
Play and its role in the mental development of the child

L. S. Vygotsky

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Introduction: Vygotsky’s “Play and its role in the mental development of the child” – a history of its translation

Vygotsky’s seminal text on play was originally given as a lecture at the Herzen Pedagogical Institute in Leningrad in 1933, and is consequently a relatively late work. It is thanks to a stenographic record of the lecture that this text, a key influence on psychological research on play, has survived. This was Vygotsky’s major work on play and despite its brevity it has continued to resonate in all discussions of play ever since its publication. But in fact it was not published, or translated into English, until more than 30 years after it was originally delivered.

This history of the publication of Vygotsky’s lecture is as follows:

1966: Vygotsky’s lecture, “Igra i ee rol v umstvennom razvitii rebenka”, was published in *Voprosy psibologii* [Problems of psychology], 12(6), 62–76.

1967: In the following year, the first translation into English of the lecture, entitled “Play and its role in the mental development of the child” appeared in *Soviet Psychology*, 5(3), 6–18. Jerome Bruner wrote the preface to this issue of the Journal. The translation is not credited but is almost identical to that later credited to Catherine Mulholland.

1976: The same translation was republished in J. S. Bruner, A. Jolly, & K. Sylva (Eds.), *Play: Its role in development and evolution* (pp. 537–554). New York, NY: Basic Books. Obviously, Bruner had met it in the 1967 issue of *Soviet Psychology* for which he supplied the preface. This translation is almost identical to that published in *Soviet Psychology*, but there is one sentence where it differs, which contains what must be intended as a correction. The sentence reads: “Is it possible to suppose that a child’s behaviour is always guided by meaning that a preschooler’s behaviour is so arid that he never behaves with candour as he wants to simply because he thinks he should behave otherwise?”. In the *Soviet Psychology* (1967) version, this sentence read “and that he never behaves with candy [*sic*] as he wants to”. This obviously must have seemed to the editors an improbable translation, and so they substituted “candour”—a plausible substitution (the word makes perfect sense in the context) but unfortunately inaccurate.

1977: The Play lecture next appears in *Soviet Developmental Psychology: An anthology* (pp. 76–99). New York, NY: White Plains. This anthology of articles from *Soviet Psychology* was edited by Michael Cole. The translation here is clearly credited to Catherine Mulholland and the text used is very close to the translation already encountered. However there are minor changes throughout. For instance, at the end of the first paragraph, the original *Soviet Psychology* translation reads: “Is play the leading form of activity for a child of this age, or is it simply the predominant

form?”). The end of this sentence in the 1977 translation reads: “or is it simply the most frequently encountered form?”. Most of the changes in this 1977 translation are minor (e.g., “which are highly important” is replaced by “that are very important”; “he will go away” is replaced by “he will turn away”). It should be noted that, although previous translations are generally attributed to Catherine Mulholland, this is the first time that she is named as the translator.

1977: This translation also appeared in 1977 on the Marxists Internet Archive. (The translation—probably unchanged, though this is now impossible to check—now appears on the Marxists.org website dated 2002 (see below) with its source given as *Voprosy psibologii* [Problems of psychology], 1966): www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1933/play.htm

1978: A version of the Play lecture—“The Role of Play in Development”—appeared in *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (pp. 92–105). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

It has frequently been noted that this text is hardly a translation at all. Van der Veer and Valsiner, in their Introduction to *The Vygotsky Reader* (1994), refer to this book as “the cocktail-type mixing of various of (Vygotsky’s) ideas to fit the American audience” (p. 4).

In the Editors’ Preface to *Mind in Society* (1978), Cole and his fellow editors, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ekkeb Souberman, give the source of the Play lecture as *Voprosy psibologii* [Problems of psychology] 1966. In a famous apologia they also make clear the “significant liberties” they have taken with Vygotsky’s texts in this issue:

The reader will encounter here not a literal translation of Vygotsky but rather our edited translation of Vygotsky, from which we have omitted material that seemed redundant and to which we have added material that seemed to make his points clearer . . . We realize that in tampering with the original we may have distorted history (p. x).

Michael Cole’s Prologue to Rieber and Robinson’s *The Essential Vygotsky* (2004) makes clearer why these drastic editorial changes were considered necessary at the time:

I received the Vygotsky manuscripts from Luria in the early 1970s. But even with the expert help of able colleagues and a good translation to work from, I could not convince the publisher with whom Luria had entered into an agreement about the publication of Vygotsky’s work that the manuscripts were worth publishing. All of the problems that I had experienced earlier remained in place. The work seemed dated, the polemics either opaque or outdated, and the overall product certain to produce fiscal disaster, not to say personal embarrassment.

Faced with this seemingly unsurmountable barrier, and with help from Luria, whom I visited every year or two and corresponded with regularly, we created a selection of readings from the two manuscripts he had given me to which we added several essays that seemed of an applied nature so that it would be possible for readers to see how the abstract theoretical arguments played out in practice. The result, which was titled *Mind in Society*, was published in 1978. I heaved a great sigh of relief. (p. xi)

The “selection of readings” which is *Mind in Society* has become the most widely read Vygotsky text in the world. It unquestionably established Vygotsky in the West as a major psychologist, and began the “Vygotsky boom” as Cole terms it later in the Prologue. But it also substituted a

streamlined version of Vygotsky for the real texts, and it continues to be the case even today that it is *Mind in Society* that appears on university reading lists, rather than, say, *The Vygotsky Reader* (now available on the Marxists Internet Archive).

The version of the Play lecture found in *Mind in Society* is considerably shorter than the full Mulholland translation that we have so far been concerned with. It is approximately 3000 words shorter than the Mulholland text (which is 8400 words long) and is different from the Mulholland text (and the stenographic record that is based on). It is also to a considerable extent rephrased; the editors allowed themselves considerable latitude in their rewording of what they regarded as Vygotsky's "opaque" or "outdated" original texts. However, a full comparison of this version with the Mulholland translation is not possible here.

2002: A differently dated version of the original Mulholland translation appeared on the Marxists Internet Archive (www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1933/play.htm)

This is essentially the same Mulholland translation that we have encountered in *Soviet Developmental Psychology* (1977) and in other contexts.

2002: *Play and its Role in The Mental Development of The Child* [Kindle Edition] (Catherine Mulholland, Trans.). This is the same translation as that published in the same year on the Marxists Internet Archive. However the source of the text is given here as the website All-About-Psychology.com

It is therefore clear that the Mulholland translation of the Play lecture has been—with the notable exception of the text in *Mind in Society*—the only translation available in print and online for nearly 50 years. This fact is testimony to the strengths of this translation which is, in general, faithful both to the original stenographic record, and to the complexities of Vygotsky's thought in this dense and often demanding text.

