

"Tätigkeit" or "Activity"?

The Limits of Translating Key Psychological Concepts into other Languages

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In German and Russian the words Tätigkeit and dejatel'nost' have different meanings from the words Aktivität and aktivnost'. The English word activity does not mean what Tätigkeit or dejatel'nost' mean in Marxist psychology (The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology, 1983).

It has been a common method of formulating theories to take some poorly defined but sufficiently general concept and to load it with additional, new definitions and associations until it assumes for itself the appearance of a "theory". The concepts of Gestalt and Tätigkeit, for example, have trod this path. In each case the transition from a singular, already highly theoretical concept to an explicit theory occurred not so much as the result of gradual empirical-inductive generalization, but rather from attempts to find experimental support for the concept, to give it a more refined definition, and to exhaust its explanatory content. In the modern scientific enterprise an inevitable event on the route from concept to theory is the organization of a conference on the concept. At such a conference, as in the case of the 1st International Conference on Activity Theory in 1986, the entire range of possible transitions and forms of systematization between the singular concept and the particular science are tried out.

In this case, however, there is a particular contradiction between the "Internationality" of the conference and the attempt to exhaust the content of the concept. This is demonstrated by the poorly considered translation of Tätigkeit as "activity", which was taken over from already current practice. In Köhler's sense, this was a "bad mistake". Just as it remains questionable whether the organization of a conference on a concept necessarily upgrades it to a "theory", the choice of English as the conference language and the international pretensions do not answer the question whether the concept of Tätigkeit is in fact translatable into English, or whether an unjustifiable theoretical reduction might rather be introduced by doing so. This would require a critical analysis of hitherto existing translation practice. Not only authoritative English dictionaries, but also many authors, mainly Scandinavian and Russian speaking, have preferred the direct adoption of the concept Tätigkeit to its translation as "activity". Semantically viewed, the situation with Tätigkeit is even more complicated than it is with the untranslated concept of Gestalt in that it is similar to the concept of activity in some ways, but different from it in others.

1. Both concepts are preferably applied to systems of a higher order, i.e. to all living beings including humans. Secondly, however, the concept of activity is clearly preferred for application to physiological and psychophysical events, whereas the concept of Tätigkeit refers primarily to human behaviour. Thus the danger of an organismic reduction cannot be excluded.

2. Both concepts reflect an interactional mutual dependency of system and environment. In physiology "activity" frequently designates a state of undirected activity or the occurrence of a

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higher level of excitement in the nervous system, whereas Tätigkeiten are actions that are goal directed and practically oriented. Thus the concept of activity is burdened with numerous, especially energetic, ideas of impetus. These are entirely missing in the concept of Tätigkeit, since in it the system environment relationship is defined around the Vergegenständlichung of consciousness and this entails problems that are totally foreign to the concept of activity.

3. The concept of activity implies a component of rhythmic organization, as in phases of rest, regeneration, and recovery, that is missing in the concept of Tätigkeit. Activity is only a particular aspect of the self-organization of matter, the definition of which depends upon that of passivity, just as actions can only be defined in contrast to reactions. Living beings are characterized by periodically changing activity with short- and long-termed changes, whereas human Tätigkeit has no opposing concept in this sense. Rather, it contains within itself levels such as the relationship between the subjective and objective, or between the material and ideal as forms of Tätigkeit.

Of all the arguments clearly opposing the translation of Tätigkeit as "activity", only two will be examined here in detail.

The first of these is that the concept of activity is already a variously defined technical term (besetzter Fachterminus), for which even the Dictionary of Psychology (1934) gives four different meanings, from act, actions to activity, although the actual emphasis lies in the area of the natural sciences. The American zoologist Jennings was the first in 1906 to develop a strictly empirically defined terminology of activity for the description of the unicellular Paramecium. Since then about ten different, in part highly specialized terminologies based on the concepts of "activity," "Aktivität," and "action," in the sense of Aktion (not Handlung), have been developed, mostly in neurophysiology, physiological psychology, ethology, and animal sociology, none of which has any theoretical connection to the concept of Tätigkeit.

The second argument against translating Tätigkeit as "activity" concerns the fact that "the terms supporting this concept, such as Aneignung, Vergegenständlichung, etc., are themselves not translatable, but above all, that such translation cuts the concept off from its sources, and this is especially incompatible with a historical-critical approach.

