

# "Mind(ing) Your Language"

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**ABSTRACT:** Language is a primary medium of human communication. Reflexive language use is part of good teaching practice. A dance teacher's choice of words, terminologies, and metaphors can facilitate or inhibit effective learning in the dance studio. The relationship between linguistic meaning and bodily experience is examined, and the consequences of assuming an embodied view of semantics related to language use in the dance studio. Participants in this seminar will be encouraged to critically reflect on their use of language and find ways of making what they "say" an equal pedagogical partner to physical demonstration.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." There is more to this retort than just a child's attempt to fend-off the verbal taunts of another child. Behind this statement is the assumption that language has nothing to do with our physicality and consequently cannot, and does not, directly affect us bodily. As a teacher of dancing do you believe that? This paper is about how language is linked to the body, and how what you say can, and does, physically affect others. In particular it is about how you can skillfully use what you say to affect the way dancers move.

Planning dance classes can involve many studio hours devising new movement combinations, sequencing technical activities, and selecting appropriate music. All these elements are important. Preparing what you are going to say in order to communicate to dancers what to do and how to do it is also important.

Kinetically articulate demonstration is an important dance teaching skill. Like any skill, the ability to precisely demonstrate movement is learned through regular, reflective practice. Articulate demonstration enables you to show

dancers movement co-ordinations and qualities you intend them to see. And yet, no matter how skilled you are in demonstrating movement, dancers cannot access your experience of moving. It is true that by carefully observing the way you move dancers can infer what you may be experiencing, imagining, intending or thinking as you move. Nevertheless, it is still an inference and not a direct experience of what you are feeling or thinking.

Verbally articulate description is also an important skill in movement and dance teaching. It is important because describing in words what you are sensing, feeling, and thinking admits dancers to dimensions of your movement experience they cannot witness. However, unlike kinetic articulation, the ability to articulate in words the experience of moving is a skill that is seldom, if ever, methodically taught or practiced. Consequently many dancers, teachers of dancing, and choreographers tend to be inarticulate about the way they articulate their movement.

For a teacher of dancing, articulate kinetic demonstration and articulate vocal description are equally important skills. One skill complements the other. First, verbally guiding dancers' visual perception directs their attention more accurately to those movement co-ordinations and qualities you particularly want them to see. Second, telling dancers what you sense and feel as you move alerts them to what kinds of experiences may accompany, and therefore mark, "correct" performance. Third, informing dancers of your movement intentions enables them to distinguish between movements that are essential to the action and those which are non-essential. Fourth, advising dancers of images and ideas shaping and motivating your movement gives them cognitive resources with which to form and re-form their own movement.

The following discussion is intended for you to reflect on what you already do and so further develop skills and expand your pedagogical resources.

## Experience and linguistic meaning

The purpose of the following discussion is not to elaborate theories of language acquisition, semantics, or human cognition, but to briefly sketch an embodied, interactive view of human understanding and language.

Linguistic meaning is intimately tied to experiences. We learn a language through interacting with a linguistic community. Speakers within such communities share agreed-upon meanings to specific, regular, patterns of vocalised sound - words, phrases, and sentences. These interactions occur while both listener and speaker co-ordinate their actions in a social/physical world. The complexity of both human interactions and the social/physical world makes it absurd to think that auditory experiences alone are sufficient to learn and understand a spoken language. Human understanding, linguistic meaning included, is grounded in experiences emerging from relating to others and the world through all sensory channels - "proprioceiving" (perceiving our own bodily sensations), touching, seeing, tasting, smelling and hearing. Experiencing is never a passive process, it is active.

Our embodiment shapes our actions and perceptions (Varela,1991). What we are capable of experiencing is determined by the structure of our body. "Our reality is shaped by the patterns of our bodily movement, the contours of our spatial and temporal orientation, and the forms of our interactions with objects" (Johnson, 1987:xix). Our conceptual frameworks, through which we understand the world, are constructed on the basis of our history of bodily interactions. Word meaning is tied to such histories. Words have meanings that are grounded in bodily experience.

## Choice of words

This proposition has important implications for teachers of dancing. The words we use to describe movement reveal how we think about and perceive movement. They reflect our conceptual frameworks. For example, the

conceptual framework "the body is a fluid system" could result in a dance teacher using kinetic descriptors like "flow", "fluid", "liquid", "swirl", "wave", "surge", and so on. In using these terms, that dance teacher is implicitly influencing dancers' concepts of the human body and movement. It is precisely because concepts are not just "in your head" that what you say does have the power to shape, colour and texture a dancer's movements.

