

Body Language, Body Learning

Scott Thornbury

Words come out of the mouth and go into the ear. But they're stored in the mind. And retrieved from the mind. And understood in the mind. They're also learned in the mind.

That, at least, is the conventional wisdom – especially from the point of view of cognitive psychology. “Language is instantiated in the minds and therefore the brains of language users.” Thus argues Ray Jackendoff (2002, p. xiv). Theories of second language acquisition follow suit “Language learning, like any other learning, is ultimately a matter of change in an individual’s internal mental state” (Doughty & Long, 2003, p. 4). Anything else, such as the social contexts in which language is used, or the physical stuff of the brain itself, or even the body in which the mind/brain is housed, are considered marginal, messy, uninteresting – mere noise.

Of course, such a view has a sort of intuitive attraction. Language, obviously, is in the mind. Where else could it be? Not in the body, surely?

Not in the body, perhaps, but maybe of the body. Some cognitive linguists have broken ranks and taken issue with the stark mind-body separation that has been fundamental to rationalist thinking since Descartes first famously declared, “I think, therefore I am”. Johnson (1987, p. xiii), for example, argues that “the body is in the mind” and that “any adequate account of meaning and rationality must give a central place to embodied and imaginative structures of understanding by which we grasp our world.”

Take, for example, expressions like “Social networking is *on the up*” or “*he was feeling down*.” These are examples of what Johnson calls “the experiential embodied nature of human rationality” (1987, p. 100). The use of the word *up* to connote increase and *down* to connote decrease emerges, according to Johnson, “from a tendency to employ an UP-DOWN orientation in picking out meaningful structures of our experience. We grasp the structure of verticality repeatedly in thousands of perceptions and activities we experience every day, such as perceiving a tree, our felt sense of standing upright, the activity of climbing stairs . . .” (p. xiv).

Johnson argues that such experientially based “image schemata” are integral to meaning and rationality – and of course, language. The way that language *is*, the way we use language, and the way that language is learned are all structured and shaped by the fact that “the body is in the mind.” One fairly obvious manifestation of this is the way we choose particles for phrasal verbs. We *fill up* the tank, the future is *looking up*, but people *let us down*, especially when they *put us down*.

What are the implications for language learning? On the assumption that bringing such relationships to conscious awareness may help learning, a number of researchers have investigated the mnemonic potential of unpacking the image schemata that “motivate” common idioms and phrasal

verbs. Others, such as Holme (2009, p. 48) argue the case for using an enactment and movement (E&M) based pedagogy, thereby “building a bridge between movement, imagination and recollection.” Thus, Lindstromberg and Boers (2005), drawing on research into L1 vocabulary learning that shows that acting out word meanings helps children increase their vocabularies, demonstrated that learners remember verbs better not only when they enact them, but also when they watch their classmates enact them. As Holme (2009, p. 48) puts it: “The body can be rethought as the expressive instrument of the language that must be learnt.”

Other scholars take the notion of embodied cognition a step further, and go so far as to situate thought – and, by extension, language – not only in the body, but “in the world,” on the grounds that, as Churchill et al. (2010, p. 237) argue, “brains are in bodies, bodies are in the world, and meaningful action in these worlds is in large part socially constructed and conducted.”

In a recent article, Atkinson (2010) explores the way an extended, embodied view of cognition might affect second language acquisition. He suggests that language learning, rather than being an intellectual process of internalization, is a socially situated, adaptive behaviour, a process “of continuously and progressively fitting oneself to one’s environment, often with the help of guides” (p. 611). Language is not just cognition; it is also behaviour.

One way that this teaching-learning behaviour is realised is through what is popularly known as “body language” the way that the teacher’s gestures, for example, help construct meaning, and the way that the learner’s body expresses understanding and engagement. To demonstrate how this might be realized in practice, Atkinson traces, in minute detail, the interaction a schoolgirl has with her English teacher, as they work through a grammar exercise together: an intricate meshing of language, gesture, gaze, and laughter, inseparable from the experience of learning itself, and bringing to mind these lines of Yeats:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

References

- Atkinson, D. (2010). Extended, embodied cognition and second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics*, 31, 5.
- Churchill, E., Okada, H., Nishino, T., & Atkinson, D. (2010). Symbiotic gesture and the sociocognitive visibility of grammar in second language acquisition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 94, 2.
- Doughty, C., & Long, M. (Eds.). (2003). *The handbook of second language acquisition*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Holme, R. (2009). *Cognitive linguistics and second language teaching*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jackendoff, R. (2002) *Foundations of language: Brain,*

meaning, grammar, evolution. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, M. (1987). *The body in the mind: The bodily basis of meaning, imagination, and reason*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.

Lindstromberg, S., & Boers, F. (2005). From movement to metaphor with manner-of-movement verbs. *Applied Linguistics*, 26, 2.

Scott Thornbury is the curriculum co-ordinator for the MA TESOL at The New School in New York. He is also Academic Director of the International Teacher Development Institute. He is the author of a number of award-winning books on language and on teaching, and is currently the series editor for the Cambridge Handbooks for Teachers. His website is: www.thornburyscott.com



The 2012 KOTESOL International Conference is one of the biggest events in Asia, and we want to see you there!

Check KoreaTESOL.org for more information about the conference.

Remember, you can cast your vote in the elections at the conference as well.

Don't miss any of the speakers on October 20-21st!