

The 6th China International Forum on Cognitive Linguistics

Language, Culture and Mind:

10 lectures on development, evolution and cognitive linguistics

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Lecture 8

Participation, Practice and Cultural Learning:
Children's Play as Acts of Meaning



General Goals

- The integration of the Vygotskian cultural-historical (or socio-cultural) approach with cognitive-functional and cultural linguistics
- A materialist approach to semiotics and cognition
- *Every function in the child's development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological) ... All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals.*
Lev Vygotsky, 1896-1934.



Participation

- Goodwin and Goodwin (2004: 222)) define participation as “actions demonstrating forms of involvement performed by parties within evolving structures of *talk*” [my italics], although they also recognize the need to “expand our notion of human participation in a historically built social and material world” by attending to “material structure in the environment” (*ibid.* p. 239).
- My purpose is to foreground the semiotic aspect of materiality, and the material basis of meaning, and to analyze its role in participatory learning and development.



Materiality and semiotic mediation

- We owe the notion of semiotic mediation to Vygotsky, whose explanation of its operation in cognition, and in cognitive development, focused on the internalization of conventional signs originating in contexts of discursive practice.
- Although Vygotsky attributed great importance to the formative role of language in the emergence of “inner speech” and “verbal thought”, his employment of the concept of semiotic mediation also encompassed the use of non-systematic signs, including objects-as-signifiers.



Matter and Mind

- The commonsense philosophy of science and of most scientists is some kind of materialism
- The commonsense philosophy of philosophers, logicians, and many linguists is some kind of idealism
- Both materialism and idealism can be (or can claim to be) realist
- Embodiment is part of a materialist philosophy of cognitive science
- But many cognitive scientists are tempted by dualism, which seems (falsely) to offer the best of both worlds (cf. The "Mind/Brain")



