

BEYOND THE NORMATIVE CHARACTER OF PSYCHOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH LUCIANO MECACCI

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ABSTRACT

The interview with Prof. Luciano Mecacci discusses Vygotsky's work and his role in translating and globally disseminating his ideas, especially since the 1990s. Mecacci faced challenges with inaccurate translations and interpretations that attempted to frame Vygotsky within cognitive approaches. In 1990, he translated *Thought and Language* into Italian, and since then, he has edited several publications, including the recent *The Human Mind. Five Essays by Lev S. Vygotskij (2022)*, which explores imagination and play in Vygotsky's theory. The interview highlights how the perception of Vygotsky has changed over the past decades, emphasizing his focus on social belonging while often neglecting his historical grounding and autonomous participation in the world. Mecacci clarifies Vygotskian pedagogy and its connection to creativity, discussing how his ideas apply to inclusive education and *defectology*. He points out Alfred Adler's influence on Vygotsky's concept of compensation and notes that his work, particularly *Fundamentals of Defectology*, remains marginal in Special Education research. Mecacci's work has been essential in promoting a more comprehensive understanding of Vygotsky's developmental psychology, emphasizing the importance of "difficult childhood" (due to genetic, developmental, or social problems) in shaping a psychological development theory that considers the multiplicity of historical and cultural factors. The interview provides valuable context on the relevance of *defectology* in the construction of Vygotskian psychology.

Keywords: defectology; developmental psychology; history of psychology; vygotsky

Además del carácter normativo de la Psicología: entrevista con Luciano Mecacci

RESUMEN

La entrevista con el Prof. Luciano Mecacci aborda el trabajo de Vygotsky y su papel en la traducción y difusión global de sus ideas, especialmente desde la década de 1990. Mecacci enfrentó desafíos con traducciones inexactas e interpretaciones que intentaban encuadrar a Vygotsky dentro de enfoques cognitivos. En 1990, tradujo al italiano *Thought and Language* y, desde entonces, ha editado varias publicaciones, incluido el reciente *The Human Mind. Cinco ensayos de Lev S. Vygotskij*, que explora la imaginación y el juego en la teoría de Vygotsky. La entrevista destaca cómo ha cambiado la percepción de Vygotsky en las últimas décadas, enfatizando su enfoque en la pertenencia social, pero a menudo descuidando su arraigo histórico y la participación autónoma en el mundo. Mecacci aclara la pedagogía vygotskiana y su relación con la creatividad, discutiendo cómo sus ideas se aplican a la educación inclusiva y a la *defectología*. Señala la influencia de Alfred Adler en el concepto de compensación desarrollado por Vygotsky y observa que su obra, especialmente *Fundamentals of Defectology*, sigue ocupando una posición marginal en la investigación en Pedagogía Especial. El trabajo de Mecacci ha sido esencial para promover una comprensión más amplia de la psicología del desarrollo de Vygotsky, resaltando la importancia de la "infancia difícil" (debido a problemas genéticos, evolutivos o sociales) en la formulación de una teoría del desarrollo psíquico que considere la multiplicidad de factores históricos y culturales. La entrevista proporciona un contexto valioso sobre la relevancia de la *defectología* en la construcción de la psicología vygotskiana.

Palabras clave: defectología; psicología del desarrollo; historia de la psicología; Vygotsky

Além do caráter normativo da Psicologia: entrevista com Luciano Mecacci

RESUMO

A entrevista com o Prof. Luciano Mecacci aborda o trabalho de Vygotsky e seu papel na tradução e divulgação global de suas ideias, especialmente desde os anos 1990. Mecacci enfrentou desafios com traduções imprecisas

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e interpretações que tentavam enquadrar Vygotsky em abordagens cognitivas. Em 1990, traduziu para o italiano “Thought and Language”, editando desde então diversas publicações, incluindo o recente “The Human Mind. Cinco ensaios de Lev S. Vygotskij” (2022), que explora a imaginação e o jogo na teoria de Vygotsky. A entrevista destaca como a percepção sobre Vygotsky mudou nas últimas décadas, enfatizando sua visão do pertencimento social, mas muitas vezes negligenciando seu enraizamento histórico e a participação autônoma no mundo. Mecacci esclarece a pedagogia vygotskiana e sua relação com a criatividade, discutindo como suas ideias se aplicam à educação inclusiva e à “defectologia”. Ele aponta a influência de Alfred Adler no conceito de compensação desenvolvido por Vygotsky e observa que sua obra, especialmente “Fundamentals of Defectology”, ainda ocupa uma posição marginal na pesquisa em Pedagogia Especial. O trabalho de Mecacci tem sido essencial para promover uma leitura mais abrangente da psicologia do desenvolvimento de Vygotsky, ressaltando a importância da “infância difícil” (devido a problemas genéticos, evolutivos ou sociais) para a formulação de uma teoria do desenvolvimento psíquico que considere a multiplicidade de fatores histórico-culturais. A entrevista fornece um contexto valioso sobre a relevância da defectologia na construção da psicologia vygotskiana.

