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Private Speech and Imagination: The Liminal Experience Between Myself and Others

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a theoretical investigation that aimed to develop a comprehensive model regarding the phenomenon of imagination and private speech as liminal experiences of consciousness. A theoretical articulation between the phenomena was developed to explain how imagination and private speech allow to make sense in the liminal space between inner and outer worlds. It is concluded that the double role of iconic and verbal signs allows to configure future experiences and to construct meanings in the transitional space between oneself and others. The iconic and verbal signs used in imaginative and private speech processes, respectively, allow to experience situations ‘as if they were real’, and at the same time, to distance from them as a mental play separated from reality. This is all based on an affective matrix which determines the emergence of mental meanings and mental content. This article constitutes a contribution to the study of micro-genetic intrapsychic liminal processes.

Keywords Liminality · Imagination · Private speech

Introduction

Liminal experiences have been understood in the anthropological and psychological literature not only as a transitional phase characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty of identity but also as having the potential to transform the person (Stenner et al. 2017). Other authors have proposed that the liminal experience is a unique period of time of deconstruction of ordinary constructions, such as identity and social rules (Turner 1977 in Atkinson and Robson 2012).

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In the last decade, there has been an increase in the investigation of this phenomenon, given its relationship with human development and vital trajectories in general. Although liminality is a transverse phenomenon to all human experience, its study has been focused on the great transitions of a person's life. For example, pilgrimage journeys to meet sacred places (Beckstead 2010), traumatic experiences that affect the identity of the person (Lollar 2010), oncological illness experiences as intensive periods of liminality (Martino et al. 2016), the transitional phase between being pregnant and becoming a mother or specific transitions (for example, the acquisition of new knowledge in a conversation); however, the study of the liminal zones of consciousness and their role in the inner psychological functioning has been scarcely covered by the literature.

We consider that the notion of liminality can provide relevant support to develop theoretically some trajectories of research and study about consciousness, firstly to construct a fertile innovative frame of discussion of two salient psychological processes: imagination and inner speech. Imagination constitutes a psychological process that allows to build abstractions as if they were real things through the manipulation of iconic and linguistic signs (Tateo 2015a). On the other hand, private speech has been described as a process that fulfils the function of self-regulation of both behaviour and thought (Jones 2009).

The present work constitutes a theoretical investigation that seeks to explore and articulate the theory of imagination and private speech in the liminal experience of consciousness. With this objective, a theoretical investigation has been made on the phenomena of liminality, imagination and private speech.

Private Speech as a Tool to Guide Our Behaviour

Private speech is defined as a speech that is not explicitly directed at another person and that apparently has no interpersonal communicative function (Flavell et al. 1966). The study of this phenomenon begins with Vygotsky's studies on inner language, its micro-genetic development and its relevance for psychological organization (Vygotsky 1934).

Private speech in the literature has also been referred as egocentric language, since it constitutes a self-directed language, in the absence of a communicative object (Fossa 2017). This type of speech also differs from social speech since the latter is a type of speech directed towards another person and it is also indicative of reference, social intention and argumentation, characterized by multiple communicational shifts (Diaz 1992; Winsler et al. 1997).

Private or self-directed speech refers to an audible speech that a human being uses to communicate with himself and to refer to his daily activities (Berk 1992). Meanwhile, social speech delivers meanings for communication with others; private speech constitutes a tool of thought, for communicating with the self (Berk 1992; Diaz 1992). One of the main functions of private speech, described by Vygotsky and emphasized in all current studies on the phenomenon, is the function of regulation or self-regulation of thought and action (Vygotsky 1934).

In the states of child development, the egocentric language, which is self-directed and in the service of problem solving (Piaget 1923), develops from the outside in. That is, the function that the egocentric language fulfils in childhood will develop and fulfil the function of internal language and private speech in adult life (Vygotsky 1934). This is just an example of what Vygotsky refers to when he says that 'Psychological functions appear twice in human development: first in the inter-psychic space and then in the intrapsychic space' (Vygotsky 1979, p. 139). It can be hypothesized that speech develops sequentially from social speech, passing through private audible speech, non-vocalized private speech, and finally, silent private speech (or internal language).

