**Language and Personhood: Is Thinking Culturally Relative?**

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**Abstract:**

*The views of many scholars – including Peirce, Vygotsky, Mead, Bakhtin, Dewey, Taylor, Habermas, Gadamer, Levinas, Bruner, Appiah, Thayer-Bacon, Lipman, and Davidson– converge on the idea that personhood is an irreducibly relational construct and, hence, that our distinctive modes of thinking and awareness are fundamentally linguistic in nature. This idea, in turn, supports teaching and learning activities in which dialogue has a central place, on the grounds that improving linguistic competence through speech in particular is the key to improving cognitive competence. But this idea, in both theoretical and empirical terms, resonates most strongly in the West. Whither, then, the imperative of powerful thinking – and its correlate, powerful talking – in non-Western contexts? In particular, in light of my own experience working in China, and the undisputed truth that dialogue is not a regular aspect of formal education in Confucian-based societies, can we reasonably infer that learners in – or from – these societies are not powerful thinkers?; Alternatively, should we allow that the link between thinking and talking is, itself, culturally relative? A considerable body of research appears to support the latter viewpoint (Kim 2002 et al), but if Davidson is right, the link between talking and thinking is conceptual, not empirical, from which it ought to follow that all creatures who are capable of reflective thought and awareness must participate in a language community. In endorsing this conceptual perspective, I cast a critical eye on what constitutes formal education in both Western and non-Western contexts, arguing that the development of personhood demands a thoroughly dialogical approach.*

**Keywords:** Awareness, personhood, thinking, language, dialogue, cultural relativity,

**Introduction**

The last fifty years has seen huge growth in the number of large-scale international studies (TIMSS, PISA, etc.) of student achievement across national, cultural and ethnic boundaries. For various reasons, educators in Western countries, including Australasia, have been particularly interested in the performance of students in, or from, countries in East Asia. Such reasons include: the rapid growth of China in geo-political and economic terms, and its impact globally; the gradual realization among Western researchers that certain stereotypes/ perceptions about the performance of Chinese and other learners are not borne out objectively by the studies in question; and, connectedly, a determination on the part of Western governments to ensure that their countries did not “fall behind” in such crucial areas as mathematics and literacy. Domains studied have included hierarchies of thinking, class size and environment, pedagogic styles, moral and values dimensions, affect and disposition (motivation), and levels of student involvement and engagement. In this presentation I am interested in the relationship between students’ classroom involvement through questioning, reasoning, challenging, self-correction and classroom discussion – the ingredients of what may be termed “dialogue” – and their demonstration of various forms and levels of thinking. I am also interested in how the research has been interpreted by commentators – especially those who now claim that we must not only abandon the aforementioned stereotypes about East-Asian teaching and learning (traditional, didactic, rote, low-level, etc.) but conclude that educators everywhere should take into account the socio-cultural backgrounds of students before they rush to demand higher levels of verbal participation in classrooms from *all* students. Given the increasing numbers of students from East Asian cultures in classrooms around the world, such accounting will involve teachers in Western and other countries, in addition to those in East Asian contexts. Further, in view of the apparent achievement levels of students from an East Asian cultural background, there are those who think that Western educators should pay greater attention to teaching and learning styles traditionally associated with East Asia.

As someone who has just finished seven years teaching in Hong Kong, and as the author of a recent book which raises concerns about the interplay of culture and tradition (which look inward), on the one hand, and personhood and ethics (which look outward), on the other, I believe that the interpretations referred to are too generous with respect both to what *actually* happens in (and beyond) classrooms in places such as China, Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, and what *might* happen if we applied certain normative ideals in these contexts. I question some of the strategies and lines of reasoning that have led researchers to their conclusions; including: the easy acceptance of cultural and/or moral relativism; too great a reliance on the subjective views of students and teachers; and a stubborn commitment to a form of positivism which ignores the possibility that key issues in this field – notably, the inter-dependence of thinking and talking – are conceptual in nature, and cannot be easily overthrown by empirical findings.

