

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEKSANDR FADEEV

on being a PhD student and his experiences in researching the semiotic side of Vygotsky's framework: A summary.

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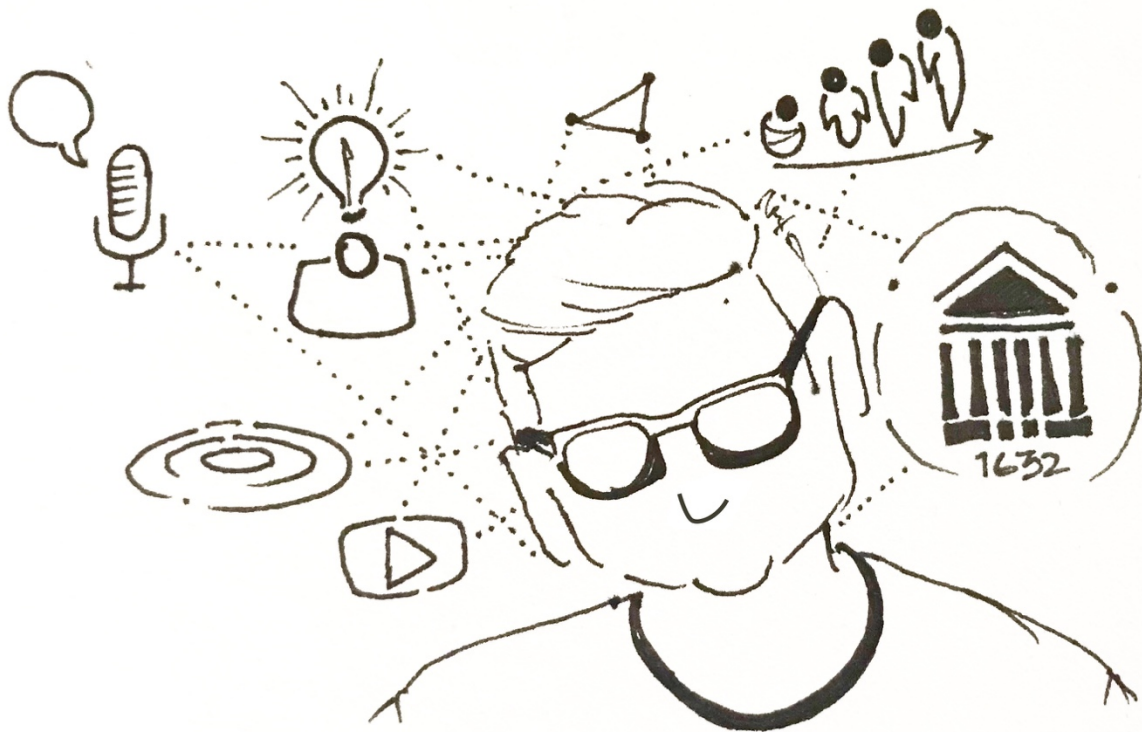
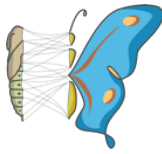


Illustration by Kaustubh Khare, 2021



## Introduction

In the following interview, with Aleksandr Fadeev, a Ph.D. student in semiotics and culture studies at the department of semiotics at the University of Tartu, a number of questions were posed to him that inquired about his experiences as a Ph.D student, his Ph.D project, the importance of Lev Vygotsky, and some intricacies of working with Vygotsky's texts. Fadeev replied to these questions in the audio file that accompanies this summary. Moreover, you will also be able to find a reference list containing the works Fadeev discussed, at the end of this summary. I have structured this text to first present the question posed to Fadeev, and have his answers follow directly afterwards. I have done this as I believe it allows the text to simulate Fadeev speaking style, while also allowing for easy recognition of the sections of this text and their corresponding sections within the audio file, consequently allowing for easier comparison and reference.

