

Рецензия | Review

A book in dialogue: L.S. Vygotsky's ideas a century on¹

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Understanding L. S. Vygotsky's ideas requires not only immersion in the context of the era in which he lived and worked, but also engagement with the writings of his students, followers, and contemporary scholars of cultural-historical psychology. Professors N.N. Veresov (Monash University, Melbourne) and N.E. Veraksa (Faculty of Psychology, Moscow State University) have published a new book that brings all of this together in concentrated form. The book grew out of a series of conversations held as part of an educational outreach initiative of the International Academy of Preschool Education (MPADO) and posted on the organization's official website (MPADO, 2022–2024).

“*Dialogues about L. S. Vygotsky*” is not just another monograph offering yet another interpretation of the tenets of cultural-historical psychology. The title emphasizes the book's distinctive genre: before the reader

is a live dialogue in which the logic and key ideas of Vygotsky's psychological theory are revealed step by step. The authors offer a kind of guide to the territory of cultural-historical psychology, taking on the role of guides.

A dialogical presentation creates room for debate, mutual criticism, and polemic in addition to an exchange of views. It is a pity that the authors did not take advantage of this opportunity to make their dialogue fuller and more engaging. They appear deliberately to steer clear of controversy and avoid direct argument with one another. By contrast, the book contains ample polemic with other Vygotsky scholars, chiefly on N. N. Veresov's part.

The authors' aim was for readers, as witnesses to an intellectual conversation, gradually to join the process of reflection themselves. Vygotsky called this “cooperation”; today, the term “jointly distributed activity” is

¹ Veraksa N.E., Veresov N.N. (2025). *Dialogs on L.S. Vygotsky*. Moscow: Moscow University Publ.

² Веракса Н.Е., Вересов Н.Н. (2025). *Диалоги о Л.С. Выготском*. М.: Изд-во Московского университета.

widely used (Rubtsov, 2024). According to Vygotsky, all higher mental functions arise and develop through cooperation, so that open dialogue creates the most favorable conditions for learning — the kind of learning that leads development. At the same time, highly complex theoretical ideas in cultural-historical psychology become more accessible without losing their depth. It is no accident that, in the foreword (Yu.P. Zinchenko), the book is described as “a propaedeutic to the cultural-historical approach” (p. 6).

The book under review comprises eight conversations on the key propositions and concepts of L.S. Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory and on their possible applications in educational practice. A separate strand of the dialogue concerns contemporary preschool education. The authors address the theory's fundamental concepts — development, consciousness, the social situation of development, the zone of proximal development, the ideal form, *perezhivanie*, and higher mental functions — and clearly demonstrate their methodological and practical significance for contemporary psychological science and practice. N.E. Veraksa repeatedly brings the discussion back to preschool education and to educational practice more broadly.

The first conversation, “The Cultural-Historical Conception of L. S. Vygotsky and Contemporary Preschool Education”, establishes the book's overall framework. N.N. Veresov notes that there is still no shared understanding of consciousness, while the meaning of the term “development” is gradually being diluted. He insists that Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology is a theory of the development of human consciousness, understood as a system of higher mental functions.

The conversations also examine such concepts as sign, cultural forms of behavior, maturation, play, psychological age, and the child's relationship with the social environment. When the discussion turns to the practical design of the educational process, N.E. Veraksa draws particular attention to the concept of *perezhivanie*. A child does not simply “reflect” external influences like a mirror; those influences are refracted through the child's own *perezhivanie*. This helps explain why essentially the same situation can affect different children in very different ways.

The second conversation, “The Concept of Ideal and Present Forms and the Process of Development”, explores a central proposition of cultural-historical theory: the social environment is not merely a factor in a child's cultural development, but its source. Development unfolds through interaction between the present form already embodied in the child and the ideal form available in culture. The social environment is therefore not an external backdrop, but the actual space in

which higher mental functions take shape. “We are coming to understand the depth of this idea more and more clearly. This is especially true in the contemporary world, where the social environment is becoming digital and we can see how it affects children's development: development follows different trajectories, yet remains governed by the same laws”, N.N. Veresov concludes (p. 29).

The third conversation is devoted to one of the most important concepts in cultural-historical psychology: the zone of proximal development. The speakers show how learning, play, and creativity can function as forms of development. The zone of proximal development is presented as a space of developmental possibilities that arises through cooperation with an adult and with other children. N.N. Veresov defines it as “the distance between the actual level of development and the possible (potential) level of development” (p. 56).

