

The role of embodied metaphors in solving choreographic problems in dance

The goal of the project is to describe and investigate how embodied metaphors work as a tool in solving choreographic problems. Embodied metaphors can be understood as ways of verbalising and gesticulating mental states and general concepts; they are used by people when learning and when acting. They grow out of the proprioceptive and kinaesthetic bodily experience of people responding to their environment and in response to the behaviour of others. Embodied metaphors may take the form of verbal instructions and gestures to aid interpersonal communication in dance – in the course of organising and teaching choreographic routines. In dance, as one of the many performative arts, metaphors appear in the terminology of dance describing the varied dance moves. They also appear in the communication between dancers or in the instructions of the teacher or choreographer, instructions which seek to organise the dancer's movements. In each of these cases, metaphorical phrases and gestures are closely connected to bodily experience. The "choreographic problem" that might appear in various kinds of dance is solved at the level of verbal communication and gesticulation. The considerations involved in the project are interdisciplinary and a key element of this approach is the theory of embodied cognition, a theory claiming that cognition is mediated by the body – the body shapes the mind and ways of thinking. Another key theoretical element of the background is situated cognition which David Kirsh has presented as an important element of problem solving. In the process of solving choreographic problems another key theory is the theory of cognitive metaphors as developed by George Lakoff, Mark Johnson – referred to in this project as "embodied metaphors". The most pertinent aspect of the latter theory is the conception therein of orientational metaphors which are embedded in the physical as well as the cultural experience of the world.

The researched planned aims to show how embodied metaphors and knowledge expressed metaphorically are used in solving significant problems of dance. The empirical part of the project will revolve around researching choreographic problem-solving by means of embodied metaphors, in three different situations: (1) the choreographer's teaching dance phrases where the goal is the memorising of a sequence of movements; (2) dance rehearsals where a dance is being created and where problems are solved in the relationships dancer-dancer as well as choreographer-dancer (3) improvised dance where the goal is to create a move and the problem is expressed in the form of metaphorical instructions. When dancers perform movements as per the teacher's instructions, they base their understanding on their own bodily experience, including on imaginative schemes (bodily schemes and body images) which define the content and value of the metaphors appearing in expressions and movements. This process means that learning dance movements is facilitated, a fact which brings said imaginative schemes into the project's focus of interest.

The use of metaphor in the solving of specific choreographic problems has been researched so far only superficially, when researched at all. In particular, there has been insufficient awareness of the embedding of metaphors in the bodily experience of subjects. For this reason, a first stage in the project will be to integrate these previous, partial results from selected conceptions and theories to form a unified conception of embodied metaphors in dance. Secondly, there will be carried out empirical research into the functioning of metaphorical instructions and gestures given during various kinds of dance (classical dance and GAGA) where both professional and amateur groups perform the appropriate dance phrases, learn them, cooperate with each other and improvise. The effectiveness of embodied metaphors will be researched for each of the aforementioned cases on the basis of a mixed methodology consisting of quantitative and qualitative research also based on the dance and choreographic experience of the project director, as well as incorporating the participation of competent judges and dance experts.

From the research results, one might expect a confirmation of the following research hypothesis: metaphorical instructions – both verbal and gesticulated – are deeply involved with the individual experience of dancers as well as being an effective means of organising the teaching and performance of dance.