

**Embodied fictive interaction metaphors:
The primacy of the Conversation Frame in dance discourse**

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In its initial phases, cognitive-linguistic theories of *embodiment* conceived of the human body as a solitary, organic entity confined to self-reliant practices of metabolizing nourishment and moving around in its physical environment. By contrast, our theoretical foundation for philosophical and semantic analysis integrates into the concept of a human body a social as well as communicative dimension of existence. As it is, intersubjectivity and expressivity are essential and unavoidable aspects of having a human body: and we are born into a world of conversational participants who are an intricate part of our natural environment. In addition to its physiological configuration and bio-mechanical organization, a body is thus also a body in relation to *other bodies and minds*. A body's natural environment is a platform for social interaction, verbal and otherwise.

In the following, we examine metaphoric conceptualizations of dance evoking the easily accessed conceptual frame of verbal face-to-face interaction from the domain of communication, i.e. the Conversation Frame (Goffman 1963, 1981). Indeed, the basic structure of ordinary conversation may model the conceptualization of experience as a fictive kind of interaction (Pascual 2002, 2014). We may construe an artwork as 'speaking' to its artists or to viewers (e.g. Sullivan forth.), one's body as 'contradicting' one's mind, or a long walk as the 'answer' to a headache (see overview in Pascual 2008, 2014).

Dance may thus be construed both in physical and in dialogical terms, which is a common conceptualization, evidenced by the many hits of the "Dance as a conversation" combination in search engines. This essay is based on descriptions of

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different dance forms by dancers, as well as dance instructors, choreographers and theorists. Since, after all, dance is not literally a language, we are here dealing with a non-trivial difference between two “ranges of experience” or ‘domains’ (Lakoff & Johnson 1980): the source (dialogue) and the target (dance).² What this means exactly has not been investigated in any systematic way. The question of *domain difference* is therefore deserving of some attention.

1. Source and target domains in dance-as-conversation metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe conceptual metaphor as understanding one thing (the target) in terms of another (the source). In some cases it is a structural similarity between the two that allows one to find coherence in the range of highlighted experiences of the target domain. This goes for the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor (e.g. “a battle of wits”) and the ARGUMENT IS DANCE metaphor suggested as an alternative, highlighting cooperation rather than strife (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 5). Indeed, arguing is a subgenre of verbal interaction. Dance and dialogue appear to be highly compatible experiential domains, all the way down to the level of the dance-like proto-conversations between infant and caretaker (e.g. Trevarthen 1979). In fact, this “temporal phenomenon of experienced sharedness is probably the elementary form of communication”, based on “primordial intersubjectivity as participative temporal togetherness” (P.Aa. Brandt 2012: 23).

Note that as such the ARGUMENT IS DANCE and the BABY-CARETAKER INTERACTION IS DANCE metaphors have the reverse source and target directionality of the conceptual metaphor under consideration here, namely DANCE IS CONVERSATION. This conceptual metaphor involves bringing together these two ranges of experience or domains: the communicative expressivity of conversation is brought to bear on a non-verbal activity that likewise relies on temporal attunement between interacting parties and on establishing a turn-taking rhythm.

In this conceptualization, the source domain is what Sweetser (1990) calls the ‘speech-act domain’, in terms of *semantic domains*, which encompasses forms of verbal (and gestural) face-to-face interaction (in Sweetser’s work, most notably meta-linguistic negotiation and speech acts) in which the conversation frame is activated. The conversation frame thus originates in the speech-act domain, which, critically, is

² For a critique of the notion of *domains* in cognitive linguistics, see L. Brandt (2013).

the one that Sweetser (1990) considers to be the least basic. According to Sweetser (1990), so-called ‘semantic domains’ (i.e. the socio-physical, epistemic and speech-act domains) are grounded in human cognition and hypothesized to be the foundation for ‘metaphorical mappings’. These domains are hierarchically organized, the physical domain being the constitutional ground for the others (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Sweetser 1990).