There is more than one way to think about movement. And yet, an unreflexive use of language may unintentionally constrain dancers' ideas about movement and dancing. Reflecting on how you describe movement, both to yourself and dancers, creates the opportunity to discover patterns of word usage. In so doing you can make explicit your implicit concepts about the human body, movement and dancing. Explicit concepts and conceptual knowledge can be consciously employed to aid learning, not limit it. As you become aware of the words you do use, you may also start to notice words you never use to describe movement. At that moment, the possibility arises of expanding your knowledge, and in doing so, enriching the learning environment in your dance class.

It is also worth reflecting on the kinds of movement qualities conveyed by words. For example, you may want dancers to extend their limbs more fully. What do you say? Your use of kinetic descriptors will, and does, make a difference to how the dancers move. Using the word "stretch", or the phrase "stretch it out", will prompt different kinetic qualities to using "lengthen" or "extend" or "reach-out". The reasons why this is so have already been touched upon. Suffice to say that word meaning is not abstract but based on lived bodily experience. Recall your experience of "stretching". What kind of effort is involved? What kind of perceptual focus? What kind of breathing pattern? What kind of intent? Now, in turn, apply the same reflective process to the terms "lengthen", "extend" and "reach-out". Do each of these terms evoke different experiential profiles? Most likely they do. And if they do, then the

more mindful you are of your language use the more able you will be to articulate intended movement co-ordinations and qualities. This can only serve to make you a better teacher of dancing.

## Choice of terminologies

Western theatrical dance styles like Classical Ballet, Graham Technique, Cunningham Technique, Limon Technique and so on, are distinct movement systems. Each of these systems use distinct terminologies to describe their movement vocabularies. For example, the terms "plie" and "tendue" refer to specific movement co-ordinations in Classical Ballet. However, it is interesting to note that some terms appear in several dance styles. For example, "plie" and "tendue" are used in Classical Ballet and Limon Technique. In the same way that phonetically identical word sounds may have distinctly different meanings in different contexts, eg. 'love' in everyday English, and in a tennis match (=0), so too identical dance terms may have distinctly different "kinetic" meanings in different dance styles.

Pedagogically, specific dance terminologies simplify movement description, allowing a teacher to use a single word to evoke a specific, complex, regular pattern of movement. But terminologies only work if dancers know what the specific terms mean, and such knowledge is acquired through learning the dance style in which those terms are used. Experiencing the distinctive movement co-ordinations and qualities of a particular dance style is what gives terminologies their "kinetic meaning".

On the surface, your use of specific terminologies may not seem to be pedagogically problematic. And it may not be, depending on what kinds of movement co-ordination you are trying to teach and who is in your dance class. But what happens if terms are used unreflectively. Imagine yourself teaching a release technique class. Most of the dancers in class have classical ballet training. You begin with simple warm-up movements involving bending the

ankles, knees and hip joints while dancers are standing in "parallel". Then you use the term "plie". What do you think the dancers will do? Most likely they will do the warm-up movement like a classical ballet plie, even if they stay in parallel. They will do this because the kinetic meaning of "plie" is grounded in their experience of doing classical ballet.

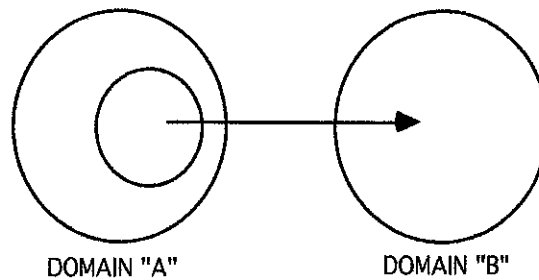
Classical Ballet and Release Technique have quite distinct movement co-ordinations and qualities. The movement qualities associated with doing a Ballet "plie" are almost antithetical to the kinds of kinetic qualities encouraged in Release Technique. In this example using the term "plie" may be pedagogically convenient but it is simultaneously pedagogically problematic in that it hinders dancers learning the distinct "kinetic vocabulary" of release technique.

As already suggested above, a solution to potential pedagogical dilemmas surrounding using terminologies is to reflect on your understanding of the terms you know and frequently use. When you think of a specific term, what kinds of kinetic experiences come to mind? What specific movement co-ordinations are involved? What kinesthetic qualities? Are these the same as what you are trying to teach to dancers in your class? If not, how else could you describe what you are wanting them to do and how you are wanting them to move? You may find yourself coining specific phrases to refer to recurrent movement co-ordinations you teach in class. Isn't that how dance terminologies came about in the first place? One thing is sure, through the reflective process you will come to intimately understand the kinetic meanings of the terminologies you use.

## Choice of metaphors

Many teachers use metaphors to describe movement and movement qualities. Metaphors are more than poetic devices. They are a primary means of constructing an understanding of the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1987,

1999). The following illustration suggests how metaphors work.



