

Article

Decolonising terminology – dance-music unity

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Abstract English has become the world language, which on the one side is a blessing for international communication. On the other side, its dominance tends to make large parts of the world rely on only one language for academic work. This impoverishes the conceptual, expressive and epistemological richness available in all the other languages and makes believe that a translation can bring every concept from one language to another.¹ My aim here is to discuss one concrete problem with a missing concept in English; dance and music as a unity. I will test epistemological arguments; why should we keep dance and music apart and why should we unite them under a new term. I then ask why we do not see concepts from other languages as a resource to improve academic terminology in English and other European languages.

Keywords: 1; Decolonisation 2; Terminology; 3; Dance anthropology 4; Ethnochoreology; 5; Choreomusical; 6; Epistemology; 7 Linguistic decolonization.

1. The missing term

Disciplines such as dance anthropology, ethnochoreology and ethnomusicology have the problem that European languages hardly have any suitable one-word term for the complex of dance and music or dancing and musicking.

Dancers and musicians stress that dance and music are two sides of an indivisible unit.²

Still, we do not have any name for that unison in our disciplinary terminology. I suggest considering two perspectives on the lack of concepts. One is that the lack of a word for a phenomenon does not cancel its existence; we mostly find ways to refer to it, even if it makes writing and translating cumbersome and unsatisfactory. The other is how words or lack of them shape our epistemological awareness and understanding of a phenomenon. As a Scandinavian, I miss the word *døgn* in vernacular language, the period of a day and a night, when I express myself in English.³ Is it no more than an inconvenience when translating; that you cannot say something quite the same way in English as in your native language, or does it play with our epistemological orientation? Just as with the missing word for dance and music, *døgn* combines two different or even contrasting elements. Practitioners and researchers from many African countries claim they do not have words to talk about the movement and the sound dimension of the dance/music separately. How would it be not to have words to distinguish day from night?

¹¹ The Spanish linguist María Sánchez, point[s] “towards the practical impossibility of conveying in one language exactly what was originally said in another.” Sánchez, María T., *The Problems of Literary Translation: A Study of the Theory and Practice of Translation from English into Spanish*, 18 vols (Peter Lang, 2009), p. 276

² It has to be noted that Rudolf Laban’s already in 1920 declared as an ideological aim to liberating dance from serving other expressions, particularly music. Choreographers still are testing dance without music with different artistic rationales.

³ Wikipedia contributors, ‘Nychthemeron’, *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, UTC, <<https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nychthemeron&oldid=1007985488>> [accessed 24 April 2021], edn, 2021 vols (2021)

2. The choreomusical split

Western dance researchers also have stressed the unity of dance and music and argued against the split in a way that can remind about the discussions on the Cartesian split.⁴ At the same time, the relationship between dance and music has become a trendy topic, and a new set of words has been coined; choreomusical or choreomusicology. In some ways these terms confirm the split. The Danish dance researcher Inger Damsholt surveys and discusses the terms and attributes them to the American musician and educationalist Paul Hodgins.⁵ It gives us the possibility to talk about the relationship between dance and music and see it as a sub-discipline of choreology and musicology, choreomusicology.

3. Movement and sound are different expressions

I quite often heard criticism against educationalists and researchers of dance and music for not keeping the two together.⁶ At this point, it is necessary to remind that dancers produce movement as their primary expression, whereas musicians primarily produce sound. More precisely, musicians produce movement that they intend the receivers to experience mainly as sound. I say this because it takes very different knowledge, training, and methods to analyse movement patterns compared to sound patterns. Despite the conviction that dance, and music cannot and should not be severed, it is necessary for practical and methodological reason to analyse each of them with different tools. Therefore, methodologically researchers and teachers will necessarily have to separate them. They can, of course, deal with the two simultaneously, and some methods can integrate the work to a certain degree. Still, learning to produce movements and learning to produce sounds are necessarily different. Few experts will be equally skilled and experienced in the analysis and teaching of both expressions. It seems unrealistic and unnecessary to discard all experts specialising in mainly one of them. Even many of the practitioners specialise in only one of the expressions. That is very different from experts who do not have any understanding or interest in more than one of the expressions. Of course, it is, in most cases, a significant advantage to study and teach dance and music in parallel, and when we approach them as a social phenomenon to see them in context their unity is obvious.

4. A culturally constructed relationship

Now, despite these differences that split dance as movement and music as sound, how are they still a unity? Is it laid down in our genes to react to certain kinds of organised sound with movement? Do we wish to add sound to certain kinds of movement patterns as an all-human reflex? These are questions far beyond my competence. However, my empirical studies have shown me again and again that the relation between dance and music is culturally constructed. That means that dance and music are not kept together by the laws of nature. Dancers and musicians, in my experience, have it as the primary motivation to experience movement and sound melt together, getting ultimate satisfaction from their interaction.⁷ Still, there are hardly any limits to how this interaction can function or be created.

⁴ Short, Brandon D., *The Cartesian Split: A Hidden Myth* (Routledge, 2020)

⁵ Damsholt, Inger, *Viden Om Dans : En Grundbog* ([Kbh.]: Multivers, 2018), in /z-wcorg/ refers to Hodgins, Paul, *Relationships between Score and Choreography in Twentieth-Century Dance: Music, Movement, and Metaphor* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), a book reviewed by Jordan, Stephanie, 'Matching Music and Dance', *Dance Chronicle*, 17 (1994), 217-221, in JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567815>>

⁶ It is mostly in conference discussions or informal exchange, but an example of written argumentation is; Akombo, David, *The Unity of Music and Dance in World Cultures* (McFarland, 2016)

⁷ In my experience this is particularly typical for social dancing.

In our time of fusion, media often present a dancer and a musician from totally different genres performing together.⁸ It often is seen as a sensation, while it is actually not that challenging. Since the relationship between dance and music is culturally constructed, most dancers can adapt their dance skills and dance patterns to any kind of music.⁹ Most musicians can adapt their playing to any kind of movement. More precisely, most dancers can use their basic patterns and movement skills to move in whatever way that comes to their mind, but they cannot go far beyond their knowledge and skills. Let us say that a tango dancer and a ballet dancer, with high skills in each their genre and not in the other's genre are set free to do whatever they like. My claim is that they would not be able to take over each other's dancing, nor come up with an improvisation they do the same way. We cannot do in a skilled way what we do not know and have not learned. Even contemporary dancers, claiming they have the freedom to move as they wish, will be stuck inside their movement competence. The difference is that most practitioners of most dance genres find it more exciting and satisfactory to remain inside defined frames and conventional patterns of their dances. Contemporary dancers want to avoid defined patterns and often claim that there are no borders for their practice. There seems to be a credo that the instant immediate expression has particular artistic value. This brings about a tendency to devalue dance forms "premade" and relying on frames. I think these ideas need to be confronted with the understanding that dancing is a skill that needs to be learned and rehearsed. There is no way to learn dancing in general, more that there is a way of learning to speak in general, you depend on choosing between French or Turkish or between Kathak, Tango or some contemporary technique. The arts have enormous treasures of works made by famous and renowned artists, such as music and dance. There are also traditional music and dance developed, selected and used with striking stability through centuries, setting millions of bodies moving. Comparing and juxtaposing the immediate artistic expression with pieces of dancing or musicking, developed and selected through long-term and advanced processes, is a daring but exciting project.

Returning to a dance and music as a unit, the relationship between its two parts can also result from long-term development, selection and adaptation, parallel with the discussion above. The resulting choreomusical pattern becomes at the same time stable and flexible. The meeting of dancers and musicians in the realising of a particular dance, I will claim, is every time the recreation of the choreomusical relationship on which the unit is built. In most cases, the allowed degree of adjustments is so narrow that it creates a strong attention and effort for perfection and total harmony. It is the feeling that this dance cannot be done to any other music.

5. Can we fill gaps of missing concepts

Languages have always borrowed words from each other, and mostly the words been borrowed from high-status languages. In the past it could be French and English that borrowed from high-status Latin.¹⁰ Today English has the high-status, exporting words. In such cases, the borrowings are often rather unnecessary; there may often be an excellent word for the same in the borrowing language. We do not need to borrow words such as bag or tape in Norwegian, but we still do.

The borrowing from low-status languages into high-status languages often happens when a phenomenon from the area of a low-status language gets world attention. Then the original name of the phenomenon may stick and be adopted into more languages; examples are the Norwegian slalom. The borrowing of concepts from low-status to high-status languages has mostly happened by chance because a word got popular in a new language.

⁸ Yuxia, Jiang, *Hip-Hop Dancers Meet their Match in the Form of Classical Music*, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/706870.shtml> edn, 2021 vols (Beijing: Global Times Published:, 2012-4-26)

⁹ I have witnessed such work, tried it myself and it is easy to find examples on for instance YouTube

¹⁰ Durkin, Philip, *Borrowed Words: A History of Loanwords in English* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

The “ngoma” principle of teaching music

There is an interesting case where the Norwegian musicologist Jon-Roar Bjørkvold adopted a Swahili term for dance and music into Norwegian and English. A reviewer characterises Bjørkvold’s work;

In his book *The Muse Within*, which discusses the universal ideas of music and culture from birth to aging, the Norwegian Jon-Roar Bjørkvold emphasises the point of the Kiswahili word ngoma. He describes it as the musical idea that best fits the way all children naturally learn music. Whether right or not, the Kiswahili word should at least apply to Swahili culture. The word itself means “drum”, but describes a musical practice, which always includes several musical expressions simultaneously, such as drumming, singing and dancing. In addition, it also reflects a social dimension of making music together, or music as a social happening.¹¹

Bjørkvold was enthusiastically received by many educationalists and his radical vision of music education for children also included dance. He was not the first to borrow the term Ngoma into European languages, but earlier it seems to have been used for African music including dance.¹² Bjørkvold proposes it as an educational concept which integrated music and dance, in general and not only for Africans. As far as I know researchers in our field has not taken it up as a general term for dance and music. There are certainly linguistic issues with the idea, and Ngoma may not be the most appropriate term for the purpose, but I find it to be a principally very interesting possibility

6. Conclusion

The sciences have long tradition for Latin taxonomies, dance often uses French taxonomies. This is a suggestion for research to benefit from the epistemological constructions available in words from other languages. It would in most cases take an adjustment and a new definition to bring concepts that may be limited in space and time on to a general plain. Additionally, I find it vital for descriptions of phenomena that are not conceived about or constructed in language we use as researchers to use the terms from the language of the practitioners, To understand the etymological roots of the term and to get a glimpse into the epistemological universe where it functions should be a serious concern. As discussed above, I think dance research would benefit from having a term binding the complex of dance and music together, and that we should take that term from where it functions as epistemological reality.

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¹¹ Mans, Minette, *Centering on African Practice in Musical Arts Education* (African Minds, 2006), p. 66., Bjørkvold, Jon-Roar, *The Muse within: Creativity and Communication, Song and Play from Childhood through Maturity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992)

¹² 'Ngoma. [Journal]', *Ngoma.*, München (1977, 1980), in /z-wcorg/, Tracey, Hugh,, *Ngoma. An introduction to Music for Southern Africans*, (Cape Town: Longmans, Green, 1948), in /z-wcorg/

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