

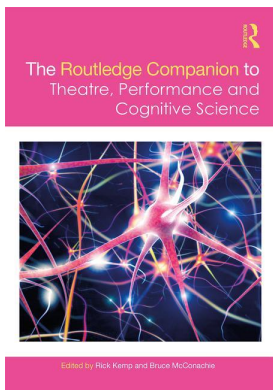
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### **Acting Technique, Jacques Lecoq and Embodied Meaning**

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# ACTING TECHNIQUE, JACQUES LECOQ AND EMBODIED MEANING

*Rick Kemp*

### **Introduction**

The idea that actors employ technique can be surprising to many outside the fields of theatre and performance. While the visibility of technique varies according to style and medium, in the naturalistic style of most Western drama, actors seem to appear to respond spontaneously to events, creating an apparent naturalness of behaviour in fictional circumstances. In fact, this naturalness is generally the result of many years of training, and long and painstaking preparation for individual roles. Actors preparing and playing a role engage in most, if not all, of the cognitive processes that humans conduct in daily life – with a crucial difference. Actors consciously elicit and regulate phenomena that generally arise spontaneously for most people. It is probably easy to recognise that an actor will seek to consciously regulate features such as vocalisation, facial expression, gesture and movement, because these are audible and visible. But actors also address many other phenomena that are not so readily apparent. Imagination is necessary to embody a fictional character in fictional circumstances. Empathy with the fictional character may be stirred by this process, and the actor certainly seeks to stimulate empathy in an audience. Actors also seek to stimulate and regulate emotion – the believability of emotion in fictional circumstances is highly valued by Western audiences.

A heightened faculty of memory is necessary not only for the obvious task of precisely memorising dialogue, but also for less evident tasks, such as reproducing the planned movement and behaviour in a specific production, often at the micro-level of ‘actions’ that communicate unspoken thoughts and feelings. In preparing a role by analysing a script or through improvisatory creation, an actor needs a knowledge of linguistic and narrative forms, as well as a psychological and sociological understanding of human behaviour. This list is not exclusive, but it gives an idea of the realm of extended cognitive-affective activities within which an actor’s technique operates. Some of the activities are conscious, many operate below the level of conscious awareness most of the time and many can never be consciously accessed. So actors are frequently seeking to consciously elicit otherwise unconscious phenomena. The means by which they do this are the assorted exercises and practices that I collectively call technique. It is these activities that are taught in actor training.

In Western theatre, actor training as a dedicated activity arose predominantly in the twentieth century, with varied forms of apprentice systems largely responsible for the development of

technique prior to this. The most influential formulator of contemporary acting technique in the West was Russian actor and director Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938), who developed a system for preparing a role that is widely taught in European, North American and Western-influenced theatre conservatoires. His work is analysed from a cognitive perspective by Sharon Carnicke in Chapter 1 of this book. Stanislavski's approach is largely applied to text-based performance and associated mainly with the style of psychological realism that has been prevalent on stage and screen in the second half of the twentieth century and early part of this century. By contrast, the performance pedagogy of Jacques Lecoq (1921–1999) deals mainly with improvisation, deliberately avoids language in its early stages, engages with multiple styles of performance and explicitly seeks to stimulate the creation of new forms of performance. It is a training system for actors that is radically different from Stanislavski's, yet the two are widely used alongside one another in Western actor training programmes, suggesting that in practice they complement each other.

In this chapter I propose that Lecoq's conceptualisation of acting technique is implicitly congruent with the principles of embodied cognition, and often explicitly forecasts its precepts. When viewed in the theoretical framework of embodied cognition, many of Lecoq's training practices consciously elicit and define what would otherwise be unconscious activity, articulating expressive techniques that demonstrate the dynamic and constructive nature of meaning as broadly posited in the concept of embodied simulation. I will give a brief overview of some of the relevant principles of embodied cognition and will then relate these to key themes of Lecoq's pedagogy. The chapter concludes with a case study that gives an example of how Lecoq's rigorous training not only benefits actors, but can also provide information for research beyond the field of acting. The case study focuses on a video of Lecoq teaching a class on gesture and language. The extract that I describe uses gestures associated with 'taking' executed by different language groups among Lecoq's students. The phrase 'je prends' (normally translated as 'I take') provokes a variance of gesture among the different language groups. When viewed from the perspective of embodied cognition, this suggests that the concepts associated with this action differ significantly among language groups, indicating the culturally situated nature of meaning. This also suggests that the linguistic translation of 'take' for 'prendre' overlooks the cultural nuances of meaning that are revealed by Lecoq's training in acting technique.

