

## **Asymmetries of Embodied Meaning in Language and Thought**

In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that we are our bodies.<sup>1</sup> Today embodiment is one of the key ideas in cognitive psychology. From this perspective, sensory impressions, emotions and even abstract thoughts are the product of the body. The mind is part of the body. In its turn, the body interacts with its environment and cannot be abstracted from the world in which it is situated. All meaning emerges through the interaction between the body and its environment. Merleau-Ponty suggests that we make sense ‘by being this body and this situation’ (*P*, 525).

There is a curious tension at work between two aspects of embodiment when it comes to meaning-making. On the one hand, we regard the experiences immediately related to the body as inherently meaningful, and rely on them to make sense of more abstract ideas. On the other, it is common to speak about the ineffability of subjective experience. Language and conscious thought do not encompass all that we feel and perceive.

If I say that something is a ‘hot topic’, I am using the embodied experience of heat to comprehend, and make comprehensible, the abstract idea of importance or relevance. However, the same sense of heat might defy my capacity for intellectual comprehension and self-expression in the case of a painful burn. I might engage figurative speech to say that it hurts as if I were on the surface of the sun, or I might choose to swear to alleviate my pain or not to speak about it at all. In this second case, the embodied experience of heat becomes incomprehensible and inexpressible in literal thought and language.

Embodiment appears to be ambivalent: it both creates and confounds meaning. The first facet of this ambivalence has recently drawn the attention of cognitive psychologists,

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2005 [1945]). Henceforward abbreviated as *P*.

linguists and philosophers, whereas the second has long been intuited by the practitioners of meaning-making, including dancers, writers and everyday speakers of natural language. Both aspects have been explored separately in philosophy, psychology and linguistics, but their interplay has not been previously in the limelight of research. To fill this lacuna, scholars will need to outline the contours of the underlying tension between meaningful and incomprehensible bodily experiences.

This conundrum can be thought of in highly specific terms such as metaphor and sensory impressions, and at the same time it can be scaled up to the general ambivalence of human existence. The imbalance between meaningful embodiment and ineffable bodily experience both plays out in everyday language and lies at the heart of being human.

In *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson devise the paradigm of ‘embodied realism’ and argue that our bodies give meaning to thought and language.<sup>2</sup> On this view, reason is embodied, largely metaphorical and mostly unconscious. First, the mind cannot be separated from the body: ‘what we call “mind” and what we call “body” are not two things, but rather aspects of one organic process, so that all meaning, thought, and language emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity.’<sup>3</sup> Second, we often create new meaning by metaphorically associating abstract phenomena with familiar experiences. In their evocatively titled article ‘Metaphors We Think With’, Lera Boroditsky and Paul Thibodeau give empirical evidence in support of the idea that

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<sup>2</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1.

‘metaphors have profound influences on how we conceptualize and act’.<sup>4</sup> In his major new book *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (2017), Robert Sapolsky highlights the significance of metaphorical thought and writes that it must be an evolutionarily recent skill that we have not yet mastered.<sup>5</sup> Finally, most cognitive processes remain under the radar of consciousness. Not only breath, but also abstract thought can be unconscious. In *A Skeptic’s Guide to the Mind* (2013), Robert Burton recognizes that ‘without unconscious cognition, there would be no complex thought’.<sup>6</sup>

We intuitively use touch, vision, temperature, space, motion, balance and force to understand politics, social interaction, language, time, causation, physical processes and other ideas. It is true that all these concepts are ultimately embodied, but our sensorimotor experiences are more directly related to the body than are politics or time. Theoretical approaches to the study of the mind account for the processes that allow people to understand more abstract ideas with the help of concrete phenomena. According to this line of argument, embodied experience facilitates the understanding of less tangible entities. In linguistic and psychological research, it is commonly assumed that embodiment underlies everyday meaning-making. We speak about feeling warmth when receiving acts of kindness. In English and other languages, loneliness is associated with being cold. To discuss time, we use spatial language and categories of motion. Sounds are described using our understanding of

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<sup>4</sup> Paul H. Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky, ‘Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning’, *PLoS ONE*, 6:2 (2011), 1–11 (p. 1).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Sapolsky, ‘Metaphors We Kill By’ in *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), 553–79.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Burton, *A Skeptic’s Guide to the Mind: What Neuroscience Can and Cannot Tell Us About Ourselves* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2013), 66.

space and touch: voices can be characterized as high or low, soft or flat. Embodiment empowers us to make sense of the world.