Palavras-chave: defectologia; psicologia do desenvolvimento; história da psicologia; Vygotsky

INTRODUCTION

Diversity is a key concept in the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) who already introduced the idea of the cultural-historical nature of the variety of psycho-developmental patterns in his first psychological research and publications. His initial studies were devoted to children with sensory and cerebral impairments, as well as to children with affective and cognitive disorders. He also addressed forms of youth delinquency in relation to dysfunctional social relations. In his studies, Vygotsky challenged normative assumptions such as normal vs. abnormal and he understood “defectology” as focusing on children who develop differently, i.e. having a “defect” that exerts an influence on their development and can make development difficult (Vygotsky, 1993). In fact, his understanding of “difficult childhood” (*trudnoe detstvo*), was the basis for his general research on children development. His approach was not without consequences in the context of Russian psychology: at the beginning of the XX century children’s studies (or “pedology”) were consolidating a body of studies that later sparked the attention by the Soviet government who intended to educate masses of illiterate children and adults (Van der Veer, 2020). While the use of tests and standard measures were shaping soviet educational policies, Vygotsky challenged these practices as based upon assumptions that would not hold in the different USSR cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1993) and suggested to study the influence of specific features of children’s social environment on thinking and behavioural patterns. In redefining the learning agency in relation to mediation and cultural tools - the specific symbolic systems that once internalised provide the mind with cognitive tools – Vygotsky found himself in a difficult position within Soviet academia that intervened censoring his publications, although this issue went largely ignored by Western academia until the late Eighties. The work by Luciano Mecacci has been crucial to address a more comprehensive and consistent reading of Vygotsky studies and his contributions to the field of “defectology” and of developmental psychology.

Vygotsky’s work had gradually begun to surface abroad especially after the publication in 1962 of “Thinking and Speaking”, published in the US as “Thought and Language” (The M.I.T. Press, edited and translated by Eugenia Hanfmann, Gertrude Vakar, and Norris Minnick). In 1978, by naming him “The Mozart of psychology”, philosopher Stephen Toulmin drew the attention of psychologists to Vygotsky’s work on the occasion of the US edition of the anthology “Mind in Society” (Harvard University Press, 1978) edited by Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner and Ellen Souberman. In his article for the New York Review of Books, Toulmin (2021/1978) pointed out that:

The power of Vygotsky’s own empirical studies (...) is largely connected with the fact that he refused to begin by isolating his ‘experimental subject’ from all contextual cues - as experimental psychologists in the US so often do - but, instead, considered his subjects’ behaviour always in relation to their specific ‘cultural-historical’ situations. (p. 11).

Those were also the days when Prof. Luciano Mecacci was organising a seminal conference entirely focusing on Vygotsky that would take place in Rome in January 1979 and that he opened offering the initial key-note speech. Two conferences followed over a short period of time, one in Chicago (1980) and one in Moscow (1981).

Studying at the Faculty of Psychology in Rome in the Eighties offered repeated opportunities to listen to Luciano Mecacci’s observations after his regular visits to Moscow. He always offered inspiring insights as well as two main concerns: about the cuts and changes that were made on Vygotsky’s works published in Russia between the 1950s and the 1980s; and about the Western translations and conceptual framework built upon those publications. His first-hand knowledge of Vygotsky’s original documents as well as accounts of his life and position as recalled by Gita L. Vygotskaya and scholars such as Aleksandr Lurija made him aware of issues of censorship and “adaptation” that eroded the accountability of the translated works. Luciano Mecacci

openly addressed this issue in Budapest in 1988 at the international symposium on Vygotsky which was attended by Russian colleagues as well. His speech received the appreciation by Gita L. Vygotskaya.

This led him to work at the translation of "Thought and Language" on the basis of the first Russian edition of 1934. When compared with the Russian 1956 and 1982 editions (the one that was included in the Collected Works' second volume) various cuts and edits are evident both in the 1956 and in the 1982 editions. Finally, in 1990 the 1934's original edition was translated into Italian and published by Laterza.