Egocentric language, then, is destined to be internalized, and thus to guide thought and behaviour, allowing people to elaborate a plan for future activities, to master their own behaviour and to control thoughts (Alonso 2000).

Fernyhough and Russell (1997) have described characteristics of social speech through dimensions such as *eye contact* (the person maintains visual contact with another person), *behaviour* (involves others), *content* (the statement follows the same content as the message of the other person) and *temporary contiguity* (the declaration takes place a few seconds after the previous social declaration). On the contrary, private speech lacks visual contact with others, as the content is self-referential, the behaviour is self-directed, and there is no temporal sequence with another interlocutor (Fossa 2017).

There is evidence in literature where it has been possible to classify different private speech expressions (Winsler et al. 2005).

Some of them have been classified as *exclamations*: typically a word or affect expressions, or expletives ('Oh!', 'Oops!'), *self-descriptions*: statements regarding the self or the behaviour ('I'm looking for the blue', 'I found a fish', 'I'm hungry', etc.), *environmental/task descriptions*: statements regarding the environment that surrounds the child, or about the task he is performing ('They're the same colour', 'It's too hot in here', 'That's blue', etc.), *motivational or evaluative statements*: statements regarding the skill, performance or the evaluation of the task ('I did it', 'I'm good at this', 'Good', 'This is easy', etc.), *planning*: planning the future, future-oriented statements or 'yes-then' constructions ('I need a purple one', 'I'm going to do this first', 'If I put this here...then'), *questions/answers*: self-directed questions or clear answers to own questions ('Which one should I put next?', 'This one', 'Where's the blue?', 'Is it okay?', 'Yes!', etc.), and, *transitional statements*: reflexive statements related to finishing a task and starting another ('Then', 'Next one', 'OK', etc.), among others.

Although since Vygotsky's work (1934), the main function of private speech has been understood as a problem-solving function; investigations after Vygotsky's work have referred to other possible functions such as an *instrumental function*: a statement which indicates desire ('I want it!'), *regulatory function*: a statement referring to an imminent future event, where the child is commanding his own actions ('I put this there'), *attentional function*: referred to an ongoing sensorial event or to an imminent sensory event ('Look!', 'Look at that!'), *referential function*: talking about an object in the immediate environment or referring to an event that occurs in the present ('That'), *interrogative function*: the syntax of the expression is formed as a question, or the inflexion of the child indicates a question ('What?'), *imaginative function*: the statement is sung; it is expressed as a pun or is describing an object through feigned words ('This hat'—referring to a wooden block that the child placed on his head), *informative function*: referring to an object or event that is not in the immediate environment ('Dad is at work'), among others (Furrow 1984).

However, recent investigations have developed a theoretical model of empiric verification about an expressive dimension of private speech, that is, a self- contemplative function characterized by a strong affective load, mental images and an involuntary and uncontrollable functioning, with global, spherical, non-referential and pre-verbal contents (Fossa 2017; Fossa et al. 2018).

From Vygotsky's perspective (1934), the internalization of egocentric language and its manifestation as internal speech and private speech, constitutes one of the major changes in human development (Vygotsky 1934; Smith 2007). Furthermore, while a loss of eye contact and a decrease in voice volume can be observed in social context, on the psychological sphere, all cognitive functioning is changed (Smith 2007).

There is a misunderstanding between the concept of inner speech and private speech, and in some cases, it is possible to appreciate both as synonyms; however, they have an important difference. As Feigenbaum (1992) states:

Social speech is a vocalized speech directed and intellectually adapted to others, and inner speech is a sub-vocalized speech directed and adapted to oneself, meanwhile private speech is a vocalized speech directed and adapted to oneself. Therefore, private speech is not social communication nor silent thinking, but rather vocalized thinking directed towards oneself (Feigenbaum 1992, p. 182).

The emergence of private speech provides the child the resources to focus on abstract objectives that are relevant to the tasks he faces (Wertsch 1979). Private speech and inner speech become more complex according to the development of the person, where private speech evolves significantly from irrelevant to relevant for the task that is being performed (Girbau 2002).

Imagination: A Practice of Future Behaviour Through the Manipulation of Signs

Private speech as a psychological phenomenon is not stripped of mental images. Although it is not a requirement of private speech to be accompanied by images, it is common to observe episodes of private speech accompanied by iconic signs (Fossa et al. 2018).

