# A Marxist Psychology of Language and Representation

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*What does a Marxist theory of human psychology look like? Kyrill Potapov sheds light on this topic by showing how the works of Soviet thinkers like Lev Vygotsky and Evald Ilyenkov relate to more modern research on collective intentionality and niche construction.*


*Vygotsky addresses students in a Soviet classroom.*

Soviet Marxist Lev Vygotsky, believing that psychology needed "its own Capital"[1], took aim at Western psychology's focus on classifying "fossilized behavior" as well as the Soviet tendency to lift concepts from Marx and apply them directly to observed phenomena. Western psychology served capitalism by getting us to pin our alienation on our unique internal makeup. Are you an introvert or an extrovert? Are you anally retentive or anally expulsive? What's your IQ? Do you have an Oppositional Defiant Disorder or a growth mindset? Soviet psychology was just as prone to grouping people according to static generalizations, like "How many times the child went to the public baths and how many newspapers his father reads"[2]. It treated the environment as a set of absolutes determining human behavior.

Vygotsky had not even reached his 38th birthday when he died of tuberculosis in 1934. But a group of his students took forward his scientific legacy, defying state decrees against his scientific work. The Vygotsky school continues to have a huge influence across the world, from Brazil to Finland, but many Marxists are unaware of their work and its significance.

Vygotsky was one of the first to suggest that hardship and disability are not a problem of the individual, but a problem of her society. It is not a stamp one carries around, but a social relation, the conditions of which we can and must change. Psychology had been about patterns in the external appearance of our behavior, when it should have been about the "origination and disappearance, about reasons and conditions, and about all those real relations that are the basis of any phenomenon"[3] – not what we have been but what we can be. Before you think this sounds like another self-help guru, we should remember that soon after the Russian revolution Vygotsky helped to bring education to thousands of street children.

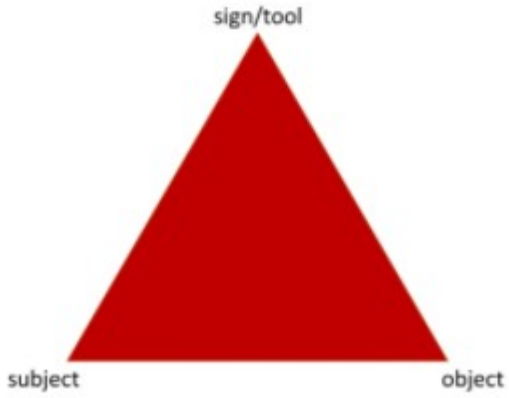
A school of Marxists including Vygotsky and the philosopher Evald Ilyenkov offered a creative counter-current to the dogma of Soviet *Diamat*. But the problems Vygotsky, Ilyenkov, and their comrades identified are still rife in psychology today. We can see the same issues at play in debates on the origins of human language. We will see how Vygotsky's and Ilyenkov's Marxist psychology can contribute to these debates by challenging the widespread assumption that science ought to start with individual minds. Vygotsky's psychology starts with the social relations and material conditions that make human consciousness possible in the first place. I will argue that this strand of Marxist psychology is being confirmed by recent breakthroughs in the study of *collective intentionality* and *niche construction*.

Evald Ilyenkov emerged as a leading figure of a renaissance in Soviet philosophy in the 1950s and 60s. He argued that what makes humans unique is that we produce representations: "The human being, and only the human being, immediately ceases to *merge* with the form of her life activity, separating it from itself and placing it before herself, that is, transforming it into representation."[4] Our clothes, our money, our games, and our country borders are made up of representations. The most important system of representations in our lives is of course our language. Scientists have often assumed we need to explain the origins of language to explain other kinds of representation. Vygotsky and Ilyenkov argue for the converse position: we can only understand language as developing out of wider concrete activity in a particular culture.[5]

At the start of the 20th century, American behaviorism and its Soviet analog (Pavlov's reflexology) suggested that human language could be explained in terms of conditioning: we learned words through imitation and reinforcement. This view was comprehensively overturned by Noam Chomsky, who argued that conditioning just could not account for the rich novelty and versatility of the speech of young children. Chomsky instead proposed that humans were born with a *language organ*[6] that acted like a computer program with a *universal grammar* that enabled any language to be learned. Over time this view too has been widely challenged: evidence for anything constituting a universal grammar has failed to materialize. Today Michael Tomasello is working at the cutting

edge of research into language development. According to Tomasello the complex structures we find in our language are fully explainable in terms of our *enculturation*: a process in which more complex structures are learned on the basis of earlier simpler ones, with the models and reinforcements of more competent speakers. What is interesting is that Tomasello cites Vygotsky as his central influence.