### **Embodied cognition**

Embodied cognition proposes that thinking and behaviour are properties of the whole human organism, not the brain alone, and that body, brain and cognition are 'situated' – engaged with the surrounding environment. This presents a radical challenge to the Cartesian separation of mind from body that has long influenced traditional Western psychology. The field of embodied cognition incorporates research from many related disciplines – psychology, linguistics and neurobiology among many others – and inevitably contains varied opinions. Certain concepts, however, are considered foundational. One of these is the principle that has emerged from neuroscientific findings that sensorial and motor experiences form the neural foundations for mental concepts.

As cognitive linguist George Lakoff and cognitive philosopher Mark Johnson explain:

Our abilities to move the way we do and to track the motion of other things give motion a major role in our conceptual system. The fact that we have muscles and use them to apply force in certain ways leads to the structure of our system of causal concepts. What

is important is that the peculiar nature of our bodies shapes our very possibilities for conceptualization and categorization.

*(Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 19)*

This concept challenges assumptions that underlie much of Western thought, since it demonstrates that mental concepts are shaped by physical experience in the material environment and use many of the same neural pathways that are involved in physical action and sensorial experience. Based on this understanding, phenomena such as consciousness, empathy, intersubjectivity, affect and aesthetic responses ‘come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities [that] are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological and cultural context’ (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991, 173). Within the field of embodied cognition there is a growing consensus that meaning results intersubjectively from our situated interactions with the world. Thus, meaning can be quite personal, as it depends on our particular experiences in particular environments. By extension, meaning is also variable across cultures. This theory of meaning depends on the theory of embodied simulation – the experience of perception and action without their physical manifestation. According to the embodied simulation hypothesis, meaning does not arise from the deployment of abstract mental symbols but is constructed from the neural experiences triggered by various stimuli and is thus dynamic and constructive (Gallese 2007a). I will describe other aspects of theory from embodied cognition later. For now, I would like to trace the links between these fundamental precepts of embodied cognition and three key precepts of Lecoq’s training: ‘Tout bouge’ (‘everything moves’), ‘Le fonds poétique commun’ (translated below) and ‘Dynamiques’ (‘Dynamics’).

### **Jacques Lecoq – Tout bouge**

The influence of Jacques Lecoq on modern theatre is significant. He founded an international school of performance training in Paris in 1956 where he taught until a few days before his death in 1999. The school continues to thrive under the direction of Pascale Lecoq, Lecoq’s daughter, and has trained over 5,000 students from at least 84 countries. Many of these students have formed their own companies, such as Le Théâtre du Soleil in Paris, Complicite in London, Mummenschantz in Switzerland, Footsbarn in France and Pig Iron in Philadelphia as well as many others worldwide. Graduates have also found success as directors of theatre and film (e.g. Julie Taymor, Luc Bondy, Simon McBurney, James McDonald), or as actors in mainstream movies (e.g. Geoffrey Rush, Toby Jones and Sergi Lopez). Many others teach in actor-training programmes or have founded their own schools in countries ranging from Chile to Germany to the USA to Belgium, Italy and Spain (for more information on Lecoq and his school, see Lecoq 2001, 2006; Murray 2003; Kemp 2012; Evans and Kemp 2016).

Lecoq’s guiding principle was ‘Tout bouge’ – everything moves. His rigorous analysis of movement in humans and their environments formed the foundation for a refined and nuanced repertoire of acting exercises rooted in physical action. These exercises develop a heightened somatic awareness in the actor of the relationship between thought, feeling, gesture and language, preparing him or her to communicate with movement in a variety of styles, to employ physical actions that both provoke and define emotion and to invest spoken language with meaningful gesture. Given the primacy that embodied cognition places on sensorimotor experience and its role in shaping meaning, Lecoq’s focus on movement immediately resonates with its principles and the involvement of physical activity with communication. It must be remembered, however, that the ideas of embodied cognition are still

in the process of gaining widespread recognition, and many people in mainstream theatre consider Lecoq's teaching to be less sophisticated an approach to acting than Stanislavski's script-oriented process – precisely because Lecoq's originates in movement. As recent scholarship shows (e.g. Carnicke 2009; Kemp 2012) the linking of Stanislavski with a purely mental and linguistic approach has been overstated, as his 'Active Analysis' work demonstrates. Nevertheless, the widespread idea of Stanislavski as 'psychological' and Lecoq as 'physical' persists, indicated by the tendency of many actor-training programmes to teach Stanislavski practice in 'Acting' classes and Lecoq work in 'movement' classes. This curricular arrangement underestimates the scope and nuance of Lecoq's pedagogy – something that an analysis from the perspective of embodied cognition will show.