According to Sebeok, iconicity lies at the core of how the human organism responds to the world. An icon is a sign that is made to resemble, simulate or reproduce its referent in some way (Sebeok 2001; Peirce 1935; De Luca Picione 2015; De Luca Picione and Freda 2016).

Imagination has been defined in the literature as a higher psychological process that utilizes the manipulation of complex sets of iconic signs in daily life (Tateo 2015a). This phenomenon, which is inherent to us, is essential to guide future behaviour. Human behaviour is based in an imaginary reconstruction of the past, in function of an imagined future (Tateo 2015b).

The temporal dimension is constitutive of the imagination process. Imagination is, fundamentally, a process occurring in the present yet oriented towards the future, while memory, similarly, is a process happening in the present that is oriented towards the past. From Valsiner's (2009) perspective, imagination is a construction process always oriented forwards, endlessly, in which new roles, actions or possible situations are being rehearsed, thus preparing the human being to experience new functions in the future. In this sense, imagination has a 'training' or 'preparation' function for future situations.

This process allows to build abstractions, specifically psychic actions of distancing from contingent phenomenal occurrences. The relevant result is that abstract signs can be experienced as if they were real things (Tateo 2015b). Imaginative processes produce the conditions to act upon the world and play a crucial role in problem solving, as well as in resistance and self-regulation (Tateo 2015b). Therefore, imagination as a psychological process is directly linked to fantasy and creativity (Tateo 2015b).

Imaginative processes are involved in all our actions and take place in a large part of our daily life. As imagination allows us to prepare, play or solve any possible situation, it constitutes a permanent evidence of psychological development of inner and silent experience. Imaginative processes produce self-regulated, abstracted and hierarchized signs in a continuous and temporary hierarchical way to promote or inhibit change and resistance to change (Valsiner and De Luca Picione 2017). Therefore, imagination is a fundamental part of any development process (Tateo 2015b).

On the other hand, imagination has an adaptive and creative function to prepare oneself for the uncertain and ambiguous future. In doing that, imagination as a psychological process is a fully cultural phenomenon (Tateo 2015b). As Zittoun proposes:

Imagination appears as a one of the possible articulations between the person and society. Humans have the need to generate sense for the world in order to have a healthy affective life, which they can only do through imagination. To give content to imagination, they take hold of cultural elements and of semiotic systems produced by previous generations, such as myths, legends, and pieces of art, which takes them to participate in the transformation of culture through imagination (Zittoun 2015, p. 4).

Imagination is a psychological process involved in creativity; however, imagination and creativity are different processes. For Vygotsky, 'imagination, as a base of all creative activity, is an important component of absolutely every aspect of cultural life, allowing artistic, scientific and technical creation equally' (Vygotsky 2004, p. 9–10). Nevertheless, creativity differs from imagination, since the former always implies a social evaluation of a process or product (Glaveanu 2010).

Imagination is a fundamental symbolic process, creating linguistic and iconic signs simultaneously to 'present and represent' the experience, creating a suspended spatial-temporal frame, where the usual strict separations are put in brackets. In this sense, the process of the imagination is involved in experiencing past and future tenses, giving life to something that is not present and transforming it into something real (Tateo 2015a). Additionally, imagination is at the service of self-regulating the behaviour in different contexts, as well as being at the base of creative processes (Tateo 2015a).

The creation of iconic signs in psychological experience aims to give sense and meaning to the uncertainty and ambiguity of the world. In this way, mental signs allow to dye the social stimulus in a different affective nuance, and to give creative solutions to the situations of the context (Brinkmann 2015).

Furthermore, imagination works in both possible directions: from the social context towards the intrapsychic, and from intrapsychic towards the social context. The impact of social reality can stimulate mental images (Fossa et al. 2018; Schofield 1992); however, mental images can also be transformed into certain plans or actions at later moments (Tateo 2015a; Cocking 2005; Valsiner 2014), where imagination acts as the process to create signs that will be used later in the future (Valsiner 2014).

