The Language of Dance

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Is dance a "language"? Should dance be included in events such as the recently inaugurated Bethesda (Maryland) Literary Festival? Why not? In this article, I will explain how the body language of dance not only resembles verbal language, but also influences literature. Understanding this dynamic can be beneficial to teaching, learning, and performance. Dance communicates ideas, stories, emotions, and moods, much like prose and poetry. Literature often inspires dance, and dance in turn inspires literature. Verbal language is used when one is teaching, learning, or creating dance, and writers often use dance imagery in their metaphors and other literary devices. In fact, dance jargon can be found in many of our metaphorical descriptions of everyday phenomena (e.g., "he waltzed around the subject").

During last year's Bethesda Literary Festival, various student and professional dance groups performed at the Maryland Youth Ballet and Joy of Motion dance studios, adjacent to the festival site, in part to illuminate these connections between literature and dance. In addition, the National Dance Education Organization hosted its own book fair in the studios.

Alas, not everyone recognizes dance as language. The old proverb, "Good dancers have mostly better heels than heads," conveys one of many common misconceptions about dance. Our society tends to distrust the body and consider it apart from the mind that creates vocal and written discourse. Schools measure knowledge in words and numbers. However, many scholars are now stressing the "mentality of matter," that is, the integration of mind and body (Damasio, 1994). One cannot dance mindlessly; indeed, dance requires many of the same faculties of the brain as verbal language.

According to renowned psychologist Howard Gardner (1993), dance is a form of kinesthetic intelligence, like surgery. In essence, dance is a kind of thinking—an ability to solve problems through control of one's bodily motions. Observations of choreographers at work show that they draw upon musical, visual, verbal, and interpersonal intelligences for success.

Nearly 30 years ago, anthropologist Gordon Hewes (1973) argued that the body is not mute and that language is based on the innate cognitive structure of gesture. Although literature moves human experience a step away from the body in its attempt to express bodily sensations, dance remains at the basic level of human expression. Movement is our mother tongue and primordial thought. Infants track movement and anticipate what will come, as in the peek-a-boo game. Recent research underscores the power of nonverbal communication, showing that it is sometimes even more compelling than verbal communication.

For example, psychologist Susan Goldin-Meadow (1997; 1999) and her colleagues (Goldin-Meadow, McNeil, & Singleton, 1996; Morford & Goldin-Meadow, 1997; Singleton, Morford, & Goldin-Meadow, 1993) discovered that among congenitally deaf children who had hearing parents and were not exposed to a conventional sign language, gestures carried the primary burden of communication, and the children could combine them in grammar-like ways. The children could also use nonverbal means to refer to information that was spatially and temporally displaced from them.

Researchers have also found that congenitally blind speakers gestured despite their lack of a visual model, even when they were speaking to a blind listener (Goldin-Meadow & Mylander, 1998; Goldin-Meadow & Sandhofer, 1999; Iverson, 1998). With gesture, blind children conveyed to seeing adults substantive information that was not found anywhere in their speech. Moreover, when speech and gesture conveyed different information, researchers found that gesture played the larger role in affecting the message that listeners received; gestures that conveyed a different message diminished a listener's ability to understand a spoken message. Similarly, other researchers found that when elementary school teachers taught math by using gestures that were well-matched to their words (e.g., making flat palm gestures under each side of an equation to illustrate that two sides should be equal), students understood the lesson better than when words and gestures were mismatched (Alibali, Flevares, & Goldin-Meadow, 1997; Garber, Alibali, & Goldin-Meadow, 1998; Goldin-Meadow, Kim, & Singer, 1999).

Gestures offer insights into a child's thoughts, mental processes, and representations by reflecting knowledge that the child possesses but does not verbalize. In fact, researchers "suggest that the knowledge expressed in gesture…appears to be inaccessible to verbal report" (Garber et al., 1998, p. 82). With the entire body as the instrument of dance, imagine its potential to communicate beyond mere hand gestures!

