

# Word Meaning is Important!

## A response to wm. Roth & þ. Jóhannsdóttir on *perezhivanie*

by Andy Blunden

### Perezhivanie as a word in the English language

The Russian language does not use definite or indefinite articles, so in appropriating a Russian word into the English language, and thereby giving *perezhivanie* an English meaning, the writer has to make a decision as to whether ‘*perezhivanie*’ is a countable noun or a mass noun. As a mass noun, it can be used in sentences like “*Perezhivanie* is the source of all personal development.” As a countable noun, it can be used in phrases like “A *perezhivanie* I had as a child changed my life,” or “The *perezhivanie* of being left on my own at such an age was traumatic,” or “Some *perezhivaniya* have a profound effect on development.” We do not need John Dewey’s article “Having An Experience” to tell us that ‘an experience’ has a different meaning from ‘experience’. Every native English speaker knows this, except that very few English speakers indeed are consciously aware of the distinction between countable nouns and mass nouns; this is generally known only to experts in English grammar. Ordinary native English-speakers will become aware of the difference when the shop assistant, who is a Sikh, says “We have many equipments in this store”; even though the native English speaker will always use ‘equipment’ correctly, we do it without conscious awareness of the grammatical rule implicit in the usage. ‘Tool’ is a unit of equipment, ‘equipment’ is not a unit of anything. Given that the countable/mass distinction is absent from the Russian language and native English speakers are generally unaware of the distinction, it is not surprising that native Russian speakers will say things like “*perezhivanie* is unit of consciousness.” However, when a native English-speaker emulates this broken English they reveal that they do not understand the meaning of the word ‘unit’, which can only refer to a countable noun. It makes no difference if the neolog ‘experiencing’ is used instead of appropriating *perezhivanie*. As a neolog, ‘experiencing’ can be countable or mass according to its usage, and being simply a translation of *perezhivanie*, those who use it always use it as a mass noun thereby depriving the word ‘unit’ of its meaning – both the scientific sense in which Vygotsky used it, and the everyday sense.

‘*Perezhivanie*’ (переживание in Russian) is a countable noun and its plural is ‘*perezhivaniya*’. *Perezhivaniya* are units of consciousness in Vygotsky’s theory. ‘Experience’ on the other hand is a mass noun and is the source of consciousness for Empiricism, опыт in Russian.

### Category and kategoria

The idiosyncratic use of ‘category’ in English, to refer to some kind of dramatic event or clash of personalities, we owe to Nikolai Veresov. Nikolai is fluent in English nowadays and has convinced some people that ‘category’ has this meaning, even though no-one else ever knew about it. Veresov is wrong in attributing this idiosyncratic meaning to Vygotsky. I think Vygotsky is quite unambiguous in his use of ‘category’ in the ordinary philosophical sense, in Chapter 7 of “Thinking and Speech.” But Veresov is not as wrong as many of his critics believe, nor as correct as many of his friends believe. The solution to the riddle lies in etymology.

Originally there was a Greek word, transliterated as *kategoria*. This word merged three meanings which have given rise to three distinct words in the English language. For Aristotle, *kategoria* meant a predicate, that is, something which is attributed to a subject. For Aristotle, logic, natural science and grammar were not distinct disciplines: the world existed just as it was cognised and expressed in language. Within his Rhetoric, *kategoria* took on a distinct meaning: *kategoria* and *apologia* were a pair of opposite modes of speech; one speaker accuses (ascribes a predicate to) the other (***kategoria***) and the other defends themselves (*apologia*). In the development of logic, beginning from the idea of *kategoria* as a predicate of a subject, Kant took **category** (the transliteration of *kategoria*) to be a fundamental concept from which other concepts derived meaning. In positivist and everyday usage this then took on the common meaning of a ‘pigeon hole’ into which things are categorised. The Kantian sense of the word ‘category’ continued in philosophy after Kant but was given a different content by Hegel and thus Marx, but is still evocative of the Kantian meaning. In grammar, the Latin translation of the Greek *kategoria*, **predicate**, has taken over this meaning, although ‘predicate’ still carries the more or less obsolete meaning of ‘accusation’ and is cognate with ‘predicament’. In Russian, *category* and *kategoria* are spelt the same.