The Liminal Spaces: Inhabiting Different Roles

Liminality is a process of ritualized dissolution of a person's habits, thoughts and identity (Turner 1977). A liminal process generates a unique period of time of deconstruction of ordinary constructions (Atkinson and Robson 2012). Liminality implies a separation between the current state and a social reality different from usual (Atkinson and Robson 2012).

Liminal experiences are transitional spaces between the ordinary and the novelty (Greco and Stenner 2017; Stenner et al. 2017). The liminal space is a zone of multiple possibilities between two states—past and future—where none is fully inhabited. It is only possible to know the previous state which has been left behind because the immediate future in which a person will arrive is uncertain (Salvatore and Venuleo 2017).

Turner (1977) described liminality as 'neither one thing nor the other', a moment filled with stress but opened to new possibilities (Turner 1977). It is a movement towards the unknown

and also an engine for human development (Beckstead 2010), in which the relationship of the person with the world is re-defined (Valsiner 2007).

In this sense, the liminal experience implies rupture. The rupture is mainly about the common and daily routines and schema of thinking, feeling and acting. That is, liminal processes interrupt the pre-existing role of the subject, while at the same time allowing the emergence of a new reality (Salvatore and Venuleo 2017). Consequently, the own contextual semiotic borders are modified, articulating new signs to organize and guide the experience (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017).

On the other hand, Stenner et al. (2017) have identified liminal hotspots, which constitute a suspension of the transitional circumstance, thus becoming permanent in time. The liminal hotspot occurs when the affective scenario associated with the pre-transition condition does not fade, but rather maintains its notoriety. Therefore, in the liminal hotspot, the new state cannot create the conditions for its interpretation, being subject to the semiotic power of the past (Salvatore and Venuleo 2017). As a result, the ambiguity and uncertainty characteristics of liminality acquire a lasting and intense quality, making the transition difficult. But, at the same time, in those moments, the transformational potential of the person is intensified (Stenner et al. 2017). This observation is useful in order to note that liminality is an incessant but transitory process at the same time. A psychological stability needs to be restored any time a disquieting liminal experience is experienced (both in macro-dimensions—social, politic, economic, etc.—and micro-dimensions—more private and internal as dreams, fantasy, imagination, etc.). Liminality is an experience of crossing borders, a phase of transition towards new levels of stability and coherence.

It is also worth noting that, like all processes of development, liminality also contains different levels. For example, at macro-genetic levels, the liminal processes can be seen during a social and political crisis in a given country. In those moments, the tension takes over the leaders and citizens, creating a space that allows new leaders to appear; new narrations, meanings and images are established as icons of the transition towards a new way of doing politics and a new way of being state/country.

At onto-genetic levels, liminal experiences can be seen in the vital transitions of a person's life, for example, changing from one job to another, the step from being single to becoming married, the transformational process of becoming a parent, the change from one city to another and the experience of an illness and the subsequent recovery. New processes of creating meaning emerge during these vital transitions in order to make sense of the experience and to cross the personal and vital limits until reaching a new state and transforming the identity. At this level, a subjective change can be appreciated, since the person lives a moment of uncertainty but also an objective change, since a certain role is left behind to make room for a new way of being and inhabiting the world (Ibarra and Obodaru 2016). In other words, liminal experiences at an onto-genetic level imply a rupture of the role that a person has exerted a large part of his life (Salvatore and Venuleo 2017).

At micro-genetic levels, liminal experiences can be observed in social interactions, in which new meanings are constantly emerging and previous narratives are replaced by new narratives, which in return gives a new comprehension of the world (De Luca and Valsiner 2017).

The Double Function of the Iconic Sign: Distance and Identification

The human being utilizes signs as a tool of mediation of the experience in front of the world. A sign 'provides a meaningful form to experience through acts of differentiation, indication,

representation, generalization and reification. It enables us to differentiate between before and after, between here and there, between me and non-me' (De Luca Picione and Valsiner 2017, p. 535). In the case of the psychological process of imagination, the sign constitutes the mental image, while private speech constitutes the self-directed word.

Distance and identification can be understood as a dual-meaning construction process between two people that negotiate from their own subjective positions of interlocutors, creating a dynamic that fluctuates from distance (establishing limits for the perception and interaction with the other interlocutor) to identification (to contextualize or understand the point of view of the other interlocutor). During the negotiation of both parties, their limits of perception can be modified through the exchange of signs and counter signs, and in this way, modifying their approach to a certain position or argument (Molina and Del Rio 2009).