As with many other psychological categories, the history of the concept of Tätigkeit begins in philosophy, or more precisely, with the critical turn against metaphysics in the more recent history of philosophy, a turn which was articulated in various ways from Kant to Hegel. Fichte, for example, considered the ego as "absolute Tätigkeit and nothing but Tätigkeit." The formula that we "act not because we know, but know because we are determined to act" signifies the turn from the god-given world of theology to reflection by the self-conscious, creative human being, the emancipatory character of which is still found in the concept of Tätigkeit. In the transition from Fichte to Marx, for example, what was first of all still individualistic Tätigkeit became the societal process of the purposeful, practical-active alteration of the social and natural environments. The concept of Tätigkeit aimed more and more precisely at the historically concrete processes of living and working, or as Hegel said, "man acts (verhält sich) with his natural needs in relationship to the nature around him in a practical way" in that he becomes active (tätig). For Marx, concrete man was the historical product of his own labour. Interest now became focussed on the active side and this "material human Tätigkeit," mostly generalized as "practice," is, in its individual subjectivity and social historicity, a central concern of Critical Psychology. Not all the problems historically linked to the philosophical concept of Tätigkeit (for example the question of the relationship between freedom and necessity) have a meaning for the psychological concept of Tätigkeit. The latter

became increasingly concerned with, for example, active intellectual Tätigkeit, the subjectivity of creative Tätigkeit, the role of the ego and individualism. Thus, seen from the point of view of the history of ideas, the psychological concept of Tätigkeit originates in philosophy and contact with these origins must be maintained if we are to be able to consider such timeless statements as "man makes his Lebenstätigkeit itself to the object of his wants and consciousness; he has conscious Lebenstätigkeit..." Vygotsky presented this transformation for the first time using Marx's bee example, thus initiating the development of the psychological concept of Tätigkeit in 1925. How a theoretical understanding of the creative human subject who produces both himself and the conditions of his life can be guaranteed by the weaker concept of activity becomes all the harder to explain when one imagines the possible reception of Leontyev's concept of Aneignung at this conceptual level. Every verbal representation of Vergegenständlichung und Aneignung, i.e., of the deeper dimensions of the problem of Tätigkeit, via the concept of activity remains not only necessarily muddled, but would mean a relapse to the trivial materialism of object and the simplistic views, the critique of which was one of the tasks of the Marxist concept of Tätigkeit.

Summarizing the above arguments, we come to the following conclusions:

1. The concept of Tätigkeit, whether declared a "theory" or a "psychology," belongs among the few systems of ideas for which there is evidence of an east-to-west migration in the field of science. As an independent psychological concept for research it was first formulated in connection with the development of children's language by the Cultural-historical school, above all in Vygotsky's 1934 book *Thought and Speech*, which was banned in 1936. The concept was later generalized as a principle of development by Leontyev. Since 1973, via *Critical Psychology*, it has become well-known among German-speaking psychologists and it is now being conveyed into English as well.
2. Linguistically and historically the Tätigkeit concept has evolved as a conceptual interaction between German-speaking and Russian-speaking countries. Both languages contain compatible concepts of Tätigkeit, whereas such a concept is missing in English, or, alternatively, only the weak representation of "activity" is possible. As with many other technical concepts in psychology, the Tätigkeit concept is a construct that is concretizing and detaching itself from its philosophical - in the last analysis, Enlightenment - source, while, at the same time, it derives its conceptual richness from that same source.
3. The translation of Tätigkeit as "activity" will have the following negative effects in the long run:
 - a. The English word will make difficult or even impossible access to its theoretical source in the philosophical concept of Tätigkeit of classical German philosophy and Marx.
 - b. Despite the quite short history of the psychological development of Tätigkeit, there have already appeared numerous specialized subtheories and methodological principles, such as Vygotsky's *Interiorisierung* and Leontyev's *Aneignung*, that are similarly problematic with respect to translation.
 - c. Translation would lead to an overloading of the semantic capacities of the English "activity" concept which would have to be burdened with meanings of Tätigkeit developed in the previous history of philosophy and psychology. Even if the translation of Tätigkeit should proceed despite these arguments, further problems will arise regarding the translation of

related terms such as *Vergegenständlichung* und *Aneignung*. By adopting the German terms in the English vocabulary, a profound loss of content and meaning can be prevented.

d. Every translation into "activity" will represent a systematic theoretical shallowing and weakening of the critical potential of the *Tätigkeit* concept. The seeming international dissemination will prove upon closer examination to be only a universally effective mechanism of reduction to a technical terminology already claimed by the natural sciences. The reflection of creative human subjectivity and societal practice will become a weary perturbation in in ultimately organically defined life-activity.

e. The introduction of the genuine concept of *Tätigkeit* into English usage will save it from becoming an empty "activity" husk and, at the same time, prevent a hopeless overloading of the "activity" concept.