

Reading C: Egocentric speech

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[...]

We [...] conducted our own experiments aimed at understanding the function and fate of egocentric speech. The data obtained led us to a new comprehension of this phenomenon that differs greatly from that of Piaget. Our investigation suggests that egocentric speech does play a specific role in the child's activity.

In order to determine what causes egocentric talk, what circumstances provoke it, we organized the children's activities in much the same way Piaget did, but we added a series of frustrations and difficulties. For instance, when a child was getting ready to draw, he would suddenly find that there was no paper, or no pencil of the color he needed. In other words, by obstructing his free activity we made him face problems.

We found that in these difficult situations the coefficient of egocentric speech almost doubled, in comparison with Piaget's normal figure for the same age and also in comparison with our figure for children not facing these problems. The child would try to grasp and to remedy the situations in talking to himself: "Where's the pencil? I need a blue pencil. Never mind, I'll draw with the red one and wet it with water; it will become dark and look like blue."

In the same activities without impediments, our coefficient of egocentric talk was even slightly lower than Piaget's. It is legitimate to assume, then, that a disruption in the smooth flow of activity is an important stimulus for egocentric speech. This discovery fits in with two premises to which Piaget himself refers several times in his book. One of them is the so-called law of awareness, which was formulated by Claparède and which states that an impediment or disturbance in an automatic activity makes the author aware of this activity. The other premise is that speech is an expression of that process of becoming aware.

Indeed the above-mentioned phenomena were observed in our experiments: egocentric speech appeared when a child tries to comprehend the situation, to find a solution, or to plan a nascent activity. The older children behaved differently: they scrutinized the problem, thought (which was indicated by long pauses), and then found a solution. When asked what he was thinking about, such a child answered more in line with the "thinking aloud" of a preschooler. We thus assumed that the same mental operations that the preschooler carries out through voiced egocentric speech are already relegated to soundless inner speech in schoolchildren.

Our findings indicate that egocentric speech does not long remain a mere accompaniment to the child's activity. Besides being a means of expression and of release of tension, it soon becomes an instrument of thought in the proper sense – in seeking and planning the solution of a problem. An accident that occurred during one of our experiments provides a good illustration of one way in which egocentric speech may alter the course of an activity: A child of five-and-a-half was drawing a streetcar when the point of his pencil broke. He tried, nevertheless, to finish the circle of wheel, pressing down on the pencil very hard, but nothing showed on the paper except a deep colorless line. The child

muttered to himself, "It's broken," put aside the pencil, took watercolors instead, and began drawing a *broken* streetcar after an accident, continuing to talk to himself from time to time about the change in his picture. The child's accidentally provoked egocentric utterance so manifestly affected his activity that it is impossible to mistake it for a mere by-product, an accompaniment not interfering with the melody. Our experiments showed highly complex changes in the interrelation of activity and egocentric talk. We observed how egocentric speech at first marked the end result or a turning point in an activity, then was gradually shifted toward the middle and finally to the beginning of the activity, taking on a directing, planning function and raising the child's acts to the level of purposeful behavior ...

Source: Vygotsky, L. (1986) 'Piaget's theory of the child's speech and thought', in *Thought and Language*, pp. 29–31, translated by Alex Kozulin, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.