

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2023.0025

Niko Popow  
City University of New York, USA  
nick.a.popow@gmail.com

## Movenglish: Dance as Sign System

### Abstract:

The paper examines a central question in the philosophy of dance from the vantage point of a specific choreographic practice: Movenglish. Movenglish attempts to establish a one-to-one mapping between English words and dance movement equivalents in the body in a way that maximally captures both the connotative and denotative aspects of the words in question. The paper argues that the success of Movenglish has several important consequences for the philosophy of dance as well as our understanding of sign systems more generally. The paper elaborates one of the strongest contributions to the philosophy of dance – the work of Susanne Langer – in order to show how the conclusions drawn from the dance produced through Movenglish both contribute to and depart from Langer’s philosophy.

### Keywords:

Susanne Langer, philosophy of dance, aesthetics, semiotics, philosophy of language

### I: Introduction

Does dance convey meaning? Dancers and choreographers will offer a range of answers to this question, running the gamut from “Of course it does!” to “No way! It does something else.” Responses, predictably, seem to depend on artistic temperament. Some choreographers keep their audience in view during the entire creative process, striving for a complete transmission of their intentions. For others, choreography grows out of “deep improvisation” sessions.

Ask philosophers the same question (many of whom are practicing artists) and similar disparities arise. Analytic philosophers of art, for instance, typically cling to some variety of intentionalism, the position that

the meaning of a work of art is – to certain extent – bound up with the intentions of its creator. On the other hand, those hailing from a more continental tradition will offer a variety of reasons for claiming that a work of art severs itself from the animating intentions of its creator. Once that dissociation is accomplished, it is easy to infer an irreducible polysemy, openness to interpretation, or even a “withdrawal” of the artwork from cognitive disclosure.<sup>1</sup> While one dance-theorist labors to preserve the dancer’s meaning-bestowing powers, another stridently maintains that dance productively disrupts meaning, or the closure and irreversibility that meaning implies.

It is my conviction that both of the somewhat caricatured philosopher-types mentioned above have bought into the idea that one must answer the “meaning question” in an all-or-nothing fashion. A “sometimes yes, sometimes no” response seems more defensible, but for many, will be less satisfying. I aim to compensate for that initial deficiency by examining a remarkable choreographic practice that upends a set of assumptions that philosophers across the board have uncritically adopted *vis a vis* dance. So, while either philosopher can be right (depending on the case), both are in another sense, completely mistaken about what dance *can* do.

The assumption that I aim to dispose of is the following: regardless of whether dance can convey meaning, it cannot convey discursive, linguistically articulated meaning, at least not by itself. Obviously, if a series of “movement-phrases” are accompanied by text in a dance, then the dance conveys meaning in a sense. But the written or spoken words are the vehicle for that meaning, while the dancing functions as a kind of ornament, or more charitably a sort of aesthetic response or interpretation. Through examining the “Movenglish” dance practice of Charly and Eriel Santagado, I will argue that their choreographic language – while completely bodily and not reliant on the display of written or spoken words for its intelligibility – can convey meaning in exactly the same way that discursive representations do. But will go even further to argue that Movenglish can convey the sort of meaning, which written or spoken words transmit, in a way that makes certain aspects of that meaning more salient. In other words, Movenglish does not merely translate meaning from one signifying system to another; it reveals meanings or aspects of meaning nested within the initial system, which tend to fly under the radar in ordinary communicative contexts.

## II: Ontological Considerations

In the early stages of dance theory – when anxieties about the autonomous “dignity” of the art form were perhaps more prominent – the relationship between dance and music was a contested issue. “Chicken-and-egg” questions held sway amongst dance practitioners and philosophers alike: music or dance, religious ritual or rhythmized movement, drum-beat or synchronized gestures – the feeling was that a great deal hinged upon the question of what came first. Isadore Duncan – a major pioneer of modern dance – attempted to steer clear of this debate by emphasizing that dance “incarnated” music, in much the same way that Schopenhauer thought that music directly incarnated “the Will.”<sup>2</sup> This is, on the face of it, a rather obscure claim, and its feasibility took a further hit when several music critics decried Duncan’s feeble grasp of the very music that her dance purported to incarnate.<sup>3</sup> For the sake of argument, let us say that Duncan had enough musical competence to defuse that particular criticism. Her stance runs into a further problem. It is perhaps easy to see how her choreography in a given piece isolates something fundamental about a given melody when the melody is directly

---

1) See Heidegger, *Origin of the Work of Art* for a discussion of how the tension between “world and earth” in a given artwork causes a part of it to “withdraw” or “veil itself” even as it stands in the open light of presence. Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 67.