An iconic sign constitutes the space 'in between' the mental and social world. Through imagination, human beings treat real and concrete things as if they were abstract, and non-existing objects and abstract concepts as if they were real things (Tateo 2015b).

Imagination, then, is a real form of action that receives the elements of the environment and traduces them into mental images, at the same time that the mental images prepare oneself for future action, through a temporary condition of suspension. Imagination is in permanent transit from internal reality to external reality, and from external reality into internal reality (Tateo 2015b).

According to Valsiner's perspective (2016), signs are heterogeneous in their symbolically iconic (imaginary) forms, and that heterogeneity is the basis for their re-contextualization processes under different circumstances.

In his own words: 'the power of the signs is in its flexibility to be able to abstract itself from what it usually refers to, together with the flexibility of being able to re-contextualize' (Valsiner 2016, p. 9). In an example given by Tateo (2015b), it is proposed to imagine a kid playing with a piece of wood 'as if' it was a sword. After the kid finishes playing with it, he stops symbolizing the piece of wood as a sword but manages to maintain a new imagined scheme for future use (Tateo 2015b).

In this example, we can appreciate the double function of the iconic sign. During the game, the piece of wood IS a sword. The kid identifies and loses distance with the sign in order to put himself in the situation of having a sword in his hand. At the same time, the piece of wood IS NOT a sword, where the sign was just transformed in a symbolization tool.

A very interesting conceptualization is provided by the idea of transitional space and transitional object of the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1953). Through his work, we find the importance of an area of transformation of the cultural world, the importance of play, the potential and median position of a third space between the internal world and the external world and the possibility to subjectivize creatively the relationships with the social world.

The sign IS and IS NOT. Distance and identification are displayed as a double process in the use of the iconic sign. The sign is phenomenologically experimented as real, but at the same time, it constitutes a mental creation. Distance and loss of distance, and identification and de-identification, are permanent processes in the act of imagining and speaking to oneself.

Heinz Werner, in his studies of human perception, observed a similar phenomenon which he called loss of distance (see Werner 1955, 1956; Werner and Kaplan 1963). For him, the perception of language and the world is perceived in an organismic way rather than conceptually. Therefore, words may seem pretty, ugly, rough, hard or cold before understanding their propositional meaning. In this sense, in the appreciation of the world and language, there is an

identification and loss of distance with the sign to experiment it phenomenologically as a complete reality.

Affective Matrix as a Base of Meaning-Making in the Liminality of Consciousness

Affectivity is the basic form to make sense of the experience and not a quality associated with its content (Salvatore 2015). According to Salvatore: ‘the subject does not experiences affectivity, he experiences thanks to affectivity’ (Salvatore and Venuleo 2017, p. 217).

The affective matrix of the consciousness operates as a global system that generates the experience and predisposes certain emotional states and experiential inclinations to relate with the world. As a result, there is an affective semiosis that provides a pre-semantic approach to experience (Mannarini et al. 2012), which will subsequently be symbolized through the use of verbal and iconic signs.

This affective matrix at the base of the meaning-making process is characterized by being an incarnated experience through the involvement of the body, allowing an orientation of the experience (phenomenological positioning towards the world) and is a process of symbolization in itself (De Luca Picione et al. 2018).

In these terms, we assume that meaning construction and the use of signs required to make sense of the experience are the results of the affective matrix (Salvatore and Venuleo 2017). Iconic signs and private speech are not independent of the generating character of the affective matrix. From here, the content and form of the imaginative processes and private speech are derived, as well as their function and role that they fulfil in the human development of the person.

Note that Vygotsky (1934) emphasized the role that affections have in the entire psychological organization. For Vygotsky, psychological processes cannot be studied separately from their imminent affective nature. For him, the last phase of the psychological experience analysis was called the affective-volitional zone of consciousness which influences the deployment, development, functioning and quality of the psychological processes. The Vygotskian inter-functional analysis—that is, the intersection between different cognitive processes as a unit of analysis for the study of consciousness—has allowed us to comprehend that in the psychological analysis, the memory cannot be comprehended without the affective nature of consciousness, nor the thought and language, as well as imagination and private speech. Since Vygotsky’s research, the notion of sense and meaning has been established as units of analysis that integrate aspects of experience into a complex unit, and also integrate the volitional sphere of consciousness into the analysis of higher psychological processes (Fossa et al. 2019).