### Questions:

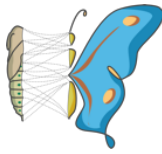
1)

The first question posed to Fadeev: "What attracted you to the semiotics department at the University of Tartu, especially regarding the Ph.D. program?" Fadeev discusses at length about this, first discussing his past visits to Tartu, and his love for the city, its status as a university centre, and its having a "[...] special atmosphere and academic life [...]", which the scholar describes as inspiring.

The semiotics department at the University of Tartu was also a major draw for Fadeev, which he viewed as an opportunity to further expand his master's research on the works of Vygotsky to the Ph.D. level. Fadeev also mentions the opportunity to work with prominent semiotic scholars, such as Peeter Torop, Kalevi Kull, and Mihhail Lotman as another 'important factor' in his decision to further his studies in Tartu.

2)

The following question: "How have your experiences at the department been regarding studying, opportunities for grants, supervision, and more general aspects about your time here?" Is again answered thoroughly. Fadeev mentions his positive surprise with the organisation of studies at the department. This largely relates to the University of Tartu allowing students in Ph.D. studies to focus their curriculum on the



needs of the PhD research. The university not only supplies a set of core classes, but allows students to conduct studies in a way that supports their own needs as a developing researcher. As Fadeev states, “[...] you can also study and take different courses, which actually relate to your specific research focus, your specific scientific interests, so that you do not just follow some abstract educational curricular [...]”, which the semiotician mentions is important for effective Ph.D. research.

The facilitation of interdisciplinary studies and research is also mentioned here by Fadeev as a positive experience within his studies as a Ph.D. student. He states that “[...] you sometimes need to incorporate the knowledge of different departments [...]” and continues to state that the good communication between the university’s departments allows for easy contact with peers and scholars within these departments, which helps to develop interdisciplinary research. Focusing on the semiotics department, Fadeev states he was ‘positively surprised’ with the support they offered him, that he was able to turn to them with questions, and needs for information, and they were ‘[...] always welcoming to help.’

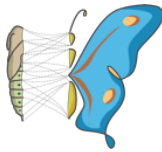
Fadeev then turns his discussion to the supervision he received as a Ph.D. student, and considers his supervisor as supportive. Moreover, the semiotician mentions that the organisation of supervision within the department, means supervision not only acts as a mentorship, but “[...] promotes the partner relationships between the Ph.D. student and the supervisor [...]” which is valuable at PhD levels of study.

Turning to grant opportunities, Fadeev says he did not become knowledgeable about the grant system quickly, that it took time for him, as his master studies were in a different country and that the differences between these systems took some time to adapt to. However, he does mention that over his study period in Tartu, he has noticed that the grant system has been ‘actively developing’. That workshops and meetings promoting and assisting in grant opportunities have become prevalent for doctoral students. The relevance of this, Fadeev states, is important for international students from different education systems.

Fadeev also quickly mentions another positive of studying at the university, the ability for Ph.D. students to teach a course, of which they have the option to structure it to their specialties. The scholar states this was valuable, as it allowed for him to teach a regular course on Vygotsky and a short course about inner speech, gain students’ feedback, and allowed for the further development of his academic competence for future positions.

3)

When answering the third question: “What projects are you currently working on?”, Fadeev mentions a number of projects. Firstly, he discusses a project ‘Education on Screen’, which he is working on in a Transmedia research group from the semiotics department. The research implicates semiotics of culture to the empirical research of contemporary media environment, digital reading, cultural autocommunication,



teaching and learning. In other words it focuses on “[...] how various aspects of contemporary culture, such as for instance, the development of media, can be used to enhance learning practices [...]”. In the practical side, the project is focused on creating digital education platforms on the basis of key Estonian cultural texts (e.g. “Truth and Justice”, “Spring”, etc.), which are aimed towards secondary schools and can be used for enhancing learners’ competences in various subjects, including culture, history, social studies, environment, digital media, etc. The methodology of the project is based on the affordances of semiotics of culture and the interdisciplinary dialogue with other disciplines, such as psychology, media and education studies. Through this project, Fadeev and his colleagues are able to gain practical results and publish articles, while also engaging with cultural and educational institutions.<sup>2425</sup>

