

**Acquirers' trajectories and orientations to meaning and activity:
The combined use of Bernstein's code theory and cultural historical
activity theory to analyse subject position and semiotic mediation
variation in foreign language education in Japan.**

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The socio-genetic model of development emerges from Vygotsky's answer to the stimulus-response dualism found in most of the psychological schools of his time. The model introduces semiotic mediation as an element that mediates the subject's object-driven activity. This opens the way to a non-deterministic account in which psychological tools (especially speech) serve as the means whereby the individual acts upon and is acted upon by social, cultural and historical factors. Semiotic mediation is a pivotal unit that bridges the internal with the external and the social with the individual. Semiotic mediation, when referred to Vygotsky's unit of analysis, is primarily a term referring to mediation through speech (language). According to Lee (1985), Vygotsky focused on language because (a) linguistic signs are 'reversible', they can be both stimulus and response, allowing language to be internalised and then used to regulate behaviour; (b) language is multifunctional, it can be used as a means to organising multiple goal-oriented activities; (c) language serves the purpose of communication, that is, of sustaining social action and, closely linked to this, (d) language allows, on the one hand, generalisation, that is, it can depict common characteristics of phenomena through various levels of generality, and on the other, self-reflection –'language is the only sign system that can refer to itself' (p. 76-77). The generalisation and self-reflection qualities of language create the possibility of abstract thinking, and abstract thinking finds reality and form in language (expression) in a dialectical fashion. In foreign language education, adult learners—who have already acquired higher psychological functions—are also encouraged to learn structural aspects of the target language (theoretical knowledge) by communicative means, that is, by everyday speech (everyday knowledge), establishing an uncommon relation between theoretical and everyday knowledge and therefore, peculiar forms of semiotic mediation. Nonetheless, semiotic mediation does not take place in a social vacuum or in undifferentiated activity systems. Semiotic mediation modulates and is modulated by object-oriented activity within particular institutions which are semiotic mediation in themselves, whose affordances and constraints are historically situated. Using cultural historical activity theory's socio-genetic analytical framework and Bernstein's theory of codes, I attempt to analyse how semiotic mediation varies according to the particular subjects of a given activity system beyond the dichotomy individual/group, paying attention to the particular characteristics of the relation between theoretical and everyday knowledge and between language's socio-communicative and representational functions. First, I develop and validate an instrument of analysis based on Bernstein's code theory and attuned to foreign language educational settings at the tertiary level in Japan. Bernstein proposes a dialectical approach to determining and analysing subject position, as well as a model that can generate a vast range of modalities of pedagogic discourse and practice. He is concerned with both the 'translation of ... power relations, and ... of control relations' (Bernstein, 2000, p. 5). The translation of power relations into principles of classification and how these principles establish social divisions of labour—and

therefore identities and voices—is called ‘classification’. This is the *structural* level. The translation of control relations into forms of realisation of discourses—and therefore messages—is called ‘framing’. This is the *interactional* level. Pedagogic codes are the result of differences in strong or weak classification and framing (Bernstein, 2000). Second, based on the theoretical work on activity structure, I determine motive-action as the unit of analysis of classroom interaction, since motive-action is the germ-cell that contains the possibility of joint activity (collective objective-driven activity). Then I combine both approaches in analysing two tertiary organisations teaching Spanish as a foreign language in Japan, tracing back acquirers’ educational trajectories and determining their orientations to meaning. The findings indicate that acquirers who had a formal trajectory of language learning and who can recognise grammar instructional discourse attain better levels of achievement (active realisation) than those who had informal trajectories (e.g. learning languages overseas in a conversational fashion without following a formal programme) and cannot recognise grammar instructional discourse. This suggests that the programmes of both organisations are (perhaps involuntarily) heavily based or pursue almost exclusively language’s representational function instead of language’s socio-communicative function—even in so-called ‘communication’ courses. Therefore, acquirers who have an informal approach (a socio-communicative orientation) to language learning have a great start but soon lag behind their course peers. Furthermore, many doubts arise about the viability of non representational-function approaches to foreign language learning for adult acquirers. The data seem to indicate that there is no way outside representational-function programmes (even though acquirers enrol in those programmes attracted by their communication prospects). The findings suggest that transmitters’ pedagogies should care more for those acquirers whose trajectories and orientations to meaning are informal. The bottom-up move within Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development is suggested as a feasible intervention without a drastic reshaping of the programmes. Tightening and making more explicit the evaluation criteria (so as to have those acquirers gradually recontextualising their approaches), especially in ‘communication’ courses, may also help. In conclusion, the use of cultural historical activity theory and Bernstein’s theory of code looks promising in analysing semiotic mediation variation in its relation with acquirers’ identities and consciousness and offers a more accurate way of comparing semiotic mediation across organisations and pedagogical settings.

References

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