In our translation we used both Mulholland translations (1967 and 1977) as a combination "base text" and focused particularly on those places in that text which did not offer a perfectly adequate rendering of the Russian original. Our aim has been to provide an authentic translation that should, above all, be faithful to the original stenographic record—Vygotsky's words—with all its repetitions and sometimes hurried arguments (to be expected in what was after all a spoken text). This has involved us in some long discussions about particular sticking points, where particular Vygotskian ideas seemed not to be fully conveyed by either Mulholland translation, or where the Mulholland translation was hard to follow.

The work of this translation has been carried out as an email conversation, which has taken place over more than 18 months, between Nikolai Veresov, initially in Finland and subsequently in Monash University, Australia, and Myra Barrs in London.

Vygotsky's "Play and its role in the mental development of the child"

In speaking of play and its role in the preschooler's¹ development, we are concerned with two fundamental questions: first, how play itself arises in development – its origin and genesis; second, the role that this activity, play, has in development, and its meaning as an aspect of development in a child of preschool age. Is play the leading form of activity, or is it simply the predominant activity, in a child of this age?

It seems to me that from the point of view of development, play is not the predominant form of activity, but is, in a certain sense, the leading line of development in the preschool years.

Let us now consider the problem of play itself. We know that a definition of play based on the pleasure it gives the child is not correct for two reasons – first, because there are a number of activities that give the child much keener experiences of pleasure than play does.

For example, the pleasure principle applies equally well to the sucking process, in that the child derives functional pleasure from sucking a pacifier even when he is not being satiated.

On the other hand, we know of games in which the activity itself does not afford pleasure – games that predominate at the end of the preschool and the beginning of school age and that give pleasure only if the child finds the result interesting. These include, for example, sporting games (not just athletic sports but also games with an outcome, games with results). They are very often accompanied by a keen sense of displeasure when the outcome is unfavourable to the child.

Thus, defining play on the basis of pleasure can certainly not be regarded as correct.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that to refuse to approach the problem of play from the standpoint of fulfilment of the child's needs, his incentives to act, and his affective aspirations would result in a terrible intellectualization of play. The trouble with a number of theories of play lies in their intellectualization of the problem.

I am inclined to give an even more general meaning to the problem; and I think that the mistake of many age-based theories is their disregard of the child's needs – taken in the broadest sense, from inclinations to interests, as needs of an intellectual nature – or, more briefly, their disregard of everything that can come under the name of incentives and motives for activity. We often describe a child's development as the development of his intellectual functions, i.e., every child stands before us as a theoretical being who, according to the higher or lower level of his intellectual development moves from one stage to another.

Without a consideration of the child's needs, inclinations, incentives, and motives to act – as research has demonstrated – there will never be any advance from one stage to the next. I think that an analysis of play should start with an examination of these particular aspects.

¹ This paper of Vygotsky is devoted to the development of play in early childhood. In the original Russian text Vygotsky uses the word *doshkol'nik* (ДОШКОЛЬНИК)/preschooler which according to Russian educational system refers to the age from 3 to 6 years. The Russian terms "preschool" and "kindergarten" refer to the same age period and therefore is different from the English/Australian usage which refers only to the last year before school. In the text "preschool age" and "preschool child" means a child at the age from 3 to 6 years, "very young child" is from birth to 3 years.

It seems to me that every advance from one age-related level to another is connected with an abrupt change in motives and incentives to act.

What is of the greatest value to the infant has almost ceased to interest the toddler. This maturing of new needs and new motives for activity should be moved to the first plane. Especially as it is impossible to ignore the fact that a child satisfies certain needs and incentives in play; and without understanding the special nature of these incentives, we cannot imagine the unique type of activity that we call play.

At preschool age special needs and incentives arise which are very important for the whole of the child's development and which directly lead to play. In essence, there arise in a child of this age a large number of unrealizable tendencies and immediately unrealizable desires. A very young child tends to resolve and gratify his desires at once. Any delay in fulfilling them is difficult for the early years child and is acceptable only within certain narrow limits; no one has met a child under three who wanted to do something a few days hence. Ordinarily, the interval between the motive and its realization is extremely short. I think that if there were no maturing in preschool years of needs that cannot be realized immediately, there would be no play. Experiments show that the development of play is arrested both in intellectually underdeveloped children and in those who are emotionally immature.

From the viewpoint of the affective sphere, it seems to me that play is invented at the point in development where unrealizable tendencies begin to appear. This is the way a very young child behaves: he wants a thing and must have it at once. If he cannot have it, either he throws a temper tantrum, lies on the floor and kicks his legs, or he is refused, pacified, and does not get it. His unsatisfied desires have their own particular modes of substitution, rejection, etc. Toward the beginning of the preschool age, unsatisfied desires and tendencies that cannot be realized immediately make their appearance, while on the other hand the tendency to immediate fulfilment of desires, characteristic of the preceding stage, is retained. For example, the child wants to be in his mother's place, or wants to be a rider on a horse. This desire cannot be fulfilled right now. What does the very young child do if he sees a passing cab and wants to ride in it, no matter what may happen? If he is a spoiled and capricious child, he will demand that his mother put him in the cab at any cost, or he may throw himself on the ground right there in the street, etc. If he is an obedient child, used to renouncing his desires, he will turn away, or his mother will offer him some candy, or simply distract him with some stronger affect, and he will renounce his immediate desire.

In contrast to this, a child over three clearly shows his own particular conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, a large number of long-lasting needs and desires appear that cannot be met at once but that nevertheless are not passed over like whims; on the other hand the urge towards the immediate realization of desires is almost completely retained.

Henceforth play appears which – in answer to the question of why the child plays – must always be understood as the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires.

Imagination is a new formation that is not present in the consciousness of the very young child, is totally absent in animals, and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action. The old adage that children's play is imagination in action can be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and schoolchildren is play without action.

It is difficult to imagine that the incentive compelling a child to play is really just the same kind of affective incentive as sucking a pacifier is for an infant.

It is also hard to accept that the pleasure derived from preschool play is conditioned by the same affective mechanism as the simple sucking of a pacifier. This simply does not fit our notions of preschool development.

All of this is not to say that play occurs as the result of each and every unsatisfied desire: a child wants to ride in a cab, the wish is not immediately gratified, so the child goes into his room and begins to play cabs. It never happens just this way. Here we are concerned with the fact that the child not only has individual, affective reactions to separate phenomena but also generalized unspecified affective tendencies. Let us take the example of a microencephalic child suffering from an acute inferiority complex: he is unable to participate in children's groups; he has been so teased that he smashes every mirror and pane of glass showing his reflection. But when he was very young, it had been very different; then, every time he was teased there was a separate affective reaction for each separate occasion, which had not yet become generalized. At preschool age the child generalizes his affective relation to the phenomenon regardless of the actual concrete situation, because the affective relation is connected with the meaning² of the phenomenon, in that it continually reveals his inferiority complex.