2) See Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation Part I*.

3) See Sakharov, *Reflexions sur la musique*; and Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 170.

played with that movement. But absent musical accompaniment or any indication of what music is being translated, it is hard to imagine an audience member picking up on the music that is being “incarnated” through purely visual observation. Worse, this might be taken to count as evidence for those who view dance as merely parasitic on music.<sup>4</sup>

Other choreographers claimed that dance was a plastic art, akin to moving sculpture. But this position begged the question of what distinguishes dance from other kinds of movement, from the rhythmic circling of flies around a cow-patty, say, or a series vaguely ritualistic gestures in a performance art piece. This stance has little to offer those in the “meaning-camp” of dance theory. Pantomime was offered as an improved version of this sort of explanation of what dance is fundamentally up to.<sup>5</sup> But many dances clearly lack even a hint of pantomime.

Then came Susanne K. Langer. In her book *Feeling and Form*, she developed a comprehensive ontology of dance (and art in general) that redressed the pitfalls of previous, more slapdash proposals. The first part of Langer’s account involves isolating what she terms “the primary illusion of dance.”<sup>6</sup> “The ‘primary illusion’ of an art form is something created, and created at the first touch – in this case, with the first motion, performed or even implied. The motion itself, as a physical reality and therefore ‘material’ in the art, must suffer transformation.”<sup>7</sup> According to Langer, the kind of motion that must “suffer transformation” is gesture.<sup>8</sup> Typically, gestures function as means of communication. I throw my arms up in frustration after my favorite basketball team misses yet another free throw or I frantically wave my hand at the curb to hail a cab during a rainstorm. A physical movement is invested with a certain intentional content that others can “read” by sight.<sup>9</sup>

Now, the key to the “transformation” Langer has in mind lies in her liberal use of the word “vital” to qualify the uniquely expressive gestures of dance. “Dance is seen and understood as *vital* movement.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of describing a set of physical movements that would not occur in any context other than a dance, the very *space* in which the dance occurs (and which the dance itself determines or reconfigures in some way), alters the perception of both dancer and spectator alike such that they now see and feel that the occurrent gestures betoken “vital forces.”

Langer is not merely recapitulating some version of the Duchamp-effect, as if simply circumscribing an object or event with a frame is enough to elevate it to artwork status. The space in which the dance takes place and the vital gestures comprising it reciprocally determine one another.<sup>11</sup> To illustrate the difference between a gesture occurring in everyday life and one “vitalized” in the context of a dance, Langer gives the following example:

---

4) I do not mean to dismiss research into the connections between music and dance, or the possibilities for translating music into dance. I am merely ruling it out as a means for ontologically specifying “what is proper to dance” as a distinct art form.

5) Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 174

6) Ibid.

7) Ibid.

8) Ibid.: “All dance motion is gesture or an element in the exhibition of gesture ... always motivated by the semblance of an expressive movement.” I will use dance-gesture to encompass all forms of expressive movement that occur in dance, not just those that bear some resemblance to everyday gestures. Nor do I restrict the term to upper body movement as is common in some practices.

9) Some dance artists claim that their work is moving away from gesture. They mean that their movements do not even have a trace of resemblance to the “real world” gestures that Langer mentions. My own use of “dance-gesture” is meant to broadly cover these kinds of abstract movement as well.

10) Ibid.

11) See Randall Auxier’s paper, *From Symbol to Form* for a detailed overview of this aspect of Langer’s account.

A squirrel, startled, sitting up with its paw against its heart, makes a gesture and a very expressive one at that. It is not dancing. Only when the movement that was a genuine gesture is *imagined*, so that it may be performed apart from the squirrel's momentary situation and mentality, it becomes an artistic element, a possible dance-gesture. Then it becomes a free symbolic form, which may be used to convey other *ideas* of emotion, of awareness and premonition, or may be combined and incorporated into other virtual gestures, to express other physical and mental tensions.<sup>12</sup>

A gesture which normally has a definite function or that expresses a definite emotion or mental state, is decontextualized and estranged such that it takes on new functions, new expressive potentials. The gesture of the startled squirrel becomes a piece of artistic material to be configured in a pattern of other gestures. The meaning of a given gesture is normally self-sufficient: shaking my head back and forth means “no” regardless of whether a hand-waving gesture preceded it. By contrast, in a dance, the gestures are arranged in a sequence, and the expressive content of each gesture is subtly affected by those that precede and follow it.