**The “Paradox” of the Chinese (or East Asian) Learner**

One notable series of studies focusing on “the Chinese learner” was published by the Comparative Education Research Centre (Hong Kong) in three volumes (Watson and Biggs, 1996, 2001; Chan and Rao, 2009). The impetus for these studies was the so-called “paradox of the [East] Asian learner” (Watson and Biggs, 1996, pp. 49, 70), which juxtaposes the perception of Confucian-heritage countries (‘CHC’)” and their students as too focused on low-level rote learning and memorization, with both the reality of higher achievement levels among these same students, and their own expectations of themselves and their teachers. The latter often link the goal of moral, intellectual and even aesthetic perfection with high-level, meaning-based learning activities. In this paper, I am mainly interested in one key dimension of this alleged paradox: the perception of passive learning in students who do not speak up in class, ask very few questions and, most emphatically, almost never challenge either their teachers or one another in the classroom; set against the reality of high expectations and high achievement in subjects such as mathematics which, it seems, require higher-order thinking strategies.

One quick way to diffuse the sense of paradox here is to concede that earlier perceptions of CHC students were simply mistaken: that they really do speak up, ask questions and challenge in classrooms (perhaps when the research observers were not present?). However, this suggestion is a bit of a stretch, as can be attested by anyone who has worked with CHC students (of varying ages and levels) over significant periods of time. Notwithstanding the dangers inherent in making culturally-based generalizations, it is simply not true that these students are as vocally active in classrooms as their Westernized counterparts, although there may well be some notable counter-examples.

A second response is to question if the achievement levels of CHC students, even as determined by multiple and repeated forms of evaluation, are really as high in comparative terms as reported. Perhaps these students simply are conditioned from an early age by their cultural guardians – specifically parents and teachers – to “play the game” more effectively than others – that it is their sense of commitment, determination and single-mindedness to the task at hand, which actually translates into better results. But as has been pointed out, such conditioning is more likely to lead to greater student passivity; there is little reason to think that CHC students are genuinely more interested in learning than others; what they are interested in is not rocking the boat and making their families proud, etc. In any case, it is difficult to deny that CHC students do better in school, including in Western schools where they regularly out-perform other students.

A more sophisticated response to the paradox, one taken by most of the contributors to the series referred to above, is to suggest that earlier observers from non-CHC failed to realize that CHC students were actually deeply engaged in the kinds of thinking and learning that would facilitate high levels of achievement, notwithstanding their relative passivity in behavioural terms, and the persistence of what has been perceived as rote learning focused on memorisation and other low-level cognitive skills. In short, these students might not say much in class, but they are both learning *and* thinking in ways which allow them to progress, in time, to high levels of cognitive achievement. This kind of finding has led, in turn, to cautionary claims about undertaking and interpreting cross-cultural studies, and to various forms of cultural relativism, e.g. that students from different cultures (most notably, “Western” and “East Asian”) learn and think differently from one another, have different understandings of the role of student talk in classrooms, have different ethical expectations and values with respect to themselves and their teachers (self-perfection: *Ren*), and see differences in achievement as reflecting quite different parameters, e.g. ability in one case and effort in the other; etc. (Watson and Biggs, 1996,pp. 59-60; Watson and Biggs, 2001, p. 297; Chan and Rao, 2009, p. 74).

With respect to the specific place of discussion, questioning and other forms of verbal interaction in the classroom, there is an emerging consensus among researchers that where Western students are encouraged to be actively involved from an early age, East Asian students are encouraged to begin learning activities by careful listening, practice at memorisation and application (Chan and Rao, 2009, p. 45), and only later to participate in more collaborative activities, including critical discussion “once they have understood the issue and mastered the field (Chan and Rao, 2009, p. 56). The same author is quite prepared to link such a measured approach on the part of student attitudes to specific aspects of East Asian culture, including the imperative of not losing face (for example, their own if they say something foolish or just incorrect, but also the teacher’s if they pose a challenge that she cannot meet) and the need to show intellectual humility rather than the pride they may feel in doing something well.