Play is essentially wish fulfilment – not, however, isolated wishes, but generalized affects. A child at this age is conscious of his relationships with adults, and reacts to them affectively; but in contrast to early childhood,³ he now generalizes these affective reactions (he respects adult authority in general, etc.).

The presence of such generalized affects in play does not mean that the child himself understands the motives that give rise to a game or that he plays consciously. He plays without realizing the motives of the play activity. In this, play differs substantially from work and other types of activity. On the whole it can be said that the sphere of motives, actions and incentives is less open to awareness at this stage, and becomes accessible to consciousness only at the transitional age. Only an adolescent can clearly determine for himself why he does this or that. We shall leave the problem of the affective aspect for the moment – considering it as given – and shall now examine how the play activity unfolds.

I think that in finding criteria for distinguishing a child's play activity from his other general forms of activity it must be accepted that, in play, a child creates an imaginary situation. This becomes possible on the basis of the separation that occurs, in the preschool period, of the visual and meaning fields.⁴

This is not a new idea, in the sense that imaginary situations in play have always been recognized; but they have always been regarded as one of the groups of play activities. Thus the imaginary situation has always been classified as a secondary feature of play activity. In the view of earlier writers the imaginary situation did not share those criterial attributes which are the defining characteristics of play in general, but only the attributes of a particular group of play activities.

² Vygotsky uses the term *smysl* (смысл) here.

³ Early childhood is the period from birth to 3 years.

⁴ *Vidimoe i smyslovoe pole* (visual and sense fields) in the Russian original

I find three main flaws in this argument. First, there is the danger of an intellectualistic approach to play. If play is to be understood as symbolic, there is the danger that it might turn into a kind of activity akin to algebra in action; it would be transformed into a system of signs generalizing actual reality. Here we find nothing specific in play, and look upon the child as an unsuccessful algebraist who cannot yet write the symbols on paper, but depicts them in action. It is essential to show the connection with incentives in play, since play itself, in my view, is never symbolic action in the proper sense of the term.

Second, I think that this idea presents play as a cognitive process. It stresses the importance of the cognitive process while neglecting not only the affective aspect but also the fact that play is the child's activity.

Third, it is vital to discover exactly what this activity does for development, i.e., what might develop in the child with the help of the imaginary situation.

Let us begin with the second question, as I have already briefly touched on the problem of the connection with affective incentives. We observed that in the affective incentives leading to play there are the beginnings not of symbolism, but of the necessity for an imaginary situation. If play is really developed from unsatisfied desires, if ultimately it is the realization in play form of tendencies that cannot be realized at the moment, then elements of imaginary situations will involuntarily be included in the affective nature of play itself.

Let us take the second instance first – the child's activity in play. What does a child's behaviour in an imaginary situation mean? We know that there is a form of play, distinguished long ago and relating to the late preschool period, but considered to develop mainly at school age, namely games with rules. A number of investigators, although not at all belonging to the camp of dialectical materialists, have approached this area along the lines recommended by Marx when he said that "the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of the ape." They have begun their examination of play in the early years in the light of later rule-based play and have concluded from this that play involving an imaginary situation is, in fact, rule-based play. It seems to me that one can go even further and propose that there is no such thing as play without rules and the child's particular attitude toward them.

Let us expand on this idea. Take any kind of play that involves an imaginary situation. The imaginary situation already contains rules of behaviour, although this is not a game with formulated rules laid down in advance. The child imagines herself to be the mother and the doll a child, so she must obey the rules of maternal behaviour. This was very well demonstrated by a researcher in an ingenious experiment based on Sully's famous observations. The latter described as remarkable play in which the play situation coincides with reality. One day two sisters, aged five and seven, said to each other: "Let's play sisters." Here Sully was describing a case in which two sisters were playing at being sisters, i.e., playing at reality. The above-mentioned experiment based its method on children's play, suggested by the experimenter, that dealt with real relationships. In certain cases I have found it very easy to evoke such play in children. It is very easy, for example, to make a child play with its mother at being a child while the mother is the mother, i.e., play at what is, in fact, true. The vital difference in play, as Sully describes it, is that the child, in playing, is trying to be a sister. In life the child behaves without thinking that she is her sister's sister. She never behaves in relation to the other only as a sister would – except perhaps in those cases when her mother says, "Give in to her". In the game of sisters playing at "sisters", however, they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood; the fact that two sisters begin to play at "sisters" makes them both acquire rules of behaviour. (I must always be a

sister in relation to the other sister in the whole play situation.) Only actions that fit these rules are acceptable to the play situation.

In the game a situation is chosen that stresses the fact that these girls are sisters: they are dressed alike, they walk about holding hands – in short, they enact whatever emphasizes their relationship as sisters vis-a-vis adults and strangers. The elder, holding the younger by the hand, keeps telling her about other people: “That is theirs, not ours.” This means: “My sister and I act the same, we are treated the same, but others are treated differently.” Here the emphasis is on the sameness of everything that is concentrated in the child’s concept of a sister, and this means that my sister stands in a different relationship to me than other people. What passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behaviour in play.

If play, then, were structured in such a way that there were no imaginary situation, what would remain? The rules would remain. The child would begin to behave in this situation as the situation dictates.

Let us leave this remarkable experiment for a moment and turn to play in general. I think that wherever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules – not rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game, but rules stemming from the imaginary situation. Therefore, to imagine that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules, i.e., as he behaves in a real situation, is simply impossible. If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behaviour. The role the child fulfils, and her relationship to the object, if the object has changed its meaning, will always stem from the rules, i.e., the imaginary situation will always contain rules. In play the child is free. But it is an illusory freedom.

Although initially the investigator’s task was to disclose the hidden rules in all play with an imaginary situation, we have received proof comparatively recently that the so-called pure games with rules (played by school children and older preschoolers) are essentially games with imaginary situations; for just as the imaginary situation has to contain rules of behaviour, so every game with rules contains an imaginary situation. For example, what does it mean to play chess? To create an imaginary situation. Why? Because the knight, the king, the queen, and so forth, can move only in specified ways; because covering and taking pieces are purely chess concepts; and so on. Although it does not directly substitute for real-life relationships, nevertheless we do have a kind of imaginary situation here. Take the simplest children’s game with rules. It immediately turns into an imaginary situation in the sense that as soon as the game is regulated by certain rules, a number of possible actions are ruled out.