Dance as Language

Dance has purposeful, intentionally rhythmical, and culturally influenced sequences of body movements that are selected in much the same way that a person would choose sequences of verbal language. Merging mind and body, dance commonly captivates both dancer and viewer thereby, making it a powerful tool of communication (Hanna, 1983). There is the sight of dancers moving in time and space; the sound of this movement; the smell of the dancers' physical exertion; the tactile sensation of body parts touching the ground, each other, or props, and of the air moving around the dancers; and the sense of distance. All of these facets of dance may have culturally based meaning.

Research has shed light on how dance is similar in many ways to verbal language (Barko, 1977; Goellner & Murphy, 1995; Hanna, 1979a, b, 1983, 1986, 1987, 1988a,b,c, 1989, 1992, 1998, 1999; Safire, 1991). Like American Sign Language, dance draws upon the same components of the brain for conceptualization, creativity, and memory as verbal language. Both dance and verbal language have vocabulary (steps and gestures in dance), grammar (rules for justifying how one dance movement can follow another), and meaning. Although spoken language can simply be meaningless sounds, and movements can be mere motion, listeners and viewers tend to read meaning into what they hear and see. Both verbal language and dance also have arbitrariness (many of their characteristics have no predictability), discreteness (separateness), displacement (reference can be made to something not immediately present), productivity (messages never created before can be sent and understood within a set of structural principles), duality of patterning (a system of physical action and a system of meaning), cultural transmission, ambiguity, affectivity (expression of an internal state with the potential for changing moods and situations), and a wide range in the number of potential participants in their communication process.

There are countless other intersections between dance and verbal language. For one thing, the process of teaching, choreographing, and performing dance is impossible without verbal language (e.g., references to the body and its actions; elements of dance; different kinds and qualities of movements). Furthermore, literature often inspires dance. For example, the *Nutcracker* ballet, created in 1890, comes from a long fairy tale, E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Nutcracker and the King of Mice*. In March 2000, Septime Webre choreographed a work for the Washington Ballet in collaboration with Maurice Sendak, the author-illustrator of the children's classic, *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Dance has similar impact on literature. For example, dance metaphors are often used to explain issues in language, politics, health, science, social relations, and sports. Novelists and poets use different dance forms to portray characters or seasons and to illuminate other aspects of their work. Shakespeare allowed lovers to speak indirectly to one another by using dance as a metaphor for love in *Much Ado About Nothing* (e.g., Beatrice speaks of the "hot and hasty" quality of the jig). Some poets even read their work with dance accompaniment.

Even our everyday language shows this influence. There are common metaphors such as "words are a dance of thoughts" and "they choreographed the battle." Journalists offer descriptions such as "[the prosecutor] began an exhaustive, carefully choreographed presentation" (Rohde & Barnes, 2000, p. A21). About the economic market, financier George Soros commented, "Maybe the music has stopped, but people are still dancing" (Hakim 2000, p. B18), while another writer speculated about "The Earnings Waltz" (Morgenson, 1999). A recent article on a pending company merger had the caption "Practicing the Steps Even Before the Dance" (Deutsch, 1999). During last year's presidential campaign, one saw articles with titles such as "Abortion Minuets" (2000) and debate jabs such as Bill Bradley's, "What you've seen is an elaborate, what I call Gore Dance" (Nagourney, 2000, p. A1). One commentator called actor Warren Beatty's flirtation with endorsing a candidate "his unconsummated political striptease" (Rich, 2000, p. A29). In sports, one writer described how tennis player Magnus Norman's " forehands…dance delicately at his opponent's feet" (Alexander, 2000, p. D1).

Yet it must be remembered that both "dance" and verbal "language" are generic terms. One does not speak "language," but rather English, Igbo, or some other specific tongue. Similarly, one dances, for example, ballet or Bharata Natyam; contrary to conventional wisdom, dance is not a universal "language," but many languages and dialects. There are close to 6,000 verbal languages, and probably that many languages of dance as well. For example, Peter Martins, director of the New York City Ballet, believes that classical ballet and modern dance are different dialects of the same language (in Solway, 1988). By contrast, classical Indian dance, with its ancient, elaborate system of codified gestures, is a different language altogether.

