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**The language portrait in multilingualism
research: Theoretical and
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Abstract

Language portraits, in which participants visualize their linguistic repertoire using the outline of a body silhouette, were originally developed as a language awareness exercise in education, and they are now increasingly employed as a research tool investigating how speakers themselves experience and interpret their heteroglossic practices and repertoires. The present paper discusses a theoretical and methodological framework for this multimodal approach. It draws on Susanne Langer's (1948) distinction between discursive and presentational forms of symbolization, arguing that the language portrait can combine both forms. By providing a body image, body portraits offer the possibility of reflecting on one's communicative repertoire both from the 'inner' perspective of the experiencing subject-body as well as from an 'external' perspective on the object-body.

1. Introduction

For more than 25 years so-called language portraits (Figure 1) – graphic visualizations of the linguistic repertoire using the outline of a body silhouette – have been used, in schools and other educational institutions, to initiate processes of language reflection and to promote sensitivity in dealing with multilingualism. In recent years the language portrait has also increasingly become established as a research tool, proceeding from work done by the *Research Group Spracherleben*¹ [lived experience of language] at the University of Vienna. The portrait has proven to be particularly productive in dealing with questions that foreground a perspective of lived experience of language and concepts such as subject positioning.

While language portraits were eagerly embraced and applied in various ways mainly in pedagogical contexts, they are, when applied in research, frequently met – like other creative methods – with scepticism and subjected to a general suspicion of being insufficiently scholarly. The present paper sets itself the task of subjecting the language portrait, as a research tool, to a critical examination, discussing the theoretical bases of this approach, and addressing the question of what the language portrait is capable of achieving and what methodological implications are involved in its use.

1 www.heteroglossia.net



Figure 1: Doing a language portrait

2. From body mapping to the language portrait

Body silhouettes, as a frame for the visualization of lived experience, have been used in various disciplines for a considerable time as a means of stimulating processes of reflection. In the beginning, mainly life-sized silhouettes or body outlines were used, creatively developed by participants, frequently in a workshop setting. In a survey article analysing contributions in academic journals, de Jager, Tewson, Bedlow & Boydell (2016) trace the course of *whole-body mapping* since the 1980s. The studies they discuss are concerned with such themes as health, trauma, social inequality, political advocacy, migration, community development and education. Much of this work has been concentrated in Canada, South Africa and Australia, but it is also being carried out in European countries. The growing interest in body-mapping as an approach, according to the authors, is related to increasing interest in creative methods, not least in feminist and post-colonial studies. In addition to whole-body silhouettes, small-format, stylized silhouettes have been used, as well, recently, as applications suitable for use in tablets. The principal concern of body-mapping is to bring to the fore the experiential perspectives of the participants, in a collaborative process with a sense of self-empowerment.

At the beginning of the 1990s, under the title “I speak many languages”, the German journal *Grundschulzeitschrift* published – in their *Ideenkiste* (Ideas box) – the silhouettes of a girl and a boy. The article suggests giving students the task of filling in the silhouettes with coloured pencils so that one can see which languages they speak, and what ideas and feelings they associate with each of their languages. The language portrait as an instrument for language awareness, especially in schools, became more widespread through the work of Krumm in particular (e.g. Krumm & Jenkins 2001), who sought to demonstrate that languages and language-learning are linked to emotions, belonging and biographical experience. The language portrait drawing exercise was also taken up in various national and regional versions of the European Language Portfolio (e. g. Österreichisches Sprachen-Kompetenz-Zentrum 2010: 24; Oomen-Welke 2006). A survey of the development of the language portrait in the field of education is to be found in Gogolin (2015). The extent to which the language portrait has been adopted in German-speaking countries and beyond may be revealed by a simple Internet search that shows that it is being applied at all levels of schooling as well as in pre-school education, adult education and teacher training. A glance at the large number of handouts, collections of materials and publications that demonstrate the use of the language portrait – sometimes represented as “language figure” – will show that not only are different shapes in

circulation, but also that the prompts and tasks are framed in very different ways. Both of these factors, as we shall discuss below, exert an influence on the way the linguistic repertoire is represented.