Tomasello's innovations have come from shifting the focus of research from the individual-world relation to the social relations into which individuals are born. It is here that he most fully follows Vygotsky.




Vygotsky suggested that while the behavior of non-human animals was explainable in terms of stimulus and response conditioning, human activity was mediated by social forms. While ripples on the water could direct a heron to dive for fish, humans could treat the ripples as a sign instead of automatically reacting, modifying their own response to it, for instance by adding a colorful float to their fishing line. The *modus classicus* for Vygotsky and Tomasello here is learning to point. While an infant's extended reaching gesture might at first be met with the response that her mother gives her what she is reaching towards, over time it can become a mutually recognized sign which the infant has learned to appropriate to express her intentions. The mutual recognition involved in acting with others allows us to develop concepts with which to grasp the world. Tomasello has extended this hypothesis by noting that chimps raised in captivity can also be taught to point, though this pointing remains at the level of indicating what they want. Human infants meanwhile learn to point for a range of purposes such as expressing interest or directing someone to something *they* might want. This research brings confirmation to theories which Vygotsky first proposed from his readings of Hegel, Marx & Engels and their concepts of self-actualization and alienation.[7]

Unfortunately, I think it's too early to see Tomasello as progressing the project of Vygotsky's Marxist psychology. The cognitivist milieu in which Tomasello works has found it hard to shake off the grip of mind-body dualism. Here is the kind of story Tomasello offers to explain the history of language development: Before language existed, we walked around with intentional states and no way to express them to others. I would get hungry and an intentional state to climb the tree for cherries would form in my mind and I would lug my lonely self up the tree. But then one day I find someone already up the tree picking cherries and realise that others are after the same goals as me. I realise others

have intentional states just like mine. Now I can apply my intentional states to them and understand them. With our *shared intentional states* we can now coordinate our activities and introduce gestures, then words like “ripe” and “rotten”[8].

But what are intentional states and how can we share them? When does one state stop and the next begin? When I play chess can’t I say that what I share with my opponent are the chess pieces right there on the board? I see certain dangers and openings as real parts of the dynamic situation. My intentions are embedded in the situation: enacted through the real constraints of the chess pieces and the activity of chess.[9]

Psychologists Racine & Carpendale[10] offer a helpful summary of this criticism:

> In their interactions with others, children do not observe a pattern of activity and then go about computing the underlying meaning; children instead come to see psychological concepts directly in such patterns of activity.

Tomasello reduces language and representations to patterns of information forming my mental states. He does not consider how such representations as parts of the material world, in turn, influence our development.[11]

This is one of the key areas in which Tomasello has rejected Vygotsky. At the heart of Vygotsky’s work is the bold claim that “Every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an intermental category, then within the child as an intramental category”.[12] Vygotsky called this his *general genetic law of development* (GGLD). Whether they know it or not, mainstream psychologists tend to assume a Kantian frame in which the categories of thought were formed *a priori* in the mind of each individual. Over in the Frankfurt School, Alfred Sohn-Rethel tried to challenge this assumption by suggesting Kantian categories are produced through structures of human relations; but Sohn-Rethel’s work narrowly focuses on the conditions of exchange relations on the market, leaving little to say about everyday psychology.