By contrast, P.Aa. Brandt’s (2004) elaboration on Sweetser’s idea posits a division of our experiential lifeworld into four basic domains of intentional intersubjective coordination (see also Brandt 1996) which are equivalent and universal or “cognitively ontological” (Oakley 2014: 339). Consequently, communicative interaction is suggested to be a basic semantic domain in human cognition, on a par with the physical, social and mental domains.³ That *conversation* be basic to human experience challenges the prevailing physicalist paradigm in cognitive linguistics. It should be noted, however, that present-day conceptual metaphor theory seems to be coming around to the fact that human cognition is grounded in overall experience, “not only in the [physical] body, but also in the situations in which people act and lead their lives, the discourses in which they are engaged at any time in communicating and interacting with each other” (Kövecses 2015: 200). In sum, conceptual metaphors create virtual connections between different experiential domains, as well as between different semantic domains, and in both directions.

2. Conversational participants in dance-as-conversation metaphors

Dance is often referred to as “a language that cannot be entirely put into words” (Leseho & McMaster 2011: 59) and that may be composed of “regional, vernacular, corporeal body languages and vocabularies”.⁴ More specifically, amateur and professional dancers and choreographers alike frequently describe dance as “a conversation between body and soul”, a “dialogue between dancers”, or as a means to “tell a story” to the audience.

In this paper, we discuss different communicative channels in the conceptualization of dance as a conversation between: (i) the dancer’s body and mind;

³ This perspective, with its placement of communication and *the conversation frame* in a larger linguistic and philosophical context, is supported by L. Brandt (2010, 2013).

⁴ <http://jessicakoslow.com/2011/11/04/j-u-i-c-e-and-keet/>. This and subsequent links accessed March 2015.

(ii) the dancer(s) and music; (iii) between dancers; and (iv) the dancer(s) or the dance itself and the audience or bystanders. While these sub-metaphors apply to most if not all dance forms, we will focus on three very different improvisational dances, namely Biodanza, tango, and capoeira, each particularly characterized by one or two of such fictive communication channels and conversational participants.

2.1. Dance as a dialogue between body and mind: The case of Biodanza

Dance may be construed as “a language of the heart” (e.g. Leseho & McMaster 2011: 59). Across history and around the world, unrelated cultures and social groups often treat dance as a way to get in touch with the inner self, which may lead to self-knowledge and eventually have a healing power (Leseho & McMaster 2011; Roth 2011). This certainly goes for Biodanza, i.e. the Dance of life, described by its founder, the Chilean Rolando Toro (e.g. [2000] 2007), as a system of existential human development through music, movement, and emotion. Biodanza is a fundamentally creative and improvised dance form with non-choreographed movements or steps and fundamentally related to the dancer’s emotional world. Not surprisingly, Biodanza, like similar types of free dance, has often been defined as “a conversation between BODY and SOUL”.⁵ Consider this narrative from a Biodanza facilitator about how this free dance form helped her when she lacked “sufficient words to express [her]self and define [her] identity” (underlining added in all examples):⁶

- (1) ...I found stillness in my body and from that place of stillness arose an emotion, a voice much deeper, stronger, and more truthful to the expression of my essential self. Creativity that never before had the language to express itself began to flourish through explorations in movement, music, and emotion. [...] Below the layers of verbal communication I discovered how to communicate with my heart, allowing the emotion of the moment to be included in my interactions. I expanded the tools I have to express myself in the world by honoring my body’s wisdom as equally important as my mind’s knowledge.

Similarly, in an interview on Biodanza, Rolando Toro explains that we need to learn “to listen to what the body says” and “respond” directly to it, since – contrary to our mind – our body is always “true”.⁷

⁵ <http://www.healthybiza.com/retreats/biodanza/>.

⁶ <http://bodymindmoves.com/in-the-space-before-words/>.

⁷ Our translation from the Spanish original in an interview by Eli Neira, in Caamo magazine, Chile, June 2009 (<http://cronicasapocrifas.blogspot.nl/2009/06/entrevista-rolando-toro.html>). Gabrielle Roth, founder of the 5Rhythms, another creative free dance, expresses this idea particularly eloquently: “Dance is the fastest, most direct route to the truth -- not some big truth

In Biodanza, which is practiced collectively, this internal conversation is also encouraged by each dancer's interaction with the rest of the group in what may be experienced as "very strong collective communication" (Cruz 2012: 85). The movement and eye gaze of fellow dancers may thus be construed as an invitation to stay in touch with one's own emotional responses. This fictive conversational embedding is described in this dancer's account (Cruz 2012: 86):

- (2) It's as if there was an external call from all of us together, in communion! It has communication with my intimate self [...] with the permission to open even more, especially the space I have inside.

