



Investigating the development of consciousness through *ostensions toward oneself* from the onset of the use-of-object to first words



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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the development of consciousness in a pragmatic and semiotic perspective. Grounded in Vygotsky's pivotal cultural-historical conception of sign, the role of nonverbal signs through ostensions involving an object that infants address to themselves is investigated, evidencing the link between the material world and the development of the human psyche. The main functions of such ostensions which have been identified are presented and an analysis of the meaning-making processes underlying these functions is suggested.

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Consciousness is reflected in the word, as the sun is reflected in a droplet of water. The word is related to consciousness as a miniature world is related to a large one, as a living cell is related to an organism, as an atom to the cosmos. It is a miniature world of consciousness. The meaningful world is a microcosm of human consciousness.

Vygotsky, 1934; quoted by Wertsch, 1985, p. 194.

One of the main insights of Vygotsky was to highlight the role of signs in psychological development. Through the choice of word meaning, Vygotsky sets up the principle of a non-dualistic approach allowing a dynamic access to consciousness where both *mediation* and *constitution* (Leitch, 2011) processes are considered and articulated as a whole. In this chapter, we will focus on another semiotic issue that still remains to be investigated in a culture-based conception of development. It concerns the study of the formation of consciousness through infants' *nonverbal signs toward oneself*. More specifically, ostensions involving an object that infants address to themselves are of special interest for studying the link between consciousness and social practices grounded in the material world before language.

We will first pose the question of consciousness as a social formation in Vygotsky's works. We will then outline the heuristics of the Vygotskian semiotic conception of development that we propose to enlarge to the study of consciousness before language. Ostensions toward oneself employing the object redefined in its conventional uses highlight the role of the material world in the formation of consciousness prior to language. After this, we will present the research question and the hypotheses, followed by the methodology. Finally, an illustration of our microgenetic pragmatic and semiotic analysis will be shown through four paradigmatic examples.

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1. Vygotsky and the problem of consciousness

The term *consciousness* [*conscientia* in Latin] literally means *sharing knowledge* (Simha, 2004). In *The Scriptures* (St. Paul to the Romans, 2, 15–16, [The Jerusalem Bible, 1956](#)), the inner sight (or self-reflection) is inconceivable without the *mediation* of the law or of the Word which is also *constitutive* of the reflection. In these historical definitions (Simha, 2004), we can notice a certain analogy to Vygotsky's conception of consciousness. Thus for Vygotsky:

far from it being a special, private, inner theatre or workshop of the mind, [. . .the] emergence [of consciousness] depends completely on the intertwining or intermingling of our “inner lives” with the “inner” lives of those around us (Shotter, 2006 p. 13).

Early in his career, in the celebrated lecture *consciousness as a problem of the psychology of behavior* (1925/1999), Vygotsky provides a first theoretical sketch of his conception of consciousness, arguing that its study constitutes the central purpose of psychology. Although still employing a behaviorist perspective at that time, he suggests a non-dualistic approach to consciousness where psychological functions and social relationships can be regarded as two sides of the same coin (Sève, 2002), suggesting “that consciousness is [. . .] a social contact with oneself” (Vygotsky, 1925/1999, p. 12), “an experiencing of experiences, i.e., a redoubled¹ experience” (Vygotsky, 1925/1999, p. 12) which may have “infinite varied degrees” (p. 12). In the same article, inspired by James (1904), the characterization of consciousness as a function becomes of particular value to Vygotsky, making it accessible through practical human activity.

At the end of his career, in *thought and language* (1934/1986), Vygotsky moves to a semiotic definition of consciousness, determining the basic unit of analysis of “word meaning” to approach consciousness, grounding his proposal in the well-known water metaphor. In a brilliant exegesis of Vygotsky's works, and responding to Wertsch's contestation of this unit as a means to study consciousness (Wertsch, 1985), Leitch (2011) (see also Moro, 1998, 2000) argues in favor of Vygotsky's reliance on such a unity, re-reading and connecting his work to the German psycholinguistic tradition (distinct from the Marxist tradition) exemplified in the works of Hegel and Herder, stating that:

human consciousness is formed through linguistic interactions, and the language which constitutes consciousness is therefore always a part of it, unable to be separated (Leitch, 2011, p. 306).

In this way, Leitch argues that the unit of analysis of “word meaning” both *mediates* and *constitutes* consciousness. However, the second part of the analysis (how meaning constitutes consciousness) is largely neglected by contemporary research.

For Vygotsky (1934/1986), “word meaning” is at the core of the dynamic of consciousness and offers a means to analyze qualitative changes occurring in the interrelationships between psychological functions. Vygotsky views consciousness as a process of selection (Vygotsky, 1925/1971; Vygotsky, 1927/1987) as had already been proposed by James (Driver, 2001), from whose argument Vygotsky draws his inspiration.

In so defining the problem of consciousness, Vygotsky distinguishes his approach from mentalist reduction of consciousness to mental states and to a notion of an internal and private landscape (Shotter, 2006).

2. Object pragmatics and the advent of communication before language

In this section, we will extend the analysis of consciousness as a social phenomenon to the period before language. Recent studies in what is termed object pragmatics (e.g., Moro, 2011; Moro & Rodríguez, 2005), inspired by Vygotsky's framework, have demonstrated that development is semiotically oriented in the preverbal period through the public meanings related to the appropriation of the conventional uses of objects,² evidencing the link between the material world and psychological development (see also Sinha, 1988, 2005). Consequently, sign and meaning are (re) placed at the core of psychological development before language.

An unexpected result that emerged from these studies was that when infants acquire the conventional uses of the objects, they also become able to produce signs (mainly nonverbal) that were initially produced by surrounding adults to transmit the conventional uses of the objects to them. These signs are produced either toward other people³ or toward oneself.⁴ The main hypothesis concerning these unexpected results is that the child's appropriation of public meanings related to the conventional use of the objects leads to the development of the child's communication in both modalities (Moro, 2000).⁵

New studies have therefore been conducted in which, on the one hand, the link between the appropriation of conventional uses of the objects and the advent of intentional communication toward other people has been demonstrated in 8–16 month-old infants (Dimitrova, 2012; Dimitrova & Moro, 2013); and, on the other hand, for the same age range, the role of

¹ Translation of Veresov modified by Joanne Deller, translator of the present chapter.

² At 7 months, infants use the objects in an undifferentiated manner (e.g., mouthing, banging the objects, etc.) while at 13 month-old, they use them according to their conventional use (e.g., putting the peg in the correct hole in a sorter box). At 10 months, they use the objects in a proto-conventional manner revealing an initial understanding of the conventional uses of the objects (e.g., putting the peg in a hole, but not the correct one).

³ These results are in line with the onset age of gesture production (Bates, Camaioni, & Volterra, 1975; Volterra et al., 2005).

⁴ See Vygotsky's pivotal conception of the sign, inspired from Yakubinsky (1923), cited by Wertsch (1985).

⁵ In Vygotsky's works, « sign meaning » is defined as the unit of analysis of psychological development and consciousness in ontogenesis.

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