

WORD MEANING IS IMPORTANT A RESPONSE TO W.-M. ROTH & Þ. JÓHANNSDÓTTIR ON PEREZHIVANIE

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Abstract. This paper is written in response to a paper which exhibits all the confusion in the English-speaking world surrounding the key concepts of Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory. Rather than engaging in a point-by-point critique, just 10 topics have been selected for clarification.

Keywords: Vygotsky; perezhivanie; unit of analysis; category; concepts; activity.

The following observations are made in response to Roth and Jóhannsdóttir's article [1] with the aim of clarifying certain word meanings and concepts which have become intolerably confused, at least among English speakers.

1. Perezhivanie as a word in the English language (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 1)

In English, the use of definite or indefinite articles (a, an, the), pronouns like 'this' and 'that' or plurals, are unambiguous signals that the noun is a count noun, not a mass noun, some finite entity, not a continuum. The Russian language does not use definite or indefinite articles, so in appropriating a Russian word into the English language, and thereby giving perezhivanie an English meaning, the writer has to make a decision as to whether 'perezhivanie' is a count noun or a mass noun and use it in accordingly. Many English nouns are either mass nouns or count nouns according to context, but will have quite different meanings in each case. "Tool" is a count noun, as in "I have three tools." "Equipment" is a mass noun, so if you say "I have three equipments" it just sounds silly. You should say: "I have three tools," or "I have three pieces of equipment." "Experience" (as opposed to "experiences" or "that experience" or "an experience") is a mass noun, whereas in the other instances it is a count noun. In English, the mass noun "experience" and the count noun "an experience" have quite different meanings. As a mass noun, "experience" means the passive background to life, the basic concept of Empiricism, and as such can have no affective content. As a count noun, it means a significant, probably emotion-laden, unexpected or revealing interaction of some kind. This is what John Dewey meant in his 1934 essay "Having An Experience." When "perezhivanie" is

translated into English as “experience” (not “an experience” or “experiences,” etc.) then it is a mass noun, i.e., the basic concept of Empiricism.

Every native English speaker recognises the difference between count and mass nouns, but very few English speakers are consciously aware of the distinction; this is generally known only to experts in English grammar. Ordinary native English-speakers will become aware of the difference when, for example, a Russian speaker says “Word meaning is unit of intellect,” because “unit” can only be a count noun and the correct expression is “Word meaning is a unit of the intellect.” Even though the native English speaker will always use such nouns correctly, they do it without conscious awareness of the grammatical rule implicit in the usage. Given that the count/mass distinction is not made explicit in Russian grammar and native English speakers are generally unaware of the distinction, it is not surprising that native Russian-speakers will say things like: “Unit of consciousness is perezhivanie.” However, when a native English-speaker emulates this broken English they reveal that they do not understand the meaning of the word “unit,” which is itself a count noun, and only count nouns can be units. It makes no difference if the neolog “experiencing” is used instead of appropriating perezhivanie. As a neolog, “experiencing” can be count or mass according to its usage, and being simply a translation of perezhivanie, those who use it always use it as a mass noun thereby depriving the word ‘unit’ of its meaning – both the scientific sense in which Vygotsky used it, and the everyday sense. And English-speakers are often quite ready to believe that Vygotsky was an Empiricist who used words like “unit” in an idiosyncratic manner.

2. “Category” and “kategoria” (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 1). The idiosyncratic use of “category” in English, to refer to some kind of dramatic event or clash of personalities, we owe to Nikolai Veresov [2]. Veresov has convinced some people that “category” has this meaning, even though no-one else ever knew about it and Veresov is wrong in attributing this idiosyncratic meaning to Vygotsky. I think Vygotsky is quite unambiguous in his use of “category” in the ordinary philosophical sense, in Chapter 7 of “Thinking and Speech” [3]. But Veresov is not as wrong as it at first sight appears, nor as correct as Roth believes. The solution to the riddle lies in etymology.