So Veresov may be quite correct in claiming that *kategoria* (spelt this way in English when indicating the term in rhetoric) was appropriated by Russian drama theory, despite the fact that no evidence whatsoever can be found for this claim and no-one with expertise in Russian drama theory has ever heard of the book by Meyerhold which Veresov claims to have seen. Even though Russian speakers deny that *kategoria* has this meaning in Russian, one needs to ask a Russian expert in Rhetoric, not a psychologist. It is a plausible claim and anyone who wants to build a theory of personal development around *kategoria* and *apologia* has a valid foundation. Further, I think there are aspects of Vygotsky’s thinking which would be open to such an interpretation. However, I have seen nothing in Vygotsky’s writing to substantiate the claim that *he* used the word in this way. But apart from all this, the word in English is ‘*kategoria*’, not ‘category’.

### Continuous and discrete development

The observation that Vygotsky understood *perezhivanie* as a unit of personal development, draws our attention to the fact that if all units are countable nouns, how then is it possible to understand ‘continuous’ development? It also raises the philosophical problem of the distinction between discrete and continuous development. Is this just a question of the speed of development? Although Vygotsky did talk of periods of *gradual* or *lytical* development taking place within a stable social situation of development, and periods of crisis during which the social situation of development is *transformed*, it would be a mistake to suppose that gradual development is a continuous and not a discrete process. In the case of continuous development, we would have to suppose that a person undergoes development even while they are asleep and consequently it would draw into question whether the actions of those responsible for assisting a person’s development have any role in the process at all. Development may be gradual but it is still composed of a great many discrete ‘leaps’. What is gradual about the process is that the social situation of development remains stable. Generally speaking (though not universally), the critical phase of development is characterised by the person adopting a subject position which is in conflict with the subject-position implicit in the activity of those with whom the person is collaborating. This is what generates the contradiction: everyone changes their activity, the subject develops, the

social situation is transformed and the new subject-position must be re-stabilised in a series of ‘minor crises’. It is also possible that the crises could be generated externally by a transformation of the social environment, but this is not the archetype of Vygotsky’s conception of personal development in a social situation. Where external changes force a person to adapt to a new environment we have the situation just as it is understood by ordinary empirical and behavioural psychology.

### Units of the process and units of product

Are perezhivaniya units of consciousness or units of personal development? The point is that consciousness, as the end product of a process of personal development can only be understood, we are told, in and through its history or development. So if a unit is to reveal to us the nature of consciousness, then it must already reveal to us the dynamics of its development, but to reveal to us the dynamics of personal development, perezhivaniya must be units of personal development. So the answer is *both, necessarily*. This also applies to word meaning, or any unit of analysis. Word meaning reveals to us the development of the intellect and *consequently* can function as a unit of intellectual activity, i.e., thinking. So how do perezhivaniya function as units of development? Because when confronted by a crisis of some kind, positive or negative, we ‘must’ change our social situation, either by modifying our own activity or by modifying the relevant aspects of the environment.

So what does perezhivanie mean, in the English language? We cannot hope to import all the connotations which the word has acquired in Russian, so our aim must be to formulate an *abstract concept*, in the Hegelian sense, which can concretise itself through its interaction with the body of cultural-psychological theory in the English language, thus producing a new, concrete concept expressed in the English language, different from but related to the Russian word, but nonetheless *meaningful*. Perezhivaniya are situations in which a subject finds themselves; these are not simply objective, because what is a boon for one person may be a disaster for another, or irrelevant to still another person; in other words, it is the *significance*, or if you like, the meaning (I think Lydia Bozhovich is quite mistaken in her criticism of Vygotsky on this point), of the objective situation *for the subject*, insofar as it is relevant to their development, i.e., actually *poses developmental tasks* for the subject (I thank Nikolai Veresov for this last important qualification). The significance of a range of environmental conditions is not something subjective. A person is not facing a life and death situation *just* because they *feel* it to be so – the results of their actions depend on objective, material events and relations, not just the subject’s beliefs; but nor is a situation simply objective. And (NB) nor is the social situation of development the *entire* global social and economic conditions simply added to a person’s activity. The person’s self-consciousness or identity as a person and their needs, picks out, so to speak, the specific aspects of the environment or conjunction of factors which is problematic, and it is *this conjuncture* or situation or *predicament* which constitutes *an experience* in the relevant meaning.