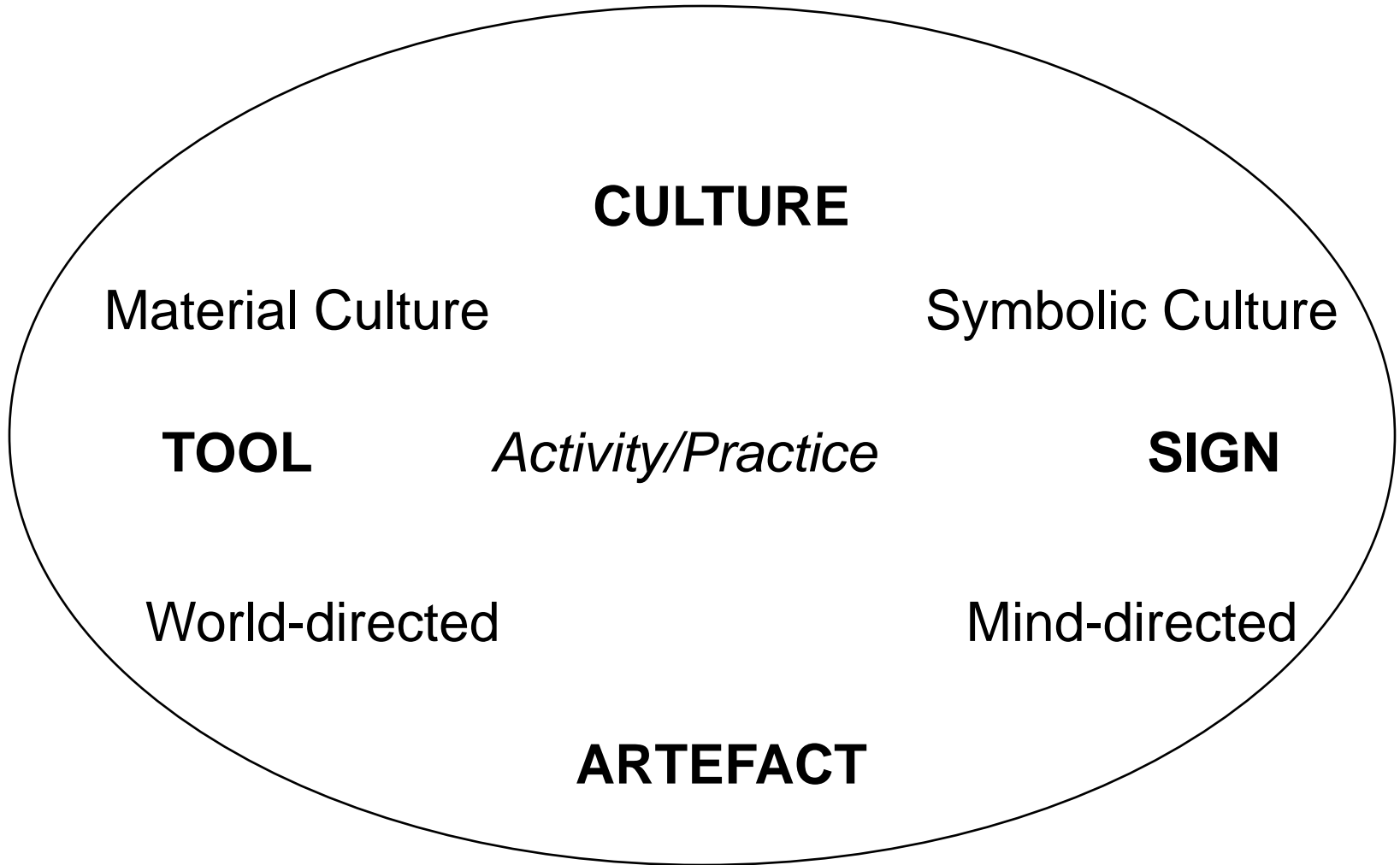
The materiality of representation

- Representation is not a relationship between "mind" and "reality", but a cognitive and semiotic relationship *within* and *constitutive of* human ecological reality
- All of reality is material, but some levels and properties of reality are irreducible to their material base (e.g. money, marriage)
- Things can be representations, but representations are not things, in the head or anywhere else
- Any material object (or, more widely, physical entity) can be a representational sign



Artefacts

- Artefacts (ranging from tools to notations and images) can be "read" but (unless they are textual artefacts) they are not texts
- Artefacts represent the practices they support, constrain and amplify. They can represent both non-representational and representational (e.g. symbolic) practices
- The representational role in each case involves canons or conventions, but neither the meaning nor the convention need be identical between different practices, universes of discourse and communities (e.g. the symbolic values of status commodities)



Culture and Artefacts.



Learning how to mean

- Learning to be a learner, in a semiotic field constituted by culturally available signs and normatively regulated practices
- The ontology of subjectivity is that of neither mechanism nor organism
- Subjectivity is fundamentally social, being dependent upon the elaboration of the intersubjective dimension of meaning



Culture and environment in human development

- The environment represents socio-cultural practices and norms in its material, symbolic and interactional structure
- The environment develops along with the learner (activity settings)
- Naturalizing and developmentalizing cognition means socializing cognition



Symbolic play

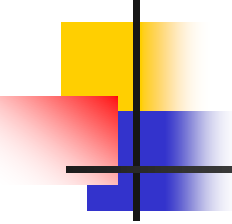
- Symbolic play encompasses play with objects as well as socio-dramatic play
- Symbolic play with objects emerges during the second year of life, sociodramatic play at 3-4 years
- All symbolic play involves the projection of imaginary or fictive cognitive and/or symbolic value onto entities in the child's immediate environment
- Symbolic play is (as Piaget recognized) an instance of Hockett's "displacement", or virtual cognition



Conceptual Metaphor

(Lakoff and Johnson)

- Metaphoric understanding involves the conceptualization of one (usually more abstract) domain in terms of another (usually more embodied) one.
- This can occur with different levels of scope or specificity, eg
 - Time is space
 - Life is a journey
 - A career, relationship etc is a journey



Conceptual Blending (Fauconnier and Turner)

- The integration of two different mental domains or spaces in a blended space with emergent properties and/or meanings
- Like conceptual metaphor, this is not just a linguistic operation, but a resource for conceptualization and creative understanding
 - eg the Buddhist monk problem



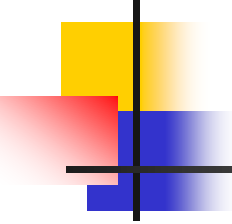
Language and artefacts as vehicles for the construction of virtual worlds

- Fictive motion (Talmy)
 - The bridge goes from Copenhagen to Malmö
- Fictive reference
 - Mickey Mouse was a pedophile ringleader
- Material anchoring (Hutchins)
 - Calendars, computing artefacts etc



Meaning construction

- The developmental process of meaning construction is contextualized by the significations carried by objects (artefacts)
- New meanings emerge through processes of conceptual integration (blending) in which material aspects of human ecology are integrated into symbolic acts and structures
- This process is inherently (initially) social and dialogic
- The capacity for Intra-personal meaning construction is based upon Inter-personal (intersubjective) negotiations of meaning



The cowboy, his hat and the girl

- Smolka, ALB, De Gões, MCR & Pino, A.
1997 (In)determinacy and the semiotic constitution of subjectivity. In A. Fogel, M. Lyra & J. Vaalsiner (eds.) *Dynamics and Indeterminism in Developmental and Social Processes*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates, pp. 153-164.

See also

Sinha, C. (2005) Blending out of the Background: Play, props and staging in the material world. *Journal of Pragmatics*.