Originally there was a Greek word κατηγορία. This word merged three meanings which have given rise to three distinct words in the English language. In ancient Greece, κατηγορία meant a predicate, that is, something which is attributed to a subject. For Aristotle, logic, natural science and grammar were not distinct disciplines: the world existed just as it was cognised and expressed in language. Within his Rhetoric, κατηγορία took on a distinct meaning: κατηγορία and απολογία were a pair of opposite modes

of speech; one speaker accuses (ascribes a predicate to) the other (κατηγορία) and the other defends themselves (ἀπολογία). In the development of logic, beginning from the idea of κατηγορία as a predicate of a subject, Kant took 'category' (the transliteration of κατηγορία) to be a fundamental concept from which other concepts derived meaning. In positivist and everyday usage this then took on the common meaning of a 'pigeon hole' into which things are categorised. The Kantian sense of the word 'category' continued in philosophy after Kant but was given a different, critical content by Hegel and thus Marx, but is still evocative of the Kantian meaning. In grammar, the Latin translation of the Greek κατεγορία, 'predicate', has taken over this meaning, although 'predicate' still carries the more or less obsolete meaning of 'accusation' and is cognate with 'predicament'. English speakers will be familiar with the word apologia, but very few know that apologia is the opposite of kategoria.

So Veresov [2] may be quite correct in claiming that 'kategoria' (spelt this way in English when indicating the term in rhetoric) was appropriated for Russian drama theory by Meierhold, but there is no extant evidence to support this claim. Most Russian speakers would be surprised to hear that 'kategoria' has this meaning in Russian, but one needs to ask a Russian expert in Rhetoric. It is a plausible claim and anyone who wants to build a theory of personality development around kategoria and apologia has a valid foundation. Further, I think there are aspects of Vygotsky's thinking which would be open to such an interpretation. However, I have seen nothing in Vygotsky's writing to substantiate the claim that he used the word in this way. But apart from all this, the word in English is "kategoria," not "category."

3. Continuous and discrete development (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 6). The observation that Vygotsky understood perezhivanie as a unit of personal development, draws our attention to the fact that if all units are count nouns, how then is it possible to understand continuous development? It also raises the philosophical problem of the supposed dichotomy of discrete and continuous development. Is this just a question of the speed of development? Although Vygotsky did talk of periods of gradual development taking place within a stable social situation of development, and development occurring during periods of crisis during which the social situation of development is transformed, it would be a mistake to suppose that gradual development is a continuous and not a discrete process. In the case of continuous development, we would have to suppose that a person undergoes development even while they are asleep and consequently it would draw into question whether the actions of those responsible for assisting a person's development have any role in the process at all. Development may be gradual but it is still composed of a great many discrete 'leaps'. What is gradual about the process is that the social situation of development (predic-

ament) remains stable. Generally speaking (though not universally), the critical phase of development is characterised by the person adopting a subject position which is in conflict with the subject-position implicit in the activity of those with whom the person is collaborating. This is what generates the contradiction: everyone changes their activity, the subject makes a development, the social situation is transformed and the new subject-position must be re-stabilised in a series of 'minor crises'. It is also possible that the crises could be generated externally by a transformation of the social environment, but this is not the archetype of Vygotsky's conception of personal development in a social situation. Where external changes force a person to adapt to a new environment we have the situation just as it is understood by ordinary empirical and behavioural psychology.

4. Units of the process and units of the end-product (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 1). Are perezhivaniya units of consciousness or units of personality development? The point is that consciousness, as the end-product of a process of personality development can only be understood in and through its history or development. So if a unit is to reveal to us the nature of consciousness, then it must already reveal to us the dynamics of its development, but to reveal to us the dynamics of personal development, perezhivaniya must be units of personality development. So the answer is both, necessarily. This also applies to word meaning, or any unit of analysis. Word meaning reveals to us the development of the intellect and consequently can function as a unit of intellectual activity, i.e., thinking. So how do "perezhivaniya" function as units of development? Because when confronted by a crisis of some kind, positive or negative, we 'must' change our social situation, either by modifying our own activity or by modifying the relevant aspects of the environment.