Just as we were able to show at the beginning that every imaginary situation contains rules in a concealed form, we have also succeeded in demonstrating the reverse – that every game with rules contains an imaginary situation in a concealed form. The development from an overt imaginary situation with covert rules to games with overt rules and a covert imaginary situation outlines the evolution of children’s play from one pole to the other.

All games with imaginary situations are simultaneously games with rules, and vice versa. I think this thesis is clear.

However, there is one misunderstanding that may arise, and must be cleared up from the start. A child learns to behave according to certain rules from the first few months of life. For a very young child such rules – for example, that he has to sit quietly at the table, not touch other

people's things, obey his mother – are rules that make up his life. What is specific to the rules of play? It seems to me that several new publications can be of great aid in solving this problem. In particular, a new work by Piaget has been extremely helpful to me. This work is concerned with the development of moral rules in the child. One part of this work is specially devoted to the study of rules of a game, in which, I think, Piaget resolves these difficulties very convincingly.

Piaget distinguishes what he calls two moralities in the child – two distinct sources for the development of rules of behaviour.

This emerges particularly sharply in games. As Piaget shows, some rules come to the child from the one-sided influence upon him of an adult. Not to touch other people's things is a rule taught by the mother, or to sit quietly at the table is an external law for the child advanced by adults. This is one of the child's moralities. Other rules arise, according to Piaget, from mutual collaboration between adult and child, or between children themselves. These are rules the child himself participates in establishing.

The rules of games, of course, differ radically from rules of not touching and of sitting quietly. In the first place, they are made by the child himself; they are his own rules, as Piaget says, rules of self-restraint and self-determination. The child tells himself: I must behave in such and such a way in this game. This is quite different from the child's saying that one thing is allowed and another thing is not. Piaget has pointed out a very interesting phenomenon in moral development – something he calls moral realism. He indicates that the first line of development of external rules (what is and is not allowed) produces moral realism, i.e., a confusion in the child between moral rules and physical rules. The child confuses the fact that it is impossible to light a match a second time and the rule that it is forbidden to light matches at all, or to touch a glass because it might break: all "don'ts" are the same to a very young child, but he has an entirely different attitude towards rules that he makes up himself.

Let us turn now to the role of play and its influence on a child's development. I think it is enormous.

I shall try to outline two basic ideas. I think that play with an imaginary situation is something essentially new, impossible for a child under three; it is a novel form of behaviour in which the child's activity in an imaginary situation liberates him from situational constraints.

To a considerable extent the behaviour of a very young child – and, to an absolute extent, that of an infant – is determined by the conditions in which the activity takes place, as the experiments of Lewin and others have shown. Lewin's experiment with the stone is a famous example.⁵ This is a real illustration of the extent to which a very young child is bound in every action by situational constraints. Here we find a highly characteristic feature of a very young child's behaviour in the sense of his attitude toward the circumstance at hand and the real conditions of his activity. It is hard to imagine a greater contrast to Lewin's experiments showing the situational constraints on activity than what we observe in play. In the latter, the child learns to act in a mental, not a visible, situation. I think this conveys accurately what occurs in play. It is here that the child learns to act in a mental, rather than an externally visible, situation, relying on internal tendencies and motives, not on motives and incentives supplied by external things. I recall a study by Lewin on the motivating nature of things for a very young child; in it Lewin

⁵ The video link to famous Lewin's experiment is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3x4HWLMAwe8>

concludes that things dictate to the child what he must do: a door demands to be opened and closed, a staircase to be run up, a bell to be rung. In short, things have an inherent motivating force in respect to a very young child's actions and determine the child's behaviour to such an extent that Lewin arrived at the notion of creating a psychological topology, i.e., of expressing mathematically the trajectory of the child's movement in a field according to the distribution of things with varying attracting or repelling forces.

What is the root of situational constraints on a child? The answer lies in a central fact of consciousness that is characteristic of early childhood: the union of affect and perception. At this age perception is generally not an independent feature, but an initial feature of a motor-affective reaction, i.e., every perception is in this way a stimulus to activity. Since a situation is always, psychologically, accessed through perception, and perception is not separated from affective and motor activity, it is understandable that with his consciousness so structured, the child cannot act otherwise than as constrained by the situation – or the field – in which he finds himself.

In play, external things lose their motivating force. The child sees one thing but acts differently in relation to what he sees. Thus, a situation is reached in which the child begins to act independently of what he sees. Certain brain-damaged patients lose the ability to act independently of what they see; in considering such patients one can begin to appreciate that the freedom of action available to adults and more mature children is not acquired in a flash, but has to go through a long process of development.

Action in a situation that is not seen, but only conceived mentally in an imaginary field (i.e., an imaginary situation), teaches the child to guide his behaviour not only by immediate perception of objects or by the situation immediately affecting him but also by the meaning⁶ of this situation.

Experiments and day-to-day observation clearly show that it is impossible for very young children to separate the field of meaning⁷ from the visual field. This is a very important fact. Even a child of two years, when asked to repeat the sentence "Tanya is walking" when Tanya is actually sitting in front of him, will change it to "Tanya is sitting down." In certain diseases we are faced with exactly the same situation. Goldstein and Gelb have described a number of patients who were unable to state something that was not true. Gelb has data on one patient who could write well with his left hand but was incapable of writing the sentence "I can write well with my right hand." When looking out of the window on a fine day he was unable to repeat "The weather is nasty today," but would say, "The weather is fine today." Often we find that a patient with a speech disturbance is incapable of repeating senseless phrases – for example, "Snow is black" – whereas other phrases equally difficult in their grammatical and semantic construction can be repeated.

In a very young child there is such an intimate fusion between word and object, and between meaning⁸ and what is seen, that a divergence between the meaning field⁹ and the visual field is impossible.

⁶ *smysl*

⁷ *smyslovoye pole* (смысловое поле; field of sense).

⁸ *znachenie* (значение; meaning).

⁹ *smyslovoye pole* (field of sense).

This can be seen in the process of children's speech development. You say to the child, "clock." He starts looking and finds the clock, i.e., the first function of the word is to orient spatially, to isolate particular areas in space; the word originally signifies a particular location in a situation.

It is at preschool age that we first find a divergence between the field of meaning¹⁰ and the visual field. It seems to me that we would do well to restate the notion of one of the investigators who said that in play thought is separated from objects, and action arises from thoughts rather than from objects.

Thought is separated from objects because a piece of wood begins to play the role of a doll and a stick becomes a horse. Action according to rules begins to be determined by thought, not by objects themselves. This is such a reversal of the child's relationship to the real, immediate, concrete situation that it is hard to evaluate its full significance. The child does not do this all at once. It is terribly difficult for a child to split off thought (the meaning of a word)¹¹ from its object. Play is a transitional stage in this direction. At that critical moment when a stick – i.e., an object – becomes a pivot for severing the meaning¹² of horse from a real horse, one of the basic psychological structures determining the child's relationship to reality is radically altered.