The other crucial component in the quote above lies in the word “imagined” and also in the phrase “*ideas* of emotion” (as opposed to emotions themselves). Here, Langer anticipates Kendall Walton's renowned theory of art as akin to games of make-believe. According to Walton, emotions in a work of art are not real emotions *per se*, but “quasi-emotions.” This is because they lack the real-world correlates that characterize normal emotions. For instance, the actor playing Juliet in Shakespeare's play does not feel anguish in the same way that she would have had her lover just committed suicide in real life. If the latter event had occurred outside of the context of the play and the actor caught wind of the heartbreaking news, their performance would doubtless be seriously compromised. This illusionary character of the vital gesture enables it to express more than merely imagined or simulated emotions.

Virtual (used interchangeably with “vital” in this context) gestures are seen by others as signals of will. But virtual gestures are not signals, they are symbols of will. The spontaneously gastric character of dance motions is illusory; the “powers” (i.e., centers of vital force) in dance are created beings – created by the semblance of gesture. The primary illusion of dance is a virtual realm of Power – not actual physically exerted power, but appearances of influence and agency created by virtual gesture.<sup>13</sup>

Many readers will find the references to “power” and “vital force” to be opaque. Certain philosophers will find the vitalist overtones objectionable, but Langer convincingly uses these terms to vary a roughly Kantian point. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant famously speaks of “purposiveness without purpose” in relation to artworks that appear to be deliberately, fastidiously designed but, unlike other objects, shorn of any definite use-value.<sup>14</sup> A comb clearly wears its function of arranging hair on its sleeve, but a piece of abstract sculpture, though manifesting the intentionality of its creator, lacks a similarly concrete end. Instead, the abstract sculpture reveals something about the intentionality that is a prerequisite for artmaking. The intention to make art, to create something – crystalized in the completed artwork – is purified of the utility that we ascribe to other made tools.

---

12) Ibid., 175. Note how this seemingly does not apply to improv, where movements are not transposed from other contexts to be reshaped in a dance. They arise *ex nihilo* from improvisation as it were. However, I do not think this impairs Langer's argument.

13) Ibid., 175.

14) See Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, .

There is, admittedly, a vitalist undercurrent to Langer's account; she sees intentional human activity – whether it be on an individual or collective scale – as always concealing a “geometry of force” that is “trans-individual.” Her descriptions of the interplay of these forces are redolent with metaphysical overtones that some will prefer to drop. But the abstractive operation, whereby the dance lifts gestures and movements out of their quotidian contexts to signify creativity as such, can easily be retained.

Finally, I come to the most important part of Langer's account for my own understanding of Movenglish and the consequences it bears for the philosophy of dance. Langer divides expressive movements along lines that incorporates the denotative/connotative distinction common to linguistics and philosophies of language.

Gesture is defined in the dictionary as “expressive movement.” But “expressive” has two alternative meanings: it means either “self-expressive,” i.e. symptomatic of existing subjective conditions, or “logically expressive” i.e. symbolic of a concept, that may or may not refer to factually given conditions.

A sign is often expressive in both capacities, as symptom and symbol; spoken words are normally expressive in both ways. ... The same is true of gesture: it may be either self-expressive or logically expressive. It may indicate demands or intentions as when people signal to each other, or it may be conventionally symbolic like the deaf-mute language, but at the same time the manner in which a gesture is performed usually indicates the performer's state of mind; it is nervous or calm, violent or gentle. Or it may be purely self-expressive, as speech may be pure exclamation. *Language is primarily symbolic and incidentally symptomatic; exclamation is relatively rare. Gesture, on the contrary, is far more important as an avenue of self-expression than as a “word.”*<sup>15</sup>

There is a clear division of labor here between language and gesture: language primarily delivers concepts (tone and other aspects of expressive delivery as well as connotation are secondary in ordinary communicative contexts), while gestures express the seemingly more intangible vital forces and imagined emotions. This distinction parallels one of Langer's more renowned interventions in the philosophy of language: discursive symbols *versus* presentational symbols. Neatly summarizing what this distinction amounts to, Professor Correia (in an excellent essay on Langer's definition of art) writes, “discursive symbols are the product of language while presentational symbols are the expression of art itself.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to emphasize that this move, this cleavage between discursive and gestural forms of expression, stems from all that was so radical and energizing about Langer's work.