In multilingualism research, language portraits are used predominantly when experiential perspectives and subject positioning are deemed to be relevant. Farmer (2011) and Prasad (2014), for instance, report a research project in Canada, lasting several years, which examined the question of how a school that was designed for a regional minority now sees itself increasingly as the gateway to a multilingual world. In their project they replace the drawn silhouette with a photograph of each participant that was arranged by the students and reduced to a silhouette using an image-processing program. Bristowe, Oostendorp & Anthonissen (2014) concern themselves with the linguistic practices and positioning of young people in Johannesburg using hybrid language forms such as so-called *Tsotsitaal*. Coffey (2015) uses the work of Lakoff & Johnson on metaphors to analyze representations of language by trainee teachers in Great Britain. He is primarily concerned with emphasizing the bodily and emotional dimensions of language learning. Singer & Harris (2016) introduce their long-term project on small-scale multilingualism in the Warruwi community in the Australian Northern Territory. From their data, which was essentially based on language portraits, they concluded that the basic model of polyglossic distribution with a dominant lingua franca does not occur in such communities, but that individual repertoires embrace a broad spectrum of local languages, which permit the practices of receptive multilingualism. In my own work with language portraits, I was concerned with topics such as the post-colonial and post-apartheid imprinting of individual linguistic biographies (Busch 2006), the problematic classification of students according to their first languages (Busch 2010), with experiencing but also subverting the power of categorizing language ideologies (Busch 2012), or language experience in the context of social exclusion (Busch 2016). The language portrait was also used in the framework of the transdisciplinary exploratory pilot study “Multilingualism and Resilience” (Busch & Reddeman 2013), which was concerned with the exploration of linguistic resources in psychotherapy and counselling². Earlier theoretical-methodological considerations to the language portrait can be found in Busch 2006, 2012, 2013.

However much the above-mentioned research studies differ in their theoretical and methodological assumptions, they are nonetheless related in their endeavour to explore linguistic repertoires that prove to be much more complex than discursively created dichotomies might suggest, such as those between first and second language, original and target language, or majority and minority language. The language portrait is understood as a means of gaining insight into everyday linguistic practices of bodily and emotional language experience, or of ideologically informed ideas about, of attitudes to, and of stance taking towards particular languages or modes of speaking. It is thus concerned with the investigation of questions that cannot immediately be answered from the perspective of a strictly observational research methodology.

3. At the interface between biography and discourse

The language portrait is interested in subjective evaluations, it elicits a visual and narrative first person account, and suggests exploring the linguistic repertoire from a subject perspective. From this point of view the linguistic repertoire cannot be understood as a toolbox out of which

² See also: www.heteroglossia.net/Resilienz-und-Mehrsprachigkeit.121.0.html

one may extract, according to need, different languages or registers in which one is more or less competent. Instead, work with language portraits is implicitly or explicitly based on conceptions of the repertoire, according to which we are dealing with a chronotopically layered disposition, adopted and modified in interactions with significant others. It is thus seen as embodied, as part of our corporal being with which we relate to the environment, and as forming a kind of script into which discourses and ideologies that tell us who we are or what we are able to think, feel and desire are enregistered (Busch 2012, 2017).

At a more fundamental level, the use of the language portrait as a research instrument raises the question of how 'subject' is to be understood. Do we follow Husserl or Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]) in understanding the subject from a phenomenological viewpoint as an indisputable precondition of our bodily being in the world? Or do we agree with Foucault (1972) or Butler (1997) in seeing it from a post-structuralist point of view as being constituted only in and through discourse, as the result of preceding processes of subjectivation? Or do we allow these distinct approaches to be combined, as is increasingly postulated in biographically oriented research (Schäfer & Völter 2005, Wehrle 2016, Spies & Tuidter 2017, Busch 2017), so as to take account of both viewing angles: that of discourse towards the subject, and that of the subject towards discourse. If we understand the body as an interface where the biographical and the discursive intersect, then we may ask how historically located discourses enter into the body and the experiential world of the individual subject, but also, conversely, how bodily and emotionally lived experience can contribute to the confirming or shifting of discourses. If we consider the language portrait as body image both aspects – the biographical and the discursive – seem equally relevant: language portraits are employed by the authors to represent language attitudes and emotional aspects, but they also allow us to identify the influence of language ideologies and of stance taking towards such ideologies.

4. Image and language

In language portraits we are typically concerned with what Mitchell (1987) characterized as "image-text", that is to say, a form of representation in which image and language do not appear in their "pure" form, but refer reciprocally to each other. Meaning is created in both modes: one mode is not a translation or illustration of the other. We must therefore ask what peculiarities are shown by pictorial forms of representation compared to linguistic forms. From the point of view of social semiotics Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) examine the relationship between writing and image, and attempt to develop a grammar of visual design founded on semiotic and discourse theory. They speak of the sequential, linear order of what is captured in language and of the absence of such an evident 'reading path' in the visual dimension, which is structured according to relations and proportions.