The child cannot yet split off thought from object, he must find another object to act as a pivot. This expresses the child's weakness; in order to think about a horse and to define his actions in using the horse, he needs the stick as a pivot. But all the same the basic structure determining the child's relationship to reality is radically changed at this crucial point, for his perceptual structure changes. The special feature of human perception – which arises at a very early age – is so-called reality perception. This is something for which there is no analogy in animal perception. Essentially it lies in the fact that I do not see the world simply in colour and shape, but also as a world with sense and meaning. I do not see merely something round and black with two hands, I see a clock; and I can distinguish one thing from another. There are patients who say, when they see a clock, that they are seeing something round and white with two thin steel strips, but they do not know that this is a clock; they have lost the ability to recognise objects. Thus, the structure of human perception could be figuratively expressed as a fraction in which the object is the numerator and the meaning¹³ is the denominator; this expresses the particular relationship of object and meaning¹⁴ that arises on the basis of speech. This means that all human perception is not isolated perception but generalised perception. Goldstein says that this objectively formed perception and generalization are the same thing. Thus, for the child, in the fraction object/meaning,¹⁵ the object dominates, and meaning¹⁶ is directly connected to it. At the crucial moment for the child, when the stick becomes a horse, i.e., when the thing, the stick, becomes the pivot for severing the meaning¹⁷ of horse from a real horse, this fraction is inverted and meaning¹⁸ predominates, giving meaning/¹⁹object.

¹⁰ *smyslovoye pole* (field of sense).

¹¹ *znachenie slova* (значение слова)

¹² *znachenie*

¹³ *smysl*

¹⁴ *smysl*

¹⁵ *smysl*

¹⁶ *smysl*

¹⁷ *znachenie*

¹⁸ *smyslovoi*

¹⁹ *smysl*

Nevertheless, properties of things as such are still significant: any stick can be a horse, but, for example, a postcard can never be a horse for a child. Goethe's contention that in play any thing can be anything for a child is incorrect. Of course, for adults who can make conscious use of symbols, a postcard can be a horse. If I want to show the location of something, I can put down a match and say, "This is a horse." And that would be enough. For a child a match cannot stand for a horse; there has to be a stick. Therefore, play is not symbolism. A symbol is a sign, but the stick is not the sign of a horse. Properties of things are retained, but their meaning²⁰ is inverted, i.e., the thought becomes the central point. It can be said that in this structure objects are moved from a dominating to a subordinate position.

Thus, in play the child creates the structure meaning/²¹object, where the semantic aspect²² – the meaning of the word, the meaning of the thing – dominates and determines his behaviour.

To a certain extent meaning²³ is freed from the object with which it was directly fused before. I would say that in play a child operates with meaning severed from objects, but that meaning is not severed in real action with real objects.

Therefore an extremely interesting contradiction arises in which, in play, the child operates with meanings²⁴ severed from their original objects and actions –and yet operates with these meanings inseparably attached to other real objects and real actions. This is the transitional nature of play, which makes it an intermediate between the purely situational constraints of early childhood and thought that is totally free of real situations.

In play a child operates with things as having meanings,²⁵ he operates with word meanings,²⁶ which replace objects, and thus an emancipation of word from object occurs (a behaviourist would describe play and its characteristic properties in the following terms: the child gives ordinary objects unusual names and ordinary actions unusual designations, despite the fact that he knows the real ones.)

Separating words from things requires a pivot in the form of another thing. The child cannot sever meaning from an object, or a word from an object, except by finding a pivot in something else, i.e., by the power of one object to steal another's name. From the moment the stick – i.e., the "other thing" – becomes the pivot for severing the meaning of "horse" from a real horse, the child makes one thing influence another in the semantic sphere. Transfer of meanings²⁷ is facilitated by the fact that the child accepts a word as the property of a thing; he does not see the word, but the thing it designates. So for a child the word "horse" applied to the stick means, "There is a horse there", i.e., mentally he sees the object standing behind the word.

At school age play is converted to internal processes, becoming part of inner speech, logical memory, and abstract thought. In play a child operates with meanings separated from their real referents (e.g., the horse). But at the same time, these meanings can only be separated through

²⁰ *znachenie*

²¹ *smysl*

²² *smyslovaya storona*

²³ *znachenie*

²⁴ *znachenie*

²⁵ *smysl*

²⁶ *znachenie*

²⁷ *znachenie*

real actions with real things (the stick) To separate the meaning of “horse” from a real horse, and to transfer it to a stick (which is the necessary material pivot to keep the meaning from evaporating), and then to act with the stick as if it really were a horse, is a vital transitional stage to operating with meanings alone. A child first acts with meanings as with objects and later realizes them consciously and begins to think, just as a child, before he has acquired grammatical and written speech, knows how to do things but is not aware that he knows, i.e., he does not realize or master them consciously. In play a child unconsciously and spontaneously makes use of the fact that he can separate meaning from an object, without knowing he is doing it – just as he talks without paying attention to the words and does not know that he is speaking in prose.

Hence we come to a functional definition of concepts, i.e., objects, and to a word as part of a thing.

And so I should like to say that the creation of an imaginary situation is not a fortuitous fact in a child’s life; its first consequence is the child’s emancipation from situational constraints. The first paradox of play is that the child operates with an alienated meaning, but does so in a real situation. The second paradox is that in play he adopts the line of least resistance, i.e., he does what he feels like most, because play is connected with pleasure. Yet at the same time, he learns to follow the line of greatest resistance; for by subordinating themselves to rules children renounce what they want – since subjection to rule and renunciation of spontaneous impulsive action constitute the path to maximum pleasure in play.

The same thing can be observed in children in athletic games. Racing is difficult because the runners are ready to start off when one says, “Get ready, get set . . .” without waiting for the “go.” It is evident that the point of internal rules is that the child should not act on immediate impulse.