A careful look at this 1990 edition revealed that the translations into other languages were usually based on the 1956 or on the 1982 Russian editions and that those editions presented a number of changes and omissions when compared with the original 1934 text. We had to wait until 2001 to see the original, unabridged edition of "Thought and Language" published in Russia.

On these issues we present here an interview with Luciano Mecacci, providing the context that led him to study Vygotsky's work and core ideas before addressing the normative character of psychology and Vygotsky's approach to "defectology".

Luciano Mecacci's studies combine his passions and deep understanding of philosophical, psychological, and historical disciplines. Born in Livorno (Tuscany) in 1946, he graduated in Philosophy at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' in 1970 (the first Higher Education Psychology degree course was introduced in Italy in 1971). Between 1971 and 1986 Mecacci worked in Rome as researcher at the Institute of Psychology of the National Research Council (CNR). In 1972 he made his first visit at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow, where he worked as researcher in the fields of psychophysiology and the history of Russian psychology. From 1977 to 1995 he taught at 'La Sapienza' where he also held the position of Director of the Department of Psychology (1992-1995). From 1995 to 2009 he taught at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Florence, where he also served as Pro-rector (1998-2006). In 2009, he left university teaching to devote himself mainly to his historical studies.

1) How did you become interested in Vygotsky?

In 1970 I graduated in Philosophy from the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' with a dissertation in psychology (at that time there was no degree in psychology in Italy) on a psychophysiology topic. In November 1971 I became a research fellow at the Institute of Psychology of the National Research Council and in January 1972 I went to the Moscow Institute of Psychology for a six-month stay in order to further my research in the Laboratory of Psychophysiology of Individual Differences, directed by Vladimir D. Nebylitsyn. The work conducted by this laboratory was well known internationally because the

articles and books by Nebylitsyn and his collaborators had been translated into English (Gray, 1964; Nebylitsyn, 1972; Nebylitsyn and Gray, 1972; Mecacci and Brožek, 1975; Mecacci, 1976). The laboratory's perspective was neo-Pavlovian: the typology of higher nervous activity - described by Pavlov to explain individual differences in the acquisition of conditioned reflexes in dogs - had been updated for the study of individual differences in human psychic processes (together with Vladimir M. Rusalov, a researcher at the Laboratory, I conducted experimental research on the electrophysiological correlates of attention which was published in 1973). The Laboratory was a kind of oasis within the Institute as all the other laboratories dealt with general psychology or developmental psychology from a very different perspective: the cultural-historical theory founded by Vygotsky. When I arrived in Moscow I only knew Vygotsky's name, I had not read any of his works. I had read some of Luria's writings, but only those on neuropsychology. I soon realised that there was a different history of 'Soviet psychology' from that which had been described in Western countries, even when it was based on reconstructions that Russian historians themselves had made. There was, so to speak, a 'parallel' history'. Let me give just one example: many of Vygotsky's papers circulated in the Institute in typewritten form. This type of documents was called *samizdat*: books and articles by banned authors (such as Vygotsky who had been banned since 1936) were typed by the authors themselves and distributed among friends, and having them in the house could be proof of 'anti-Soviet activity'.

2) Who did you meet from the Vygotskian 'school'?

I met everyone: Luria, Leontiev, Elkonin, Zaporozets, Davidov, Galperin, Smirnov, etc. They were curious that there was a young Western foreigner working in the Institute. There had only been short visits by Western psychologists, but never a relatively long stay to do research in a laboratory. So, they were very nice. They would invite me to their offices to talk, give me books, information, etc. I used to eat with them in the students' and professors' canteen. Solid friendships were born even though in some cases there was an age difference (I am thinking especially of Luria). I soon realised that there were at least three groups: the so-called Vygotskian 'old guard', Rubinshtein's pupils (Budilova, Brushlinsky, etc.; I will talk about them later) and the 'new guard' formed by Boris Lomov, Nebylitsyn himself, etc., who in 1973 formed the core group of the great new Institute of Psychology of the Academy of Sciences (Brožek and Mecacci, 1974), where I would spend further periods of research in 1975 and 1978, and where Rubinshtein's students also converged (upon Lomov's sudden death Brushlinsky became director, a fact not to be overlooked: the largest Institute of Psychology in the Soviet Union was headed by a non-Vygotskian).

3) In translating Vygotsky into Italian, you had to deal with inaccurate or partial translations of his writings, with attempts to link him to a cognitive approach. What were the main obstacles at Italian and international level to an accurate reading of his work?