Memorization, when viewed as a necessary step in the long and complex process that leads to knowledge and understanding, is consistent with what Marton *et al* (Watson and Biggs, 1996, Ch. 4) call a deep approach to learning, that is, one which focuses on the goal of understanding or finding the meaning of what is being learned. But from a Western perspective, memorization – also known as rote learning – has long been associated with a surface approach to learning, in which it becomes an end in itself and is assessed as such. If, as seems plausible, we regard understanding as a process of *making connections* – typically, connections between what is presented as new or unfamiliar and what is regarded as already understood – then it is not difficult to see how focusing one’s attention on specific items by having to commit them to memory can enhance understanding. However, it is noteworthy that in the study by Marton *et al*, typical of many in the field, such crucial terms as “understanding” are not defined at all, let alone treated as topics worthy of inquiry. Philosophically, concepts such as *understanding* and *meaning* satisfy what I have elsewhere called the “3-Cs”: they are common or familiar enough, they are central or important in various respects, but they are problematic or contestable, in that there is no consensus on what they really mean. To take such meanings for granted – or simply to defer to what one or other expert asserts their meaning to be – is to miss a valuable opportunity for an inquiry that the research in question should be prepared to undertake.

We need to be careful not to paint too rosy a picture of what happens in “Western” countries (including Australia) with respect to the nature and place of student talk in the classroom. I do not challenge the commonly-held belief that these classrooms – whether at primary, secondary or even tertiary level – are “noisier” than their East Asian counterparts but of course the important issue here concerns the type of noise produced and how (or if) it contributes to student learning and thinking. If we control for disruptive talk and chit-chat (a big ask in the case of crowded urban public schools in the USA), and focus on the kinds of talk that teachers encourage on the grounds that it facilitates learning, there is still the question of what *kinds* of *thinking* are thereby produced or facilitated.

On the other hand, the relative absence of classroom talk among East Asian students does not mean that they do not talk about or discuss their schoolwork either among themselves out of class, or with the teacher (often on a one-to-one basis, Watson and Biggs, 1996, p. 59). This is consistent with features already noted, namely, the preference for learning in a quiet environment, and the desire to avoid losing face in a public place like the classroom.

As teachers know only too well, skills and knowledge may be important but an even more fundamental requirement involves student attitudes and dispositions to learning, particularly motivation. And here several researchers have noted that in this respect, East Asian students may have an advantage, albeit an ironic one. Assuming that schools, generally, require and reward such traits as obedience, conformity, persistence, and docility, the gap between them and those traits valued by the society outside the classroom is smaller in East Asian contexts simply because the latter are similar to the former. Where American children (to take the example which is often used, albeit misleadingly, as representative of all “Westerners”) grow up believing that they are free to say (if not do) what they want, when they want to, because such traits as individual autonomy and creativity are valued and rewarded, East Asian students are better prepared for schooling because obedience, conformity and the like are ingrained in all aspects of their upbringing (Watson and Biggs, 1996, p. 58; Chan and Rao, 2009, p. 73). If such an analysis is discomforting, it might be because while it accounts for behavioural differences in the two cultural groupings, it reinforces the suspicion, held by many progressive thinkers, that students, everywhere, are often bored by and indifferent to what they are required to learn. Notwithstanding protestations to the contrary – as noted earlier – it is difficult to see how they can find genuine meaning in their schooling, assuming that meaning is, indeed, something that must be found (constructed, developed, discovered, invented…) rather than something which can be transmitted. Accordingly, claims – such as those reported in the studies referred to here – that East Asian students develop a deep understanding of their school subjects, not just in spite of, but *because of* their docility, need to be carefully scrutinized.

As will become clear, my own interest in these matters centres around the connection between forms of high-level thinking that I term “inquiry” and forms of verbal behaviour that I term “dialogue”, wherein it is tempting to conclude that not much of either takes place in either Western or East Asian schools. One key component of dialogue – particularly in contexts where students are still developing the associated skills and dispositions – is *questioning*. Consistent with the general line developed in the studies I have cited, several authors insist that East Asian teachers quite often ask “provocative questions” and allow “reflection time” (notably in Japanese classrooms where teachers spend many hours learning the “right” questions to ask, and where the size of the curriculum is limited so as not to overwhelm the goal of deep understanding), even though, when compared with their Western counterparts, East Asian university students believe that one mark of a good teacher is that she *has an answer* to their questions, regardless of their complexity (Watson and Biggs, 2001, p. 119). To what extent does such a belief affect teachers’ determination and students’ willingness to *think for themselves* about matters of importance? I shall return to this question.

