Book Reviews

Genetic Approach

Thought and Language. Lev Semenovich Vygotskii. Translated from the Russian and edited by Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar. M.I.T. Press and Wiley, New York, 1962. xxi + 168 pp. $4.95.

This is a remarkable book. Not the least remarkable thing about it is that it still retains freshness and interest today, more than a quarter of a century after it was written. Its young, Russian author still seems ingenious and persuasive; its arguments still have relevance for the psychological enterprise. The book—a summary statement of Vygotsky's (1896–1934) psychology—was written in haste during his final illness. It appeared posthumously in Moscow in 1934, was suppressed in 1936, then was revived in 1956. English-speaking psychologists knew it existed, of course—some of Vygotsky's techniques have been widely used as clinical tests and fragments of the book had even been translated into English—but we could not appreciate its full force and originality until now.

The relation between thought and language is one of the most difficult, yet one of the most fruitful and important, topics in modern science. The issue has long been kept alive in American psychology by the repeated attempts of behaviorists, from Watson to Skinner, to reduce all thinking to behavior in general, and to speech in particular. In anthropology and linguistics the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis of linguistic relativity—that your whole conception of reality is relative to the semantic and syntactic dimensions of the language you speak—has been equally hotly debated. And, of course, from Frege and Russell to Wittgenstein and Ryle, the relation of thought to language has been a major theme of 20th century philosophy.

Vygotsky's approach to the problem is genetic. How, he asks, does a linguistic unit develop into a functionally integrated and indissoluble union of sound and meaning? He reviews the work of Jean Piaget and William Stern on the development of children's language. Piaget's early conception of an egocentric function for the child's language, prior to the age of five or six, is reinterpreted by Vygotsky as basically sociocentric; the monologues of a young child are the first manifestations of symbolic thought processes, before the processes are finally suppressed and converted into inner speech. Stern's personalistic psychology is judged incapable of explaining the essentially social nature of language and of the intellectual processes based in language. Vygotsky's own interpretation of the development of thought from social intercourse through personal monologues to private, inner speech is cleverly buttressed by anecdote, by logical and rhetorical arguments, by literary quotations from Tolstoy and Mark Twain, by appeal to authorities both scientific and philosophical, by linguistic analysis, by every kind of evidence and argument that a resourceful and well-educated man might bring to bear on such a topic, but most convincingly by his own studies of young children and of the social factors that control their apparently egocentric monologues.

Somewhat more familiar to American psychologists, no doubt, will be the fifth chapter, "An experimental study of concept formation," for Vygotsky's methods of studying concept formation have been used by Hanfmann and Kasanin in their well-known studies of conceptual thinking in schizophrenia. Vygotsky, however, was primarily interested in the way children form concepts and in the progressive changes in their concept-forming capacities and strategies. The familiar technique thus takes on new interest when it is seen in this context of concern for the genesis of thought and language.

The translators admit they have taken certain liberties with Vygotsky's original text; they eliminated much polemical and repetitious material, added some references to the technical literature, and tried to simplify and clarify his involved style. Without reading the Russian text one cannot comment on the accuracy of their work, but one can certainly express appreciation for the clear and readable English text they produced. One suspects we have here the rare case of a book that gained something in translation.

In any case, the mind of a profound and thoughtful psychologist shows clearly through the translation. Vygotsky was neither a slavish follower of Pavlov and Bekhterev, dedicated to the materialism and reflexology that dominated Russian psychology at that time, nor an angry young rebel, seeking mentalistic arguments at the opposite extreme. "Vygotsky is an original," says J. S. Bruner in a short biographical introduction. "He transcends, as a theorist of the nature of man, the ideological rifts that divide our world so deeply today." It is good to meet such a man, even if only in the pages of a book. And it is good to think his work will now be better known to the English-speaking public.

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On Reprinting

Genetic Mechanisms in Human Disease: Chromosomal Aberrations. M. F. A. Montague, Ed. Thomas, Springfield, Ill., 1961. xviii + 592 pp. Illus. $19.50.

Only in the last few years has the development of appropriate methods made it possible to examine, in some detail, the chromosomes of cells of human beings. Since 1956 a cascade of papers has all but drowned the casual reader, and they must have revealed, even to the initiated, that many more questions were being raised than answered. The time will soon come, if it is not already here, when a synthesis will be required, a sorting out of available facts, so that new workers can see what the problems are, those not actively engaged in the field can see how it bears on their own work, and even those very close to the field can see where they are going.

In his introduction, the editor, Ashley Montague, states that the book's purpose is to introduce the interested reader to a field that opens up "a com-