Professor Adrienne Chaplin – who has written an excellent book on Langer<sup>17</sup> – has captured the delicate tightrope walk Langer's aesthetic theory performs. On the one hand, Langer wants to do justice to forms of expression (predominant in the arts) that do not reflect “grammatical means of expression.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, she wishes to avoid the suggestion that “they are blind, inconceivable, mystical affairs.”<sup>19</sup> She avoids this latter trap by conceiving of these forms of expression through “a symbolistic schema other than discursive language.”<sup>20</sup> This is incontestably an important, valuable enterprise that captures what many artists are up to

---

15) Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 180. My emphasis

16) Correia, *Langer and Art*, 9.

17) Chaplin, *Philosophy of Langer*, 260.

18) *Ibid.*

19) *Ibid.*, 261.

20) *Ibid.*

in their work much of the time. The problem is that Langer's symbolistic schema is delivered as a theory that purports to capture what an art form essentially does, what is *proper* to it, and such a theory will necessarily project limits that establish what an art form does not do, what it cannot do. So, the art form in question in this essay (dance) is defined by Langer in terms of its ability to express meaning non-discursively. The possibility that dance might be able to express the denotations and connotations of words, as opposed to the vital forces and emotions that Langer touts, is not entertained.

Consider poetry as an example of an art form that is certainly discursive but that also liberates the vital forces at issue for Langer. A poet would naturally claim that their writing practice upsets the very division Langer invokes when considering dance. For a certain kind of poet, the point of toiling away to craft resonant lines and stanzas is to release those supposedly secondary aspects of words – the (partly) conventionalized connotations but also the vital energies that hum beneath them – in order to harmonize them with the “bare senses” of those words.<sup>21</sup> Of course, a poem constitutes a highly rarified language-context, and the success of such connotative and emotional foregrounding is usually judged on a case by case basis as indicative of the aesthetic quality or value of a given work. A great deal of ingenuity is required to wrest words from their everyday, merely denotative use.

The question is: could dance work in the same way? I will argue that Movenglish (assuredly a dance form) does so, while achieving a more seamless integration of connotative and denotative dimensions than poetry. This is because the connotative and denotative aspects – along with the “vital forces” – are already “baked into” the signs themselves; they are conventionalized and therefore part and parcel of the proper usage of each “gesture-word.” Such harmonization obviously contravenes Langer's dichotomy, and I will have to delve a bit deeper into how Movenglish works to demonstrate this.

### III: Against the Arbitrariness of Connotation

Movenglish is a recently established system of dance-gestures which attempts to establish correlates (lexeme by lexeme) for all words in the English language. It is obviously an ongoing project. The similarity with sign language is palpable, but Movenglish differs in key respects. First, each movement is segmented into parts that map onto the syllables particular to its verbal counterpart.<sup>22</sup> Second, the goal for each dance-gesture is to capture as many onomatopoeic, connotative, or conceptual features of the word as possible in a physical movement. There are many ways of accomplishing this, some of which I will explain in due course through specific examples. But first, I will attempt to show how this aspect of Movenglish does violence to Langer's distinction between the “symbolic” and the “symptomatic” aspects of language, and for the same reasons, Ferdinand de Saussure's renowned emphasis on the “arbitrariness” of the signifier/signified relationship. This will lay the groundwork for my claim that Movenglish further foregrounds and conventionalizes something that is already characteristic of “verbal” sign systems.

Saussure's “arbitrariness” axiom held sway in linguistics (not to mention the philosophy of language in both the analytic and continental traditions), for an astoundingly long time. It has only recently been contested

---

21) Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 67.

22) Most words consist in combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables. Movenglish captures this aspect of phonological structure by emphasizing that part of the dance-gesture that corresponds to the stressed syllable in any number of ways: starkly differentiating the part in terms of movement form or by increasing the length of the movement, the speed, the intensity, and so forth. (You can “scan” the Movenglish phrase and see it replicate the meter of a line of poetry.)

by a handful of linguists and philosophers.<sup>23</sup> Saussure divided the components of the sign (the lexeme or individual word), into the *signifier* (the grapheme or visual aspect of the word coupled with the phonemes that compose it when uttered), the *signified* (the “concept” or denotative definition of the word), and the relationship between the two.<sup>24</sup> Saussure claimed that the relationship between signifier and signified was purely arbitrary in the sense that there was no deeper reason that could explain why a given signifier happened to correspond to its signified. He took the fact that different languages employ completely different signifiers to denote the same signified as incontestable evidence of this arbitrariness.