**Culture and Relativism**

I want to make a distinction here between the socio-political dimensions of culture, on the one hand, and its epistemological and moral dimensions, on the other. Briefly put, where the former may be articulated, descriptively, within the bounds of particular cultures – and will, therefore, vary from culture to culture, the latter are not so easily categorised. I concede that *descriptions* of how people learn, come to know, and defend and act on moral values and judgements may well be similarly culturally bound. However, it is far from clear that such formulations exhaust all there is to be said about knowledge and morality. In particular, there are – or could be – conceptual and normative claims which are not bound thereby because they are characteristics of *all* human persons, both in terms of who they are, but more importantly, in terms of who they *might* be and how they *might* live. Such claims determine how we interpret claims of cultural relativity, as we shall see. Here I make two key claims about persons – i.e. about the *concept* of a person. First, morality, as both an examination and an evaluation of how we should live our lives, is conceptually anchored in the concept of *person*. Our being persons consists, at least in part, in our being moral creatures, both capable of making and obliged to be bound by, moral judgements of one sort or another. Accordingly, both the capacity and the obligation extend beyond the contingencies of our cultural, religious, national, ethnic and other affiliations and associations. Secondly, it is the same, *mutatis mutandis*, with our capacity to know (and understand). Whether we are culturally bound by an individualistic or collectivist framework in socio-political terms, the concept of *knowledge* – what it means to know – is a shared feature of our common personhood.

Education has both moral and epistemological implications: excellence in teaching and learning will be judged in terms of how well students come to know and understand, but also in terms of how well they are becoming prepared to live worthwhile and decent lives (however these aspects may be determined). Since my concern here is to look at key educational elements across different cultural contexts, getting clear on this point is very important.

As indicated earlier, I do not see much evidence in the social science literature of an appreciation that such central epistemological concepts as *knowledge*, *understanding*, *thinking*, *belief*, *truth* and *certainty* are, themselves, problematic. These concepts are usually understood within a Cartesian-like framework in which knowledge and certainty are properties of individual learners, irrespective of whether they are encouraged to learn independently, collaboratively, or whatever. Self-knowledge or self-awareness is given, and each person must make the transition to knowledge and awareness of the world around them. Whatever the cultural context, thinking is regarded as a private, subjective activity (albeit one made possible by the complexity of the human brain) which forms the basis of genuine understanding and knowledge. If much of our thinking is actually linguistic, this is doubtless the result of internalizing external modes of linguistic expression among individuals *a la* Vygotsky; still, thinking itself remains eternally the province of the individual. Viewed in this way, it is hardly surprising that researchers can countenance the juxtaposition of high-level thought and sparse linguistic engagement that is said to characterise East Asian learning styles.

Suppose, however, that this subjectivist framework is fundamentally flawed from the start; that the Cartesian view which puts so much epistemological weight on first-person certainty and knowledge is wrong? Once more, I shall have something to say on this issue shortly.

I remarked earlier that researchers in the field with which I am concerned have been willing to concede some form of cultural relativism in order to account for observed differences in areas such as learning, talking and thinking among students. But the thesis of cultural relativism is actually a loosely-organized collection of distinct claims which include the following:

(1a)People’s behaviour, both individually and collectively, along with the beliefs and values that support them, can be understood only in the context of their cultural backgrounds (including how they relate to others, language, custom, tradition, role, history…);

(1b) The very concept of human behaviour is permeated by cultural elements; behaviourally, at least, we are creatures of culture;

(2a) What is (judged to be) morally right in one particular set of circumstances may not be so in another (even the broadest moral principles are sensitive to context);

(2b) Moral judgements cannot be coherently made beyond the contingent circumstances in which they are, in fact, made, where culture constitutes the main component of these circumstances; morality itself is a function of these contingencies;

(3a) How we learn and come to know –thereby, what we judge to be true – depends on cultural and related contingencies;

(3b) Epistemology itself is culturally relative; not only does what constitute knowledge and truth vary across cultural boundaries, but all genuine knowledge and judgement – including evaluations of what counts as good or bad reasoning, powerful or strong thinking, etc. – are culturally relative.