Vygotsky’s work came to the West during the Cold War and it reached its readership cleansed of its Marxist roots. Editors cut out references to Marx and rephrased passages to sound less Marxist. To use Vygotsky’s own language, Western psychologists had different social motives and were not in a social situation of development in which his radical theory of sociogenesis could be oriented. He was instead popularized as a flawed social constructivist. Trainee teachers often meet the watered-down version of Vygotsky’s GGLD that *children learn best from others,* while sociologists have highlighted that *everything is culturally mediated*. These truisms have little to do with Vygotsky’s project. Vygotsky followed Marx in taking the categories of thought to be produced through concrete labour. Unlike Sohn-Rethel, Vygotsky extended Marx’s insights on the dynamics of commodity exchange and applied them to other (and newly developing) forms of social practice.

Though Vygotsky's work is grounded in Marx, Hegel & Spinoza, its influences are much broader. The figure Vygotsky first credits for the discovery of the GGLD is psychologist James Mark Baldwin. A passage from Vygotsky's student Aleksei Leontiev may help us see why Baldwin would interest a group of Marxist scientists:

> Mastering stimulation, man masters his own behaviour; in submitting himself to its natural laws he in this way subjects it to himself, in this sense turning it into voluntary behaviour. We see that at the foundations of this process lies the general process of the socialization of man. The beginning of collective labour and economic activities, which signify that humanity has entered the historical phase of its development – this is the chief condition for the appearance of higher forms of behaviour. Here we have an extremely complicated process of the double relation of interchange between the individual and his social comrades. In this process, in J. M. Baldwin's terminology, 'the social element projecting itself into the personality forms the "subjective", which by a return movement is transmitted anew to other people and thus becomes "ejective" [the social form].[13]

Leontiev is tying Vygotsky's theory of sign mediation into the broader context of Marx's discussion of tool production and social practice. What is more interesting is the role that Baldwin is playing in this account. In a typical passage Vygotsky quotes Engels:

> "Both natural science and philosophy have till now completely disregarded research on the influence of man's activity on his thinking. On the one hand, they know only nature and on the other, thought. But a more substantial and closer base for human thinking is precisely man changing nature and not nature alone as such, and the mind of man developed according to how man learned to change nature" (K. Marx and E Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 20, p. 545).[14]

Though he was by no means a Marxist, American psychologist and evolutionary biologist Baldwin independently arrived at many of the same conclusions as Engels. Baldwin was a leading voice in America until details of his sex life became public. Vygotsky and Leontiev took interest in Baldwin at a time when he had been largely forgotten by the global scientific community. That is until the 1990s when Baldwin was rediscovered in Terrence Deacon's *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain.* The renewed interest in Baldwin is now part of a much bigger wave of interest in the biology of *niche construction.*

For Deacon, we should understand the complexity of human language not through an inner universal grammar but through the "semiotic" constraints which come with the use and manipulation of the distinctive types of signs which define human language, namely, symbols.  Deacon proposes a mechanism to explain this development that neither relies on dualism, nor crudely flattens everything to a favored foundation like neurons or reflexes. Something must account for the kind of readiness for language which allows a two-year-old to comment on the spilled cereal while a cat living in the same house meows and bangs her head against my leg. Deacon calls this mechanism for adaptation *Baldwinian evolution.*

Baldwinian evolution (or what is more widely called *niche construction*) makes the striking claim that a group's evolution can be altered by the behavior of its members during their own lifetimes i.e. that culture can change the course of evolution. While this may look like Lamarckism, it is fully compatible with Darwinism. Baldwin notes how many higher mammals have young who dedicate a lot of time to play. Goats living in the planes learn to jump one way and goats in the mountains jump another way – if goats got too experimental in their play, they'd jump off the edge of the cliff, but they've evolved the right level of flexibility in play to learn in their environment. Play and imitation-based learning give animals a huge advantage because it's far more efficient than learning how to catch the fish in the nearby lake or hide from a predator through your own trial and error. These are a few of the basic ingredients but we have not yet seen full-fledged Baldwinian evolution.

The most widely cited example of human Baldwinian evolution concerns lactose intolerance. Cultures that developed cattle herding have far lower rates of lactose intolerance compared to those relying on crops or fish. To this day there are clear disparities in the rates of lactose intolerance in France compared to China for instance.