Since the 1990s, in the context of the so-called pictorial or iconic turn, there has been increased interest in the use of visualization in science, the purpose of which is to rehabilitate thinking about images and in images, and to refine methodical instruments of pictorial analysis (Bredenkamp 2005). In this, the seminal studies of Susanne Langer (1948) are often invoked. Without making any categorial distinction between image and language, she distinguishes between what she characterizes as 'discursive' forms of 'symbolism' or meaning making and 'presentational' forms. As Langer demonstrates, using the example of language, discursive forms of symbolism follow the specific projection of a linear, successive ordering "which requires us to string out our ideas even though their objects rest one within the other, as pieces of clothing that are actually worn one over the other have to be strung side by side on the

clothesline" (Langer 1948: 65-66). In contrast visual forms (lines, colours, proportions, etc.) present the components not sequentially but simultaneously. The meanings of particular elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure. This kind of non-discursive, condensing symbolism, such as may also be characteristic of dreams or poetry, is in Langer's understanding especially suitable for the expressions of ideas, feelings, free associations and fantasies, which tend to defy linguistic projection: "The ambivalences and intricacies of inner experience, the interplay of feelings with thoughts and impressions, memories and echoes of memories, transient fantasy, or its mere runic traces, all turned into nameless, emotional stuff" (Langer 1948: 82-83). This view suggests that, unlike what happens in the discursive mode, which favours the creation of diachronic continuity and synchronic coherence, in the analogous pictorial mode contradictions, disruptions, overlaps and ambiguities can readily coexist.

In the language portrait the image functions as a means of opening a conversation and as a point of reference within the conversation, and thus furthers the elicitation of (biographical) narratives. For participants the creative process of visualization offers the possibility of pausing in order to use the pictorial representation to reflect on linguistic practices and preferences that normally pass without awareness, and then to talk about them. The process of designing, commenting and interpreting can also contribute to becoming increasingly aware of linguistic resources considered as peripheral in other contexts (for example languages acquired in informal contexts), to re-assessing one's own repertoire, and to validating it in a sense of self-empowerment. Overall, a way of representation that employs both the visual and the verbal mode can contribute to preventing us from reverting too rapidly to pre-established narrative patterns and responding to normative expectations. With reference to language in the writing up of a CV, for example, it is expected that individual languages will be listed according to the degree of competence or in the chronological order in which they were learnt. The visualization of the linguistic repertoire favours a representation that also allows us to deal with language attitudes or bodily and emotional aspects of lived experiences of language. Kramsch (2009: 60) points to the importance of taking into account such subjective stances in the process of language learning: "Far from being perceived as primarily a tool for communication and exchange of information, the foreign language is first and foremost experienced physically, linguistically, emotionally, artistically." Important insights for multilingualism research are often to be gained when unexpected or irritating material is expressed in language portraits. If pictures genuinely produce visibility of 'something' which is not accessible to perception without the picture, they are no more to be seen as media for the representation of a reality that exists independently of them: they are in themselves creators of reality, they become performative (Breckner 2010: 89).

The multimodal character, that is, the possibility of presenting the linguistic repertoire in both a pictorial-presentational and a linguistic-discursive fashion, permits the participants to refer to the pictorial in conversation and, conversely, to make subsequent pictorial reference to what has been verbalized. The change from one mode to another makes it possible to switch between three poles: (1) the representation of language as an object, as a quasi-externalized third party, (2) the representation of moments in lived experience of language as a bodily-emotional state of affectedness, and (3) the representation of language ideologies about, attitudes to, and stance taking towards particular languages or linguistic practices.

In the interpretation of language portraits we presume that the image, the caption, and the spoken (or written) interpretation of the image form a whole and that meaning is created in the interplay between presentational and discursive forms of representation. Unlike many

psychoanalytically inspired approaches (e.g. Diem-Wille 2001), we look at the image not as an encrypted representation of an 'inner truth' which is not accessible to consciousness, but (like language) as an interaction-seeking gesture of making visible and showing, which is able to direct the beholder's gaze at certain issues while blinding out others. We therefore refrain from an auctorial interpretation of the image, and view the explanation and interpretation of the portrait by the participant as part of an interactive research process. According to the particular research interest, different qualitative procedures may be used (discourse-linguistics, conversation analysis, metaphor analysis, and so on), in order to appreciate the language portrait as a pictorial-linguistic form of text production. Although with the language portrait we are dealing with a qualitative approach, in some circumstances elements of quantitative evaluation may also be used, particularly if one is concerned with exploring language repertoires of persons belonging to a particular group, for example for the purpose of elaborating school language profiles (Busch 2010).