Fadeev offered some further information about his project after the interview: “For the recent years we have been developing a collaborative project with the Estonian National Museum. The result of this collaboration is the course on Estonian culture, which is based on the platform “Education on Screen”, but which at the same time includes visits to the museums, workshops and various interactive activities. The course is meant for newcomers, international students, and everyone interested in Estonian culture, history and identity. Beginning from this semester we even offer it as a university course. So students can also get credits for it (you can find it on SIS). We welcome everyone and especially students from our department!”

A second project the scholar is a part of has to do with inner speech research, which is a project being developed between the semiotics and psychology departments. As Fadeev states, the project tries “[...] to understand how inner speech is involved in the meaning-making of various artistic texts [...]” which includes texts in digital form. After the interview Fadeev clarified that, specifically, this project is interested in how internalised verbal speech is involved in the interpretation, creation/generation of non-verbal artistic texts. This collaboration between the semiotics and psychology departments, allows for a multi-view perspective on inner speech, which Fadeev calls a ‘multifaceted phenomenon’, and as such this collaboration may allow for a more holistic view of inner speech and meaning making.

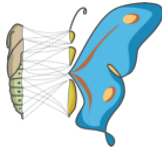
Fadeev, outside of the audio, mentioned a further project he is working, a podcast called “Alex Speaking Science” As he states:

“I am currently working on a popular science project, which is currently a podcast, but I am also considering a Youtube channel. The idea of the podcast is to

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<sup>24</sup> Through this research project, a digital educational platform, called ‘Education on Screen’ (“Haridus Ekraanil”, est.), was developed that utilises cultural semiotics to create study materials for students and teachers (Ojamaa et al. 2019: 152-153). The platform mediates texts, with the intentions of helping students develop cultural skills needed for contemporary learners.

<sup>25</sup> The Education on Screen digital platform can be found in in the following link: <https://haridusekraanil.ee/>



discuss (in a popular and understandable way) how we learn and what influences our learning abilities. So, you can see that it is related to what I am researching within my PhD thesis. And of course there I am discussing the basics of our learning process, as well as some actual questions, such as digital learning (and its effectiveness) or the role of the new media environment in learning processes. I am also considering discussing inner speech there and its role in our everyday life.”<sup>26</sup>

4)

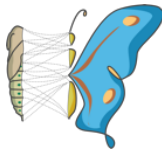
As a fourth question, I asked Fadeev: “Your PhD thesis, “The Role of the Semiotic Approach in L. S. Vygotsky’s Pedagogy” takes interest, as the title states, in the more semiotic aspect of Vygotsky’s work. Briefly, may you give a general overview of your thesis and what you are attempting to accomplish with it?” Fadeev replied stating that his PhD dissertation is intended to “[...] develop the understanding of how recent cultural changes, including digitalization, new forms of cultural communication, and so on, influence learning, and more precisely the acquisition and development of sign operation in learning.” His project also aims to identify the actuality, value and the possibility of a practical use of Vygotsky’s cultural historical theory in the context of contemporary culture regarding acquisition and the development of sign using activity, verbal and artistic languages, meaning-making, inner speech, semiotic mediation, etc. The PhD research argues for the necessity of addressing learning within contemporary culture through Vygotsky’s framework and analyses the affordances it provides for the contemporary understanding of learning processes and the development of sign operation. Fadeev is attempting to study these phenomena in a multidisciplinary manner, which also follows Vygotsky’s work, through using psychology, semiotics and other disciplines to create a more encompassing view of the objects of study.

