Concerning the book review, *Language in Action: Vygotsky and Leontievian Legacy Today*, the L&SCT editors would like to note that the book was first published in 2007 but was selected for review because of its applicability to present-day Vygotsky revisionist issues.


*Jacob Rieker*

The role of language in activity is central to both Vygotskian and Leontievian thinking. In line with Marx and Engels (1969), if language is understood as ‘practical consciousness’ (p.39), it follows that both sociocultural theory and activity theory, albeit with different objects of study and units of analysis, should be able to explicate how language mediates the development of human consciousness arising from engagement in activity. Yet, for Riikka Alanen and Sari Pöyhönen, editors of *Language in Action: Vygotsky and Leontievian Legacy Today* (2007), the relations between language and activity remain open to debate. The authors assert that there exists considerable scope to flesh out ‘[t]he role and nature of language in action and activity’ (p.1). Building on this gap, Alanen and Pöyhönen contend that ‘[t]here is no one widely accepted monolithic Vygotskian or Leontievian theory’ (p.1). Addressing these issues, *Language in Action: Vygotsky and Leontievian Legacy Today* is a collection

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**Affiliation**

*The Pennsylvania State University, USA.*

Email: jrr5915@psu.edu
of papers from a conference of the same title held in 2006 at the University of Jyväskylä. Alanen and Pöyhönen assemble contributions based on papers from the conference representing a set of diverse, multidisciplinary interpretations and applications of Vygotskian and Leontievian thinking to issues in second language studies. Ultimately, the book aims to shed light on the relations between language and human activity in domains relevant to second language learning and teaching, and in the process, showcase the potential of sociocultural theory and activity theory in understanding human sensemaking activity. The book is thus relevant to a wide audience including researchers and practitioners from applied linguistics, education, and psychology looking to know more about the role of language in activity from sociocultural and activity theoretical vantages.

The 470-page volume consists of an introductory chapter by the editors followed by 19 Chapters from 24 contributors. Although not explicitly delineated, the book is largely organized into theoretical, methodological, and empirical report strands, reflecting the organization of contributions at the original conference. The majority of the contributions fall into the third strand of empirical papers and deal with a wide range of phenomena pertinent to second language studies including classroom interaction, second language development, language assessment, learner and teacher identity, and teacher education. While it is beyond the scope of the present review to discuss in detail each of the chapters, I instead aim to highlight notable chapters to exemplify how sociocultural and activity theoretical perspectives are used in the book and subsequently discuss issues raised by the contributions that are still relevant to Vygotskian and Leontievian scholars today.

At the outset of the volume, Dorothy Robbins (Chapter 1) and Dmitry Leontiev (Chapter 2) offer theoretical contributions by characterizing the intellectual lineage of Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, and A.A. Leontiev. Robbins focuses her discussion on A.A. Leontiev’s non-classical psycholinguistic approach to speech activity and Vygotsky’s conceptualization of language in the development of higher mental functions. Leontiev takes a broader scope to examine the implications of the non-classical approach in reframing the human sciences and the role of language in understanding mind, culture, and activity through an embrace of anti-Cartesianism, being-in-the-world, the primacy of interaction, and the fundamentally social origins of human consciousness. In common between Robbins’s and Leontiev’s chapters, and others throughout the book, including Peter Jones’s and Randall Holme’s contributions on problematizing language in activity theory (Chapter 4) and cognitive linguistics (Chapter 10) respectively, is a conceptualization of language that is dialogic, situated, holistic, dynamic, and embodied. Such an understanding of language seems to cut across the perspectives of the edited volume despite
Yet, certain chapters employing activity theory, including Ros Fisher (Chapter 11), Barbara Hawkins (Chapter 12), and Stella Hadjistassou (Chapter 17) indirectly illustrate a tension that is currently relevant for Vygotskian and Leontievian scholars; that is, capturing the development, identity, and contributions of individuals within larger activity systems regulated by tools, rules, divisions of labor, communities, and the like (Veresov, 2020a). While these chapters are able to capture how participants are positioned as subjects within educational activity systems, less attention is paid to the development of particular individuals and the role of language. This is not necessarily meant to be read as a criticism of these contributions in particular but rather a comment on the consequences of adopting activity theory as the primary theoretical lens in these contexts. Moreover, from our contemporary vantage, we can see how current insights surrounding *perezhivanie* as both a psychological phenomenon and unit of analysis in analyzing human consciousness (Veresov, 2017) would have had much to offer in this regard. Still, the tension surrounding the individual in activity systems represents a point of departure for reflection that is relevant for scholars working to advance Vygotskian and Leontievian thinking today.