Background, Stage and Enactment

- Background: Beto Carrero is the proprietor and cowboy hero of a popular Brazilian theme park called Beto Carrero World.
- Stage: the house corner of a primary school classroom, with props including a cowboy hat.
- Enactment: Sociodramatic play by Alcione, Thaís and Camila (5-6 yr old girls). Alcione is in the role of daughter of Thaís, Camila has no role yet assigned. Suddenly, the hat falls off a shelf. Alcione picks it up and puts it on.
- The world of Enactment is the play world.

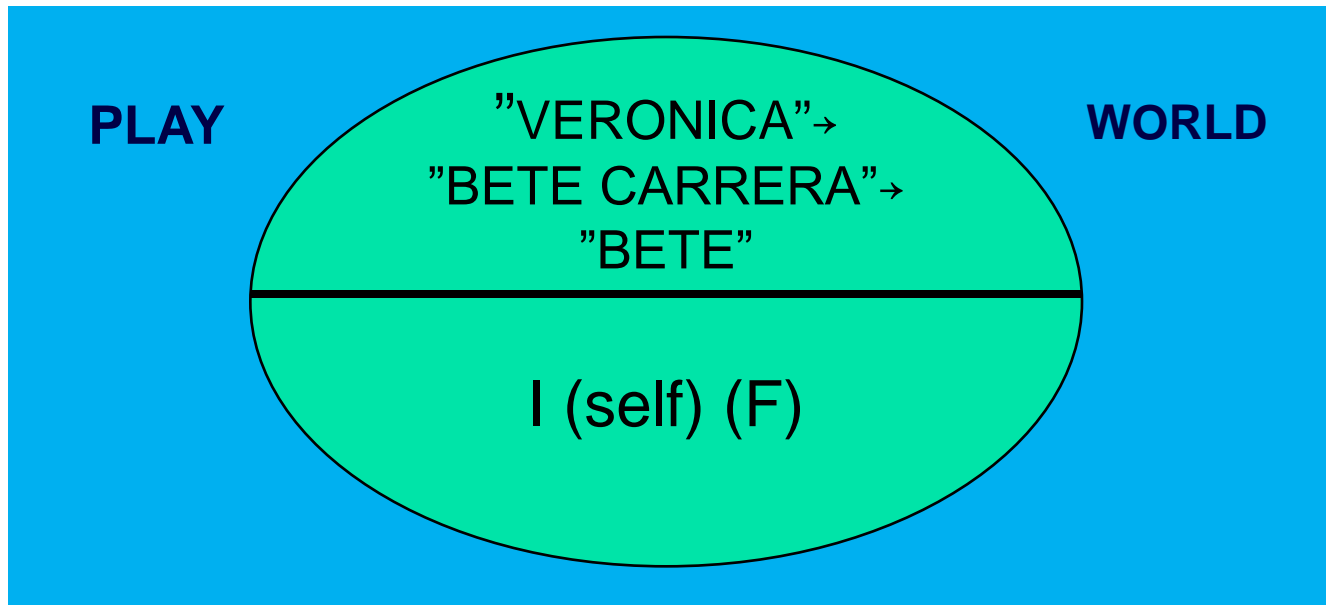
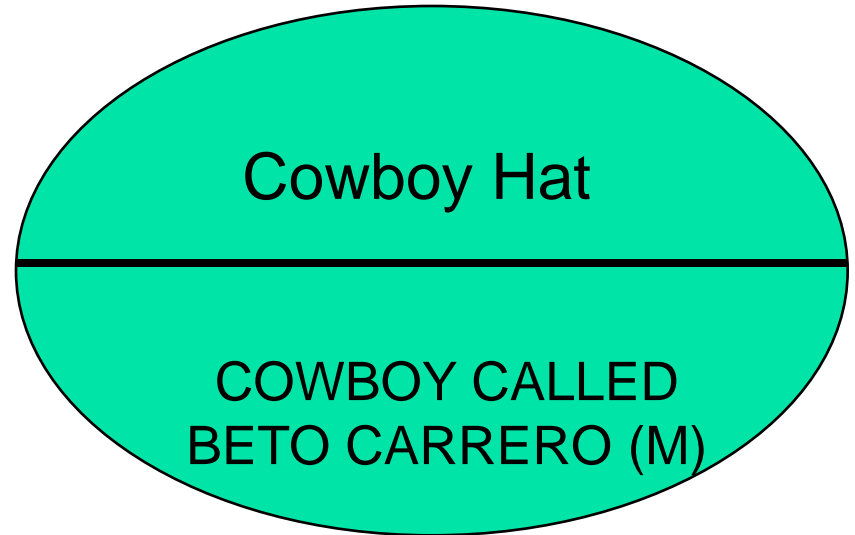
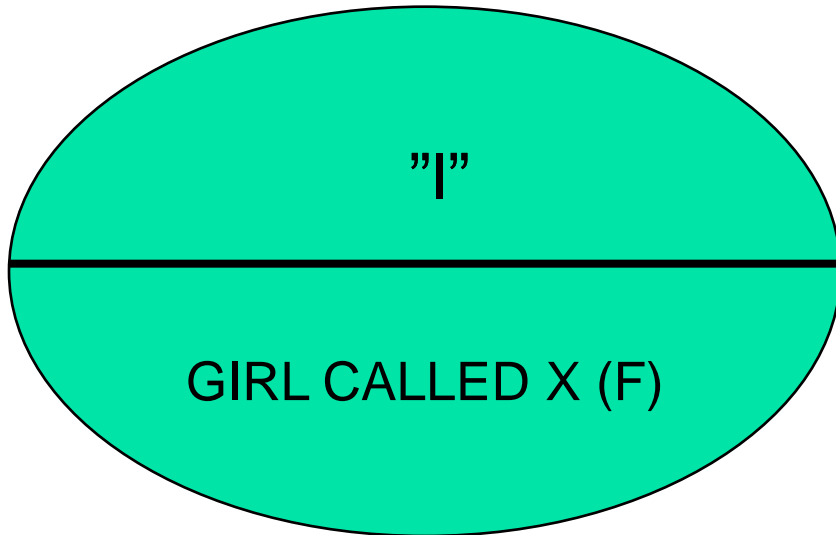