Play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse, i.e., to act according to the line of greatest resistance. I want to run off at once – this is perfectly clear – but the rules of the game order me to wait. Why does the child not do what he wants, spontaneously and at once? Because to follow the rules of the whole structure of the play promises much greater pleasure from the game than the gratification of an immediate impulse. In other words, as one investigator puts it, recalling the words of Spinoza: “An affect can be overcome only by a stronger affect.” Thus, in play a situation is created in which, as Nohl puts it, a dual affective plane occurs. For example, the child weeps in play as a patient, but revels as a player. In play the child renounces his immediate impulse, coordinating every act of his behaviour with the rules of the game. Groos describes this brilliantly. He thinks that a child’s will originates in, and develops from, play with rules. Indeed, in the simple game of “sorcerer” as described by Groos, the child must run away from the sorcerer in order not to be caught, but at the same time he must help his companion and get him disenchanted. When the sorcerer has touched him, he must stop. At every step the child is faced with a conflict between the rule of the game and what he would do if he could suddenly act spontaneously. In the game he acts counter to what he wants. Nohl showed that a child’s greatest self-control occurs in play. He achieves the maximum display of willpower, in the sense of renunciation of an immediate attraction, in the “game of candy”, where the rules of the game are that the children are not allowed to eat candy because it represents something inedible. Ordinarily a child experiences subordination to a rule in the renunciation of something he wants, but here subordination to a rule, and renunciation of acting on immediate impulse, are the way to maximum pleasure.

Thus, the essential attribute of play is a rule that has become an affect. “An idea that has become

an affect, a concept that has turned into a passion” – this ideal of Spinoza’s finds its prototype in play, which is the realm of spontaneity and freedom. To carry out the rule is a source of pleasure. The rule wins because it is the strongest impulse. (Cf. Spinoza’s adage that an affect can be overcome only by a stronger affect). Hence it follows that such a rule is an internal rule, i.e., a rule of inner self-restraint and self-determination, as Piaget says, and not a rule the child obeys like a physical law. In short, play gives the child a new form of desires, i.e., teaches him to desire by relating his desires to a fictitious “I” – to his role in the game and its rules. Therefore, a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play – achievements that tomorrow will become his average level of real action and his morality. Now we can say the same thing about the child’s activity that we said about things. Just as we have the fraction object/meaning,²⁸ we also have the fraction action/meaning.²⁹

Whereas action dominated before, this structure is inverted, with meaning becoming the numerator, and action taking the place of the denominator.

It is important to realise what kind of liberation from action the child obtains through play – as when actions associated with real eating are translated into finger movements, for example. That is, the action is performed not for its own sake, but for the sake of the meaning³⁰ it carries.

At first, in a child of preschool age, action dominates over meaning³¹ and is incompletely understood; a child is able to do more than he can understand. It is at preschool age that there first arises an action structure in which meaning³² is the determinant; but the action itself is not a sideline or subordinated feature: it is a structural feature. Nohl showed that children, in playing at eating from a plate, performed actions with their hands reminiscent of real eating, but all actions that did not designate eating were impossible to perform. Throwing one’s hands back instead of stretching them toward the plate turned out to be impossible, that is, such action would have a destructive effect on the game. A child does not symbolize in play, but he wishes and realizes his wishes by letting the basic categories of reality pass through his experience,³³ which is precisely why in play a day can take half an hour, and a hundred miles be covered in five steps. The child, in wishing, carries out his wishes; and in thinking, he acts. Internal and external action are inseparable: imagination, interpretation, and will are internal processes in external action.

The meaning³⁴ of action is basic, but even by itself action is not neutral. At an early age the position was the reverse: action was the structural determinant, and meaning³⁵ was a secondary, collateral, subordinated feature. What we said about severing meaning³⁶ from object applies equally well to the child’s own actions. A child who stamps on the ground and imagines himself riding a horse has thereby accomplished the inversion of the fraction action/meaning³⁷ to meaning/³⁸action.

²⁸ *smysl*

²⁹ *smysl*

³⁰ *smysl*

³¹ *smysl*

³² *smysl*

³³ *perezhivanie*

³⁴ *smysl*

³⁵ *smysl*

³⁶ *znachenie*

³⁷ *smysl*

³⁸ *smysl*

Once again, in order to sever the meaning³⁹ of the action from the real action (riding a horse, without having the opportunity to do so), the child requires a pivot in the form of an action to replace the real one. But once again, while before action was the determinant, in the structure “action-meaning”,⁴⁰ now the structure is inverted and meaning⁴¹ becomes the determinant. Action retreats to second place and becomes the pivot; meaning⁴² is again severed from action, by means of another action. This is a repetition of the turning point leading to operations based solely on the meanings⁴³ of actions, i.e., to volitional choice, a decision, a conflict of motives, and to other processes sharply separated from fulfilment: in short, to the development of the will. Just as operating with the meanings⁴⁴ of things leads to abstract thought, in volitional decision the determining factor is not the fulfilment of the action, but its meaning.⁴⁵ In play an action replaces another action just as an object replaces another object. How does the child “melt” one object into another or one action into another? This is accomplished by movement in the field of meaning, which is not connected with the visible field or with real objects, and which subordinates all real objects and actions to itself.

This movement in the field of meaning is⁴⁶ the most important movement in play. On the one hand, it is movement in an abstract field (a field that thus appears before voluntary operations with meanings) but the method of movement is situational and concrete (i.e., it is not logical, but affective movement). In other words, the field of meaning⁴⁷ appears, but action within it occurs just as in reality; herein lies the main genetic contradiction of play.

I have three questions left to answer: first, to show that play is not the predominant feature of childhood, but is a leading aspect of development in the child; second, to show the development of play itself, i.e., the significance of the movement from the predominance of the imaginary situation to the predominance of rule; and third, to show the internal transformations brought about by play in the child’s development.

I do not think that play is the predominant type of child activity. In fundamental, everyday situations a child behaves in a manner diametrically opposed to his behaviour in play. In play, action is subordinated to meaning;⁴⁸ but in real life, of course, action dominates over meaning.⁴⁹

Thus we find in play – if you will – the negative of a child’s general, everyday behaviour. Therefore, to consider play as the prototype of his everyday activity and its predominant form is completely without foundation. This is the main flaw in Koffka’s theory. He considers play as the child’s other world. According to Koffka, everything that concerns a child is play reality, while everything that concerns an adult is serious reality. A given object has one meaning⁵⁰ in play, and another outside it. In a child’s world the logic of wishes and of satisfying urges dominates, not real logic. The illusory nature of play is transferred to life. This would be true if

³⁹ *smysl*

⁴⁰ *smysl*

⁴¹ *smysl*

⁴² *smysl*

⁴³ *smysl*

⁴⁴ *smysl*

⁴⁵ *smysl*

⁴⁶ *smyslavoje pole*

⁴⁷ *smyslavoje pole*

⁴⁸ *smysl*

⁴⁹ *smysl*

⁵⁰ *smysl*

play were indeed the predominant form of a child's activity. But the child would look like a patient in a mental hospital if the form of activity we have been speaking of were to become the predominant form of his everyday activity – or even if it were only partially transferred to real life.

Koffka gives a number of examples to show how a child transfers a situation from play into life. But the real transference of play behaviour to real life can be regarded only as an unhealthy symptom. To behave in a real situation as in an illusory one is the first sign of delirium.