Certainly, there are differences between dance and verbal language. In dance, the motor, visual, and kinesthetic channels predominate instead of the vocal and auditory channels. Whereas verbal language exists solely in a temporal dimension, dance involves the temporal plus three dimensions in space. Yet it is more difficult to communicate complex logical structures with dance than with verbal language. A summary of the differences and

similarities between dance and verbal language is presented in table 1.

Dance as a Figurative Language

Dance also has symbolic potential, and in that sense more often resembles poetry than prose. Writer Jennifer Dunning (1998) noted,

Dance, like poetry, is an art of metaphor and abstraction, though it whisks by and cannot easily be reread. There are narrative dances, from *Swan Lake* to *Revelations*, just as there are narrative poems. And nothing having to do with the human body can be truly abstract. Stillness and motion are inherently dramatic. But even the most clearly expressive phrase of dance is a distillation, whether the beating of a foot that suggests the beating of a heart newly and fearfully in love, or a raising of arms that approximates prayer. (p. B2)

Poetry has multiple, symbolic, suggestive, and elusive meanings, and there can be various interpretations of prose as well. Similarly, people "read" and "write" dance from the perspectives of their cultures and personal experiences. For example, ballerina Alessandra Ferri said, "But even if you are not telling a story, you are playing a character. You are playing yourself. You are bringing something of yourself into the dance. You *are* telling a story" (quoted in Dunning, 1997, p. B1). If two dancers are on stage, the audience will create all sorts of narratives to account for their movements. Even the most abstract of dances may be viewed as symbolic of human existence, rather than as the autonomous, "pure dance" a choreographer may intend.

Postmodern choreographer Merce Cunningham is known for his abstract dances that parallel the ideas of 20th-century writers such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and T. S. Elliot. Cunningham wrote,

It goes from paragraphs, to sentences, down to words—and now to words themselves separated, so you don't have even a whole word…I never made explicit references…. I could just as well substitute one image for another, in the Joycean sense of there being not a symbol but multiple symbols…. (quoted in Dalva, 1988, p. 60).

In the 1930s, renowned modern dancer Martha Graham described dance as essentially emotional expression. As we came to know more about nonverbal communication, however, Graham and others began to speak of dance as a language that expresses meaning as well as emotion (Hanna, 1983). Various *New York Times* writers, from the arts to politics, share William Safire's view of dance as "a form of speaking," "a lexicon of wordlessness," and "silent speech" (Safire, 1991, p. 16). As modern-dance pioneer Isadora Duncan is widely reported to have said, "If I could *tell* you what I mean, there would be no point in dancing."

Conveying Meaning Through Dance

How do we learn to "speak" and "hear" the language of dance? One way is to experience how dance communicates ideas, stories, emotions, and moods using the following basic elements:

- Space has direction, level, amplitude, focus, grouping, and shape.
- Rhythm has tempo, duration, accent, and meter.
- Effort, or dynamics, is force, energy, tension, relaxation, and flow.
- Shape is the changing relationship of the mover to another person or object or to the space.
- Locomotion is the means of moving from place to place, including walking, running, leaping, hopping, jumping, skipping, sliding, and galloping.
- Gesture is movement that does not carry weight, such as rotation, flexion, extension, and vibration.
- A phrase is a group of movement sequences that makes a distinctive statement.
- A motif is a movement portion that can be presented in different ways (e.g., fast or slow, with more or less force).

An example of how these elements of dance are used to communicate comes from the Ubakala, Igbo of Nigeria (Hanna, 1987). Since the social and biological roles of men and women in this society are supposed to differ—women as life-giving mothers, and men as life-taking warriors—the dances of each gender contrast. Women dance slowly and easily in circles, whereas men dance rapidly and forcefully in angular lines.

Combining sociolinguistics, semiotics, and the anthropology of dance worldwide, it is possible to identify different devices for, and spheres of, encoding meaning in dance (Hanna, 1987). Dancers may use one or more of the six symbolic devices described below to embody the imagination. These devices vary in degree of abstraction.