In terms of the dialogic nature of human consciousness, Bakhtin appears alongside Vygotsky and Leontiev throughout the book. On a theoretical footing, Craig Brandist’s paper (Chapter 5) examines the parallels and divergences in thinking between the Vygotsky and Bakhtin circles. He finds that although the two scholars drew from similar sources, the conclusions that they came to regarding psychology and discourse diverge from each other in fundamental ways. For Brandist, while the Vygotsky circle, consisting of Vygotsky himself, Luria, and A.N. Leontiev, aimed at finding synthesis among biology and culture, the Bakhtin circle was motivated by a neo-Kantian drive to divide the world into teleology and causality. Arising from this core difference and others mentioned in the chapter, Brandist comes to the conclusion that synthesizing the work of the two thinkers in a principled, non-superficial way would require substantial revisions that ultimately would result in serious contradictions. Likewise drawing on Bakhtin, Sari Pöyhönen, and Hannele Dufva (Chapter 8) use Bakhtin’s notions of dialogue, heteroglossia, and voice to investigate language and identity among Ingrian teachers of Finnish as a foreign language in Russia. Pöyhönen and Dufva show how the teachers in their ethnographic study come to understand their identities as Finnish instructors through a multivocalic, dialogic, and dynamic process that calls into question the notion of a unitary Finnish or, more broadly, the national versus foreign language distinction. These chapters and others throughout
the book bring up important and surprisingly timely questions of what it means to interpret the Vygotskian and Leontievian legacies by synthesizing their work with Bakhtin and Voloshinov or even Dewey and Gadamer as Emily Duvall does in Chapter 7. If the result of such synthesis is principled eclecticism that yields new insights or analytic contradiction that distorts, the respective theories remain contested territory and food for further thought. For Vygotskians, this is especially relevant as recent publications of Vygotsky’s previously unavailable works, including a translated selection of Vygotsky’s notebooks (Zavershneva and van der Veer, 2018), call to our attention to the need to continue uncovering and reconstructing the totality of cultural-historical theory as originally laid out by Vygotsky (Veresov, 2020b).

The majority of the latter chapters are comprised of empirical papers dealing with issues in second language learning and teaching. Notable contributions include Hawkins’s piece (Chapter 12) on the interactional dynamics of shifting expertise between a teacher and students in an ESL classroom, Lynda Stone and Tabitha Hart’s paper (Chapter 13) on the role of context in private speech use, and John Smeds’s investigation (Chapter 19) into pre-service teachers’ participation in language communities. These chapters and the others in the empirical paper strand of the edited volume speak to an understanding of second language learning and teaching as fundamentally social, cognitive, and affective processes mediated by language use in practical activity.

Overall, Language in Action: Vygotsky and Leontievian Legacy Today is a fruitful synthesis of sociocultural and activity theoretical perspectives in a number of areas of concern to second language learning and teaching. Despite being published a number of years ago, the book raises a number of important questions for contemporary Vygotskian and Leontievian scholars: (i) what exactly is the role and nature of language in activity within sociocultural theory and activity theory and (ii) what are the implications and limitations of recruiting perspectives outside of these theories to investigate the place of language in the development of human consciousness. While these central questions are certainly still open to debate even today, the diverse contributions cutting across disciplinary boundaries assembled in this edited volume demonstrate the staying power of sociocultural theory and activity theory in studying language-mediated human practical activity, development, and learning in ways that account for people as cultural, historical, and social beings.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacob Rieker is a PhD candidate in applied linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University, USA. His research focuses on Vygotskian sociocultural theory, second language teacher education, and concept-based instruction for language teacher development.

REFERENCES