The permanent fictive conversation between the dancers' body, mind, and heart is naturally also encouraged by the music. Indeed, as opposed to other free dance forms, like improvisational dance, which may be practiced in silence, Biodanza sessions are always guided by music, with specific songs having been selected for specific exercises to evoke or guide particular inner explorations and movement expressions. One thus speaks of 'musical semantics', and construes music as fictively speaking to dancers. In the interview extract below, Biodanza creator Rolando Toro compares the communicative role of music in Biodanza to its role in traditional African dance:

- (3) What matters is the inner cry. African music has this inner quality, which is not a sound game for the ear's delight, but is tell-ing you **something**, uh, uh, when you have to go to war, honor the ancestors, you know? And music is telling you, in a uh... an **intense** way, the in-ten-si-ty in this music is tremendous.⁸

Music becomes "the instrument of mediation between the emotion and body movement", as a "universal language", whose "influence goes to the emotion directly, without passing through the filters of analytical thought".⁹ Music is thus not a memory supporting device or material anchor to make certain movements, but the aid to communicate with one's inner self. Hence, the moves resulting from such silent interaction will differ depending on the dancer's emotional state at the time:

- (4) Even though the music bathing us is the same (even though the grammar is the same), each of us feels it and translates it their own unique way. And we are invited to a

that belongs to everybody, but the get down and personal kind, the what's-happening-in-me-right-now kind of truth" (2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gabrielle-roth/spirituality-dance_b_862226.html).

⁸Our translation from the Spanish original in: "La belleza de pensar", filmed: 29 March 2009, published: 3 June 2012 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYDZTj2J9Z0>, 42:00, 47:59).

⁹http://www.scuolabiodanzatriveneto.it/en/Articles_and_books/Articles/art_neuroscience_and_biodanza_by_gittith_ariela_sanchez_padilla/.

rhythmic and expressive dialogue for a dance. In a relationship, if we fail to establish a bridge between our differences, the dialogue becomes difficult. Synchronizing with each other is an art. This art is a dialogue. An art that transforms each other in a subconscious and yet perceptible manner.¹⁰

In Biodanza, as in most dance forms, for that matter, the coordination between dancers may be construed and spoken about in conversational terms. In sum, in one same Biodanza session, different fictive communicative channels may be activated simultaneously, if not with the same prominence at the same time.

2.2. Dance as a dialogue between dancers: The case of tango

A partner dance, like waltz or salsa, is often defined as a ‘language’ that dancers use to “converse”: they “must both speak the same language in order to dance together”.¹¹ A type of dance that particularly attracts dialogue metaphors is, perhaps not surprisingly, the tango:

- (4) Tango is a walking embrace. It is a corporeal dialogue that is intimate and sensual, danced to nostalgic music. Born from foreigners who could not return to their homeland, they compensated for this with an embrace that communicated longing and sensuality through its walked movement.¹²

Tango has been described as “perfect communication without dialogue”¹³ between a man and a woman. The communication that occurs between the dancers is characterized by connoisseurs as not only intensely physical but also as an “emotional dialogue with another”,¹⁴ whose moves may even be viewed as “erotic dialogues in dance”.¹⁵ Metaphorical conceptualizations of the tango, “that dance of entwined limbs in conversation”,¹⁶ license myriad mappings between two mediums of expression: talk-in-interaction and an intention-driven turn-taking of moving bodies:

- (5) The tango is often comparable to a language with rules, words, well-encoded grammatical forms, from which endless possibilities and combinations are developed,

¹⁰ Our translation from the original French article “De la rencontre à la relation ou l’écologie relationnelle approche de la Biodanza®” (p. 185,

<http://www.pensamentobiocentrico.com.br/content/edicoes/18-full.pdf> - page=59).

¹¹ <http://www.cruzdancestudio.com/-!lessons/c1t44>.

¹² <http://www.psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/tango-a-feeling-that-is-danced/>.