Concretization is movement that reproduces the outward aspect of something. Examples include a warrior dance displaying advance and retreat battle tactics, a dancer depicting an historical figure such as Nijinsky, and a wide-open mouth denoting a scream.

An *icon* represents most characteristics of something and is responded to as if it actually were what it represents. For example, a Haitian dancer manifesting through a specific dance the presence of Ghede, the god of love and death, is

treated by fellow Haitians with genuine awe and gender-appropriate behavior—as if he actually were the god himself.

A *stylization* encompasses both conventional and arbitrary gestures or movements. For example, a Western classical ballet *danseur* points to his heart as a sign of love for his lady, and a swing dancer shakes a finger in the lindy hop as a sign of joy in moving well.

A *metonym* is a motional conceptualization of one thing representing another, of which it is a part. An example is a romantic duet representing a more encompassing relationship, such as an affair or marriage.

Metaphor, the most common way of encoding meaning in dance, involves expressing one thought, experience, or phenomenon in terms of another. For example, contrastive movement patterns for men and women can illustrate their distinct biological and social roles, and dancers can perform as animal characters to comment on human behavior. Other examples of metaphor in dance include: performing the dances of another group as a way of identifying with it, being part of it, or even dominating it; mechanical movement symbolizing the rigidity of bureaucracy; dance virtuosity representing human aspiration to transcend the limits of the body; a woman from the Gogo tribe in Africa performing the men's warrior dance as a way of saying, "I am giving you my strength to enhance your success"; gang signs in rap videos standing for competitive groups; cutting sessions in tap, when each dancer one-ups the other through dance as a symbol of personal superiority; a dancer walking on walls and defying gravity, representing the rejection of the use of gravity in traditional modern dance; and many events appearing on stage simultaneously, symbolizing the chaos of life.

Actualization is a portrayal of one or several aspects of a dancer's real life. For example, in a performance setting without rigid boundaries between performer and spectator, a dancer could express in dance a romantic interest in a spectator who, through participation in the dance, accepts or rejects the dancer. As in verbal speech, dance may reflect a person's actual personality or condition. A dancer who is known to have AIDS can evoke awe during a performance due to this fact.

The devices for encapsulating meaning in dance seem to operate within one or more of eight spheres of communication:

1. The dance event itself (e.g., when people attend a social dance to be seen, perhaps as participants in a charity ball)
2. The total human body in action (e.g., in a dancer's self-presentation)
3. The whole pattern of performance—emphasizing structure, style, feeling, or drama—with the focus on the interrelation of those parts of a dance that give it a distinctiveness, as in a sacred dance
4. The sequence of unfolding movement, including who does what to whom, and how, in dramatic episodes (e.g., narrative ballets like *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*, and *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin*)
5. Specific movements and how they are performed, as when a male dancer parodies a female dancer by dancing *en pointe*
6. The intermesh of movements with other communication modes, such as singing, speaking, or costuming (e.g., in the hit Broadway musical, *The Lion King,* or in Japanese Noh, where the performer meditates on a mask representing a deity and transforms into the deity in order to tell a story of great intensity)
7. Dance as a vehicle for another medium (e.g., dance as a backdrop for rap; Polynesian dance, which is an adjunct of poetry)
8. Presence, the emotional impact of projected sensuality, raw animality, or charisma; "the magic of dance," the energy that passes between dancers and to the audience

Meaning in dance also relies on who does what, when, where, why, how, and with whom. Such variables can help dancers highlight sexual orientation and gender roles. They can also help to emphasize ethnic, national, and other group identities (e.g., see Shay, 1999), which may promote self-esteem and separatism. Cuba's rumba, originally a dance of poor blacks, has become the national dance; the government hopes that it will bond everyone in a celebration of "rainbow" diversity (Daniel, 1995).

Similarly, religions from Christianity to Hinduism have long used dance to convey their precepts and legends of divinity, while in 19th-century Europe, ballets such a *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty* provided ethical instruction for court and bourgeois behavior. In 20th-century United States, Bill T. Jones's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin* called attention to events in American history that should not be repeated. Other issues that would be impolite, politically incorrect, or even treasonous to articulate in verbal language are often expressed (or parodied) through the language of dance. Because dance speaks so powerfully, some religious organizations and totalitarian governments consistently attempt to control it.