But just to be *faced with* a developmental crisis does not in itself mean that a person *makes* a development. Development can only occur afterwards, as a result of the person working over the experience, integrating it into their personality, and successfully overcoming it, sublating it, which we call *catharsis*. We owe this observation particularly to Fedor Vasilyuk. There is no English word which evokes *both* an

experience and the catharsis. I suggest that we use *perezhivanie* for the experience and catharsis for the working over, but in any case, we must be aware of the distinction.

### Units, categories and elements

Although Vygotsky did not invent analysis by units, in Chapter 1 of “Thinking and Speech” he introduced a new meaning for an existing term – ‘unit of analysis’ – a term already known to mainstream natural and social science, by giving it the critical Hegelian content of ‘abstract concept’. Vygotsky was following Marx’s lead. In the Preface to *Capital* Marx said: “But in bourgeois society the commodity form of the product of labour – or the value form of the commodity – is the economic cell form.” (*MECW* v. 35, p. 8). Note that the commodity is not the cell form of political economy but of bourgeois society, i.e., the market – not the science, but the phenomenon itself. In writing *Capital*, Marx began by identifying the primordial unit which exhibited all the essential properties of the market, and therefore of relations resting on the market. By analysing the internal contradiction contained within this relation, namely the non-coincidence of use-value and exchange-value, he was able to ‘unfold’ the entirety of the phenomena of bourgeois society and its development. It is this selection of a *specific relation* – not capital, not price, not labour, but the commodity relation – which is the insight, or *aperçu* as Goethe says, which allows the writer to found a new science, which reveals the inner dynamics of the totality of a range of phenomena unified by this one relation. A unit is a category in the normal Kantian philosophical sense; but ‘category’ in this sense, provided it is subject to Hegelian critique, can function as a unit only in a very specific sense, viz., a category is a unit *of some theory* or normative project. That is, a theory is made up of various fundamental concepts, or categories. But ‘category’ is not a synonym for ‘unit’. ‘Unit’ is a relative term, that is, a unit *of* some complex process or whole. To say that something is a unit, full stop, is nonsense, but it *is* meaningful to say that something is a category because ‘category’ is not a relative term.

Famously, Vygotsky also contrasted ‘units’ with ‘elements’. The elements of which water is composed are essentially diverse, viz., hydrogen and oxygen, and neither have the properties of water. The units of water are H<sub>2</sub>O, which is of only one kind and is the smallest fragment of water which nonetheless remains water; a mass of water is just many H<sub>2</sub>O units. So does this licence us to say that a person + their environment, each being elements, are, taken together, units of ... what? let’s say, of a social formation. No. The ‘environment’ is already the entire social formation, not part of it. Is it to be the unit of that individual’s consciousness? No. There are billions of events and relations in the environment which are unknown to an individual and have no impact on their personal development at all. A whole is made up of many, many such units. If the person + their social environment is one unit, what are all the *other* units which together make up the complex whole – the person’s consciousness. “Unit of analysis” is *not* a synonym for the topic of interest, the whole; specifically, it is the *negation* of the subject matter of interest.

### Concepts and heaps

There is an idea that a unit must be “the smallest unit that still preserves the essential unity and quality behind any complex activity,” and that what this means is scouting around to find everything which strikes the writer as being part of the essential unity of, say, a person’s development, and including it in the unit. This process is approached in

much the same way that a person packs for going on a trip to the countryside, packing into their suitcase everything that they might need to live whilst away from home. Vygotsky called such concepts ‘heaps’, a type of infantile concept formation. When Marx sat down to write *Capital*, he did not run through everything that he could think of which might be relevant to bourgeois society – banks, money, workers, wage labor, production, technology, etc. etc. – and then invent a neolog to carry the meaning of all these diverse relations packed together. No, from 1843 to 1859 he worked over his material before coming to the conclusion that the germ cell (or unit of analysis) was that *one simple relation*, an exchange of products. Making a start on a science, or even tackling the psychological development of one individual requires such an *insight*, and gathering together in a heap everything that might prove useful on the journey is no substitute for that insight. Science begins from that insight.