But as one begins to plunge deeper into the connotative dimensions of language as they manifest themselves at the level of the *phonestheme*,<sup>25</sup> the arbitrariness claim looks shakier and shakier. The denotative/connotative distinction is typically parsed as follows: the denotative dimension captures those “essential properties” which are yoked together to comprise the official definition of a given word; for instance, the word “horse” denotes a four-legged mammal belonging to the chordate phylum and so forth, whereas the connotative dimension consists in the halo of associations that fan out from a given word which are inessential to its dictionary definition. We might include in the connotations of the word “horse” such standard cultural associations as “swift,” “gentle,” and “strong” that form the bedrock of such expressions as “he was stout as a horse.” There are also less conventional connotations dependent on individual psychology that vary from person to person (someone with a bad case of equinophobia might automatically associate horses with “horrifying”). A word’s immediate circle of connotations will give it its “feel.”

In most quotidian communicative contexts, however, connotation is suppressed in favor of denotation. This is because connotations can be slippery and run the risk of impeding the efficient transmission of information to accomplish basic goals.<sup>26</sup> Of course, the poet’s aim is not necessarily the unambiguous transfer of information,<sup>27</sup> which is why poets often describe their apprenticeship as the development of an extraordinary sensitivity to the latent connotations churning beneath the denotative surface of words. The temptation that Saussure and many others succumbed to, was to view connotation as negligible. After all, the slipperiness and subjective nature of connotation, which tends to fluctuate from culture to culture, does not constitute a rule-bound, formalizable phenomenon in the way that denotation does. Hence the arbitrariness thesis that accounts for a comparative lack of systematic attention to the phonestheme.

Even if connotations and other seemingly non-denotative, subsidiary connections between words are more subjective than denotations, the overwhelming persistence of connotative phenomena in language systems across the globe is not. In addition, recent research in linguistics has begun to uncover just how non-arbitrary the connotations that accrue to words can be. Phonesthemes will often have shared “qualia” at the level of sound. Linguists have tracked the way that pervasive continuities in the “feel” of certain words run parallel with commonalities in sound. For instance, similarities in the “harshness” or “softness” of a given set of words can betray an associational thread that links them semantically. A well-known example is the phoneme *-gl*

---

23) See Firth, *Selected Papers*; and Magnus, *Gods of the Word*.

24) The American pragmatist logician, Charles Sanders Pierce, resorted to a similar tripartite division. His concept of the “interpretant” was meant to capture the relationship between the signifier and signified as well.

25) I have taken this term from Firth. The term is meant to capture the unity of sound and sense that is most saliently present in clearly onomatopoeic words.

26) Of course, this is not always the case. In many speech situations that necessitate innuendo – for purposes of tact or the avoidance of blame for saying something that is potentially incriminating – connotation will be mobilized in a way that is still oriented toward communication rather the polysemous play or poetic ambiguity.

27) There are important exceptions to this. See poets Billy Collins and Tony Hoagland, who see their work as a response to the prevailing “obscurity” of contemporary poetry.

which shows up in a startling number of words related to “reflected light,” “sight,” and “slipperiness.” Consider “glare,” “glisten,” “glow,” “glower,” “glaze,” “gloss,” “glitter,” “glide,” “glass,” and “gliss.”<sup>28</sup>

These parallels cannot be explained away by simply appealing to etymology (most of these words are completely unrelated in that respect). Considering recent research on what were formerly written off as so many instances of “sound symbolism” hallucinated by poets with overactive imaginations, many linguists now take examples like these to betray a fundamental and pervasive aspect of language. What Pierce termed “broad iconicity” (instances in which sound seems to “enact” the referent of the word) is no longer exclusively relegated to words like “clatter” or “crisp” which are so “on the nose” in their acoustic resemblances that one would not dare deny the role that onomatopoeia played in their origination.