The relationship between embodiment and meaning-making, however, can be less propitious. We often struggle to express our feelings and sensory impressions, and we reach for familiar images to present them figuratively. In such cases, language appears to lack the means to help us comprehend and represent our bodily experience, and we fall back on metaphor and metonymy, or admit that words fail us. Furthermore, it can be challenging to reflect on our feelings and perception. We do not know ourselves because we do not understand our bodies. Such embodiment is no less real or immediately relatable than those sensorimotor experiences that illuminate other ideas. Yet we have difficulty comprehending it and seem to lack the tools to speak about it. We miss Ludwig Wittgenstein's 'private language' that would allow us to 'refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations'.<sup>7</sup>

Because much of what we think and feel is unconscious, we are not fully aware of our embodiment. As a result, the body does not always make sense to us. We tend to take the body for granted without recognizing its limitations or potential bias. The instrument that we use to measure the world is not precise. Paradoxically, we are generally expected to understand the world and present it in language with the help of such an imperfect tool.

In her recent essay 'The Curse of the Perceptual', Patricia Kolaiti observes that 'when trying to communicate phenomenal states, speakers are, more often than not, likely to see themselves stumble and fall.'<sup>8</sup> For example, it can be extremely difficult to describe dance

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<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986 [1953]), 89<sup>e</sup>, §243.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Kolaiti, 'The Curse of the Perceptual: A Case from Kinaesthesia', *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 46:1 (2017), 47–65 (p. 62).

moves or facial expressions. When somebody exclaims: ‘You should have seen his face!’, it is far from clear what it means. Not only is it challenging to speak about the emotion giving rise to the observable physiological change, but it can be hard to explain the physical movements themselves. Such sensorimotor experiences and emotions may lack their own concrete language.

When we are overwhelmed with pain and suffering, or joy and happiness, language reveals its limitations, even though it might let us express such bodily experiences by way of figurative images. In the best-case scenario, ideas that are presumably less relatable to the body serve as tools to elucidate how our bodies feel and perceive the world. For instance, we can say that we are *on cloud nine*, or *down in the dumps*. Neither ‘cloud’ nor ‘dumps’ intimately relates to the body, but being up or down is inherently meaningful thanks to our natural ability to maintain our body orientation, and it helps us reflect on euphoria and melancholy. Unfortunately, we often neglect our feelings and misunderstand thought, and hence we cannot register the biases and needs of our fragile bodies. Metaphors can help us make sense of ourselves, but they can also mislead and obscure our thoughts and feelings.

There is a strange asymmetry between the way our bodies shed light on things around us, and those moments when we fail to understand and express how those same bodies feel, look and function. Some bodily experiences are directly accessible in thought and easily expressible in language, whereas other aspects of embodiment are ineffable and hard to grasp. This agrees well with Merleau-Ponty’s observation that ‘radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all’ (*P*, xvi).

Embodiment makes possible our understanding of the world, but we do it imperfectly because our bodies have their weaknesses. In the paradigm of embodied realism, all meaning is created by the body and can help it survive and flourish. Merleau-Ponty, who can be

regarded as one of the predecessors of embodied realism, remarks that ‘because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning’ (*P*, xxii). Our bodies, however, do not always make sense, because they are fundamentally limited: we misunderstand, make mistakes, hallucinate, create false memories and forget; in the end, our bodies age and die. While knowledge is highly useful, it remains deeply flawed. The body both constructs and undermines our image of reality. This unresolved imbalance merits careful thought.

Ultimately, there might be a tension between meaningful and incomprehensible bodily experiences that inform language and thought. For future research, I propose identifying, analyzing, and categorizing instances when embodied experience is first used to understand more abstract ideas (“a hot topic”), and then becomes incomprehensible and is explained through familiar phenomena (“as hot as the sun”). The study of this dynamics will bring together cognitive linguistics, philosophy and psychology, and delineate the asymmetries of embodied meaning in language and thought.

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