

Chapter 2

Self as Gestalt Quality



If we understand our conversation as a flow of interaction or negotiation, the self I attempted to describe in the introducing chapter is not attributable to a specific utterance by the child or her mother. In other words, inspecting and categorizing each turn separately, as in many qualitative or quantitative approaches to psychology, tells us little about the positions of the participants in the configuration or the portrayal of the child in the relationship. We find the act of positioning in the *sequence* of turns and the relationship between them, and the figure of Mina emerges in resemblances and differences among her friends and herself. Thus, the emerging process of the self I discuss here must be understood in light of how we figure out it. Concerning this point, I connect the essential attribute of the self as discussed here and the concept of *Gestalt quality* (as exemplified by von Ehrenfels in 1890; see von Ehrenfels, 1988a) for observers, and attempt to show the validity of this perspective in relation to several classical and important theories concerning the nature of signs and meaning.

Emergence of the Self and Gestalt Quality

A focus on the holistic nature of human recognition existed in the early phase of psychology. In 1929, von Ehrenfels (1988a), a key figure in the development of Gestalt concepts in psychology, proposed the concept of Gestalt qualities. This is what appears in our minds from a configuration of elements that have relationships to each other. He defined Gestalt qualities as follows:

By a *Gestalt quality* we understand a positive content of presentation bound up in consciousness with the presence of complexes of mutually separable (i.e., independently presentable) elements. That complex of presentations which is necessary for the existence of a given Gestalt quality we call the *foundation* [Grundlage] of that quality. (p. 93)

He used the example of music and notes below to introduce the concept of Gestalt qualities, showing that what we observe in the configuration of elements is

not reducible to single elements. When a German folk tune was played in F sharp major after having been played in C major, the similarity between the melodies was evident, although the two did not have a single note in common. However, if we play the notes that constitute the original melody in a different order, no such similarity appears. Thus, we find a figure, a melody of a tune, arising from the relationships between notes as one type of Gestalt quality.

In the example of notes and tune, the order or sequential connection of each note is important, and in the music we enjoy, notes are strictly categorized according to their dispositions as pitch or length. However, it is not only in the sequential order of such systematized elements that we find the Gestalt quality. Von Ehrenfels (1988b) also argued that multiple aspects of our recognition have a disposition as a Gestalt quality, as follows:

Every word of a language is a Gestalt quality. One can form some idea of the extent of Gestalt qualities in psychical life from the fact that the so-called laws of association operate much more frequently in relation to Gestalten than in relation to elements. Thus, for instance, with the image of an individual person, which is (certainly physically and in all probability psychically) a Gestalt quality, there are associated numerous images of other persons according to the law of similarity [...]. (p. 122)

The examples and definition of von Ehrenfels resonate with what occurs when we find Mina's self in an episode of conversation. Although we do not know any details about the children mentioned in the conversation, we construct an image of a girl who belongs to a group of rabbits, and who reports this to her mother in a somewhat bossy way, which also implies the receptive and warm nature of their relationship. It is not the sum total of divided pieces of interaction but what emerges from the whole of a configuration they construct in this episode. It is difficult to suppose the uniformity of the images each of us has, but we construct images within our meaning construction through the interaction I presented *and* our resources to understand what we see there.

Relying on the term presentation (*Vorstellung* in German) that von Ehrenfels consistently used to describe the process, I coined the term *presentational self*. It comes up as a Gestalt quality through the activity of meaning construction (e.g., mother-child conversation) and active integration of the observer (Komatsu, 2010, p. 220). It is defined as a genre of self that emerges from the act and the result of meaning construction—here, the configuration of a child and others in conversation—“that creates unique meaning to observers” (Komatsu, 2010, p. 209). The presentational self is essentially relational in a variety of aspects and this contrasts with the notion of *representation* prevailing in psychological research, which presupposes that the self exists independently of the observer.

Presentation as a Mode of Symbolism

The standpoint I take here stresses the process in which an episode of conversation works as a whole to generate a presentation in observers' perception, and this may be comparable with the understanding of works of art. For example, although it is

possible and often useful to know how a painting was painted and how its composition functions, our experience of viewing a painting is not derived from single details, nor from the sum total of what we think about the divided sections of one painting. This also applies to pieces of music; that is, what we feel from a piece of music is not our understanding of specific techniques used in the composition, nor the aggregate of what we feel from each note or measure, though specialists may sometimes focus on such details.