The speakers examine in detail the relationship between play and learning activity and Vygotsky's principled distinction between them. School-based forms of instruction must not be transplanted into the preschool years. Children must be allowed to develop fully through play if imagination — the central neoformation of the preschool years — is to emerge. N.N. Veresov argues for a gradual transition from play to learning, with “strictly instructional tasks wrapped in play narratives” in the first grade, as envisaged in Davydov's system of developmental instruction (p. 67).

The fourth conversation addresses the laws of psychological development identified by Vygotsky. These include, on the one hand, four laws governing the genesis of higher mental functions, subsumed under the “general genetic law of cultural development”, and, on the other, the laws governing the formation of “psychological systems”: the relations among mental functions, their differentiation and synthesis, the hierarchy of functions, and related processes, as N.N. Veresov explains (p. 76). The systemic organization of mental functions becomes a central object of inquiry in Vygotsky's late work.

The fifth conversation, “Vygotsky's Dialectics”, seeks to reveal the methodological core of his theory. The authors argue that dialectics should be treated as a method for analyzing the process of development, not as a universal scheme applied to a particular object of psychology. That claim is difficult to dispute. Yet much of the conversation is devoted precisely to *examples of applying* dialectics to various psychological questions in Vygotsky's work. The reader learns relatively little about the dialectical *development* of his theory “from the abstract to the concrete”, or about the *development* of the

child's consciousness. There are also some questionable excursions into philosophy, such as the claim that "Spinoza took the concept of matter and distinguished two attributes within it — mind and brain" (N.E. Veraksa, p. 97). The conversation on dialectics is perhaps the least successful in the book.

The sixth conversation, "The Psychology of Creativity in the Work of L.S. Vygotsky", examines the problem of creativity from a cultural-historical perspective. Creativity is understood as a movement from indeterminacy to structure, from conception to realization, and from an initially external cultural meaning to personal meaning. For Vygotsky, what makes an activity creative is not the materials or tools it employs, but the meaning that transcends the immediate action. The development of a child's creative abilities therefore cannot be reduced to a set of activity-based exercises. It requires the child's participation in culture, where the meanings and values accumulated by humanity "become the individual's own personal meanings" (N.N. Veresov, p. 118).

The seventh conversation, "Dialectics and the Study of Child Development", returns to the methodological foundations of cultural-historical psychology. The speakers consider why teachers need dialectics. The discussion centers on contradiction as a source of development. Various factors may accelerate, slow, or alter the trajectory of development, but they do not explain its internal dynamics or logic. To understand child development, one must examine the interaction between its two lines — the natural and the cultural — and recognize the social environment as the source from which specifically human forms of behavior emerge. Particular attention is therefore given to the concept of the social situation of development.

The eighth conversation, "Consciousness: Cultural or Natural?", returns to the question posed at the beginning of the book: what is consciousness from a cultural-historical perspective? Answering it requires attention to the shift in our understanding of Vygotsky's work over the past quarter-century, brought about by the publication of a large body of archival manuscripts, lec-

ture transcripts, and notebooks. "These works revealed a new Vygotsky to us. An entirely new one", N.N. Veresov acknowledges — a Vygotsky far more profound than the one scholars had known before and thought they understood so well. Vygotsky's principal achievement, he argues, was that "he posed and answered the question of what human consciousness is... It arises when a person begins to participate in cultural practices, in joint activity, in practices that involve the use of artificial means" (p. 144).

In discussing L.S. Vygotsky's work, the authors focus mainly on writings and ideas from his late period. This emphasis is justified: in the late texts, Vygotsky's theoretical thought reaches its fullest maturity — its acme. It is regrettable, however, that the book gives little attention to his work and discoveries of the 1920s, apart from the idea of ingrowing, and therefore says little about the roots of his theory. There is no mention of the "instrumental method" or the "double-stimulation method", while the 1928 lectures on developmental psychology are unexpectedly described as "one of the last lecture courses Vygotsky delivered" (N.N. Veresov, p. 86). The book does not, of course, claim to provide a comprehensive account of Vygotsky's ideas.

Some conversations, especially the fourth and fifth, occasionally drift into monologues by N.N. Veresov, while N.E. Veraksa's contributions are largely confined to clarification and support. The other dialogues, although less markedly, also suffer from a lack of intellectual polyphony. Highly complex, multifaceted, and contested questions in Vygotsky's legacy are viewed through a single scholarly lens — admittedly a powerful one. Even so, the authors undoubtedly achieve their chief aim: to demonstrate the continuing relevance of L.S. Vygotsky's legacy for contemporary science and educational practice.

In our view, the publication of this book marks an important event in cultural-historical psychology and offers further compelling evidence that Vygotsky's ideas will continue to live and develop in the cultural soil from which they emerged.

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