It is worth asking “Which of these claims are descriptive and which are normative or value-laden?” My own view is that the “(a)” claims above may safely be interpreted empirically; of the “(b)” claims, (1b) could go either way, but (2b) and (3b) are conceptual, value-laden claims which, accordingly, cannot easily be established or overturned by empirical findings. In the literature comparing the “thinking” and “talking” styles of Western and East Asian students, the failure to acknowledge the empirical/conceptual distinction has important implications. In particular, the empirical thesis that students and teachers in/from CHC do not in fact either use or value speech – whether internalized or actual – in undertaking higher-level cognitive tasks leaves open the question of whether they *might* benefit from so doing and, hence, whether educators, researchers and commentators who support the *status quo* (by claiming that these students should not be pushed to verbalize their thoughts, engage in dialogue, etc.) are, if unwittingly, complicit in denying them the *best* forms of teaching and learning that are available (where “best” reflects both epistemological and ethical values).

**Thinking, Talking and Culture**

One notable study of the influence of culture on the thinking/talking relationship is by Heejung Kim (Kim, 2002). His main hypothesis is that the oft-cited relationship between thinking and talking – specifically, that the latter both allows the expression and communication of the former, and “creates, change and signifies” it – is not, in fact, universal to all persons, but is quite culturally specific. The view that it is universal is, according to Kim, an unwarranted generalisation usually made by European and North American researchers. He cites Jerome Bruner as one example: “[the equivalence of thought and talk is thought to be] the nature of human nature” (Kim, 2002, p. 828). Kim points out that East Asian assumptions about language, thinking and talking – as reflected in Buddhist and Taoist teachings, for example – are different from those in the West, because the former have always valued silence and introspection more highly than “jumping in” verbally. As noted earlier, this difference is reflected in East Asian societies today where the verbal expression of both thoughts and feelings is less prominent. Kim also cites research which shows that the “mode of thinking” in Western and Eastern contexts is, itself, different, with the former being more “analytic” and the latter more “holistic” (“in which many elements are held at the same time in thought in order to grasp the gestalt of the parts” Kim, 2002, p. 830). If, as Kim claims, analytic thinking is more easily verbalizable than holistic thinking, we already have some warrant for claiming that talking plays a more facilitative role with respect to thinking in the West but a more disruptive role in the East.

The guiding hypothesis for Kim’s research is that “East Asians who tend to use holistic thinking would be negatively affected by talking, but European Americans who tend to adopt analytical thinking would not be negatively affected by talking” (Kim, 2002, p. 830). The two groups in question are distinguished from the start by relevant cultural assumptions concerning the impact of talking on thinking. What Kim’s work claims to demonstrate is that these assumptions are borne out in practice, (i.e. not merely the actual impact of talking on thinking, but the impact of relevant cultural beliefs about that impact!). By way of a brief summary, three empirical studies were undertaken, each involving native English-speaking American college level students from European an East Asian backgrounds (so differences in linguistic ability in English were not relevant). Each of the studies used Raven’s Progressive Matrices, a familiar instrument for testing broad-based analytic reasoning competence. In one study, participants completed the relevant tasks while “thinking aloud”, i.e. verbalizing their thought processes. In the second study, participants were instructed to use an “articulatory-suppression” mechanism while completing the task, i.e. verbally expressing something completely irrelevant (reciting the alphabet out loud). Consistent with the guiding hypothesis, European Americans’ performance was not impaired by their thinking aloud, while East Asian Americans’ performance was, implying that the latter do not use language overtly when solving cognitive problems, and are distracted if made to do so. Conversely, the East Asian Americans’ performance was not negatively impacted when the verbalising task involved articulatory-suppression, whereas the European Americans’ performance was, implying that the latter do use language overtly when solving cognitive tasks, and are distracted if the language they are required to use blocks their usual verbal behaviour.