### Open-ended totalities and concepts

Quite specifically, what science needs is a concept of its subject matter, not a description, but a *concept* of the subject matter. The scientist, like any person, is initially faced with a diversity of phenomena manifesting a loosely connected range of problems, and united by some abstract, contingent property. For example, faced with the inequality and exploitation of modern society, all the relevant phenomena appear to be united by money, or perhaps by capital. This is an abstract general conception. Following Hegel, Marx showed how science had to work over this material to discover behind it that one simple abstract concept which can then form the foundation for rising again to the concrete with which he began, but now reconstructed in conceptual, scientific thought rather than in immediate perception. So open ended totalities like “the environment” or “the social and political conditions” are useless. Such categories describe the problem, the *starting point of investigation*, not the abstract concept which is to function as a unit of analysis for the construction of a scientific perception of the complex whole. It should be noted that once a unit of analysis is selected, the science which is constructed on its basis creates a *new* unity, uniting a distinct range of phenomena not identical with the range of phenomena which made the starting point of investigation. For example, slavery may have appeared alongside wage labour as part of the problem, but once the concept of commodity was selected for analysis, slavery turned out to be a form of exploitation alien to bourgeois society.

### Intellect and affect, abstracted from an original unity

Wherever there is discussion about perezhivanie we hear about the unity of intellect and affect, and even “praxis, intellect and affect” and other arbitrary “unities.” Vygotsky’s starting point was in the analysis of actions, in particular actions conceived as *artefact-mediated* actions, such as word meaning. This starting point is significant because it is *prior* to the abstraction of such *partial aspects of action* as “affect” and “intellect.” It is not a question of positing two abstractions – intellect and affect – and then packing them together into a neolog and declaring it a unity. So long as our overall theoretical framework is grounded in a concept like action or perezhivanie, which are prior unities of all the various aspects of action, then we are in a position to *abstract* observations about such entities as affect and intellect. As to praxis, which is the Greek word for practice, this is a unity of consciousness and behaviour, each of which are concepts which may be *abstracted from* the observation of action. And all of them – praxis, affect and intellect – are mass nouns, unsuitable for use as units, either singly or together. To

form a concept which is a prior unity is something quite different from taking two ready-made abstractions and adding them together. Generally speaking the word for that prior unity already exists, but because of the nature of general, non-scientific discourse, it will exist side-by-side with concepts of a different level of generality. So the prior unity expressed in the concept has to be rigorously recovered from degradation it may have suffered in ill-informed discourse. Nonetheless, even everyday discourse should recognise the prior unity of diverse elements, so neologisms should be used only as a last resort.

### TAS is not adapting to the social environment

Anna Stetsenko's concept of Transformative Activist Stance needs to be clarified as well. This concept forms the foundation of Stetsenko's approach and stands in contrast to Adaptation, that is, the stance in which a person simply accommodates or adapts to adverse social conditions. In TAS, with conscious awareness, the subject determines themselves as an agent of social change, taking moral responsibility to change the social situation in which they find themselves by changing the social conditions rather than adapting to them. This concept *cannot* be equated with a person's successful adaptation to changed social conditions – it is the very *opposite* of TAS, and is the standpoint of Empiricism and Behavioural Psychology.

### Activity systems, activities and activity

There is one last, very longstanding problem to be attended to which has also arisen from the absence in the Russian language of the definite and indefinite article and the translation of concepts developed in the Russian language into English, without an appropriate definite or indefinite article. In this case the word, 'activity'. The Google translator translates the title of ANL's famous book as "Activities, Consciousness and Personality," and this cleverly captures the meaning of the title better than the usual "Activity, Consciousness and Personality." Unfortunately, Leontyev followed Vygotsky in the use of analysis by units very imperfectly, and what ANL meant by "activities" could be better translated as "types of activity," midway between a mass noun and a countable noun, particular rather than individual or universal. An analysis by units requires us to begin with activities as units of human life. "Activity" is a generalised substance, not a unit, since it is a mass noun, simply indicating the materialist intent of the theory, but failing to give it a genuine scientific foundation worthy of Vygotsky's legacy. The units of activity are activities: an activity is many actions sharing a common motive which differs from the aim of each action. It is understandable then that with invention of terms like "activity systems" there is an effort to recover a countable noun (i.e. 'system') for the unit of activity, but at the same time the idea of "unit" has been lost, because a system is the complex whole itself, not a unit of the complex whole. In lieu of the smallest unit of a complex phenomenon we have a collection of all the diverse elements. Again, the search for a solution is replaced by a redescription of the problem.