

Postface

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The question as to how the mind creates “mental images” of concepts and memories, and how we use them in communication and thought, has fascinated philosophers for centuries. While it seems obvious that we acquire the meaning of objects, actions, words and abstract entities through our senses by interacting with our environment, the question as to how our bodies and environment shape the representation of meaning in mind and brain is still highly controversial in cognitive science. The last two decades have seen a number of exciting developments in this area. The concept of “embodiment”, i. e. the idea that sensory-motor systems can be part of abstract higher-level processes and representations, has penetrated a wide range of scientific fields. As demonstrated in these conference proceedings, the topic is discussed in literature studies, theoretical and computational linguistics, psycholinguistics, and cognitive neuroscience. From Chinese characters to metaphors and Shakespeare – the involvement of sensory-motor representations is part of the debate.

The analysis of every-day usage of language, the measurement of reaction times in laboratory tasks, or imaging the brain activity during language comprehension have provided us with a wealth of data on the role of sensory-motor knowledge in language. However, the excitement over the interdisciplinarity of this research area also comes at a cost: Are we all talking about the same things when we talk about embodiment or the role of sensory-motor systems? While for some researchers embodiment manifests itself in the different usage of verbs in metaphors, others require changes in brain activity in specific parts of the cortex. The conference “Sensory Motor Concepts in Language and Cognition” in Düsseldorf provided an ideal forum to discuss issues like these, and brought together world-leading experts from several relevant disciplines.

It became apparent that the abstract concept of embodiment is itself embodied in different ways in language corpora, reaction times and brain activation. We may not all ask the same questions. But connecting different theoretical approaches will help us to

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ask better questions, and introducing each other to different methodological approaches will help us answering them. Let us hope that our research will be embodied in more conferences like this in the future.