Private Speech and Imagination as Catalysts for the Liminal Space of Consciousness

A catalyst has been understood as a substance that allows or inhibits a certain reaction (Beckstead 2010). In general, this concept has been used in physical and chemical sciences; however, in the psychological field, catalysts have been understood as semiotic-emotional tools that determine certain influences or redirect the person’s relationship with the world (Beckstead et al. 2009). As Beckstead states:

The catalyst does not cause the emergence of feeling or meanings, but rather provides the necessary conditions for them and guides what the person does and the construction

of meaning in that environment of here and now. Catalysts are enabling or inhibiting conditions that allow or block the apparition of regulatory signs that modify and limit the action (Beckstead 2010, p. 391).

In imaginative and private speech processes, the signs—iconic and verbal—can act as catalysts of the liminal experience between a recent past and an immediate future, or rather, between internal and external reality. The iconic and verbal signs in the processes of imagination and private speech are lived as if they were being experienced in reality. Imagination and private speech allow oneself to transit between a current experience and a near future, between inner reality and external reality, at every moment in the micro-genetic development of the human experience.

The flow of iconic signs, accompanied by private speech, allows oneself to cross the familiar limits into the unknown and back, which creates the necessary tension to train for a future situation, and then also allows to recover the previous stability to try new alternatives (Beckstead 2010).

When Tateo (2015b) states that through imagination, we treat concrete things as abstract, and abstract things as concrete and real, he proposes that the verbal and iconic signs of inner experience allow us to be in our own private mental elaboration at the same time that we are placing ourselves in the future experience as if it was real. For example, when driving to a work interview, the person might be going through an imaginative and private speech process that allows him to 'prepare' the experience that will take place a few minutes later. In that moment, the person is looking at the interviewer and speaking to him—he can even imagine the office, the desks, his body position and other contextual elements—managing to place himself in the situation and feeling it as if it was real. In that liminal space, the person IS in the interview, since the iconic and verbal signs lose symbolic distance, producing an identification with what was symbolized. Subsequently, when he arrives to the interview, those verbal or iconic elements distance themselves, symbolization is recovered and both remains as tools to face the immediate future that he is about to live.

Imagination and private speech act in the liminal space between the present and future, evidencing the transition from the mental to the social sphere, and vice versa, from the social to the mental sphere. It is there where the imaginative process emerges, between personal and cultural spheres, blurring the dichotomy between internal and external worlds.

Conclusion

In the present work, it has been proposed that imagination and private speech fulfil a catalyst role of inner experience, establishing a liminal zone between the motivations of consciousness and the social cultural context. Imagination and private speech are psychological higher functions, which allow the emergence of two very sophisticated processes for the human being (Toomela 2003): (1) incessant contextual sense-making of experience and (2) symbolic devices of mediation in order to create a complex semiotic cluster. These processes can be observed at work through the creation of a psychological micro-process that allows the blur of past-future borders and of the inner-outer world borders, thus triggering liminal experiences of consciousness with a diffuse and ambiguous zone between the self and others.

This article is a contribution to the theorization in psychology related to liminal processes of the inner experience. Even though literature has managed to understand, theorize and research

liminal experiences at an onto-genetic level, the deepest liminal transitions of consciousness have not been fully addressed.

As it was proposed in the article, imagination and private speech seem to be evidence of how psychological experience transits between the deepest 'in here' and the outermost 'out there', dissolving the dichotomies and condensing the inner psychological experience as a diffuse zone between 'being' and 'not being', and 'what it is' and 'what it will be' in an immediate future.

This is due to the double function of iconic signs, which allows us to experiment phenomenologically as if inner experiences were actually happening, at the same time that they allow us to distance ourselves and prepare the action in a different reality for future use.

This article seeks to contribute to the analysis of liminal experiences at a micro-genetic level and to the sense-making processes in the inner experience.

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