Dance Notation

One must also consider what is called "dance literacy," where knowing "the language of dance" means being fluent in one or more systems of dance notation, such as Benesh, Labanotation, Laban Movement Analysis, or Eshkol-Wachmann (Hutchinson-Guest, 1989). Dance notation describes movement with ideographic symbols rather than with verbal language. Ann Hutchinson-Guest's "The Language of Dance" (LOD), for example, is a simplified form of Labanotation that can help children learn to understand movement.

Mastery of Labanotation meets one of two foreign language requirements for the Ph.D. in Dance History and Theory at the University of California, Riverside. This parallels engineering programs that allow programming languages to meet foreign-language requirements. For example, Kevin Frey used LOD for his DMA in Music Composition/Horn at the University of Wisconsin, Madison; J. Kovach used Labanotation for a degree in comparative religion at Boston University; and the faculty of computational linguistics at the University of Amsterdam accepted Joukje Kolff's thesis on the structure of Labanotation.

Although dance notation systems are not the equivalent of verbal languages, they have some similarities. Verbal language, dance, and dance notation are all generative, in that performers are capable of producing and understanding an infinitely large number of never-before-encountered expressions. Although notation may be generative and interpretive, it is primarily used to record dance, not create it. Dance notation is a conceptual tool using a kind of "alphabet" script to describe a language. Like a verbal alphabet, dance notation symbols can transcribe various languages. Dance notation systems emphasizing the universality of body structure are composed of universal alphabets applicable to a variety of dance idioms. In a sense, dance notation is a meta-language—a "language" about languages.

Much like a music score, dance notations are scripts that can be created and read to reconstruct physical movements and movement qualities. Notation systems may use nouns, verbs, and adjectives to describe different movements and languages of dance with their own cultural memory, individual expression, and physical and verbal meanings. In dance notation, the verb is the action of body parts in space. Labanotation's action-stroke vocabulary and its adverbial symbols illustrate its syntactic capability. In Laban Movement Analysis, the notator chooses what to observe and record; the primary modifier may be a body part, effort, shape, or space. Despite this syntactic complexity, large areas of linguistic symbolism (e.g., figurative modes of expression) have yet to be represented in an evolving notation system.

Dance as an Interdisciplinary Tool

Because dance is language-like, it is a medium for interdisciplinary education. It facilitates learning by promoting creativity and by giving concrete, moving expression to abstract concepts. Before earning a Ph.D. in anthropology from Columbia University, I was a school teacher in Los Angeles, certified by the state of California to teach high school social studies and English. In 1972—with this background, as well as my dance training and experience in teaching dance—I offered a dance-centered course for Gill/St. Bernard's High School in Bernardsville, New Jersey. I saw firsthand how the language of dance could be a point of entry into academic subjects. Students learned different dances and then researched their culture and history. English skills were developed when students wrote critiques of the dance concerts they saw at Lincoln Center and then compared their critiques with what critic Clive Barnes wrote in *The New York Times* the next day.

Many students (especially those at risk of dropping out of school) are alienated from schooling that cuts knowledge into subjects pieces that are unrelated to each other and detached from real life. Dance education hooks many such students' attention through its immediate engagement of mind and body. Once students are anchored in dance, other educational options present themselves. A well-developed dance-education program propels students to learn the "three Rs," and it fosters multilingualism as well. In this technology-centered 21st century, even dancers must be able to read, write, and calculate. Of the many students intent on becoming professional artists, few actually realize dance career aspirations. Yet all students can be motivated to pursue dancerelated careers with skills that are transferable to jobs outside dance, such as dance program fundraiser, promoter, writer, administrator, photographer, or therapist.

Conclusion

Current knowledge challenges assumptions about dance long held by non-dancers and dancers alike. In addition to contributing to a healthy lifestyle, dance is a "language" with which to communicate emotions and ideas. Like vernacular and literary language, dance embodies the human imagination, records our achievements, and distinguishes us as human beings.

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