So what is the concept of 'perezhivanie' which we want to render in English? We cannot hope to transfer into English all the connotations which the word has acquired in Russian, so our aim must be to formulate an abstract concept, in the Hegelian sense, which can concretise itself through its interaction with the body of English-language cultural-psychological theory, thus producing a new, concrete concept expressed in the English language, different from but related to the Russian word, but nonetheless meaningful. Perezhivaniya are situations in which a subject finds themselves; these are not simply objective, because what is a boon for one person may be a disaster for another, or irrelevant to still another person; in other words, it is the significance, or if you like, the meaning (I think Lydia Bozhovich [4] is quite mistaken in her criticism of Vygotsky on this point), of the objective situation for the subject, insofar as it is relevant to their development, i.e., actually poses developmental tasks for the subject. The significance of a range of environmental conditions is not simply subjective. A person is not facing a

life and death situation just because they feel it to be so – the results of their actions depend on objective, material events and relations, not just the subject's beliefs; but nor is a situation simply objective. And (NB) nor is the social situation of development the entire global social and economic conditions simply added to a person's activity. The person's self-consciousness or identity as a person and their needs, selects, so to speak, the specific aspects of the environment or conjunction of factors which is problematic, and it is this conjuncture or situation or predicament which constitutes an experience in the relevant meaning.

It should be noted here that when we are speaking of the significance of features of the environment for the subject and how a subject 'understands' their situation, we do not suppose that this significance is grasped intellectually by the subject, any more than we ascribe intelligence to an animal that takes fright at the sound of an explosion, or an infant which cries when it's mother leaves the room. The subject perceives their situation in a manner appropriate to their own development and their needs at that stage of development.

But just to be faced with a developmental crisis does not in itself mean that a person makes a development. Development can only occur afterwards, as a result of the person working over the experience, integrating it into their personality, and successfully overcoming it, sublating it – the process which we call 'catharsis' [5]. We owe this observation particularly to Fedor Vasilyuk [6]. There is no English word which evokes both "an experience" and "the catharsis." *Perezhivaniya* are realised as personal development through catharsis. I suggest that English speakers use "*perezhivanie*" for the experience and "catharsis" for the working over, but in any case, we must be aware of the distinction.

5. Units, categories and elements (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 1). Although Vygotsky did not invent analysis by units, in Chapter 1 of *Thinking and Speech* [7] he introduced a new meaning for an existing term – 'unit of analysis' – a term already known to mainstream natural and social science, by giving it the critical Hegelian content of 'abstract concept'. Vygotsky was following Marx's lead. In the Preface to *Capital* Marx [8] said: "But in bourgeois society the commodity form of the product of labour – or the value form of the commodity – is the economic cell form." Note that the commodity is not the cell form of political economy but of bourgeois society, i.e., the market – not the science, but the phenomenon itself. In writing *Capital*, Marx began by identifying the primordial unit which exhibited all the essential properties of the market, and therefore of relations resting on the market. That is, the market is nothing but many exchanges of commodities. By analysing the internal contradiction contained within this relation, namely the non-coincidence of use-value and exchange-value, he was able to 'un-

fold' the entirety of the phenomena of bourgeois society and its development. It is this selection of a specific relation – not capital, not price, not labour, but the commodity relation – which is the insight which allows the writer to found a new science, which reveals the inner dynamics of the totality of a range of phenomena unified by this one finite relation.

Unit is a category in the normal Kantian philosophical sense; but 'category' in this sense, provided it is subject to Hegelian critique, can function as a unit only in a very specific sense, viz., a category is a unit of some theory or normative project. That is, a theory is made up of various fundamental concepts, or categories. But 'category' is not a synonym for 'unit'. Further, 'unit' is a relative term, that is, a unit of some complex process or whole. To say that something is a unit, full stop, is nonsense, but it is meaningful to say that something is a category because 'category' is not a relative term.

