

**“CORPOREALITY” IN METAPHOR STUDIES:  
WHY IT IS SO EASY TO MISS THE POINT  
 (“Corporealidade” nos estudos sobre metáforas:  
por que é tão fácil não entender)**

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**Abstract:** *It is argued that the notion of corporeality that is so much present in discussions about mind, language and the way metaphor functions in real life is best understood as first and foremost having to do with corpo-reality rather than corporeal-ity. This is a far more revolutionary idea than often seen to be and calls for a thorough revision of many of our well-entrenched dogmas. Not surprisingly, rearguard maneuvers designed to blunt its thrust are all too common in metaphor studies.*

**Key-words:** *corporeality; corpo-reality; mind; social constructivism.*

**Resumo:** *Argumenta-se que a noção de corporealidade que se destaca nas discussões sobre a mente, linguagem e o modo como a metáfora funciona na vida real é mais bem entendida como tendo a ver com corpo-realidade e não corporeal-idade. Isto é uma idéia muito mais revolucionária que se pensa comumente e demanda uma revisão drástica de muitos dos dogmas entrenchados. Não é de se estranhar que manobras com vistas a neutralizar seus efeitos são comuns em estudos sobre metáfora.*

**Palavras-chaves:** *corporealidade; corpo-realidade; mente; construtivismo social.*

The word *corporeal* (as well as its cognate *corporeality*) has been bandied about in metaphor studies for quite some time now. Like so many others, it has lost much of its sheen, I believe, due to overuse and is in serious danger of being treated—if it is not already being treated—as a fancy word for something familiar and banal, the academic equivalent of old wine in new bottle! In what follows, I want to focus on why there is today an urgent need to revive the term, restore its original thrust and stress its revolutionary potential.

First, an important caveat. The word *corporeality* is best thought of as ‘corpo-reality’ rather than ‘corporeal-ity’ as the familiar rules of English

morphology would make us expect. It is all about reality; or, if you like, the million-dollar question as to what the ultimate reality is all about. And here is where it makes an important point that goes totally against the grain. To appreciate this point, one must take into account what the default answer to questions of meaning has been through the centuries.

We have all been conditioned to believe that meaning is contained in—in fact literally imprisoned by—words. The latter is to the former as the body is to the soul. So to embody a given meaning is to contain it, imprison it. And corporeality in this sense is the state of a meaning's containment or, rather, concealment.

Among other things, this means, meaning is inaccessible to us except through its bodily manifestation, the word. It was this piece of familiar wisdom that Ferdinand de Saussure made the corner-stone of his theorizing. In the translator's introduction to his *Course in General Linguistics*, one reads:

The revolution that Saussure ushered in has rightly been described as 'Copernican'. For instead of men's words being seen as being peripheral to men's understanding of reality, men's understanding of reality came to be seen as resolving about their social use of reality. (Saussure 1916: 4)

The initiate, however, must be warned of several snags here. The Copernican character of Saussure's revolution is ascribed to his emphasis on the social use of reality and, by implication, his foregrounding of society over the lonesome individual of a Cartesian lineage—an idea that many scholars believe he picked up from Émile Durkheim. Now, Saussure must be given all the credit and kudos for this, though it is equally true that once he incorporated into his theorizing the idea that language is a 'social fact', he slipped back into what many critics have described as some sort of methodological individualism. But, be that as it may, Saussure's thinking seems to have been entirely in line with the traditional wisdom insofar as the sign relation was concerned. For, as Derrida was quick to denounce, his signifier/signified dichotomy was far from symmetrical or equitable from a metaphysical point of view as projected originally. Like many other dichotomies of Western metaphysics, this one too was lop-sided.

In effect, then, although Saussure announced a Copernican revolution in relation to the Platonic idea of stable, immutable meanings, his overall framework was very much within the dictates of traditional metaphysics

because, when all was said and done, it was the signified that could, as it were, stand alone whereas the signifier was condemned to remain in a state of dependency in relation to it (Rajagopalan 2009). In the end, it was Western Metaphysics that had the last laugh. For much of his revolutionary zeal, Saussure's theory ended up by endorsing it. All he could achieve was, as Derrida (1967) would famously conclude, replace its trademark logocentrism with his own 'phonocentrism'.