I must start with the fundamental role Luria played in introducing me to Vygotsky. To begin with, by having me regularly attending his Laboratory of Neuropsychology at the Burdenko Institute of Surgery, he enabled me to understand the relevance of Vygotsky's ideas in relation to studying brain functions (which got me to write the book "Brain and History", published in Italian in 1977, and in English in 1979, with Luria's preface). Moreover, he advised Gita Vygodskaya to meet me personally to encourage the diffusion of her father's works in Italy. Since then, Gita has become a great friend. I have often told the story of my first meeting with her (in January 1972), which was almost clandestine. The most important fact is that, during that very first meeting, she brought me several pages of the manuscript preface to "Thought and Language", which I was able to photocopy. Since this manuscript got lost, those photocopies are the only proof of its existence. A great and sincere friendship was born with Gita. She was an exceptional woman who, while facing difficult personal and family circumstances, had made every effort to preserve the authentic profile of her father (on this matter, one can read a letter she wrote to me; Mecacci, 2011). I must emphasise, however, that it was Andrej Brushlinsky, who drew my attention to the problem of editions and reprints of Vygotsky's works, and he invited me to always read and refer to the first editions. When the conference on Vygotsky was held in Rome in 1979, I spoke about this problem in my introductory paper to the amazement of the audience who had read Vygotsky, essentially "Thought and Language", in an edition that did not correspond to the original (Mecacci, 1979b). The conference in Rome was the first that was organised on Vygotsky's work, way before similar events took place in Russia or other Western countries.

4) In 1990, the Italian translation of "Thought and Language" (Pensiero e linguaggio) edited by you was published: can you tell us about this work? What are your thoughts about the reception it has had in Italy and abroad?

I began to work on the translation of "Thought and Language" when the 1982 Russian reprint came out in the so-called Collected Works: this reprint introduced changes with respect to the 1956 reprint (on which all the Western translations had been based until then) and this 1956 reprint had made heavy cuts and changes with respect to the 1934 first edition. Virtually all Western translations were of little use for the new translation, not least because of the presence of serious translation errors. Mine was not only a translation, but also an analysis of what kind of corrections and cuts had been made in the two 1956 and 1982 reprints. I did so in order to

provide understanding of the historical reasons for this "censorship" at such different times in Soviet history. So, in my translation there is a long set of notes on these changes by the editors. My work was received with great interest by Vygotsky scholars but had no real impact on their work. First, because having to cite "Thought and Language", generally in English-language works, these scholars had to cite existing editions. Even when the new US edition of the Collected Works came out, the same problem arose again, because it was based on the Russian 1982 reprint which included the above-mentioned problems. The new German translation, published in 2002 by Joachim Lompscher and Georg Rückriem it was explicitly and largely based on my translation. It is a faithful version of the first 1934 Russian edition. The new 2004 Portuguese translation, edited by Paulo Bezerra, is also a very good version of the 1934 first Russian edition. However, it should be noted that there is no complete edition in English, the most widely used language for international communication in our field.

5) To what extent has the understanding and dissemination of Vygotsky's work changed over the last thirty years?

I would say that there have been at least two phases. The first is marked by the US edition of the six volumes of the Collected Works, published between 1987 and 1999. It was possible to have a more systematic and complex knowledge of Vygotsky that was previously based essentially on (1) the abridged (and I would add not faithful) 1962 version of "Myshlenie i rech'", whose title was already - as we all know by now - a first problem ("Thought and Language" instead of "Thinking and Speech") and (2) the "anthology" "Mind in society" (1978). Finally, the monograph by van der Veer and Valsiner ("Understanding Vygotsky") came out in 1991, offering the most comprehensive overview of Vygotskian work.

The second phase is characterised by the focus on Vygotsky's lesser known, but in my opinion fundamental, contributions to understanding the specific features of his theory, namely the works on defectology and pedology. It is no coincidence that the Turin conference in 2024 was precisely dedicated to this theme.

6) You recently edited "The Human Mind. Five essays by Lev S. Vygotskij" (2022) with five unpublished essays in Italian. How do they help us understand Vygotsky's view of imagination and of the playful dimension?

Although a couple of the essays had already been published in Italian in the 1970s, we can rightly say that they are also unpublished, because I have retranslated them from the first Russian editions, and problems of censorship and translation arose in this case as well. They are five essays from the last phase of Vygotsky's work that, on the one hand, emphasise the fundamental concept of a "psychological system" and, on the other hand, the relevance for the human mind of a psychological space,

consciousness, that develops gradually in the first years of life. It is a process for which the internal representation of the rules of the game is decisive, precisely the awareness of the plans of action and the verification of the results, within a me-other dynamic, where the other can be the playmate, or the split self.