The training programme that Lecoq created at his own school drew on many sources, is rooted in physical and verbal improvisation and engages with several theatrical styles – what he called 'dramatic territories': Greek Tragedy, Commedia dell'arte, red nose clown, melodrama, the grotesque parodies of 'bouffons.' Work on these styles is rooted in movement analysis and initial training with the Neutral Mask, created by Lecoq with sculptor and mask-maker Amleto Sartori (1915–1962). The Neutral Mask is a full-face mask, made of leather, with a neutral facial expression. Through wearing it in a variety of exercises and observing others doing the same, actors develop a heightened awareness of the communicative potential of the body. Since we are habituated to pay attention to facial expressions in daily life, the meaningful content of posture, gesture and gait becomes much more apparent to the observer when the face is covered – information that can then be used when wearing the mask oneself. The term Neutral Mask refers to the mask itself, the type of exercises conducted with it and the persona that is apparent when a performer wears it. Exercises are always conducted in an ensemble mode, with groups of 5–7 students assaying a particular exercise while being observed by the instructor and other students in the larger group of 20 or more. This mode is an important part of the training. Through the process of wearing the mask *and* observing others in it, actors develop many sensitivities, not least an awareness of the communicative potential of the body.

Lecoq's use of the mask to train actors is prescient of the discoveries of cognitive science in many ways. For example, a 2005 study demonstrates that bodily posture is highly significant in determining the meaning of emotional facial expressions for observers (Meeren, van Heijnsbergen and de Gelder 2005). By heightening an actor's awareness and expressive control of postural communication, Lecoq's Neutral Mask exercises assist in clarifying emotional expression when the mask is removed (Lecoq used the Neutral Mask only in training, not for performance). For the wearer of the mask, an interesting phenomenon arises – as one doesn't need to concern oneself with facial expression as communication, prolonged use of the mask encourages a relaxation of the facial muscles that in turn seems to prompt a sense of calm and focus. Psychologist Paul Ekman's work on facial expressions has shown that consciously arranging the facial musculature in the patterns associated with various primary emotions provokes the affective state of the emotion. This indicates that there is a reflexive proprioceptive and interoceptive relationship between facial musculature and emotion (Ekman, Davidson, and Friesen 1990; Ekman 1999, 2003) – a phenomenon that may explain the sense of calm that arises from the relaxation of the facial muscles under the mask.

Other research points to a similar reflexive relationship between larger bodily activity and the experience of emotion (e.g. Tom, Pettersen, Lau, Burton and Cook 1991; Stepper and Strack 1993, Duckworth, Bargh, Garcia and Chaiken 2002). Movements of the whole body are involved in Neutral Mask 'identifications' work, in which actors consciously embody the rhythms of movement found in natural, social and fabricated environments. This activity forms the foundation of the remarkable synchrony between Lecoq's pedagogy and the

precepts of embodied cognition, as it articulates Lecoq's conviction that the starting point for theatre is not a scripted play, but the actor's engagement with the sensorimotor experience of her environment:

In my method of teaching I have always given priority to the external world over inner experience. ... It is more important to observe how beings and things move, and how they find a reflection in us. ... People discover themselves in relation to their grasp of the external world.

*(Lecoq 2001, 19)*

This principle of Lecoq's correlates with the foundational concept of embodied cognition that I described earlier; that sensorial and motor experiences form the neural foundations for mental concepts. Beginning with sensorimotor investigations and moving through spoken, then written language, Lecoq's training grounds performance in an explicit re-experiencing of human cognitive development: He states

[T]he laws of movement govern all theatrical situations. A piece of writing is a structure in motion. Though themes may vary (they belong to the realm of ideas), the structures of acting remain linked to movement and its immutable laws

*(Lecoq 2001, 24)*

Lecoq's idea of 'the laws of movement' refers to the affordances and constraints of the typical able-bodied human anatomy and its relation to the physics of movement in the material environment. The concepts of affordances and constraints are ones that arise in significant theories of embodied cognition. I use the term 'affordance' in the sense that was originated by J.J. Gibson (1979): 'The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill' (Gibson 1979, 127). So a flat rock affords sitting, a tree affords climbing, a river affords swimming. These examples demonstrate how the concept of affordances acknowledges a symbiosis between body and environment – action arises from what a body is able to do in engagement with features of its physical environment. Gibson was prescient about the integration of body and environment that is involved in the theories of situated cognition:

An affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective–objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.