¹³ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/naomi-head/tango-intimate-dance-of-conflict-transformation>.

¹⁴ <http://www.psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/tango-a-feeling-that-is-danced>.

¹⁵ Our translation from the German *Tango-Dialogo. Erotische Zwiegespräche im Tanz*, Sartori & Marra (2004).

¹⁶ <http://www.psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/tango-a-feeling-that-is-danced>.

in continuous evolution. The man shows a choreography, a figure, and he expresses it with his intention, with his body; the woman answers with her personal vibration. That imperceptible instant in which the woman perceives the movement of the partner is the instant in which the whole conversation is moulded, the dialogue between the two.¹⁷

Further mappings may specify the ‘lexicon’ of this body language: “There is a vocabulary for tango. These ‘elements’ include walks, turns, embellishments, ochos and molinetes [...]”¹⁸ As in verbal dialogue, this communication exchange is bidirectional¹⁹ and involves “*listening*” to the other party, “since every movement of one party reverberates in the body of the other.”²⁰ As in dialogue, the other party’s input – their movements as expressive metaphorical ‘utterances’ – are taken into account and absorbed by the attentive partner. Thus:

- (6) Fluidity of movement requires negotiation not just between leader and follower or between the masculine and feminine energies of both partners, but between their physicality and their emotions. Individually and together. Movement that is based on this kind of reciprocity creates a fluid, interactive loop of communication, of dialogue, of connection. Language evolved – such is the dance of Tango. Such is the interplay of sexuality and emotions in life – a subtle negotiation between self and other and the possibilities in between.²¹

It takes (at least) two to keep a conversation going, and as in any interpersonal interaction, miscommunication can happen. Dancers can be out of sync with each other: “The movement that ensues from this corporeal communication and dialogue can be sweet, passionate, fluid, silky or...not.”²² When the dance-as-dialogue does not go well, when “the conversation isn’t flowing”²³, the dance may be experienced

¹⁷ Our translation from the Italian article “Tango Argentino: dialogo intimo e sensibile tra due individui” (‘Argentine Tango: Intimate and sensitive dialogue between two individuals’, <http://www.massacritica.eu/tango-argentino-dialogo-intimo-e-sensibile-tra-due-individui/5467/>).

¹⁸ <http://events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/event?llr=goorgsdab&oeidk=a07e6rxomhlc89845b5>.

¹⁹ Our translation from the original Italian article “Comunicazione nel Tango e dialogo nella coppia” (‘Communication in Tango and dialogue between the couple’, <http://www.tangopusher.it/comunicazione-nel-tango-dialogo/>).

²⁰ Our translation from the Spanish article by Antonella Maia Perini “Tango, un diálogo que fue y será” (‘Tango, a dialogue that was and will be’, <http://www.unitedexplanations.org/2014/09/10/tango-un-dialogo-que-fue-y-sera>).

²¹ <http://www.psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/tango-a-feeling-that-is-danced>.

²² <http://www.psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/tango-a-feeling-that-is-danced>.

²³ Notice that a *liquid* metaphor is commonly employed both for dance and conversation, e.g. “fluid” (dance), “flowing” (conversation).

instead as a one-sided “lecture”, a confrontational rather than sensual “argument”, or as the dancers basically “speaking different languages”.²⁴

2.3. Dance as a dialogue between dancers and audience: The case of capoeira

Another type of improvisational dance that attracts the conversation frame is the dynamic ritual-game-fight dance, *capoeira*, of African-Brazilian origins. A combination of fighting, spirituality, acrobatic dance and call-response songs commemorating a history of slavery and oppression, capoeira evolved as an Afro-Brazilian martial art, “an art created out of the need for freedom” (Papadopoulos 2012)²⁵. This dance-fight is performed within a circle of people, musicians included, by two capoeiristas who are simultaneously opponents and partners.

