

Language, Mind and Body

Where is language? Answers to this have attempted to ‘incorporate’ language in an ‘extended mind’, through cognition that is ‘embodied’, ‘distributed’, ‘situated’ or ‘ecological’. Behind these concepts is a long history that this book is the first to trace. Extending across linguistics, philosophy, psychology and medicine, as well as literary and religious dimensions of the question of what language is, and where it is located, this book challenges mainstream, mind-based accounts of language. Looking at research from the Middle Ages to the present day, and exploring the work of a range of scholars from Aristotle and Galen to Merleau-Ponty and Chomsky, it assesses raging debates about whether mind and language are centred in heart or brain, brain or nervous-muscular system, and whether they are innate or learned, individual or social. This book will appeal to scholars and advanced students in general linguistics, cognitive linguistics, language evolution and the philosophy of language.

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Language, Mind and Body

A Conceptual History

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Preface

Modern linguistics has been shaped by a desire to explain language in terms of the mind. Alternative accounts, connecting language directly to the body – including the brain, the nervous system, the organs of speech production and sense perception, and potentially such extensions as the blind person’s cane – have existed since antiquity and continue to be produced, yet such is the power that the mental holds over academic linguistics that these accounts have been marginalized, ignored and forgotten.

Language, mind and body: A conceptual history delves into such accounts to assess which might have something to offer present-day models grounded in classic mentalism, extended mind, embodied cognition, and ‘distributed’ approaches in which my cognition extends not just to my body but to yours. The book also examines approaches that have had such lamentable historical consequences that it is worth recalling why a stake had to be driven through their heart.

The second aim is to probe into the problematic mind–body dichotomy itself. How mind is conceived has always been controversial and in flux. In restoring balance with the bodily, the point is not to patch up the dichotomy, but to reassess how it has come to have such power as an all-encompassing frame that encourages seeing language in a polarized way, as something produced by mind *or* body, shaped by nature *or* convention, approachable as an individual *or* a social phenomenon, historically *or* contemporaneously, innate *or* learned, arbitrary *or* motivated, and so on. That has been the direction taken by the rhetoric of linguistic thought. Beneath the surface of polarized concepts, however, can be detected an endless flow of what Bruno Latour calls ‘hybrids’.

The third aim is to reconceive some key problems of present-day theoretical and applied linguistics in hybrid rather than purified terms, breaking down the mind–body dichotomy rather than shoring it up. The hope is that this will help break through some long-standing impasses that have led linguists to imagine that a single, monolithic paradigm of thought and analysis is the most direct path to progress. The penultimate chapter focusses on the distinction between ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’, which relies heavily on the body–mind dichotomy and which has long been mired in confusion yet continues to be treated as

x Preface

straightforward and fundamental, notably in language-based brain scanning research.

I wish to express my gratitude to the University of Edinburgh and my colleagues in the School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences for their support over the last twenty years, and in particular for a research leave in 2014–15 that allowed me to complete this book. I am grateful as well to my wife, Jeannette, and our children, Maud, Crispin and Julian, who have found it in themselves to be understanding and supportive even through difficult times. Helen Barton and her colleagues at Cambridge University Press have been models of what an academic publisher should be and do, both concretely and in the abstract. As if this were not good fortune enough, I have been blessed with students, friends and critics across the world who have helped me to be a better teacher, scholar and writer: to all of you, my silent co-authors – my distributed cognition – deep, sincere, enduring thanks.