

Deduction through abduction: A Peirce-Vygotskian approach to multimodal discourse analysis

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Semiotic mediation has long been a central focus of sociocultural psychology and allied approaches under the cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) paradigm. It has also been studied in sociolinguistics within the tradition of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1978). In these two domains, the mediational, transformative functions of signs are highlighted. Although scholarship has alluded to the methodological implications of Peircean semiotics for CHAT (Edwards, 2007; Holland & Lachicotte Jr., 2007; Prawat, 1999; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000), there has been scant attention to the cyclical, generative properties of signs identified by Peirce. The ever-changing and evolving landscape of human interactions with the world necessitates a more nuanced understanding of communicative and representational acts. This provides a rationale for sociolinguists and sociocultural theorists to forge ahead with the notion of multimodality by exploring new vistas for the centrality of semiotic mediation in sociolinguistic and sociocultural studies beyond linguistic imperialism.

This seminar is based on recent research in the co-articulation of Peirce and Vygotsky on signs (Ma, 2014). It sets out with an overview of conceptual plurality and variance within sociolinguistic and sociocultural perspectives on semiotic mediation. These perspectives advocate for a paradigmatic shift in emphasis from the SFL tradition to the multimodal framework for communication and representation. Arguably, they will continue to complement and interact, configuring a new synthesis through dialectical relationships. Premised on this, the Peirce-Vygotsky synergy is introduced as an analytical approach to the multimodality of semiotic mediation. Following a discussion of its theoretical basis, the logical fusion of *deduction* and *abduction* is explained as authorising this synergy. Through the interplay of words and images exhibited in mother-child shared reading of storybooks, the seminar exemplifies how this synergy can afford a nuanced semiotic account of meaning making, interspersed with insights from the notion of “intersemiotic complementarity” (Royce, 2007). Exploratory as it is, this seminar seeks to inform current debates on the methodological relevance of Peircean semiotics for CHAT by bringing the confluence of Peirce and Vygotsky to bear on the study of communication and representation.

References

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About the Speaker

James Ma is a linguist. He received his PhD from the University of Bristol and undertook subsequent postdoctoral training at the University of Oxford. Over the past few years, his scholarship has centred on semiotic philosophy and its relevance for education, resonating with his research interests in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), sociolinguistics, post-structuralism and critical discourse analysis (CDA). He holds membership of learned organisations including the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS), the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA).