

THE FREEDOM OF WORDS

The Freedom of Words is for anyone interested in understanding the role of body and language in cognition and how humans developed the sophisticated ability to use abstract concepts like “freedom” and “thinking.” This book adopts a transdisciplinary perspective, including philosophy, semiotics, psychology, and neuroscience, to show how language, as a tool, shapes our minds and influences our interaction with the physical and social environment. It develops a theory showing how abstract concepts in their different varieties enhance cognition and profoundly influence our social and affective life. It addresses how children learn such abstract concepts, details how they vary across languages and cultures, and outlines the link between abstractness and the capability to detect inner bodily signals. Overall, the book shows how words – abstract words in particular, because of their indeterminate and open character – grant us freedom.

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THE FREEDOM OF WORDS

Abstractness and the Power of Language

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A Lola, Luca e Francesco, con amore e allegria. (To Lola, Luca, and Francesco, with love and cheerfulness.)

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[Words] . . . are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries. But words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. . . . And how do they live in the mind? Various and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together. It is true that they are much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are. . . . If you start a Society for Pure English, they will show their resentment by starting another for impure English – hence the unnatural violence of much modern speech; it is a protest against the puritans. They are highly democratic, too; they believe that one word is as good as another; uneducated words are as good as educated words, uncultivated words as cultivated words, there are no ranks or titles in their society. Nor do they like being lifted out on the point of a pen and examined separately. They hang together, in sentences, in paragraphs, sometimes for whole pages at a time. They hate being useful; they hate making money; they hate being lectured about in public. In short, they hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change . . . Perhaps then one reason why we have no great poet, novelist or critic writing to-day is that we refuse words their liberty. We pin them down to one meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination. And when words are pinned down they fold their wings and die. (Virginia Woolf (1942). *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 127, 131–132).