding, can, with or without the support of effective teachers, enable novices to say more than they know. They argue that it is desirable for students, through the mediation of cultural tools, to be enabled to say and do things that seem to go beyond their existing levels of understanding because this "means they can enter into a basic form of intersubjectivity with more experienced teachers and experts and thereby leverage their way up through increasing levels of expertise" (p.157).

Wegerif's resistance to this argument lies partly in a suspicion that any domestication of children's imaginations will limit their creative potentiality. His alternative account of 'education into dialogue' aims to liberate learners beyond mere socialization and he seeks to "challenge the idea that dialogues in education can be adequately studied through a focus on mediation"

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