Famously, Vygotsky also contrasted 'units' with 'elements'. The elements of which water is composed are essentially diverse, viz., hydrogen and oxygen, and neither have the properties of water. The units of water are H_2O , which are of only one kind and is the smallest fragment of water which nonetheless remains water; a mass of water is just many H_2O units. So does this licence us to say that a person + their environment, each being elements, are, taken together, units of ... what? Let's say, of a social formation such as the economy or a nation-state. No. The 'environment' is already the entire social formation, not part of it. Is it to be the unit of that individual's consciousness? No. There are billions of events and relations in the environment which are insignificant for a person's development. A whole is made up of many, many such units. If the person + their social environment is one unit, what are all the other units which together make up the complex whole – the person's consciousness. "Unit of analysis" is not a synonym for the subject matter of interest, the whole; specifically, it is the negation of the subject matter of interest.

The 'germ-cell' and the 'unit of analysis' refer to the same entity. When we are considering how to analyse a complex process, we talk of the 'unit of analysis', the simplest unit such that the whole process is nothing other than a large number of such units. When we are considering the production of new phenomena within such a process (such as the growth of money and capital out of simple commodity exchange) and the scientific understanding of such phenomena, we talk of this same unit as a 'germ-cell'. This refers to the development of the unit itself in interaction with other processes. Hegel [9] deals with the emergence of the abstract concept (i.e., unit) in Volume 1 of the *Logic*, and the development of the abstract concept (i.e., germ-cell) in Volume 2 of the *Logic*.

6. Concepts and heaps (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 6). There is an idea that a unit must be "the smallest unit that still preserves the essential unity

and quality behind any complex activity,” [10] and that what this means is looking around to find everything which strikes the writer as being part of the essential unity of, say, a person’s development, and including it in the unit. This process is approached in much the same way that a person packs for going on a trip to the countryside, packing into their suitcase everything that they might need on their journey. Vygotsky called such concepts ‘heaps’, a type of infantile concept formation. When Marx sat down to write *Capital*, he did not run through everything that he could think of which might be relevant to bourgeois society – banks, money, workers, wage labor, production, technology, etc. etc. – and then invent a new word to carry the meaning of all these diverse relations packed together. No, from 1843 to 1859 he worked over his material before coming to the conclusion that the germ cell (or unit of analysis) was that one simple relation, an exchange of commodities. Making a start on a science, or even tackling the psychological development of one individual requires such an insight, and gathering together in a heap everything that might prove useful on the journey is no substitute for that insight. Science begins from that insight.

7. Open-ended totalities and concepts (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 6). Quite specifically, what science needs is a concept of its subject matter, not a description, but a concept of the subject matter. Like any person, a scientist is initially faced with a diversity of phenomena manifesting a loosely connected range of problems, and united by some abstract, contingent property. For example, faced with the inequality and exploitation of modern society, all the relevant phenomena appear to be united by money, or perhaps by capital or industrialisation. These are abstract general conceptions. Following Hegel, Marx showed how science had to work over this material to discover behind it that one simple abstract concept which can then form the foundation for rising again to the concrete with which he began, but now reconstructed in conceptual, scientific thought rather than in immediate perception. So open-ended totalities like ‘the environment’ or ‘the social and political conditions’ are useless. Such categories describe the problem, the starting point of investigation, not the abstract concept which is to function as a unit of analysis for the construction of a scientific perception of the complex whole. Philosophers and psychologists struggled for centuries to understand the nature of human intelligence. When Vygotsky selected ‘word meaning’ as a unit of analysis, he created a starting point for understanding the intellect; but the relation between thinking and speaking does not exhaust the phenomena normally recognized as ‘intelligence’. Once a unit of analysis is selected, the science which is constructed on that basis creates a new unity, uniting a distinct range of phenomena not identical with the range of phenomena which made the starting point of investigation. For example, slavery may have appeared alongside wage labour as part of the

problem, but once the concept of commodity was selected for analysis, slavery turned out to be a form of exploitation alien to bourgeois society, for which labour-power, not the labourer, is taken to be a commodity. Similarly, practical intelligence has different roots from the intellect, though both functions merge in the course of their development.