*(Gibson 1979, 129)*

Lecoq's Neutral Mask 'identifications' work embodies this concept through activities stimulated by the observation and conscious imitation of phenomena. In this work, the affordances are both those of the environment that enable and provoke an action of the body, and those of the body in the extent to which it can imitate rhythms of the environment. In this way, Lecoq's 'identifications' work actively demonstrates Gibson's idea that an affordance is 'equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior' (*ibid.*). This 'both/and' quality of affordances is useful in understanding the theory of enactivism, which proposes that cognition is a process of continuous reciprocal interactions between brain, body and world.

While the concept of enactive affordances is implicitly present in Lecoq's exercises, that of constraints is explicitly identified and applied: 'Different ways of using exercises are employed at each stage: [including] the method of constraints (spatial, temporal and numerical)' (Lecoq 2015, 15). Simply put, in Lecoq's pedagogy, a constraint is a limit – the boundaries of a space in which one can move, the duration of time allotted to an exercise or presentation, the number of people available to execute a task. Cognitively, constraints are also enactive in that they help us make sense of the environment and are involved in the shaping of affordances – for example, how high a body can reach or how far it can step. The idea of a constraint also helps cognitive scientists create models of how organic beings behave and interact. It is a significant feature of Dynamical Systems Theory (DST).

Originating in mathematics and developed significantly by Esther Thelen (1941–2004) in the field of Developmental Psychology, DST provides models that describe the flow of relationships among the components of a whole phenomenon. These models acknowledge the real-time, reciprocal cause-and-effect action of elements upon each other within a system. Consequently, DST models are well-suited to describe the ways in which characters, events and circumstances simultaneously affect one another in the context of a dramatic interaction. Given Lecoq's focus on movement, the following quote from a group of physiotherapists aptly describes the way in which we can understand the application of DST to the analysis of movement in conjunction with environment:

The fundamental premise of *dynamic systems theory* when applied to coordination and control is that movement patterns emerge from the interplay of the *constraints* between and within the elements of the *system*.... The patterns that emerge are a reflection of these changing organismic, task and environmental *constraints*.

(emphasis in original)

(Holt, Wagenaar and Saltzman 2010, 448)

In Lecoq's 'identifications' work, the limitations placed on the movement of beings and objects by their physical qualities serve as both constraints and affordances. Mud, for example, oozes, but does not spark. Fire sparks, but does not ooze. The human body can be considered a system that interacts with the imagined affordances and constraints of natural phenomena like these in order to effectively recreate their rhythms of movement. As Lecoq develops the actor's work, different levels of systems arise. Lecoq refers, for example, to dramatic styles as 'constraints.' From the perspective of embodied cognition, this invites a view of style as a system in which the interactive elements are performers. Lecoq's interest in the relationship between the movement of the human body and its environment through the physics of movement is also expressed in the use of architecture as a companion discipline in his school. He and architect Krikor Belekian developed the *Laboratoire d'Etude du Mouvement* which is taught as a parallel activity to the school's main pedagogy. The course is now led by Pascale Lecoq, who trained as an architect before becoming the school's director.

### **'Le fonds poetique commun'**

As might be expected from Lecoq's statement about the importance of the 'external world,' much of the content of his training programme arises from his perception of the ways in which humans interact with their material environment. This perception is expressed both in specific exercises and in broad conceptualisations that create a framework for these exercises.

One of the most significant of these conceptualizations is Lecoq's idea of 'le fonds poétique commun.' A full appreciation of this concept benefits from some reviewing of previous translation. David Bradby, who overall did an admirable job of translating Lecoq's book *Le Corps Poétique* (1997) for its English publication as *The Moving Body* (2001), rendered this phrase as 'the universal poetic sense.' However, he has acknowledged in a later editorial comment that 'the word "fonds" conveys something more real and concrete than a "sense"' (Lecoq 2006, xiii). In an earlier piece (2016), I suggested that there is a more nuanced way of understanding this concept than is provided by Bradby's free translation, and here I build on that proposal in order to gain a fuller sense of Lecoq's meaning. This is significant, as the concept of 'le fonds poétique commun' (properly defined) relates directly to the concept of situated cognition and the sensorimotor links between physical activity and semantic meaning. The association of these features can be drawn out from the way the idea evolved over time in Lecoq's pedagogy and by detailing the semantic associations of the French words that form the phrase.