Another way to deal with lactose intolerance is for the sugar to be eaten up as the milk turns. Whoever started making milk into cheese gave themselves another protection against the potential negative effects of lactose. What's more, cheese is a store of Vitamin D, meaning that cultures who make cheese can live in places that are dark a lot of the time. Gouda may have exerted a force on our evolution. The cheese itself has no magic force, rather it is in real human activity that cheese is made and cheese making is learned and passed on to others. And yet it is the cheese itself that can direct the activity, going too sour one year or too spongy: the cheese is the final criteria for cheese making. Cheese and cheese making are locked in a kind of unity in which it does not really make sense to separate one from the other. There is no gene for cheese making, but over time as cheese becomes increasingly needed for a group's survival, adaptations may arise which increase the likelihood that a group will keep consuming it– perhaps (to oversimplify) a mutation guaranteeing that me and my mum find gorgonzola delicious. Of course, this progressive entanglement of the environment with the organism need not be limited to cheese, since it applies much more widely to the social niche we have constructed for ourselves. Vygotsky reminds us of the Marxist resonance here, and the contrasts with traditional approaches focused on information processing and behavioural patterns:

> It is very obvious that external signals – a reflection of the natural connection of phenomena, wholly created by natural conditions – cannot be an adequate basis of human behavior: For human adaptation, an active change in the nature of man is essential. It is the basis of all human history. It necessarily presupposes an active change in man's behavior. 'affecting the environment by this movement and changing it, he changes his own nature at the same time," (K. Marx and F. Engels, Collected Works, Vol. 23, pp. 188-189).[15]

A chess board has been shaped over centuries of social practice and has in turn shaped social practice. Baldwinian evolution reminds us that human habits and dispositions have similarly been shaped over the course of a history of hundreds of thousands of years of engaging together with our environment. What appears to us as individual psychology is often the manifestation of complex networks of social relations:

> These techniques or methods of behavior, arising stereotypically in given situations, represent virtual, solidified, petrified, crystallized psychological forms that arose in remote times at the most primitive stages of cultural development of man and in a remarkable way were preserved in the form of historical survivors in a petrified and in a living state in the behavior of modern man.[16]

Vygotsky argues that even something as basic as a reflex response to a particular stimulus in a lab needs to be produced through wider social practice, creating the conditions for it to be observed. Cultural evolution and biological evolution have worked in tandem to produce the effects we observe in a lab. The only way science can study real behavior rather than its fossilized/reified products is by analyzing its history of production.

Though Chomsky supposedly overturned behaviorism, in his wake linguistics has continued to focus on behavioral fossils rather than the dynamics of real human activity. According to Deacon, we have struggled to understand language development because we have isolated language from these broader processes of production, instead focusing on processes internal to language and hoping to see more primitive forms of them elsewhere in the animal kingdom. As Vygotsky notes, this is a kind of fetishism.[17]

Writing in the 60s and 70s, Evald Ilyenkov greatly expanded on the philosophical implications of the strand in Marxist thought we have been following here. In Ilyenkov's philosophy, it is not mental representations that we form to grasp the world but the world itself as it appears in social practice. Our consciousness is not something inside us which we inspect for motives or apply knowledge from, it is part of our overall materially grounded activity:

> It is this that confronts the individual as the thought of preceding generations realized ('reified', 'objectified', 'alienated') in sensuously perceptible 'matter' – in language and visually perceptible images, in books and statues, in wood and bronze, in the form of places of worship and instruments of labor, in the designs of machines and state buildings, in the patterns of scientific and moral systems, and so on. All these objects are in their existence, in their 'present being' substantial, 'material', but in their essence, in their origin they are 'ideal', because they 'embody' the collective thinking of people, the 'universal spirit' of mankind.[18]

Ilyenkov does not believe that we transfer thoughts to one another but that we participate in shared activities that condition our thoughts through the objects directing these activities. Here again, we can draw comparisons to Sohn-Rethel and his comrades in the Frankfurt School. There are interesting affinities to be explored between Ilyenkov's *ideal* and Sohn-Rethel's *real abstraction*. It is not just the narrower focus on market exchange that distinguishes Sohn-Rethel from Vygotsky and Ilyenkov but a kind of pessimism which

comes perhaps from Sohn-Rethel's Kantianism or perhaps in the differences of worldview within and outside the USSR. For "Western Marxists" there is often a focus on how little we know, so that contemporary Frankfurt School philosopher Axel Honneth invites us to treat *reification* with suspicion: as phenomena concealing real relations.[19] Analysis is limited to a critique of the social sphere without much room for a constructive story about how tools and materials may be appropriated. Vygotsky and Ilyenkov understand *reification* more broadly as the process through which objects possess certain values for us because we have acquired habits for their use.