Further, our understanding constructed from what we have observed can go beyond what is described and clarify something about who made it. For example, what we find in a landscape painting by Vincent van Gogh is not an analog of the real view but the workings of the mind of a painter who depicted his experiences. Just as van Gogh wanted people to understand his unique feel of the world through his paintings, we can understand how children find the meaning of their experiences to construct figures of themselves from what they express as a whole.

In regard to this holistic orientation for the understanding of the self, I can detect several predecessors in the psychological literature before quantification and statistical analysis ruled our approaches to the mind. One of them is the philosopher Susanne Langer, who proposed a new conception of “mentality” focusing on the function of symbols to oppose the “physical world-picture” that was beginning to have a major impact on psychology at the time of her discussion. In her discussion, Langer (1948) focused on the comparison between *discursive* form and *presentational* form of symbolism. About discursive form, she explains as follows:

[...] all language has a form which requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within the other; as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on the clothesline. This property of verbal symbolism is known as *discursiveness*; by reason of it, only thoughts which can be arranged in this peculiar order can be spoken at all; any idea which does not lend itself to this “projection” is ineffable, incommunicable by means of words. (pp. 65–66)

Regarding this clarification, and in relation to what is “ineffable” and “incommunicable,” she illustrates presentational aspects of our recognition:

Visual forms—lines, colors, proportions, etc.—are just as capable of *articulation*, i.e., of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. The most radical difference is that *visual forms are not discursive*. (p. 75)

After these discussions, Langer (1948) introduced “presentational symbolism” as what “are involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation” (p. 79), which stands together with discursive form. In her discussion, presentational form is not limited to visual expression and has a close relationship with our feelings, and a variety of presentations such as paintings, music, or metaphor that demand a recognition we cannot reduce to articulate reasoning. She stressed the importance of the presentational aspect of symbolism, which had not been the object of philosophical thinking until that time, aiming to introduce an epistemology of medium and meaning (Innis, 2009), and her idea of presentational form has a close relationship with the discussion of Gestalt psychology, as Langer herself repeatedly introduced in her discussion.

Langer (1948) understood that some aspects of our recognition cannot be divided into elements that comply with those approaches to psychology which rely on statistical empiricism. Although this idea supports my approach for the self here, her discussion of two distinctive forms concentrated only on the symbolism. Concerning the *meaning* they construct, she supposed many types of emergence in our minds. She also denied the correspondence between types of meaning and symbolic forms, as “The sense of a word may hover between literal and figurative meaning” (p. 229). Thus, finding out children’s selves from conversation, as I attempt here, is the construction of figurative meaning from the symbols of discursive form, and the focus must be on the semiotic process in which meaning emerges from symbols.

The Complexity of Meaning Construction: Vygotsky’s Perspective

From Langer’s perspective, even one word is capable of bringing us a variety of meaning. She supposed that every word had many associations and significance in history and suggested that “[...] through all the metamorphoses of its meaning, such a word carries a certain trace of every meaning it has ever had, like an overtone, and every association it acquired, like an aura [...]” (Langer 1948, p. 229). Here the meaning of a word, or other discursive symbol, broadens in a fluid way according to the contexts in which we mention it.

When we elaborate this process of finding meaning from words or other discursive acts, Vygotsky’s discussion on language and meaning functions as a good guide. His discussion concerning the understanding of meaning and language (Vygotsky, 1986) and how fables, stories, dramas, and poems work for our mind (Vygotsky, 1971) focused on our integrative perception of meaning. Vygotsky (1986) stressed the need to discover a unit of analysis that would reflect the unity of affective aspect *and* intellectual aspect of a dynamic meaning system when we study children’s language. In relation to the meaning appearing from a set of expressions, he also gave an example in which a very small change in the usage of a word appearing in a poem by Heine can reshape what we understand from the whole of the poem.