The third study used both Raven’s instrument and a series of questionnaires which required participants to be self-reflective about their own beliefs concerning the link between thinking and talking, their verbal interactions with their parents, and how much they relied on language when thinking (specifically, when working on the Raven’s Matrices). Once again, the results indicated (statistically) significant differences between the two cultural groupings, with European Americans believing more strongly in the thinking-talking connection, reporting more verbal interaction with parents, and relying on language in their thinking more strongly than their Asian American counterparts.

Kim’s conclusions, similar to those in the three volumes on the Chinese learner cited above, include an appeal to researchers and teachers not to view East Asian students as deficient simply because they speak less in formal teaching situations and, thereby, to resist the temptation to push them to speak more. Student talk has its place, but so do silent reflection and forms of thinking that may not be linguistic in structure. In Kim’s words, “…the meaning of students’ silence can be the engagement in thoughts, not the absence of ideas” (Kim, 2002, p. 840). Taken together, these studies also suggest that Western educators need to reconsider their own cultural predilection toward encouraging more verbal activity in their classrooms, on the grounds that a more introspective and holistic approach to thinking might improve *their* students' test scores.

In preparing to respond to this line of thought, I note (i) that there is no way to perceive or measure excellence in thinking, beyond what is revealed in one kind of performance or another, whether the latter be in tests of higher-order thinking such as Ravens’ or in the types of questions asked by teachers and students in classrooms; but (ii) that it does not follow that the measures of performance standardly used by researchers exhaust our understanding of what excellent thinking is, or could be. Continuing a theme introduced earlier, such a modal or normative understanding must not be constrained by what is (currently) tested or observed. In case I be accused here of referring to some kind of mysterious “black-box” conception of thinking, I would point out that it is Kim and other defenders of East Asian teaching and learning styles who are more vulnerable here, precisely because they gesture at modes of deep thinking (e.g. “holistic”) that are not linguistic, but seem unable to articulate them in any precise way. In contrast, I am pre-empting any such “black-box” charge by proposing that excellent – or what I prefer to call “powerful” – thinking be de-mystified through conversation, specifically dialogue. Further, by characterising powerful thinking as a kind of *normative ideal*, I am indirectly suggesting that neither students in/from East Asian cultures, nor those in/from Western cultures are typically taught in ways which aspire to this ideal, test scores notwithstanding.

What of the claim that our normative judgements about what is good, better, excellent or powerful thinking cannot be made or even properly understood outside the broad cultural contexts in which thinkers are immersed. Far from empowering those from different cultures, such a relativistic mentality with respect to intellectual values threatens to ensure that they remain disadvantaged. Consider, as a prime example, those modes of thinking that we might loosely call “dialogical”, in that they involve participants addressing complex problems that require taking multiple perspectives and a variety of cognitive and meta-cognitive moves (analytic, imagination, deductive, inductive, speculative…). In such situations, it may not even be clear *what* the problem or most appropriate question is without a good deal of deliberation. The kinds of powerful thinking called for can be undertaken by a single individual, but only if she has a strong grasp of what dialogical thinking is. It means, for example, coming up with ideas and tentative ways forward that may well have to be revised or even abandoned later on. How could this person develop such an understanding without at least some prior – if not ongoing – involvement as a thinker *in a community of thinkers* who relate to one another through dialogue? How, in short, could she think dialogically – as opposed to monologically, working in a roughly linear direction toward a predetermined solution – unless she has been engaged in dialogue? However we choose to characterize dialogue, it is at the very least an interchange among two of more individuals who are working together to understand and solve the problems at hand. Doubtless such a scenario might require the guidance or direction of a teacher, but in a genuinely dialogical or inquiry-based context he will be doing both more and less than playing the traditional teacher’s role of expert; more because he will need to encourage students to *think* well by posing (and modelling) probing questions and having a strong understanding of the likely direction of the inquiry; but less because, student expectations notwithstanding, he very often will not know the solution and will need to assume the role of *co-inquirer*.