7) Referring to Vygotsky there is a tendency to emphasise his focus on the person's social belonging and to undervalue the dimension of his historical rootedness and the conditions for autonomous participation in the world around him.

I would say that there has been a distortion in the interpretation of Vygotsky's theory when he has been presented as a cognitivist psychologist who takes the 'mind in society' into account, a kind of 'social-minded Piaget'. Historical-cultural theory does not mean 'socio-cultural theory'. The reference to historical factors means attention to historical contexts in their social, economic, political and cultural articulation. The research on psychological processes in the peoples of Uzbekistan did not aim at confirming that in the development of the mind there is an influence of social factors in general (did any psychologist ever deny this?), but how a given context (characterised by a particular organisation of society, family, school, etc.) orients and organises psychic development.

8) How would you define Vygotsky's idea of pedagogy and its relationship with the creative dimension?

Obviously, creativity does not mean in Vygotsky a free play of the imagination. Creativity means elaborating and restructuring the information available in a given cultural-historical context in order to propose both new strategies for solving specific individual and social problems and to construct a cultural and scientific representation of reality. It is not an individual process, dependent on a 'gift of nature'. Mozart or Einstein are great examples of creativity, but had they been born in a different era or in a socially or culturally deprived context, they would not have become the 'geniuses' we know. School rather than family is crucial in this process. One can be born poor, but if the school provides the appropriate tools for the psychic and cultural growth of each child, the difference in social class at the start becomes irrelevant. The school is the central axis of a society. For Vygotsky, who was born in a Russia that marginalised the poorer social classes, leaving them victims of illiteracy, and did not allow women and Jews access to higher education, the Revolution represented an opportunity for a 'democratic school', as John Dewey put it.

9) How do you translate this pedagogical idea in relation to disabilities and institutional 'inclusion' efforts?

Firstly, by criticising and rejecting the operation of the 'negative', i.e. considering, for example, a blind or

deaf child as a 'normal' child who, respectively, cannot see or hear. If a sighted child was placed in a school for blind children, what would be the benchmark on the 'normal' development of his cognitive processes? From this perspective, Vygotsky would have considered expressions such as 'blind' and 'deaf' to be theoretically equivocal. Here we enter a wider area that concerns the normative character of psychology: based on which criteria - scientific, social, political, religious, etc. - do we establish what is the 'normal' development of a person and his social behaviour? (I dealt with this issue in an article I wrote in 2021).

10) In his studies on disabilities, Vygotsky, taking up the work of Adler, developed the concept of compensation. How does the process of compensation differ from that of mediation?

Well, the Adlerian idea is superseded. For Vygotsky (1993) there is no simple compensation: one psychological subsystem (sight) is missing, and I replace it, enhancing it, with another (touch). On the contrary, Vygotsky speaks of 'overcompensation' (*sverkhkompensatsiya*) to indicate a particular organisation of all psychological processes in relation to the specificity of the problem. It is in this perspective that the mind of a 'blind' child is conceived by Vygotsky as different from that of a 'sighted' child: they have a particular structure that must be studied according to its specificities, without taking one as the benchmark of the other or vice versa. Overcompensation is strictly dependent on the opportunities offered by school and society. Overcompensation is based on the tools (from Braille reading - to take an example from the past - to modern digital technologies) that mediate the relationship with other people and the school or work environment. Without the intervention of instrumental mediation, overcompensation is minimal.

11) Why do Vygotsky's works collected in the volume "Fundamentals of Defectology" and more generally the cultural-historical perspective seem to play a marginal role in the research conducted in the field of Special Pedagogy?

I believe it depends primarily on the role assigned to defectology in the foundation of psychology in general. Vygotsky started from the 'difficult childhood' (due to genetic, evolutionary or social problems) to arrive at a theory of child psychic development that considers the multiplicity of cultural-historical factors involved in all these cases. This is a difficult road. It is easier to start from the 'normal' child (back then, this was the 'Swiss child' of Piaget's research, as Vygotsky noted), fix the stages of 'normal' development and then apply them in the field of both 'normal' and 'special' pedagogy. Not only this is an easier road for the psychologist and the teacher. In fact, this framework responds to the more general demands that society places on its members: in this case, it concerns what the child must do, not what she or he can do.

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Note:

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Data availability

Research data are available in the document.

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