In other words, corporeality is often understood as simply corporeal-*ity* or merely a fancy term for the good old idea that meanings, being ethereal entities, need to be first materialized in the form of concrete words in order to be made tangible and accessible to us humans. What is even worse is that this idea is so embedded in Western metaphysics that it crops up every once in a while, often unbeknownst to those who invoke the term.

But there are also cases where the idea of corporeal-*ity* is implicitly assumed in theorizing about language and cognition. A classic example is the hypothesis of the language of thought or mentalese (Fodor 1974, 1975, 1987, 2008). An ardent defender of Internal Realism, Fodor advocates the absolute necessity of postulating an internal mental language that is prior to language(s) in the sense people know them. Furthermore, it is given to us in its full-blown complexity and distributed evenly. Steven Pinker (1994) endorsed the idea when he proclaimed: "there are stone-age societies, but there is no such a thing as a stone-age language".

In a nutshell, then, the overall message that comes out of these works is the following: nurture has nothing to do with the way we are, it's all determined by our nature. Nature and nature alone can explain how the mind is the way it is and how it works. And the mind is what must be tapped into if we want to explain why human language is the way it is and how it works.

In fact, so powerful is this idea that there is, every now and then, a carefully orchestrated rearguard action designed to stem the tide of any development that threatens to undo the unacknowledged dogma. A case in point is Fodor's vigorous reaction to any mention of Darwin and his theory of natural selection. In a review of Pinker's *The Language Instinct* and Plotkin's *Evolution in Mind*, he blasted what he branded as empiricist ploys to corrode the supremacy of mind over matter. He began by concurring enthusiastically with both Pinker and Plotkin when he wrote (Fodor 1998: 32)

Rationalists are nativists by definition; and nativism is where cognitive science touches the real world. As both Pinker and Plotkin rightly emphasise, the standard view in current social science – and in what’s called ‘literary theory’ – takes a form of Empiricism for granted: human nature is arbitrarily plastic and minds are social constructs. By contrast, the evidence from cognitive science is that a lot of what’s in the modules seems to be there innately.

But he soon took exception to their perceived inclination to a Darwinian explanation as to how the human mind came to be what it is. Thus he hastened to add:

But it’s the inference from nativism to Darwinism that is currently divisive within the New Rationalist community. Pinker and Plotkin are selling an evolutionary approach to psychology that a lot of cognitive scientists (myself included) aren’t buying. (Fodor 1998:33)

In a 2007 article published in the *London Review of Books* (Fodor 2007), he declared his position even more categorically when he wrote:

[...] the classical Darwinist account of evolution as primarily driven by natural selection is in trouble on both conceptual and empirical grounds.(Fodor 2007: 11)

But not all reactions to occasional challenges to the orthodoxy are so dramatic. Many even go unnoticed or at least are not commented on adequately in the literature as indeed reactions to anything at all. Take the idea of the social construction of reality. Coined by Berger and Luckmann in their 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, the term synthesizes an idea that was formulated much earlier by Karl Mannheim in the wake of World War II (cf. Simonds 1978). It came under scathing attack by Karl Popper (1966). But a more sustained and, at the same time, subtler response to it had to wait another three decades. It came in the form of Searle’s *Construction of Social Reality* (Searle 1995).

The contrast with the earlier work is evident in the very title of Searle’s book. The ingenious dislocation of the qualifier ‘social’ makes all the difference: it is no longer construction that is claimed to be social: it is reality. More interestingly, Searle is not saying that all reality is social. Rather, he is admitting that some reality is socially constructed and that it cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of physical reality. The word ‘social’ is, in other words, used partitively.

Searle's strategy consists in continuing a line of investigation that he had embarked on in *Speech Acts* (Searle 1969) and, later in *Intentionality*. He begins by invoking two oppositions he had already elaborated in those earlier works: between brute and institutional facts and between regulative and constitutive rules. Armed with the two dichotomous oppositions, Searle is able to distinguish among the natural, the mental and the social in the following way:

- Natural: public, independent of us. e.g. *Mt Everest has snow on top.*
- Mental: private, dependent on us. e.g. *I am in pain.*
- Social: public, independent on us. e.g. *This is a \$ 5 bill.*

Aside from the problem of fixing the exact referents of "us" (it makes all the difference whether it is understood as referring to us severally or collectively), especially in determining the question of dependence vs. independence, one must seriously ask whether Searle has definitively solved the problem presented by the Cartesian dualism between the mind and the matter, which was his prime target. In fact, a case can be made that he has only succeeded in postponing a solution. Because what he has effectively achieved is introducing a number of further dualisms of his own: that of observer independent vs. observer dependent reality, that of intrinsic (of mental states) vs. derived (of speech acts) intentionality, that of inner experience vs. external behavior, that of neurobiological processes vs. conscious states, and that of brains vs. minds—none of which is obvious enough or proven once and for all to be part of the *explanans*. As a matter of fact, what Searle invokes as his *explanans* is arguably part of his *explanandum* or, at the very least, a spillover from it.