Of course, counterexamples are easy to supply, further strengthening the temptation to write phonemes off as an object of study. But it is completely unclear why pervasive statistical tendencies of phonemic overlap would not merit scientific investigation. Another common objection surfaces with regard to words whose denotations lack any sensory element to them. But words that denote abstractions obviously do not lack connotative meanings, and the sounds encoded in their phonemic structure can do a lot of work to group them together into associational networks. “We hear, somehow, the roundness of *moon*, the ruminativeness of *memory* ... the thinness of *needle*, the speed of *quick*, the warmth of *mum*.”<sup>29</sup> Cognitive scientists have argued that all of this attests to the “synesthetic mapping” that constitutes an important component in our language-processing faculties. Sometimes phonosthemic clustering can be chalked up to *semi*-arbitrary conventions in usage. Computational linguist, Margaret Magnus, gives the word “house” as an example of this conventional clustering effect. “A disproportionate number of the words connected to the idea of ‘shelter’ begin with /h/: hovel, hut, hanger, hutch, hall, hostel etc.”<sup>30</sup> Such a clustering will then infect a word like “harbor,” (which initially just designates a place where ships dock) and provoke the spontaneous invention of a verb form of the word which means “to shelter or hide in an enclosed space.”

The neuroscientist, V.S. Ramachandran, has speculated about the role that this capacity for synesthetic overlap played in the “phylogenetic” origins of language in the human species. He relies on current advances in neuro- and cognitive science that deploy the concept of “modular architecture” to model the way that the various sense-processing centers in the brain tend to work in concert. He links this model to the concept of “exaptation” that is prevalent in evolutionary biology and psychology. Exaptation describes a shift in the functioning of a trait during evolution. Ramachandran hypothesizes that language may have arisen through a kind of synesthetic displacement afforded by the modular architecture of the brain. Hand-signals, used to alert other humans about the presence of a predator say, were felt to resemble a particular mouth movement. Add an audible alerting cry to the mouth-shape analog of the hand-signal and, *voilà!* a meaningful word arrives on the scene, which in turn opens possibilities for further extensions of the initial exapted hand-signal.

In our own fully-fledged language systems, instances of iconicity – rather than just passively adorning semantically self-sufficient words and concepts – come to exert a systematic influence on the system as a whole.<sup>31</sup>

---

28) I have taken this example from a book by Don Paterson (poet and linguist): *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre*. Paterson cites the phoneme *-unk* as another excellent example. “Bunk,” “sunk,” “dunk,” “trunk,” and “funk” all have a low, sunken, concave feel to them. Notice the symmetry with the denotations. These words are also (creepily) etymologically unrelated.

29) *Ibid.*, 34. Interestingly enough, the word “mum” is an almost universally typical word for mother. Doubtless this has to do with both enunciative limitations of infants and the (perhaps more tenuous) aforementioned “warmth” of the sound.

30) Magnus, *Gods of the Word*, 121.

31) “Who can say if ‘glue’ has not taken on a little sheen from its ‘unrelated’ *gl*-bearing ‘bright’ words, or ‘sneak’ a little nasality from *sn*-bearing ‘nosy’ words – or indeed if ‘apple’ has borrowed the *p*-phones themes related to ‘pulling,’ ‘stealing,’ ‘picking,’ and ‘quiet noise?’” Patterson, *The Poem: Lyric Sign, Metre*, 38.



Investigation into phonesthetic properties of lexical items reveals the untenability of Saussure's arbitrariness claim regarding the signifier/signified relationship, or at least, the way that claim has been extended to discourage research into those properties, as if they simply did not exist in the ontologically substantive way that denotation does.<sup>32</sup>

### III: Fusing Signifier and Signified in Movenglish

Let us return to Movenglish. Unlike most language systems, Movenglish did not arise through a chaotic multiplicity of intra- and cross-cultural processes over thousands of years. It is a "created language"<sup>33</sup> designed to foreground the connotative dimensions of a given word by baking them into its conventionalized substance. In other words, Movenglish practitioners work to add to the lexicon by harmonizing a set of denotative-connotative paired properties and then condensing them into a unified dance-gesture through an act of synesthetic transfer.<sup>34</sup> The process begins by carefully isolating the connotative aspects of a given word – whether they are active at the level of the phonemes and mouth/breath patterns (the sibilants, gutturals, labials, etc.), or based on more conceptual associations – and then ranking those connotations in terms of salience. Sometimes salience is judged by conceptual proximity to the denotation in hand; sometimes the cultural prevalence of an association wins out. When the connotations have been paired down to a manageable set, the dancers then have to find a set of visually apprehensible equivalents to form a unified Movenglish "word."<sup>35 36</sup>

To take a simple example of a successful "translation," the word "able" in Movenglish consist in two forceful, chopping (with fists closed) hand gestures (one after the other to follow the syllabic progression) accompanied by a forward step. It is stipulated in the Movenglish vocabulary that this particular dance-gesture (and no other) corresponds to the denotation of "able": "having the power, means or skill to do something."<sup>37</sup> But the word also embraces a strong set of connotations: intelligence, power, fortitude, and so forth. These connotations show up in such expressions as "able-bodied" and in conventionalized "phrasemes" which function like single words, such as "ready, willing and able."<sup>38</sup> There is also the seemingly non-discursive bodily "feeling" that is attached to the word. (Try repeating "able" to yourself in an empty room and register the impact it has on your facial expression, comportment, and muscles). The Movenglish dance-gesture viscerally embodies these connotations. Dancers that perform a Movenglish dance-gesture for the first time often express awe at the way their understanding of its correlative word has undergone a discernible transformation.