These discussions also suggest the complex nature of meaning that cannot be reduced into simple correspondence between what we see as a sign and what we feel and understand from that. Langer’s discussion focused on the historical roots of such extension, and Vygotsky (1986) also discussed the development of meaning in history, in relation to children’s thinking in complexes. After pointing out this indeterminate nature of word meaning, Vygotsky (1986) proposed the comparison of *sense* and *meaning* to better understand the process of meaning construction as follows:

The first and basic one is the preponderance of the *sense* [*smysl*] of a word over its *meaning* [*znachenie*] – a distinction we owe to Frederic Paulhan. The sense of a word, according to him, is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word. It is a dynamic, fluid, complex whole, which has several zones of unequal stability. Meaning is only one of the zones of sense, the most stable and precise zone. (pp. 244–245)

His discussion also focused on how a story works on our mind, uncovering the fundamental structure in which we, as readers or observers, play an indispensable role. Concerning the understanding of Hamlet, Vygotsky (1971) argued that the ideas of the story are not reducible to the summary of the story, and only direct descriptions of concrete situations can express them. Again, his approach stresses the importance of our viewing the whole of the story, with our identification with the main character and our feeling of the conflicting affective powers making the flow of story. He also pointed out our dual perspectives in this process, one of which identifies with Hamlet and another that views the entire story from outside. Thus, the story first becomes possible through the integrating work of *our* minds.

These discussions suggest that what we feel from a discursive act, as in the mother-child conversation, emerges from the flow of interaction that fixes the relationship of elements—a variety of “rabbits” described, for example. It unfolds for each person who activates and constructs the *meaning* in his or her own sense field. In this process, we must consider the uniqueness of what emerges for a young girl, for her mother, and for us. The *understanding* of an interaction is not the examination of a fixed object but the re-construction of semiotic processes that bring about the meaning of it. But how can we figure out such processes?

A Semiotic Approach for the Site of Meaning Construction

Although the discussion in the former chapter began by citing the ideas in discourse analysis, now the exploration concerning meaning construction leads us to a question concerning the framework for understanding the work of signs in our life. The thinking of semiotic psychology (Valsiner, 2007), which stresses the role of signs to create meanings in the world in which we are constantly moving through, elaborated the function of signs as what “can function as a promoter sign, guiding the possible range of variability of meaning construction in the future” (Valsiner, 2007, p. 58), and it also constructed the basic understandings of this process.

As we have already discussed, the meaning developing from a word has a vast range of possibility, and semiotic psychology considers that signs work within that field, not in fixed or static ways but rather developing with dialectic dynamics they include as their essential nature. They work both intra-personally and inter-personally to, for example, construct the meaning of our experiences, add value to the objects we encounter, or promote our actions. The self, or “who we are,” also becomes emergent through the system of signs. In Valsiner’s example of a person who says to himself or herself, “I like this,” when observing a painting, the statement not only clarifies his or her affect and guides conduct afterwards (e.g., buying a

postcard of the picture), but also clarifies his or her unique perspective to the picture. We are constantly in this sort of dialogue, in relation to external others or objects, including socially shared firm beliefs (Valsiner, 2007), and this *clarifies the position of the person that can be considered the self in relationships*.

Thus, the theory of semiotic psychology describes the relational and dynamic aspect of emerging meaning and the self. Methodological inquiry based on the semiotic approach also stresses the importance of understanding the relational nature of and researchers' positions in the process of research. To describe this complex, Valsiner (2017) introduced a figure to position "four infinities" at work in the interaction of interviewing, or in other types of researcher-participant interaction. Among these four types of infinity, "future infinity" and "past infinity" are what develop through the process of interaction. Taking an example from Excerpt 1.1, recollection of zoo visits is an extension from the here-and-now to *past infinities* in meaning construction.

The position of the researchers is also clear in this schema. In relation to the researcher and the participants, it presupposes the "inner infinity" of researchers and "outer infinity" of participants. Concerning this, Valsiner (2017) describes the scientific knowledge developing in such interactions as "both objective and subjective at the same time" and as "knowledge that is felt through by the researcher" (p. 48). In other words, researchers' understanding is not strictly governed by objectivity.

The difference between the framework of Valsiner (2017) and what I discuss here is the construction of a contact point between researcher and participant. As Valsiner presupposed direct contact between researchers and study participants, the data I will show in this monograph are interactions between mother and child, or teacher and children, and we stand outside of the interaction. Reflecting this difference, Fig. 5.2 of Valsiner (2017) is modified as Fig. 2.1 to describe the mother-child conversation. As we saw in two examples in Chap. 1, conversation between a young child and her mother often develops from the mother's questions in relation to the