8. Intellect and affect, abstracted from an original unity (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 3). Wherever there is discussion about *perezhivanie* we hear about the unity of intellect and affect, and even “praxis, intellect and affect” and other arbitrary “unities.” Vygotsky’s starting point was in the analysis of actions, in particular, actions conceived as artefact-mediated actions, such as word meaning. This starting point is significant because it is prior to the abstraction of such partial aspects of action as affect and intellect. It is not a question of positing two abstractions – intellect and affect – and then packing them together into a newly-invented word and declaring it a unity. So long as our overall theoretical framework is grounded in a concept like action or *perezhivanie*, which are prior unities of all the various aspects of action, then we are in a position to abstract observations about such entities as affect and intellect. As to praxis, which is the Greek word for practice, this is a unity of consciousness and behaviour, each of which are concepts which may be abstracted from the observation of action. And all of them – praxis, affect and intellect – are mass nouns, unsuitable for use as units, either singly or together. To form a concept which is a prior unity is something quite different from taking two ready-made abstractions and adding them together. Generally speaking, the word for that prior unity already exists, but because of the nature of general, non-scientific discourse, it will exist side-by-side with concepts of a different level of generality. So the prior unity expressed in the concept has to be rigorously recovered from degradation it may have suffered in careless discourse. Nonetheless, even everyday discourse should recognise a word indicating a prior unity of diverse elements, so invented words should be used only as a last resort.

9. Transformative Activist Stance (TAS) is not adapting to the social environment (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir p. 3). Anna Stetsenko’s [11] concept of Transformative Activist Stance (TAS) also needs to be defended against Roth’s misrepresentation. This concept forms the foundation of Anna’s approach to psychotherapy, and stands in contrast to Adaption, that is, the stance in which a person simply accommodates or adapts to adverse social conditions. In TAS, with conscious awareness, the subject determines themselves as an agent of social change, taking moral responsibility to change the social situation in which they find themselves by changing the social conditions rather than adapting to them. This concept cannot be equated with a person’s adaptation to changed social conditions – it is the very opposite of TAS, and is the standpoint of Empiricism [12] and Behavioural Psychology [13].

10. Activity systems, activities and activity (Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, p. 3). There is one last, very longstanding problem to be attended to which has also arisen from the absence in the Russian language of the definite and indefinite article and the translation of concepts developed in Russian into English, without an appropriate definite or indefinite article. In this case the word, ‘activity’. The Google translator translates the title of A.N. Leontyev’s famous book as “Activities, Consciousness and Personality,” and this cleverly captures the meaning of the title better than the usual “Activity, Consciousness and Personality.” Unfortunately, Leontyev followed Vygotsky in the use of analysis by units very imperfectly, and what Leontyev meant by ‘activities’ could be better translated as ‘types of activity’, midway between a mass noun and a count noun, particular rather than either individual or universal. An analysis by units requires us to begin with activities as units of human life. ‘Activity’ is a generalised substance, not a unit, since it is a mass noun, simply indicating the materialist intent of the theory, but failing to give it a genuine scientific foundation worthy of Vygotsky’s legacy. In English, the units of activity are activities: ‘an activity’ is many actions sharing a common motive which differs from the aim of each action. It is understandable then that with invention of terms like ‘activity systems’ there was an effort to recover a count noun (i.e. ‘system’) for the unit of activity, but at the same time the idea of ‘unit’ has been lost, because a system is the complex whole itself, not a unit of the complex whole. In lieu of the smallest unit of a complex phenomenon we have a collection of all the diverse elements, packed just in case we need them on the journey. Again, the search for a solution is replaced by a re-description of the problem.

Conclusion

All of the clarifications above are made in response to the article by Roth & Jóhannsdóttir, who, in the space of a single article, recycle all the confusions which are widespread among English-speaking advocates of Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory. By bringing all these points of confusion together in a single article they have provided this opportunity for clarification. I have not tried to introduce any new concepts or report the results of any new psychological investigations. The sole purpose of this paper has been to recover some of the Marxist concepts of Vygotsky, and where possible to make them clearer and more accessible for our times.

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