I noted before that ease of communication in daily speech (see Paul Grice's "communicative maxims")<sup>39</sup> often necessitates the suppression of a word's connotative resonances in favor of denotation. This undeni-

---

32) This does not mean that connotations are not subject to historical transformation or cultural relativity.

33) Other examples of "created languages" include, famously, Esperanto.

34) Some Movenglish words are more established than others. Oftentimes, the family of associated words that agglomerate around a given word(s) will, retroactively shift the form of the dance-gesture.

35) I must emphasize that the creative process involved in adding to the Movenglish lexicon is a collective one. Dancers come together to "workshop" a word. Candidates are then voted upon for inclusion.

36) I am only scratching the surface of the complexities involved in the creation of a Movenglish vocabulary.

37) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=-egBS-8At-A&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=-egBS-8At-A&feature=emb_logo). Accessed on 11/13/23, "'able' Movenglish", Charly Santagado.

38) Other examples of phrasemes include "over and above," "give and take," and "million-dollar question." The fact that when these words come together in these specific configurations in everyday speech, the standardized stresses are reduced so that only one syllable in the complete unit (usually located in the last word of the phrase) receives a stress, signals that we are dealing with a phraseme.

39) Davis, *Pragmatics Reader*, 79.

able fact might seem to support Langer's separation of the conceptual content of a symbol (most adequately captured in discursive form) from the symptomatic, connotative dimensions (which are supposedly the province of dance). But in Movenglish no such separation can be made; denotation and connotation, concept and symptom, meaning and vital force are too tightly fused.<sup>40</sup>

Experienced dancers and choreographers are skilled at wringing emotional content from gestural form. Langer is absolutely correct when she emphasizes the way dance-gestures can function as "symptoms" to externalize complex psychological states or liberate the play of more sub-personal emotions and affects (what she terms "vital forces"). But rarely is a dancer given text to "translate" word for word into gestural equivalents. In the rare exceptions when this sort of translation does occur, for instance in many of the pieces of Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite,<sup>41</sup> the process is more "impressionistic" than what Movenglish allows for. Syllable to movement-component matching is not a requirement, nor does the dance-gesture have to cling to the established denotation or prevalent connotations of a given word in her work. Often the same movements are used for different words. This lack of linguistic stringency affords some felicitous possibilities for the choreographer who can, for instance, signal that a word like "happiness" has a completely non-conventional meaning in the context of the piece by appending a deprecatory or anxious movement to it.<sup>42</sup>

Besides the fact that the dance-gestures in this case really do seem to entertain a somewhat arbitrary relationship with the signified or denoted they purport to translate, the dance as a whole will suffer from the same drawbacks that have always plagued the transmission of choreography. There have been attempts to standardized a dance notation<sup>43</sup> system that would allow choreographers to transmit their choreographic techniques to other dancers in much the same way that a musical score shows a competent musician how to play a particular fugue, say, with relative ease.

Admirable though as such attempts have been, they have failed to gain much traction in the dance world (at least outside of academia). Ask choreographers and dancers why they do not use Laban Notation and they will tell you that learning the notation itself is cumbersome, and actually using it is highly inefficient. The signifiers themselves are purely arbitrary which makes them hard to remember. Even more problematically, the average dance move consists in a multiplicity of different bodily movements, so to account for a single movement one would have to employ several different "Laban signs" at once. Representing individual movements that require the "stacking" of multiple signs along the "synchronic axis" (that is, at each individual stage of the move's execution), while preserving the diachronic progression (the linear ordering of the moves) on paper is often nightmarishly difficult. So far there are not any good solutions for these issues in sight, and so instead of employing a notational system, dancers rely on taking classes with the choreographers they adore (where they may learn just a short "phrase" from a piece) or watching the video recordings of a dance over and over until they pick it up. To make matters worse, copyright issues are a notoriously nettlesome affair in dance. Without clear protocols for detecting "choreographic plagiarism" many choreographers do not allow video recordings of their work to be published online.