The interface at which we find complex connections here is not between world and head but between the world and social relations. As a seasoned chess player, I see the bishop as movable diagonally, but I also see that only a few positions are open, and I cannot melt my piece and reconstruct it on the other side of the knight. How I experience my environment is already conditioned by systems of norms, but each norm is only the norm it is because of how it is materialized in concrete activity. The opposition the world poses for me shapes and is shaped by historically accumulated practice.

While traditional psychology has often sought scientific concepts for things inside the head, Ilyenkov suggests that psychology should begin with the public world we share in an activity. Ilyenkov does not deny that we have private thoughts but sees them as a sub-species of our overall activity. For Ilyenkov, instead of applying mental models or knowledge to the world, the world is its own model and already appears to us in relation to our activity. The world "gives us" this knowledge because we are inhabitants of the ecological niche Ilyenkov calls *the ideal.*

The boundary between human and wider niche construction may still be a little fuzzy. Don't beavers also live in social groups in which dams are both built through their activity and guide their activity? Again, Ilyenkov describes the distinction in terms of our production of signs or representations:

> The human being, and only the human being, immediately ceases to "merge" with the form of her life activity, separating it from itself and placing it before herself, that is, transforming it into representation.[20]

If *representations* are what distinguish us from beavers and woodpeckers, will we need to search for mental states after all? The cognitivist approach of traditional psychology is to look for a representation in the mind and consider how it is correlated with what it represents in the world. For Ilyenkov a *representation* is a functional relation, agnostic to whether it is inside or outside the skull. The power of language is in increasing my representational capacities by giving me more tools with which to represent. Discussing the work of psychologist S. L. Rubinstein, Ilyenkov explains:

> ‘Ideality mainly characterises the idea or image insofar as they, becoming objectivised in words’ [entering into the system of socially evolved knowledge which for the individual is something that is given for him.], ‘in objective reality, thus acquire a relative independence, separating themselves, as it were, from the mental activity of the individual’
>
> It is these forms of the organisation of social (collectively realised) human life activity that exist before, outside and completely independently of the individual mentality, in one way or another materially established in language, in ritually legitimised customs and rights.[21]

Ilyenkov defends a version of Vygotsky’s GGLD. People find themselves acting in a humanized nature that preceded them. They can only separate themselves from the world by being sensitive to its reifications/material constraints: by learning to recognize or create a representation of the world by which to draw meaningful distinctions within it.[22] With representations I can imagine alternatives to the present reality and I am not a slave to the visual field.

Producing representations can give us self-determination.[23] I might tie a knot in a handkerchief to direct myself to remember the milk or I might write in a journal to direct myself emotionally while going through a difficult experience. Language is also a rich source of representations that can move us (as in poetry[24]

) or by way of which we can move, as in a discussion. Motives/ affects are embodied in words through reification.[25] The process of reification can explain how our representations and everyday objects take on the seemingly magical quality of having a value for us in our activity:

> Objects in the environment are not neutral for us… they not only create difficulties for us in our actions to a greater or lesser degree or, conversely, facilitate actions, but many things and events that we meet manifest for us a more or less determined will, they stimulate us to certain actions: beautiful weather or a lovely landscape move us to take a walk, the steps of a staircase stimulate a two-year-old to climb and slide…[26]

Self-determination is the subordination or appropriation of these dynamic constraints. The role of self-determination in niche construction is something which is still an undertheorized area within research on niche construction. It arguably also undertheorized in the work of Sohn-Rethel. In a fascinating anthropological study, Lansing & Fox ask, “Can niche construction be Marx’s ‘humanized nature?’” They note:

> Presently, there is little role for conscious planning in the theory of niche construction, which explains the intricate architecture of environments like termite mounds as products of Darwinian selection. But in cases like the rice terraces, the role of conscious intention cannot be ignored.
>
> As Marx observed, 'a spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality'.[27]

Lansing & Fox use archaeological evidence and other materials to investigate the practices involved in constructing well-irrigated farms in Bali.[28] Did the rulers in Bali work with architects and construct the farms top-down from a plan or were they constructed bottom-up as directed by the farmers themselves? As might be expected, when authorities told the farmers what to do based on their own plans and models in events like flooding or pest infestation, the advice of the authorities only made things worse because of unanticipated network effects. The farms were most effective when the farmers could direct their management themselves. What stands out in this study is that it is the top-down authority that ends up associated with Marx's views and the farmers directing their own labor which represents the alternative. The authors give a nuanced discussion, recognizing the value of Marx and Hegel for research, but in assuming that for Marx the ideal is in the head, they limit the scope of their investigation. Vygotsky and Ilyenkov have shown us how we can avoid this awkward dualism, by putting psychology and representation in its proper place in Marx's system: as part of a materially realized interpersonal developmental process.

Western psychologists have often imported Soviet psychology into their work by fitting it to their existing frameworks to foreground social learning. Michael Tomasello has carried out original and interesting research on the differences between humans and our closest non-human relatives. Non-human animals can construct tools for their environment while humans can take the whole socialized world as their environment. So when young kids learn new tools there is a ratcheting effect in human culture, multiplying the possibilities of every free individual. For Tomasello and cognitive science humans have mental intentions as immediately given in consciousness and they can freely act on these intentions unless they are impeded from doing so. Ilyenkov's philosophy shows that we have no need for this division of the mind from the body. We do not need the fetishism of relating mental states to mental states because we are born into a world already shaped for our thinking.

> And it is this world of the forms of social human life activity that confronts the newborn child (to be more exact, the biological organism of the species Homo Sapiens) as the objectivity to which he is compelled to adapt all his 'behaviour', all the functions of his organic body, as the object towards assimilation of which his elders guide all his activity.
>
> The individual is obliged to subordinate his own actions to certain 'rules' and 'patterns' which he has to assimilate as a special object in order to make them rules and patterns of the life activity of his own body.[29]

In our development, it is not beliefs and intentions that make a difference but customs and practices we find in the material world. An ethnographic study by Lipatov, Brown, and Feldman on the influence of niche construction on marriage customs in Taiwan illustrates this conclusion. If I am born in a culture with certain marriage customs, it is not that I introspect on and then share intentions with others in my culture but that this is what marriage actually is as an object in my world, about which I may then form beliefs.[30]

While Tomasello suggests it is shared intentions that characterize human psychology and allow for the mediation of human culture in our development, Vygotsky argues it is symbols and tools that humans share. Ilyenkov reminds us that symbols are things we can collectively construct in concrete material practice, rather than something locked in your head.

Frederic Jameson says that these days we lack the *cognitive mapping* to orient our world. We tend to talk past each other and find it hard to communicate our intentions. But what is to be done? "Western Marxism" and Continental philosophy has often been unable to do more than offer criticism. As Ray Brassier argues, Marxism is nothing if it isn't a process of collective grasping and construction.[31] Vygotsky and Ilyenkov reframe this debate by theorizing the processes by which we produce maps and representations. Instead of grounding theories of language in "floating signifiers" or mental states, this school of Soviet Marxists has grounded them in concrete practice. As we've seen, recent scientific findings have vindicated them here. As Marxists, we should in turn appropriate this science for new emancipatory ends.

*This article is based on a presentation made to the International Friends of Ilyenkov*

*To learn more about Ilyenkov, go here.*



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21. Op. Cit.
22. i.e. *determinate negation*
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24. Zavershneva, E., and René van der Veer. “Vygotsky’s notebooks.” A Selection. New (2018): 51.
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