As research has shown, play behaviour in real life is normally seen only in the type of game in which sisters play at "sisters", i.e., when children sitting at dinner can play at having dinner, or (as in Katz's example) when children who do not want to go to bed say, "Let's play that it's night time and we have to go to sleep." They begin to play at what they are in fact doing, evidently they are creating connections that facilitate the execution of an unpleasant action.

Thus, it seems to me that play is not the predominant type of activity at preschool age. Only theories maintaining that a child does not have to satisfy the basic requirements of life, but can live in search of pleasure, could possibly suggest that a child's world is a play world.

Is it possible to suppose that a child's behaviour is always guided by meaning,⁵¹ that a preschooler's behaviour is so arid that he never behaves with candy as he wants to, simply because he thinks he should behave otherwise? This kind of subordination to rules is quite impossible in life, but in play it does become possible; thus, play creates the zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child is trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour.

The play-development relationship can be compared with the instruction-development relationship, but play provides changes in needs and in consciousness of a much wider nature. Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginative field, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives – all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development.

The child moves forward essentially through play activity. It is in this way that play can be termed a leading activity that determines the child's development.

The second question is: How does play itself change? It is a remarkable fact that the child starts with an imaginary situation where initially the imaginary situation is so very close to the real one. A reproduction of the real situation takes place. For example, a child playing with a doll repeats almost exactly what her mother does with her; the doctor looks at the child's throat, hurts her, and she cries; but as soon as the doctor has gone, the child immediately thrusts a spoon into the doll's mouth.

This means that in the initial situation rules operate in a condensed and compressed form. There is very little of the imaginary in the situation. It is an imaginary situation, but it is comprehensible

⁵¹ *smysl*

in the light of its relation to a real situation that has just occurred, i.e., it is a recollection of something that has actually happened. Play is initially more nearly recollection than imagination – that is, it is more memory in action than a novel imaginary situation. As play develops, we see a movement toward the conscious realization of its purpose.

It is incorrect to conceive of play as activity without purpose; play is purposeful activity for a child. In athletic games one can win or lose; in a race one can come first, second, or last. In short, the purpose decides the game; it justifies all the rest. Purpose as the ultimate goal determines the child's affective attitude to play. When running a race, a child can be highly agitated or distressed; and little may remain of pleasure, because he finds it physically painful to run, and if he is overtaken, he will experience little functional pleasure. In sports the purpose of the game is one of its dominant features without which there would be no point – it would be like examining a piece of candy, putting it in one's mouth, chewing it, and then spitting it out.

In play the goal, to come first in a race, is recognized in advance.

At the end of development, rules emerge; and the more rigid they are, the greater the demands on the child's adaptive ability, the greater the regulation of the child's activity, the more tense and acute play becomes. Simply running around without purpose or rules of play is a dull game that does not appeal to children.

Nohl simplified the rules of croquet for children and showed how this demagnetized the game, for the child lost the sense⁵² of the game in proportion to the simplification of the rules. Consequently, toward the end of development in play, what had originally been embryonic now has a distinct form; the purpose – the rule – finally emerges. This was true before, but in an undeveloped form. One further feature has yet to come, essential to sporting games; this is some sort of record, which is also closely connected with purpose.

Take chess, for example. For a real chess player it is pleasant to win and unpleasant to lose a game. Nohl says that it is as pleasing to a child to come first in a race as it is for a handsome person to look at himself in a mirror; there is a certain feeling of satisfaction.

Consequently, a complex of originally undeveloped features comes to the fore at the end of play development – features that had been secondary or incidental in the beginning occupy a central position at the end, and vice versa, features that had been central in the beginning become incidental at the end.

Finally, the third question: What sort of changes in a child's behaviour does play generate? In play a child is free, i.e., he determines his own actions, starting from his own "I". But this is an illusory freedom. His actions are in fact subordinated to a definite meaning,⁵³ and he acts according to the meanings⁵⁴ of things.

A child learns to consciously recognize his own actions and becomes aware that every object has a meaning.⁵⁵

⁵² *smysl*

⁵³ *smysl*

⁵⁴ *znamenie*

⁵⁵ *znamenie*

From the point of view of development, the fact of creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a path to developing abstract thought. I think that the rule-making connected to this leads to the development of actions, on the basis of which the division between work and play becomes established – a division which is encountered as a fundamental fact at school age.

I would like to mention just one other aspect: play is really a feature particular to the preschool age.

As figuratively expressed by one investigator, play for a child under three is a serious game, just as it is for an adolescent, although, of course, in a different sense of the word; serious play for a very young child means that he plays without separating the imaginary situation from the real one.

For the schoolchild, play begins to be a limited form of activity, predominantly of the athletic type, which fills a specific role in the schoolchild's development, but lacks the significance of play for the preschooler.

Superficially, play bears little resemblance to what it leads to, and only a profound internal analysis makes it possible to determine its course of movement and its role in the preschooler's development.

At school age play does not die away, but permeates the attitude toward reality. It has its own inner continuation in school instruction and work (compulsory activity based on rules). All examinations of the essence of play have shown that in play a new relationship is created between the semantic⁵⁶ field – that is, between situations in thought and real situations.

(1) I have already demonstrated in an earlier lecture the nature of a very young child's perception of external behavioural rules; all "don'ts" – social (interdiction), physical (the impossibility, for example, of striking a match a second time), and biological (for example, don't touch the samovar because you might burn yourself) – combine to form a single "situational" don't, which can be understood as a "barrier" (in Lewin's sense of the term).

⁵⁶ *smyslovoe*

Afterword: Issues encountered in translating “Play and its role in the mental development of the child”

Whilst it would not be possible to draw attention to every point where this new translation differs from the familiar Mulholland translation of the Play lecture, this section, in order to exemplify the approach taken, lists some of the main issues which were encountered, and compares the new translation with the Mulholland version (1977). The work of the new translation was both to render the meaning of the original Russian text into English as faithfully as possible, and also to avoid obscurities or ambiguities in translation. Here we exemplify both types of situation and select a number of examples that demonstrate these principles at work.

1. The first instance occurs on page 6 of the new translation in the sentence beginning: “I am inclined to give an even more general meaning to the problem”. This sentence continues “and I think that the mistake of many age-based theories is their disregard of the child’s needs.” The Mulholland translation reads here: “and I think the mistake of many accepted theories”.

The change from “accepted theories” to “age-based theories” provides a more accurate rendering of the Russian original. It also underlines a general point that Vygotsky is making in this part of the lecture, which is not well reflected in the Mulholland translation.