Commenting on the alleged opposition between the intrinsic intentionality of mental states and the derived intentionality of speech acts, this is what Gauker (2007: 126-7) has to say:

The answer to this argument is that the purported asymmetry does not exist. As Searle himself says, intentional states "are realized in the neurophysiology of the brain" (1983, p. 15). So a belief can be characterized either *qua* content-bearing state or *qua* neurophysiological entity. We are not presently able to give the neurophysiological description, but since each particular belief is a particular neurophysiological entity, the description is there to be had. So there is a perfect symmetry between the case of speech acts and the case of mental states.

It seems clear to me in light of comments like this that Searle is desperately trying to safeguard at any cost a certain philosophical orthodoxy according to which the external world “out there” is entirely within the grasp of the singleton individual endowed with the right intellectual wherewithal and that the social circumstances attending on that individual have at best an ancillary, not a decisive, role to play in all this. In an interview given to Steven R. Postrel and Edward Feser (2000), Searle says:

In the past few decades there has been a movement sometimes described as the “postmodern movement.” There’s no single word that’s really adequate to describe it, but that’s one that the people [involved] typically accept. In many respects, they see themselves as challenging the Enlightenment vision that there is an independently existing reality, that we can have a language that refers in some clear and intelligible way to elements of that reality, and that we can obtain objective truth about that reality. (Postel and Feser 2000: 8)

Searle makes it abundantly clear here is that his primary concern is to uphold the Enlightenment ideal and defend metaphysical realism against all criticism. In other words, contrary to what the title of his book might lead one to think, his real purpose in writing *Construction of Social Reality* was not to explain social reality but to explain it away so that the ground is made clear for the existence of external reality pure and simple. Or, better still, to plead that so-called social reality is an excrescence on objective reality and should not be made the primary focus of philosophical attention. Thus, continuing his diatribe against those whom he brands ‘postmodern’ thinkers, he says

They advance the view that what we think of as reality is largely a social construct, or that it’s a device designed to oppress the marginalized peoples of the world—the colonial peoples, women, racial minorities. They see the attempt to attain rationality and truth and knowledge as some kind of power play, and what they want instead is what they take to be more liberating—a rejection of the rationalist view. (Postel & Feser 2000: 10)

How does the notion of corpo-reality figure in all this? Well, to begin with, corpo-reality—as distinct from corporeal-ity—is the very negation of what Searle calls the Enlightenment project. Searle’s idea of that Enlightenment project, namely “that there is an independently existing reality, that we can have a language that refers in some clear and intelligible way to elements of that reality, and that we can obtain objective truth about

that reality" is just what is thrown upside down by the claim of corporeality. According to this view, *corpo*, the body, is what reality is made of. *The appearance, in this case, is the reality*. The soul, or whatever you want to name the putative ultimate essence, is a figment of our fertile imagination.

According to our received wisdom, the true essence of a man is his soul, not his body. Body is mere appearance, not his ultimate reality. But when Oscar Wilde remarks "It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), he is making a powerful indictment of the Enlightenment perspective, by turning it upside down. So too is Shoshana Felman (2003) when she refers to the speaking body. The body that speaks does so independently of the mind. Not having been endowed with telepathic powers, the mind can, whenever it speaks, convey meanings only metaphorically, that is to say, by means of making something else—signifiers, in Saussurean terms—do the job. Not so with the body that speaks. Bodies are meaning-makers in their own right. The signifiers do the job by themselves. They do this by contact, contiguity rather than substitution—by metonymy rather than metaphor. As Peggy Phelan (2003: 324) famously put it,

In moving from the grammar of words to the grammar of the body, one moves from the realm of metaphor to the realm of metonymy.

Herein may lie a clue to getting to grips with Davidson's celebrated claim that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more" (Davidson 1984).

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