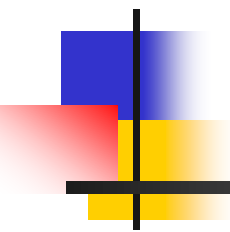
The play

- 1. Alc: You were, you were ... Do you want to play with this hat?
Alc. puts hat on Thaís' head, who takes it off again and puts it aside
- 2. Alc: Then give it to me, give it to me, Thaís!
Alc. picks up the hat again
- 3. Tha: Dear, mother doesn't like hats
Alc. puts the hat on again and looks at Tha.
- 4. Tha: You look pretty!
Alc. laughs. Camila takes the hat from Alcione. Thaís is writing.
- 5. Tha: Veronica *writing down the name she has given herself*
- 6. Tha: What's your name? *to Alc.*
- 7. Alc: My name is ... mine is Bete, Bete Carrera
- 8. Cam: Mine is Bete Carrera too.
- 9. Tha: Ahn... it can't be. Then I'm called ... Bete.
- 10. Alc: I'm called ... I'm called ...
- 11. Tha: I'm called Bete Carrera!

BACKGROUND – UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE
GENDER, IDENTITY,
BETO CARRERO WORLD



The girl, her pot and her world



Sinha, C. (1999) Situated Selves. In Joan Bliss, Roger Säljö and Paul Light (Eds.)
Learning Sites: Social and Technological Resources for Learning.
Oxford, Pergamon, 32-48.





The girl, her pot and her world





Provisional conclusions

- The “pot episode” exemplifies an encounter between two different ways of construing the situation, whose confrontation is unproductive and leads nowhere in particular. The “cowboy hat episode”, by contrast, exemplifies a negotiated and mutual re-construal of the situation, in which the participants briefly *become*, through their own signifying agency, characters in a new activity and a new discourse ... it is here, in the collaborative construction of novel meanings through the discursive “re-imagining” of the familiar, that we should seek the basis both of a general account of freedom in human agency, and of the way in which developing human beings *create and re-create themselves as learners*.



Levels of Learning

- Learning 1: State Change
 - Mechanism
 - Reinforcement, Hebbian mechanisms etc
- Learning 2: Learning to learn
 - Organism
 - Set, Strategy, Generalization and Transfer, Microdevelopment
- Learning 3: Learning to be a learner
 - Person
 - Identity, Normativity, Narrativity



The historical subject and invariant developmental tasks

- Subjectivity, mindedness, selfhood and identity are historically located
- If there is a science of the subject it is not one in search of timeless truths
- Mind, subjectivity and organism are not co-terminous
- The human organism is developmentally tasked for acquiring symbolic culture
- The symbolic universe blends actual and virtual



Agency and authorship

- Agency is universal but its construal is culturally and historically specific
- Agency may be collective and performative, as well as individual and deliberative
- Narratives are typically co-authored, polyphonic and multi-perspectival
- This is the context in which we should understand notions like “socialisation”, “life stage” and “life choice”



Paradigms and Perspectives

- Language is a normative institution
- Institutions both support and constrain social and communicative practices
- Institutions can be viewed from both external ("objectivist") and internal ("situated") perspectives
- These perspectives are complementary and each represents a moment of dialectical inquiry