

Goal formation in dialogic conversation -- Mohammed Ahmed (ELP)

In second language research on dialogic conversation, formation of goals by individual participants in the conversational activity in the face of a given task is an important subject matter for investigation in light of Vygotskian psycholinguistic theory.¹ Put simply, a goal is the end result of an activity towards which an individual directs his or her behavior. A particular goal may be perceived as simple and close; hence it may be achieved easily and quickly. In some other cases, however, a goal may be perceived as complex and distant and may be realized through a number of sub-goals. In any kind of goal formation, the important thing is: the participants go through a process of subjectively defining the goals for themselves. They may define a goal similar to or different from how the researcher intended; they may define it differently from each other; they may even keep changing their definitions within the same conversational activity. Consequently, there may be significant variability in the formation of goals by the individual interlocutors. In Vygotskian theory, the variability in goal formation is explicable in terms of such important concepts as "situation definition" and "intersubjectivity" in dialogic communication. Ultimately, such variability is related to individual motives in a given task.

An important implication of such a view is that it is more important to find out how the individual speakers in a task-based dialogic communication set the goals of the task for themselves and not just how the researcher presents the goals to them. Consequently, it is important to analyze carefully the stage when the researcher gives a task and the subjects approach the task. This present study aims at such an investigation.

The proposed study is currently being designed. As such, clear details of subjects, task, and methodology are still being worked out. In general, however, the study will involve at least five native-speaker dyads and five non-native speaker dyads. Each dyad will be given the same task to perform. The task will contain written instructions stating the researcher's intended goal for the task. The instructions will be accompanied by visual stimuli for task performance. The task will be of problem-solving nature designed to generate exchange of information and opinion between the speakers. A typical task for such problem solving

¹ Vygotskian psycholinguistic theory originated in the Soviet Union the 1920s and has gained considerable attention in the West recently. For an excellent introduction to this theory, see *Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind*, by James V. Wertsch (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985). For a scholarly collection of articles, see *Culture, Communication, and Cognition: Vygotskian Perspectives*, ed. by James Wertsch (New York: Cambridge University Press). For a recent review, see *Vygotsky's Social Theory of Mind*, by Meredith Williams (In *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 59, No. 1, February 1989).

activity would be the "survival situation on an imaginary desert island."² The conversations of the dyads during the task performance will be videotaped and later transcribed for analysis and interpretation.

It should be made clear that this study will not follow the standard statistical and hypothesis-testing approach. In other words, it is not going to make any quantitative comparisons of data across groups. Nor is it going to be predictive by formulating hypotheses of individual behavior in advance. On the other hand, the study will do a discourse analysis of linguistic features (e.g., tense/aspect, personal pronouns, modals, etc) that reveal formation of individual goals during task performance.

Furthermore, the focus of the analysis will be on individual discourses in each pair. Such a focus is in line with the Vygotskian orientation towards understanding and interpreting (within a conceptual framework) specific instances of individual discourses after a specific task has been performed.

It is hoped that the analysis will reveal the importance of goal formation in task-based dialogic conversations, and by doing so emphasize that participants engaged in communicating with each other may not passively receive instructions from an external source (i.e., researcher) but create their own instructions while defining the goals for themselves. Furthermore, it may be misleading to consider task having an independent status in its own right, as a closed object imposing its own limitations and conditions on an individual. Rather, it gains significance within the context of an individual's cognitive behavior.

² Duff, Patricia A. 1986. Another look at interlanguage: Taking task to task. In *Talking to Learn: Conversation in Second Language Acquisition*, ed. by Richard R. Day. Rowley, MA: Newbury Publishers.