Movenglish does not purport to solve these issues. Obviously, a dance without textual elements is unlikely to be translatable or transmittable to other dancers by way of Movenglish. But by accessing a free online database,<sup>44</sup>

---

40) Speed of speech versus speed of Movenglish.

41) For instance, in the dances: *Betroffenheit*. <https://www.marquee.tv/videos/crystalpite-betroffenheit>., *The Statement*, and *Revisor*.

42) To pretend that Movenglish cannot do this would be erroneous. There are many subtle ways of performing a Movenglish phrase that will dramatically shift the emotional contour of the word without compromising the standardized usage.

43) See Laban Notation and Ann Hutchinson Guest's "Movement Alphabet."

44) <https://www.mignolo.art/movenglish>

a dancer can learn the translated choreography that goes with any Movenglish-informed dance, even without viewing any video footage of it. In addition, once a dancer or choreographer has gained a degree of fluency in Movenglish, they can translate any text they like. One of the prime virtues of Movenglish lies, therefore, in its potential to break down disciplinary boundaries, or to “deconstruct” the supposedly objective principles that define what is proper to a given art form.

The renowned philosopher of art, Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, in his influential book *Laocoon*, attempted to restrict practices of art-making within a given domain to what an art form was essentially “good at.” The impulse to define what was proper to a given art form persisted, indeed it still persists in many artistic and philosophical circles. For instance, certain prescriptions followed from the fact that painting represents static scenes synchronically (namely the exclusion of narrative progression among other things), while for Schopenhauer, music’s time-bound emotional abstraction rendered it fit for representing the sub-personal fluctuations of “the Will.” I mentioned at the start of this paper, that emergent art forms usually feel a pressure to legitimize themselves by way of a defining ontological criterion. That criterion tends to spill over into a normative prescription that can be used to devalue works within a given medium that fail to accentuate those ontological conditions. The history of early film theory and the transition from classical to modern dance were fraught with these sorts of exclusionary definitions.<sup>45</sup> Although Langer does a great job of avoiding this trap while still doing justice to the ontology of dance, she commits an analogous error in relegating the transmission of conceptual content to written or spoken sign-systems and the expression of emotional content, vital force, connotation, and so forth, to dance. Yes, dance can express these things, but it can express even more.

## V: Conclusion

I have argued that Movenglish is a sign system that captures the semantic qualities of a verbalized system (English specifically) while accentuating the connotative aspects of words. The connotative axis of Movenglish is rendered more salient because it explicitly conventionalized, as a primary determinant of the visible (and for the dancer, physically enacted), the form of each “word.” In a manner that is analogous to the “estrangement-effect” that good poetry performs on language users, Movenglish practitioners register the way their perception of regular, spoken English, has irreparably changed. In the ontology of dance, Langer’s account has many merits, but the definition according to which dance as an art form *exclusively* conveys “symptoms,” “vital forces,” and “virtual emotions” is unduly restrictive. Dance does these things, and, in the case of Movenglish, much more.

---

45) See Perkins, *Film as Film*, for a great diagnosis of this tendency.

Bibliography:

- Chaplin, Adrienne Dengerink. *Philosophy of Susanne Langer: Embodied Meaning in Logic, Art and Feeling*. London, New York, Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350030565>.
- Correia, Carlos João. "Susanne K. Langer and the Definition of Art." *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 3, no. 1, (2019): 92–103. <https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc.2019.0007>.
- Culler, Jonathan D. *Theory of the Lyric*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Davis, Steven. *Pragmatics: A Reader*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Farinas, Rebecca L., and Julie Van Camp, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Dance and Philosophy*. London, New York, Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350103504>.
- Firth, John Rupert. *Selected Papers of J.R. Firth, 1952–59*. Edited by Frank Robert Palmer. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968.
- Heidegger, M. *Poetry, language, thought*. New York: First Perennial Classics, 2001.
- . *The Heidegger Reader*. Edited by Günter Figal. Translated by Jerome Veith. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Langer, Susanne K. *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- . *Feeling and Form*. Oxfordshire, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979.
- Magnus, Margaret. *The Gods of the Word: Archetypes in the Consonants*. Self-publish, 2010.
- Paterson, Don. *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre*. London, England: Faber & Faber, 2018.
- Perkins, Victor F. *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*. London, England: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Garden City, NY: Dover Publications, 1966.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.