Lecoq's pedagogy grew organically throughout his life. While 'le fonds poétique commun' is a term that he only began to use in the last third of his teaching career, practical elements of what he came to define as this concept were present from the inception of his school in 1956. From the beginning, his curriculum incorporated exercises that drew on his own training in sport, as a physical therapist, and with French theatre practitioners Jean-Marie Conty and Jean Dasté. These were combined with the results of practical research that he had conducted into the historical styles of Greek tragedy and Commedia dell'arte during an eight-year stint in Italy. As these were both masked styles, they placed emphasis on physical communication in addition to verbal and vocal communication (Commedia used both speech and gibberish). As Lecoq trainee and scholar Ismael Scheffler describes, Lecoq's training incorporated 'exercises of movements of identification and expression of natural elements and phenomena' (Scheffler 2016, 182) within its idea of mime; the school's original name was L'École Internationale de Théâtre et de Mime -The International School of Theatre and Mime. It is clear from Lecoq's practices that he used the word mime to suggest physical re-enactment rather than the formalised movement styles associated with Etienne Decroux and Marcel Marceau. Lecoq's form of mime engaged students in activities that consciously repeated humans' corporeal engagement with the rhythms and sensations of their environment. He struggled to find an explicit way of distinguishing his idea of mime from the stylised and codified approaches of Decroux and Marceau. As Scheffler points out, '[a]nalyzing Lecoq's publications before 1969 ... one can perceive the difficulty Lecoq had until then to define his comprehension of mime' (Scheffler 2016, 182). It was not until Lecoq read the work of anthropologist Marcel Jousse (1886–1961) in the early 1970s that he found both a vocabulary and a conceptualisation that resonated with his own practice. Jousse considered that humans had an unconscious and intuitive ability to reproduce the physical stances, rhythms and movements of beings and objects – a capacity that he called 'mimisme' (Jousse 1932). These ideas enabled Lecoq to refine and articulate what he called his 'mimo-dynamic' approach in which students would first consciously absorb the dynamics of their environment and then 'replay' them – a word ('rejeu' in French) that he had adopted from Jousse. By the late 1980s, when Lecoq compiled a book of his own and others' writings that expressed his views on theatre (*Theatre of Movement and Gesture*, 1987), he had assimilated the ideas of Jousse to the point where he quotes him as saying:

Miming differs from mimicry in this respect; it is not imitation, but a way of grasping the real that is played out in our body. A normal human being is 'played' by the reality



that reverberates in him. We are the receptacles of interactions that play themselves out spontaneously within us. Human beings think with their whole bodies, they are made up of complexes of gestures and reality is in them, without them, despite them.

*(Jousse in Lecoq 2006, 9)*

Lecoq recapitulated this concept in his own words shortly before his death:

The 'miming body' is the body that has the faculty to take on the dynamics that surround it, the world that surrounds it – like a child. [...] All children are mimes. People [adults] too, but they don't know it.

*(Lecoq, speaking in Roy and Carasso 1999, n.p.)*

The term 'mime' with its associations of silent white-gloved performers trapped in glass cases can easily trivialise Lecoq's approach. However, his anthropologically influenced conception of mime has considerable congruity with influential ideas in the field of embodied cognition. Neuropsychologist Merlin Donald proposes that mimesis was the evolutionary adaptation that generated a distinctly human culture, defining mimesis as a way of representing knowledge through consciously chosen motor activity. The capacity for symbolic thought has arisen from this cognitive evolution of the brain in symbiosis with culture. This has significance for present-day human activities, as evolutionarily new brain activities are 'scaffolded' on existing cognitive capacities. As a consequence of this biological phenomenon, Donald states: 'If mimesis was the adaptation that generated a distinctly human culture, it follows that the deepest communicative framework of human culture must still be mimetic' (Donald 2005, 293).

Lecoq's concept of mime, shaped by his phenomenological experience imbued with Jousse's analysis, anticipates Donald's scientifically oriented analysis:

Children gain their understanding of the world around them by miming it: they mimic what they see and what they hear. They replay with their whole body those aspects of life in which they will be called on to participate. In this way they learn about life and, little by little, take possession of it.