The studies reported by Kim all involved college-aged students. To the extent that they can solve the problems presented in Raven’s Progressive Matrices, etc., we may infer either that they were, at a more formative stage, participants in a dialogical community, or that the problems themselves were not dialogical in nature. Generalizing to the kinds of international studies cited by the authors in *The Chinese Learner* series, the high levels of achievement observed in Chinese and other East Asian students leads to a similar choice of inferences. If the “prior participation in dialogue” option is ruled out as a contingency, then it follows that the achievement measures employed simply did not involve dialogical thinking.

**Universalizing Thought-and-Talk**

My comments about dialogical thinking call to mind the work of Lev Vygotsky, who famously proposed – and defended on empirical grounds – that at least some modes of thinking are the results of *internalization.* It is instructive to juxtapose Vygotsky’s views with those of his less celebrated compatriot Mikhael Bakhtin. If the former is known for his ground-breaking theories about how children do think and learn – involving concepts like the *Zone of Proximal Development* - the latter (along with the Pragmatist philosopher G. H. Mead) highlighted a prescriptive or value-laden dimension which speaks directly to the issues I have been examining. Here I am less interested in the historical question of whether Vygotsky’s own views included the idea of dialogical thinking as “inner speech”, than focusing on the distinction between dialogical and monological thinking, where the latter is characterized as thinking directed in a fairly predictable manner toward a predetermined conclusion. One study suggests that Vygotsky’s well-known *Zone of Proximal Development* actually supports monological thinking because of its inbuilt asymmetry: that between the novice student and the knowledgeable adult (or peer) (Cheyne and Tarulli, 2005). Epistemologically, the objective here is to move the former in the direction of the latter, consistent with a consensual or convergent view of learning and knowledge. East Asian learning and thinking styles, as characterized above, fit in nicely here, despite the somewhat misleading idea that what is being internalized is inner *speech*. But it is a form of speech which, ironically, leaves little room for the student’s own voice; rather, what he internalizes is the authoritative voice of the teacher and his own place as careful listener and learner. Taking this interpretation, Vygotsky’s theories may still be understood universalistically, in the sense that while internalization always occurs, *what* is internalized with respect to speaking and thinking is quite cultural specific.

According to Cheyne and Tarulli, it was Bakhtin who emphasised the dialogical nature of “inner speech”, but only in contexts where the external environment (the site where “outer speech” occurs) is itself dialogical. In a dialogue, each utterance is connected in some way to those which precede and follow it, and it is directed to the “other” who must then respond to it (Cheyne and Tarulli, 2005, p. 132). The dialogue has a life of its own, driven by the desire of those involved to get to the bottom of things. Here what is internalized is not just inner speech but structured dialogue, and while there is still room for the Vygotskyan notion of *scaffolding*, this notion may now be regarded in more even-handed terms: not so much the smarter or more powerful assisting those who are less so, but a genuinely collaborative effort to assist one another in the face of a common problem or issue that all are trying to resolve. I submit that the distinction between Eastern and Western conceptions of the thinking-talking relationship is less important than the distinction between forms of thinking and talking which are monological, on the one hand, and those which are dialogical, on the other. And I am claiming that educators everywhere should be aiming more at the latter.

Building on the idea that the theory of thought as internalized speech is universal in its broad terms, I want to acknowledge the contribution of modern semantics (philosophy of language) to this area of inquiry. Elsewhere I have defended the view that it is language, first and foremost, which defines us as *persons* (Splitter, 2015). It may be true for us human persons that our capacity for language has its roots in evolutionary theory, neurology, physiology, and so on, but language itself is an irreducibly *social* phenomenon; the capacity to understand and interpret what we and others say requires joint membership of a *community of speakers*. Reflecting on this remarkable albeit commonplace circumstance, the analytic philosopher Donald Davidson, in Wittgensteinian mode, proposed a *triangular* model of awareness:

… the basic triangle of two people and a common world is one of which we must be aware if we have any thoughts at all. If I can think, I know that there are others with minds like my own, and that we inhabit a public time and space filled with objects and events many of which are … known to others. In particular I, like every other rational creature, have three kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the objective world…; knowledge of the minds of others; and knowledge of the contents of my own mind. None of these three sorts of knowledge is reducible to either of the other two, or to any other two in combination. (Davidson, 2001, pp. 86-87).