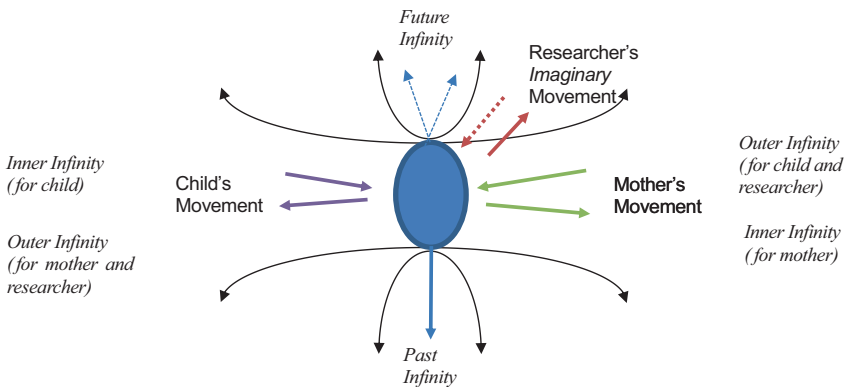


Fig. 2.1 A schematic expression of research field in this study (Cited from Valsiner (2017, p. 48, Figure 5.2), with modifications)

events in their life, while the child also questions what is unclear for her but her mother *knows* (e.g., the name of a zoo they once visited). Although they are not conscious of this structure, it can be interpreted as a variation of reciprocal interviewing in which both participants attempt to construct the meaning of the world that extends from the past to the future, externally and internally. Researchers or observers cannot participate in or control the interaction directly, but can be *quasi-participants* of the interaction, imaginarily sitting in the site of interaction.

Inquiries Into the Self on the Basis of a Semiotic Approach: How Meaning Construction Develops in the Dialectic Tensions in Life

In the following chapters, I will elaborate this theoretical framework that finds children's selves in their meaning construction and stresses the active role of observers, which is essential for understanding the entirety of the process. Relying on the theoretical perspectives discussed above, I will develop a threefold argument.

Firstly, I describe the semiotic process unfolding in conversations in which pairs of young children and their mothers talked about each child's experiences in institutions for young children before school age (*yochien* and *hoikuen*), developed from my previous analysis (Komatsu, 2006, 2010, 2013). In contrast with existing studies that sought to find psychological entities inside children as their selves, I elaborate on this process using the framework of dialogical process of meaning construction (Josephs, Valsiner, & Surgan, 1999; Valsiner, 2007), which employs a field-like expression of antithetical concept formation. Using this framework, I argue that the differentiation of shared meaning in conversation enables the appearance of presentational self for observers (Chap. 3). From this elaboration, I attempt to create a fundamental framework of the presentational self and compare it with some psychological inquiries into the self to discuss the generalizability of this concept (Chap. 4).

In the second part of the discussion, I extend my inquiry by analyzing elementary school students' writings about personal experiences (Chap. 5). In Japanese elementary schools, children often engage in writing short personal stories addressed to their teachers and classmates, which report their experiences at home. This activity, with a long historical background in Japanese school education, stands in a contrasting position to the mother-child conversation analyzed in the previous discussion. In the writings, children's meaning construction is achieved through written language, not through oral interaction with clearer dialogical nature. While the mother-child conversation is placed within the children's transition from the institutional setting of formal education to the private and intimate relationship with family members, the writings occupy another area of transition in which the private is brought into formal education. With such contrasts, these activities in the transitions in children's everyday lives also share the characteristic of *liminality* (Turner, 1969)

that involves transformation of the processes that sustain our lives (Stenner, 2017). Through the analysis of writings, I also demonstrate the application of the framework of the presentational self and discuss the role of others in the process.

These two analyses lead us to an inquiry into the fundamental processes that bring about the emergence of presentational self. In modern society, children move from a private setting to the institutionalized world every day, and these moves are the moment that triggers the meaning construction. Thus, at least one aspect of children's selves is inseparable with a socially constructed system of transition and reunion. Following from this, the third part of my discussion explores the basic structure of our lives, which sets up a variety of tensions. These structures and tensions interact with each other to build up the background to children's meaning construction. Firstly, I will make an inquiry into our lives focusing on the process of *reunion* that is co-definitive with two types of tension: *visible* <> *invisible* and *same* <> *non-same* (Chap. 6). Secondly, I will examine these two dialectic tensions, which are closely related to development in many aspects (Chaps. 7 and 8). Through these inquiries, I focus on the dialectic nature that prevails in our lives, which is also an attempt to answer the question *why* children (and we also) engage in the meaning construction that produces the presentational self.

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