*(Lecoq 2006, 1)*

It is within the context of these ideas that we need to understand Lecoq's idea of 'le fonds poétique commun.' As described earlier, Bradby used the term 'universal' for the word 'commun.' Literally translated, this would be 'common' – in this context meaning 'in common' or 'shared.' The term 'fonds commun' is normally translated as 'mutual fund' or 'common fund.' Removed from a financial context, we can understand the use of 'fonds' as 'fund' in the sense of 'fund of knowledge.' The word 'fonds' also has strong associations of 'foundation' or 'base' because of its homonym 'fond,' as in the widely used phrase 'au fond'; literally 'at the bottom of.' So Lecoq believes that in addition to having principles (or 'laws') of movement in common, humans also have a 'fund' (or 'source') of foundational shared knowledge gained from a mimetic absorption of rhythms and sensorial experience of the physical world. Within this concept, Lecoq's use of the adjective 'poetic' is not romantic or vague. His practical investigation of poetry in his pedagogy demonstrates his awareness of the ways in which poetry has effect – the importance of rhythm and sensorial and perceptive stimuli and the centrality of metaphor in human experiencing. (See Gilrain 2016 for a description of how Lecoq's teaching encourages the conscious awareness of metaphoric thinking to the point

of induced synesthesia.) This is significant when we think of Lakoff and Johnson's analysis of metaphor as a fundamental feature of human cognitive activity, given that physical experience provides the source domain for abstract thought: 'Conceptual metaphor is pervasive in both thought and language. It is hard to think of a common subjective experience that is not conventionally conceptualized in terms of metaphor' (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 45). So 'fonds poetique commun' can be understood as a fund of sensorial knowledge that humans have in common, developed through physical engagement with the material world. This foundational principle of Lecoq's actor training accords strongly with the foundational precept of embodied cognition that sensorial and motor experiences form the neural foundations for mental concepts.

### **Dynamiques**

In many of the quotes that I have used, Lecoq uses the term 'dynamics' ('dynamiques') to describe the situated environment that humans engage with through physical activity and mimesis. This term is a significant one in his pedagogy, as he defines 'dynamiques' as combinations of rhythm, force and space. Again, this is an astute conceptualisation when considered through the lens of embodied cognition. The foundational proposition of embodied cognition that I've just reiterated shows us that the mind is inherently embodied, not simply because the brain operates in a body, but because physical experience shapes conceptual thought. Furthermore, thought employs many of the same neuronal pathways as physical action (a process often called 'neural exploitation' – see Gallese 2007b). Kinaesthetic and perceptual experiences of the material world generate cognitive systems that reflect our physical environments and interpersonal experiences and form patterns for higher cognitive activity. As a result, cognitive processes like language and conceptual thought use partial re-activations of sensory, motor and affective systems. As Vittorio Gallese proposes:

[K]ey aspects of human social cognition are underpinned by brain mechanisms originally evolved for sensorimotor integration. It is proposed that these mechanisms were later on adapted as new neurofunctional architecture for thought and language, while retaining their original functions as well. By neural exploitation, social cognition and language can be linked to the experiential domain of action.

*(Gallese 2007b, 317)*

So Lecoq's description of lived experiences in the physical world as 'dynamics' – combinations of rhythm, force and space – identifies them at their sensorimotor level, the actional level at which we engage with our environments before we start to consciously reflect on them or describe them in language. It is at this level that his Neutral Mask training re-sensitises actors to the sensorimotor sources of mental concepts.

For example, they work with the dynamics of water in different states (bubbling spring, meandering river, stormy sea), of fire, of air, also those of materials like paper and cellophane and of humans experiencing varied physical environments. These activities demand a sustained mental and physical discipline to accurately observe and physically embody different dynamics in ways that make them specific and expressive. For instance, the dynamics of waves in a storm are distinct from those of a bubbling brook. The performer must distinguish how the forces within the varied physical constraints affect the water, and change its rhythm, tempo and directional tendencies. These activities provide the actor with a reinvigorated awareness of the relationship between these rhythmic patterns and the concepts that they

generate and shape through the relationship between motor cortex activity, thought and language. These activities also stimulate emotion, a phenomenon that I've addressed in an earlier publication (Kemp 2016).