5)

Fadeev answers the fifth question: “Why is Vygotsky important for contemporary semiotics” by first pointing out that Vygotsky was not a semiotician, and has never been seen as such, but that “[...] his contribution to semiotic science can never be overestimated and outcomes of his research continue to uncover new perspectives [...]” within semiotics and other areas. Fadeev mentions that Vygotsky is often referred to as the Mozart of psychology, as their lives share a number of similarities. Both men had short but productive lives; that though Vygotsky only died at age 37, he had by then made a large “[...] contribution to science in general [...]” which included psychology, educational science and semiotics, and which continues to be

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<sup>26</sup> The link for Fadeev’s podcast, is here ( <https://anchor.fm/aleks-fadeev> ) and on Google too ( <https://podcasts.google.com/feed/aHR0cHM6Ly9hbmNob3luZm0vcy82NTEyYjhOC9wb2RjYXNOL3Jzcw==> ).



important for these disciplines and relevant to new research. On another note, regarding Mozart and Vygotsky, one of Vygotsky's most anticipated works, *Thinking and Speech*, was not completely finished when he died, and as such has left many to wonder what may have developed from this. Because of this, today even his unpublished notes and lectures become of interest in the scientific community.

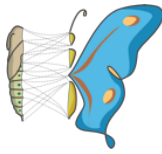
Focusing more specifically on Vygotsky and his influence on semiotics in general, Fadeev states that Vygotsky's cultural historical theory, which studies the role of 'science and science systems' in the development of higher psychological functions is especially important for current semiotics. According to Fadeev, 'culturally elaborated sign systems' are significantly important in the human learning and development processes, which includes the acquisition and use of verbal language. Vygotsky also focuses on thinking and speech process relationships, as well as the concept of meaning and its importance for human beings, symbolic mediation, inner speech etc. These, among other concepts and works, have been important for semiotics regarding research on learning, memory, development, and meaning. Moreover, Lotman, Bakhtin, Ivanov, and Valsiner all drew from Vygotsky's work.

Vygotsky's work has also been increasingly a point of interest in academia, this in part stems from English language academia, where English language publications and translations of Vygotsky's texts are becoming more prevalent. Additionally, technological changes in education and learning have allowed for new applications of Vygotsky's work as well. Fadeev states that the incorporation of digital technology, media, etc., have focused interest on how we learn and acquire knowledge in these environments. Moreover, Vygotsky's interest in inner speech and its importance for 'inner cognitive functions' has become easier to study due to the development of new research methodologies, renewing interests in these phenomena and Vygotsky's work.

According to Fadeev, Vygotsky's cultural historical theory is important for the semiotics of culture, especially in regard to researching artistic texts, but also artistic languages and learning. Moreover, the semiotician states that Vygotsky's importance to the semiotics of culture has grown with the increased use of the "[...] artistic languages of digital media in learning" and with the growing role of the new media environment in learning.

6)

Regarding the sixth question: "You have published and worked on a variety of topics including music, pedagogy, learning, literature, and psychology, perhaps you can discuss the important insights Vygotsky's scholarship has on these topics? Is there a common theme among these subjects that can be linked to, or by, Vygotsky's work?". Fadeev, in response states that the commonality between these subjects "[...] is actually Vygotsky himself [...]" as Vygotsky was a 'multifaceted scientist'. Vygotsky was interested not only in medicine, art, and psychology, but also their relationships



as well as their relevance to education and learning. Fadeev states that “[...] high psychological functions, including consciousness, for example, and also the fact, that always even when he was discussing such complex high psychological functions as learning and memory, he links them to some examples with Literature.” As such Vygotsky’s multiple interests allowed him to take a multifaceted view, which Fadeev also states influences his own scientific approach.

Fadeev states that due to globalisation, it is necessary to approach scientific issues in a multidisciplinary way. This need for multifaceted views is, according to Fadeev, important for research on inner speech for instance. The semiotician discusses when he first began studying inner speech, stating that he understood the process needed to be studied as a complex phenomenon, and this was enforced by Fadeev’s previous experiences with fields like semiotics, psychology, music, education, neuroscience, etc.