Various attacks, evasive maneuvers and acrobatics are exchanged “through dialogue, coordination, improvisation and spontaneity” (ibid.). Just as tango, and most other dance forms, capoeira is often defined as a “physical dialogue” (de Miranda 2012), “corporal dialogue”²⁶, “a dialogue of movement”²⁷ or “dialogue of acrobatics”²⁸ between two dancers, involving “questions” and “responses” (Papadopoulos 2012) and other relevant conversational elements, such as “messages” consisting of “words” used more or less “eloquently” to “reply” to a conversational partner (Ros 2006²⁹). Similarly, capoeira may be construed as a metaphor that “goes beyond mere talking-and-listening conceptions of dialogue” to capture how “contradiction” can create connection (MacLennan 2011: 147). Capoeira relies on timing and rhythm, as does conversation, and at the end of the day, this temporal attunement is the very foundation of interpersonal connection. In his book on capoeira, Papadopoulos (2012) describes the superior player/dancer in terms of his movements being perfectly coordinated with those of his opponent. The most important thing is not to break the flow and the rhythm; *coordination* (and hence *timing*) is everything. As does conversation, dance requires *cooperation*, and the key factor in such cooperative endeavors is *timing* – in essence: achieving synchronicity.

²⁴ <http://www.dance-forums.com/threads/is-west-coast-swing-taught-backwards.36874/>.

²⁵ <http://www.cadernodecapoeira.gr>.

²⁶ <http://www.capoeiraiceland.com/class-content.html>.

²⁷ <http://www.dubrovnik.com/discover/city/776-the-dialogue-of-movement-capoeira>.

²⁸ <http://www.thewarrior.org/2009/01/29/a-dialogue-of-acrobatics-capoeira/>.

²⁹ http://articles.southbendtribune.com/2006-10-17/news/26938279_1_practice-capoeira-fighters-slaves.

Critically, what most characterizes capoeira is that a dancer's moves need not just be synchronized with the moves of the opponent, but also with the musical time of the accompanying percussion. The two players/dancers communicate with one another through a “call and response” form of interaction, by their engagement in defensive attacking and counterattacking, timed to fit the rhythm of the instruments playing.³⁰ According to one capoeira aficionado, the dance therefore lends itself to a description as a dialogue of the moves (of attack and counterattack). (ibid.) Two dialogues take place at the same time: one between the two dancers, and another one between the orchestra and the human circle who contribute the musical elements of song and percussion:

- (7) [...] a kind of “call and response” interaction takes place between the bateria [orchestra] and the roda [circle of people surrounding the capoeiristas], which intensifies the game and makes it livelier. In fact, this is the spiritual food that propels two capoeiristas to play. (ibid.)

These displays are in and of themselves ritualistic, but capoeira also has a *religiously* ritualistic aspect to it, a “mystical atmosphere” in the words of Papadopoulos (2012). A game of capoeira includes a possibility for prayer – prayer for protection and to honor forebears. A fatigued dancer may also pray for strength. These practices of religious service are built into the game itself – this spiritual, musical, fight-training game and dance that is capoeira. This is somehow resemblant of the Hassidic tradition of dance as a conversation with God.³¹

More mundanely, dance as such may also be construed as a message to the viewing audience, as illustrated by these quotes, translated from Mandarin Chinese, referring to different dance forms:

- (8) a. We will use our dance to tell all the people present here to feel the happiness.³²
 b. (This) 3-minute dance tells us what is love.³³

³⁰ <http://www.cadernodecapoeira.gr>.

³¹ <http://www.polishculturenyc.org/printIndex.cfm?itemCategory=35825&siteid=217&priorId=0&CFID=8501452&CFTOKEN=99782870>; <http://www.polishculturenyc.org/?itemId=395&eventId=1057>.

³² Dance Queen without one arm / Dance King without one leg -- Lin Fei & Li Ming, ‘China’s got talent’ 中国达人秀 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7nAJdGy0E0c>, 1’:17”). Thanks to Mingjian (Wesley) Xiang for the two Mandarin Chinese examples and their translations.

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q84qcvOOVi0>.

As an artform, dance can naturally be construed as an interaction with viewers, just as visual art may be described as fictively speaking to viewers (e.g. Sullivan forth).

3. Conclusions

We hope to have shown that physical embodied experience, such as dance, may be conceptualized and spoken about as a socio-communicative activity, manifested in fictive interaction metaphors. Our lifelong experience with the domain of communication makes the Conversation Frame fundamental for thought and language, so that we may speak of embodied cognition as well as embodied fictive interaction.

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