Lecoq extends this process beyond simple physical mimicry by subsequently combining the experiential physical activities with varied modes of linguistically expressed meaning – single words, poems, improvised dramatic narrative. Through these sequences of exercises, the 'dynamics' of nature and materials are invested in and correlated with the 'dynamics' of communicative expression. Lecoq considers that this training develops lasting patterns of behaviour in the performer: 'The main result of this identification work are the traces that remain inscribed in each actor, circuits laid down in the body, through which dramatic emotions also circulate, finding their pathway to expression' (Lecoq 2001, 45). Using consciously articulated patterns of muscular activity, actors develop what is known in theatre parlance as 'muscle memory' of movement schema that are linked to concepts and emotions. Using concepts from cognitive neuroscience, we could describe this as a refined awareness of the proprioceptive and interoceptive dimensions of emotion and thought. Lecoq's phrase 'circuits laid down in the body' also evokes another primary assumption of embodied cognition – 'that any type of recall includes a sensorimotor simulation of the processes involved in the original encoding of the experience' (Koch, Fuchs, Summa and Muller 2016, 2, referencing Barsalou, Niedenthal, Barbey and Ruppert 2003, Niedenthal 2007).

### **Actions and language**

Another result of Lecoq's training is the specificity of expressive physical action that arises from this level of observational and physical rigour. When engaged with language, this physical precision offers us a view of meaning in interpersonal communication that accords with findings that language and gestural actions are intertwined in communication. As cognitive linguist David McNeill asserts, 'gestures are an integral part of language as much as are words, phrases and sentences – gesture and language are one system' (McNeill 1992, 2). Lecoq's work on language and gesture can also be usefully appreciated through Glenberg and Gallese's action-based theory of language. They point to 'findings that strongly support the existence of mirror neurons in the human motor system and [that] have led to the notion of a mirror neuron system involving areas in the frontal lobes (notably, Broca's area) and parietal lobes' (Glenberg and Gallese 2011, 8). The significance here is that Broca's area has traditionally been associated in brain research with speech and language. Glenberg and Gallese are careful to point out that they consider that both emotion and perception systems are active in language in addition to action systems, but have assimilated data from multiple findings to form a theoretical framework that roots language in action. They state that:

parietal mirror neurons not only code the goal of an executed/observed motor act, like grasping an object, but they also code the overall action intention [...] The 'motor vocabulary' of grasping-related neurons, by sequential chaining, reorganizes itself [so] as to map the fulfillment of an action intention. The overall action intention (to eat, to place the food or object) is the goal-state of the ultimate goal-related motor act of the chain.  
(Glenberg and Gallese 2011, 3)

This concept of an 'action intention' meaning that is definable through motor actions is another concept of embodied cognition that Lecoq's practice both anticipates and illuminates. Earlier work (Murray 2003, Kemp 2012) has described Lecoq's analysis of, and work with,

the action verbs of 'push' and 'pull.' This work arises from Lecoq's recognition that these actions are essential in the mechanics of movement and have extensive metaphorical applications in both verbal and nonverbal communication. To conclude this chapter, I will point out another aspect of Lecoq's work with language that anticipates the view in embodied cognition that culture is one of the factors that is involved in the situated nature of meaning.

### **Case study: 'Je prends'**

In the video *Les deux voyages de Jacques Lecoq* (Roy and Carasso 1999), Lecoq can be seen teaching part of a lesson on language and gesture. He's working on the action verb 'je prends' – normally translated as 'I take.' In the extract of the lesson that is shown in the video, he has divided a large group of about 20 students into nationality groups and asked each group to define the gesture that expresses this action for them. Each group is given a few minutes to confer and practice (the groups work simultaneously) and is then asked to show the gesture while saying the phrase 'I take' in their own language. The first group to show their work is composed of five or six Americans (of mixed gender) who stand in a circle. The gesture that accompanies the phrase is a motion with the hand and arm that reaches directly forward in front of the torso, grasps an imagined item and sharply draws it towards the torso. The movement is sudden and forceful, and the phrase 'I take' is repeated multiple times. Lecoq is surprised; from his French perspective the American version of 'take' is described as 'arrache' – 'grab.' The Americans are followed by a group of four British English speakers (again of mixed gender) who stand in a square formation. They say the phrase 'I take' once and make a similar gesture to the Americans – reaching out in front, grasping an imagined item, then pulling the item towards themselves. However, the British version, while also including the action of pulling towards the torso, seems less acquisitive than the American because there is less force, a slower tempo and the vocal expression is considerably softer – a contrast that provokes laughter among the observers and the comment from Lecoq that the gesture is 'more diplomatic.' The British are followed by a group of three Scandinavian women whose symmetrical gesture involves using both hands to reach out rapidly, grasp and then pull an imagined item smoothly towards the torso. The sustained tempo of the pulling action is in marked contrast to the sudden and rapid action of the American gesture, but is nevertheless decisive in quality. The next example is given by an individual – a woman who is the only speaker of Serbo-Croat in the class – whose gesture involves placing both hands on an imagined item in front of her and then pulling this item with a sustained tempo to the right side of her torso. This lateral movement is significantly different from the pulling action of the three previous groups that drew the 'taken' item directly towards the torso. The gesture associated with the Serbo-Croat verb does not bring what is taken to the individual but places it to the side. This prompts Lecoq to comment that the gesture evokes the idea of 'putting aside for winter.' The final group shown in the video is French – again of mixed gender. Their gesture involves both arms and hands reaching out in front of the torso and then resting on an imagined object. This completes the gesture. Intriguingly for English speakers, for whom the word 'take' has connotations of 'acquire,' the French gesture has no activity of pulling the imagined item towards the self. Lecoq seems satisfied that the gesture communicates the meaning of the French phrase 'je prends,'