7)

Fadeev responded to the seventh question: “What drew you to studying Vygotsky?” by referring to his experiences as a master level student, and his research on how students “[...] acquire the language of music in the context of contemporary learning environments.” Vygotsky’s multifaceted approach and its applicability for contemporary research on education and learning acted as a useful and helpful aid for Fadeev in developing his understanding on learning in current times.

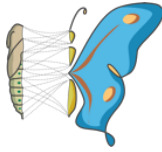
8)

When questioned “Do you have any recommended literature to read for students new to Vygotsky?” Fadeev stated that the multidisciplinary of Vygotsky’s work makes it hard to offer just a general recommendation. However, regarding semiotics, Vygotsky’s original works are recommended, and specifically, Ivanov’s article ‘Cultural-historical theory and semiotics’, published in 2014 in ‘The Cambridge Handbook of Cultural-Historical Psychology’ serves well as an introduction to Vygotsky’s “[...] contribution to semiotics and his theory”. Fadeev also recommends reading some of the leading researchers developing upon Vygotsky’s work, as well as those working within Vygotsky’s framework; classic works by scholars like Rene van der Veer, Jaan Valsiner (1991) or James Wertsch (1985).

9)

“What are some guides, commentaries or critiques that you believe are particularly important or useful for students and scholars interested in gaining more insight into Vygotsky?”

According to Fadeev, there is a “[...] growing interest in Vygotsky’s scholarship, especially in the English speaking scientific community. There have been a lot of new works published, which analyze, or somehow conceptualise Vygotsky’s works in relation to contemporary situations.” However, many of these texts sometimes



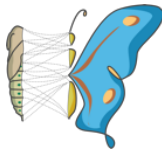
simplify Vygotsky's concepts (maybe to make them an easy solution for complex scientific issues), and as such Fadeev recommends sticking with texts authored by the scholar or key scholars of his works (mentioned above). Fadeev also argues that if a scholar is working with other authors engaged in Vygotsky's scholarship, that said scholar should do their own research on works that are being analysed as well. This is important as Vygotsky requires careful readings, as he tends to write in a condensed manner, and as such it can be easy to misunderstand, or not fully understand aspects of his work, as Fadeev states: "[...] one sentence can actually contain the whole world inside it."

10)

In reply to the final question: "Are there any challenges in studying Vygotsky that are particular to certain language translations or translators, for instance, other insights, uh, that Estonian or English translations may miss when compared to Russian texts?" Fadeev states that this is a common issue within translations, and Vygotsky's work is no exception. As Fadeev mentioned earlier, Vygotsky's works are often quite dense and complex, and as such translations may reduce some meanings. This sometimes leads to simplifications of Vygotsky's concepts or misunderstandings. However new editions attempt to overcome such problems. Another problem is that relatively little of his work has been translated, and some of Vygotsky's terms have been translated in different ways, making further work with them difficult. One example is his most famous work "Мышление и речь" (Rus.), which was translated as "Thought and Language" and later editions were translated as "Thinking and Speech". If you read the work, you will understand that these two names actually carry different connotations in relation to the ideas the author developed. This also happens with more specific things like with Vygotsky's concepts. Fadeev raises a further point about translation and Vygotsky regarding the text, '*Tool and symbol in child development*' (Vygotsky and Luria 1994), which was published posthumously by Alexander Lauria in the English language; the article was forbidden from publication in the Soviet Union. Later the article appeared in the Russian language, but was eventually retranslated into Russian as the source text does not seem to exist, and now there is some debate regarding the validity of Lauria's work.

As the final point on translating Vygotsky, according to Fadeev, is the scholar's style of writing. Vygostky often links and references art and literature within his work. Here, he not only uses empirical studies to exemplify and explain concepts, but also arts. However this also leads to a further issue with his work, as according to Fadeev, Vygotsky's experiments are often not referenced within his texts, which makes it difficult to further investigate his scholarship. However, again the recent editions (e.g. by van der Veer and Wertsch) attempt to overcome this problem by publishing Vygotsky's works with such references.





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