Vygotsky is making clear his view that theories of play based on a view of development as moving from one age-based level to the next are inadequate. In the section of the text that follows, he argues strongly that, though play development is related to age, the key factors that precipitate change are to be found in the maturing of new “needs, motives and incentives” for action, and in and the development of unrealisable “tendencies and desires”. These new affective developments create a kind of transitional conflict—it is important that the desires are unrealizable—to which play is a solution (“Play is invented at the point of development where unrealizable tendencies begin to appear”).

A couple of other changes in the new translation at around this point in the lecture relate to the same idea. The new translation reads, in the paragraph that follows:

It seems to me that every advance from one age-related level to another is connected with an abrupt change in motives and incentives to act.

The Mulholland translation reads:

It seems that every advance from one age period to another . . .

This rendering does not reflect the original Russian well, and Vygotsky’s point about the how levels of development reflect but are not entirely determined by age is lost.

Similarly, in our translation of the next paragraph Vygotsky’s argument reads:

This maturing of new needs and new motives for activity should be moved to the first plane.

The Mulholland translation reads:

This maturing of new needs and new motives for action is, of course, the dominant fact . . .

Here the Mulholland translation fails to register the fact that Vygotsky is arguing for needs and motives (and desires) to be viewed as leading play development and “moved to the first plane”.

2. After that rather complex instance of a group of related changes, the second example is more straightforward. It occurs at the point in the lecture when Vygotsky finds “three main flaws” in the argument that imaginative play is a subset of play in general, rather than being—as he believes—part of all play.

In the paragraph about the second “flaw in the argument” (the fact that play is presented as a cognitive process), the new translation reads:

It [the argument] stresses the importance of the cognitive process while neglecting not only the affective aspect but also the fact that play is the child’s activity.

The Mulholland translation reads:

. . . while neglecting not only the affective situation but also the circumstances of the child’s activity.

This is less faithful to the original Russian, which is more accurately rendered in the new translation: we have however underlined Vygotsky’s argument by italicizing “is” in the text.

3. The third example of quite a major change to the Mulholland translation occurs in the discussion of the role that an object—a stick—plays in enabling a child to imagine a horse. The Mulholland translation reads:

The child cannot yet sever thought from object; he must have something to act as a pivot. This expresses the child’s weakness; in order to imagine a horse, he needs to define his actions by means of using the horse in the stick as the pivot

The second sentence here is rather convoluted. The new translation reads:

The child cannot yet split off thought from object, he must find another object to act as a pivot. This expresses the child’s weakness; in order to think about a horse and to define his actions in using the horse, he needs the stick as a pivot.

Here the translation is faithful to the original Russian, and also avoids the clumsiness of the wording in the second sentence of the Mulholland. The psychological process described here is complex and the new translation aims for as much clarity as possible in rendering the line of Vygotsky’s argument.

4. Similarly, in the fourth example (actually two related examples), we have chosen a passage in which the new translation aims to make the sequence of a complicated argument clearer. The original paragraph, which occurs a couple of pages later than the last example, refers to the same process of “severing meaning from an object” by using a pivot. The Mulholland translation reads:

Separating words from things requires a pivot in the form of other things. But the moment the stick – i.e., the thing – becomes the pivot for severing the meaning of ‘horse’ from a real horse, the child makes one thing influence another in the semantic sphere. (He cannot sever meaning from an object or a word from an object except by

finding a pivot in something else, i.e., by the power of one object to steal another's name.)

This has always been a tortuous part of the Mulholland translation, especially because of the clumsy parenthetical sentence. Without altering much of the language, our translation moved the parenthetical sentence and thus made the sequence of the argument in the paragraph clearer:

Separating words from things requires a pivot in the form of another thing. The child cannot sever meaning from an object, or a word from an object, except by finding a pivot in something else, i.e., by the power of one object to steal another's name. From the moment the stick – i.e., the 'other thing' – becomes the pivot for severing the meaning of 'horse' from a real horse, the child makes one thing influence another in the semantic sphere.

Here the words hardly change at all, but the clumsiness of the parenthesis (the origin of which is obviously in the stenographic record) is smoothed out, and the process that Vygotsky is describing is made clearer.

Three paragraphs later, Vygotsky returns to the same example, and again in the Mulholland translation, the meaning does not come out clearly and the sentence seems rushed:

To sever the meaning of horse from a real horse and transfer it to a stick (the necessary material pivot to keep the meaning from evaporating) and really acting with the stick as if it were a horse is a vital transitional stage to operating with meanings.

The new translation aims to make the development of this complex idea much clearer:

To separate the meaning of 'horse' from a real horse, and to transfer it to a stick (which is the necessary material pivot to keep the meaning from evaporating), and then to act with the stick as if it really were a horse, is a vital transitional stage to operating with meanings alone.

5. The fifth example relates to a point in the Mulholland translation where the original Russian was obviously difficult to render, and Mulholland indicated, through the use of inverted commas, that Vygotsky was using a metaphor.

The Mulholland translation reads:

In play an action replaces another action just as an object replaces another object. How does the child 'float' from one object to another, from one action to another?

However the original Russian did not read "float"; the precise term Vygotsky used was "re-melts". On the one hand, the metaphor of "melting" was more graphic than "floating"—it conveyed the idea of how an object/action can become several things in the course of play, and how seamless these transitions can be. On the other hand, "melts" seemed a preferable translation to "re-melts" which would be an obscure wording.

Our translation therefore reads:

In play an action replaces another action just as an object replaces another object. How does the child ‘melt’ one object into another or one action into another? This is accomplished by movement in the field of meaning

6. The last example comes from the point in the lecture where Vygotsky is arguing, in opposition to Koffka, that play is not the child’s predominant or normal activity but the reverse, and that in normal everyday situations the child behaves “in a manner diametrically opposed to his behaviour in play”. Towards the end of this paragraph there is an obscure passage in the Mulholland translation:

But it is hard to envisage the insane picture that a child would bring to mind if the form of activity we have been speaking of were to become the predominant form of his everyday activity – even if only partially transferred to real life.

The opening of this sentence is rather unclear and is not a true translation of the original Russian. Our translation is more literal:

But the child would look like a patient in a mental hospital if the form of activity we have been speaking of were to become the predominant form of his everyday activity – or even if it were only partially transferred to real life.

This final section of the commentary has tried to exemplify the changes that the present translators have made to the Mulholland translation in order to clarify obscurities, correct any mistranslations, and in general to render Vygotsky’s meaning as clearly as possible. There are numerous other smaller differences from the Mulholland text throughout the new translation; here we have chosen examples that indicate the principles behind our changes. The Mulholland translation, originally published in 1967 and revised in 1977, is now nearly 50 years old. It has been in general a very satisfactory translation, and we acknowledge its strengths. However, we hope that our new version of the Play lecture, which is closer to Vygotsky’s original, is more accessible and more expressive of the meanings of this seminal text.

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