saying 'It's mine [...] I have my hand on it, I stay there' as an elaboration of the meaning of the gesture. These five gestures are all prompted by the concept 'I take,' but have significant differences in what they communicate.

Lecoq's training in the dynamics of movement enables both the clear execution and description of gesture in terms of direction, force, tempo, tension and so on. This level of specificity highlights the visible nuances of meaning among the different nationality groups. When considered in the context of Glenberg and Gallese's action-based language theory, one can see that Lecoq's approach identifies how the word 'take' – apparently equivalent in meaning when translated linguistically – has different action intentions in different cultures. Differences in force, tempo and degree of suddenness between the American, English and Scandinavian groups make gestures that have the same basic components (grasping something in front of oneself, drawing it towards oneself) evoke different qualitative associations. The similarity of the basic action components may relate to the fact that the English 'take' has its etymological roots in 'taka' – a word from Old Norse, which is the ancestor of Scandinavian languages. As I hope my description has made clear, both the Serbo-Croat and the French gestures associated with the phrase 'I take' suggest not just qualitative differences, but markedly different *action intentions*. The two-handed drawing motion to the side of the body enacted with the Serbo-Croat 'ja uzimam' evokes connotations of 'putting aside' – and we see that the gesture enacted with the French 'je prends' has no component of pulling the imagined item towards the self. The video of Lecoq's lesson shows the difference in action intentions manifested by the varied gestural patterns of the nationality groups. Further differences might well be observed were the nationality groups engaged in such an exercise further sub-divided, so that the cultural nuances attendant upon gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity and race could be expressed.

These concrete examples of meaningful behaviour that arise from Lecoq's teaching have significant implications. They demonstrate that movement tends to carry more specific meanings about physical activity than language, supporting Merlin Donald's proposal (quoted earlier) that '[I]f mimesis was the adaptation that generated a distinctly human culture, it follows that the deepest communicative framework of human culture must still be mimetic.' When we connect this idea with Lakoff and Johnson's axiom that mental concepts are shaped by physical experience, the visibly different gestures can be understood to express variations of the concept of 'take' among the nationality groups. This suggests that the concept involved in 'je prends' is more accurately translated into English as 'I take hold of' or even 'I grasp.' Conversely, the English concept of 'take' has connotations of 'acquire' – 'acquérir' in French. Lecoq's exercise gives us a vivid example of the culturally situated and embodied nature of meaning – and demonstrates ways of clarifying meaning in the symbiosis of movement and language.

## Conclusion

While Lecoq's pedagogy is certainly designed as actor training, graduates of his school have achieved success in many ways. They work as actors in various styles, as clowns and as practitioners of devised theatre and also as playwrights, painters, sculptors and directors of film and theatre. In addition to their presence in acting programmes, Lecoq's techniques are

being used in the training of doctors and architects, to teach English as a foreign language and as part of reconciliation programmes in South Africa (Evans and Kemp 2016). This wide diversity of application arises because Lecoq's concepts of 'Tout bouge,' 'le fonds poétique commun' and 'dynamiques' have shaped his training in ways that are congruent with a core proposition of embodied cognition: that meaning results intersubjectively from our situated interactions with the world. The exercises that Lecoq has developed clarify and articulate this proposition, enabling conscious eliciting of what is often unconscious behaviour in daily life. Empirically supported theories of embodied cognition show that mental, physical and emotional activities are all intertwined. Lecoq's training benefits actors and other artists by working in a way that both acknowledges and consciously utilizes this phenomenon of human cognition. Consequently, his training can provide a valuable forum of research for those from various disciplines outside of theatre who wish to study human behaviour from the perspectives of embodied cognition.

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