In metaphor certain features of one domain (Domain "A") are mapped onto another (Domain "B"). Here is an example. We use metaphor when speaking about our emotions: We say things like: "I'm feeling up", "I'm feeling low", "I'm on a high", and "I'm depressed". In these expressions we refer to our emotions as if they had spatial location and direction. In so doing we are framing our understanding of emotions in terms of spatial concepts. This metaphorical mapping is not arbitrary but has a physical basis. "Drooping posture typically goes along with sadness and depression; erect posture with a positive emotional state" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1981:15). It is exactly through this kind of metaphorical mapping that embodied experience is "translated" into the conceptual frameworks by which we make sense of our world. What we say, what we think, is more than skin deep. It is rooted in our very patterns of movement.

For the teacher of dancing this is good news. It adds another tool which can be skillfully wielded to sculpture movement. You can use metaphor to extend your range of kinetic descriptors. For example, the metaphor "moving is eating" maps features associated with eating, like taste, onto the experience of moving. This metaphor enables you to talk about movement as being "yummy", "sweet", "sour", "spicy", "bitter" and so on. The dancer knows what you mean because they have experienced the taste sensations to which are you referring. More importantly, dancers' memories of gustatory experiences are linked to bodily responses. When you think of tasting something sour it evokes

a whole body response, not just a memory of the taste. This is the strength of metaphor in shaping movement.

Once you have explored the possibilities of the "moving is eating" metaphor, go on to explore metaphors relating to other sensory modalities, such as "moving is smelling", "moving is seeing", "moving is touching", and moving is hearing". After that, you could explore how some of the following metaphors affect movement co-ordination and quality: "the body is a machine", "the body is air", and "the body is a container".

## CONCLUSION

The ability to reflect resources you as a teacher. You cannot explicitly use in your teaching that which you are unaware of. The act of intentionally describing in words your experience of moving helps make explicit movement co-ordinations, qualities and intents that may otherwise remain unexamined and therefore out of awareness. Using language to describe your experience helps you become aware of what you know, and what there is to know. This knowledge can then be explicitly communicated to the dancers you teach.

The skill of using language to make implicit knowledge explicit is furthered by becoming linguistically more articulate. This does not mean simply expanding your vocabulary. Knowing more words helps - especially descriptors that refer, either directly or metaphorically, to the kinetic experience of moving. However, what will help more is being conversant with the meaning of words and how different word relationships subtly shape meaning. I am not suggesting that you become a poet. What I am suggesting is that subtler verbal expression facilitates putting into words the finer, elusive aspects of your experience. Articulate verbal expression enables you to better express how you articulate your movement.

I have argued that linguistic meaning is grounded in experience. You have



invested many studio hours becoming kinetically articulate in order to communicate through movement. Investing some studio hours doing a version of the following process may assist you to deepen your experience of moving and extend your ability to articulate in words what you already "know in your bones".

As you plan your class reflect on your experience of moving. How are you co-ordinating the movements of different parts of yourself? What movement qualities are you feeling as you move? Silently describe to yourself in words what you are experiencing as you move. You do not have to describe every detail, just what is significant to you at the time. Use this linguistic description to help you fine tune your movement. Each change in movement co-ordination and quality will feel different. Describe in words each of these changes. Continue this process until you are satisfied that you are moving the way you want to move. This way of planning class initially takes time. The words you have used to describe to yourself this final state become a teaching resource.

In choosing the title of this paper, "Mind(ing) your language", I wanted to suggest more than just being mindful of what you say. I also wanted to suggest that language is a phenomena of the human mind. A teacher's beliefs about the nature of human mind will influence their use of language in the dance studio. A disembodied view of mind makes linguistic meaning an abstract thing of the intellect. An embodied view of mind embeds linguistic meaning in our embodiment. In an embodied view of mind words can actively affect movement because their meanings are woven through the listener's richly intricate tapestry of bodily experience. In an embodied view of mind what you say pulls on the threads of dancers' bodily experience, and in doing so, your words begin weaving within them new patterns of kinetic understanding.

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## BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTER

Zoran Kovich has over 25 years experience in movement arts. Initially a martial artist, he studied Dance at the Victorian College of the Arts and then danced professionally for six years with large and small Australian companies as well as independently.

Since 1990 Zoran has been lecturing in NSW college and university Dance programs, developing and presenting courses in Somatics, Embodied Anatomy, and Movement Analysis. His teaching focuses on facilitating technical ability, performance quality and personal presence through deepening performers' experience of their embodiment.

One of the first professional dancers in Australia to graduate as a Feldenkrais method teacher in 1991, Zoran also has 16 years practice in using Anatomical Imagery (Ideokinesis) to facilitate movement. With an academic background in Social Science, Dance, and Cognitive Science, Zoran creatively integrates theory and practice to meet the unique interests of each person or group.