Acknowledging that mere awareness, like belief, is no guarantee of truth, Davidson nevertheless insists that in order to grasp such concepts, we must have an understanding of the distinction between what is *claimed* to be true and what is *actually* true, whereby we understand the distinction between believing and knowing. Implicit here is our grasp of the concept of *error*, i.e. the idea that we are sometimes mistaken in our beliefs (and, indeed, in our claims to know). Davidson again: “…we would not have the concept of getting things wrong or right if it were not for our interactions with other people” (Davidson, 2001, p. 129). Simply put, through language, we share our observations and beliefs about the world with others, and we note that from time to time, these do not correlate; therefore, one of us must be mistaken.

Davidson’s triangulation model includes a crucial element of symmetry. My awareness of myself as a believer, knower and agent in the world goes hand-in-hand with my awareness of you having (and utilizing) these same capacities. As one commentator nicely puts it: “So, while we find that our knowledge of the world depends on the communication between persons, we also find that the communication between persons depends on our recognition that we occupy a shared world” (Avramides, 1999, p. 148).

In linking such fundamental epistemological concepts as *awareness* and *belief* to language, Davidson is implicitly referring to *all* thinkers, speakers and knowers who are bound together in their common usage of these concepts. His perspective as a Western analytic philosopher in the Twentieth Century Anglo-American tradition is surely irrelevant. Reminiscent of Kant, he is laying down conditions by which we understand and apply such concepts, irrespective of our cultural or other affiliations. But in calling attention to the importance of dialogue, Davidson reaches still further back into our shared philosophical heritage:

Writing may portray, but cannot *constitute*, the inter-subjective exchanges in which meanings are created and firmed. Socrates was right: reading is [also] not enough. If we want to approach the harder wisdom we must *talk* and, of course, listen. (Davidson, 1994, p. 432, emphasis added)

Once again, while Davidson’s views can be and have been challenged, the idea that they are, at best, culturally relative is surely wrong-headed.

In this presentation I have accepted the common view that East Asian students are not as verbally engaged in learning and thinking activities as their Western counterparts. I have also tacitly gone along with the presumption that responses to the “talking-thinking” relationship reflect salient aspects of both cultures. But the concept of *culture* is far from clear, particularly when it comes to specifying identity conditions for specific cultures. To be fair, the writers I have cited above acknowledge this point to the extent that they usually refer to specific groupings under the broad “East Asia” umbrella and are willing to highlight some notable cases (e.g. the observed phenomenon of Japanese maths students who are very much engaged as a community of mathematical thinkers – and talkers). I have criticized the idea that individual cultures carry normative or value implications, preferring instead to ground the latter in our shared personhood, which clearly crosses all cultures. So I am largely unmoved by the historical claim that East Asian teachers and students are bound by their cultural traditions when it comes to thinking and talking (valuing silent reflection over overt discussion, etc.). However, the accuracy of such claims is itself, questionable, as may be gleaned by the following remarks, recorded a very long time ago:

[Refs incomplete] 410: “The Master said, ‘If a man does not ask “How is it? – How is it?” I can indeed do nothing with him.’ (*The Analects*, 15, 15);

397. “Let us discuss together in a friendly way. Forget our position and our age. I am but one of you, so let us express our ideas frankly and without reserve.”;

398. “He seemed to have recognised the principle that there is no impression without expression’… the discussion method which was constantly used by Confucius….[he] used very often the dialectic method”.

Questions about the contemporary relevance of Confucius to East Asian culture notwithstanding, his historical significance as a “Master teacher” is undeniable. The brief comments cited here suggest that the Confucian attitude toward students’ preparedness to speak up and question authority, and the teacher’s status as co-inquirer is much closer to that of Socrates than is usually admitted. If commentators on East Asian learning styles wish to claim some degree of cultural integrity, they can hardly ignore these views expressed by the single most famous representative of that culture.

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