In our research, therefore, we are less concerned with the picture as an artefact than with the process of thinking in and with images. Boehm (2005: 32) draws attention to the dual character of an image as an object and non-object, which is expressed in English in the distinction between *image* as an idea and *picture* as an artefact. As artefacts pictures are already the result of a multi-stage process of perception, imagination, appropriation and externalization: they remain in an intermediate and mediating relationship between the world and the beholder (Schultz 2005).

5. The language portrait as an interactional process

We do not understand the language portrait, therefore, as a representation of the individual language repertoire "as it is", but as a situational and context-bound production that is created in interaction between the participants, framed by the specifications (silhouette, prompts for drawing and commenting, range of colours, etc.) and the setting.

When the language portrait is used in research, this framing has a considerable influence on the data obtained – on the pictorial representation and on the narrative. Apart from all those factors which have to be observed in every setting in qualitative research (such as selection of the location, asymmetric distribution of power, individual interview or group discussion, type of recording etc.), there are, in the use of language portraits, specific points that I should like to discuss here: the framing of the invitation to produce the language portrait and of the questions asked to prompt the interpretation of the drawing, as well as the issue as to what kind of body silhouettes are used as template.

Since, in multilingualism research, we are normally concerned with the exploration of complex heteroglossic constellations, simplifications in the introduction to the research activity, such as "use a different colour for every language that you speak", could result in an undesired reduction of complexity. Examples of this are the representation of languages as bounded separate entities, or the language ideological equating of language and nation. The specific potential inherent in thinking in images – such as the representation of a state of tension between dominant language ideologies and one's own linguistic experience – cannot be fully realised in this way.

In a recent project³ we used the following prompt:

“We would like to ask you to represent graphically your linguistic repertoire – languages and ways of speaking that are important in your life. For this you may either use the silhouette provided or draw one for yourself on the reverse side of the page; choose colours that fit the different languages and modes of speech which have a particular meaning for you.”

The task was further refined by means of supplementary questions, such as: “How do you experience different ways of speaking, writing and communicating with other people? How do you experience languages and language use that are to be found in your environment?” “What place would you allocate to them in the picture?” More detailed stimuli were also provided, such as: “You might perhaps begin with languages and ways of speaking that are currently important to you, and also think of those which are farther in the past or which might still occur”; “You might also think of different people or life situations”. On some occasions it was helpful to note that in drawing there is no question of “right” or “wrong”, and that additions may be made at any time. In addition to this, participants were asked to create a caption and to designate or clarify the individual colour entries. The request to present the portrait normally resulted in a more or less detailed spontaneous narrative, which could be supported by questions concerning the significance of colour choice or the location of particular elements in the picture. The course of the conversation was oriented to the principles of respectful biographically oriented research, as has been exemplified, for example, by Bourdieu (1999).

The more openly the invitation to produce a language portrait is formulated, the more wide-ranging and differentiated will be the spectrum of what participants cite as languages or ways of speaking. In the project mentioned above, this included languages in the conventional sense (German, Czech...), different varieties (High German, Colloquial, Slang...), language use that is associated with particular people (friends, mother, grandfather, partner...) or situations (holiday, work...), or practices (writing, singing, praying, language games). Mention was also made of talking with animals and forms of non-verbal communication (body language, gestures, silence) and finally languages in the figurative sense as an expression of moods or feelings (such as the language of fear, reason, anger, love). In all, the participants presented their communicative repertoires in a manner that made clear its heteroglossic character, whereby I understand heteroglossia in the way described by Bachtin (1979) as a complex plurality of languages, voices and discourses.

For work on language portraits, a number of different silhouettes are currently in use: these range from those that, on the basis of their dress and hair-style, may be recognised as girl or boy, to strongly abstract figures in the form of so-called “gingerbread-men”. Use is also made, as was mentioned above, of edited photographic portraits or life-sized whole-body silhouettes. After a number of different trials we decided on a template drawing on expert knowledge in art therapy⁴, which is freely available⁵ on condition that the source is mentioned (Figure 2).

3 See footnote 2.

4 I wish to express my thanks to the art- and psychotherapist Isabelle Rentsch (from Zürich) for her many valuable suggestions and for the design of the template.

5 <http://heteroglossia.net/Sprachportraet.123.0.html>

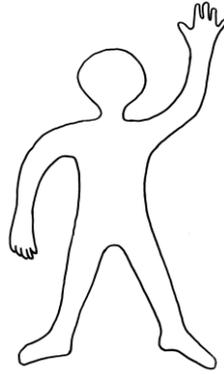


Figure 2: Template of the body outline

In this template the silhouette is represented schematically – with no gender-specific details, and no clothing, but also not ‘naked’ (for example, no toes are visible). Without the representation of any specific body movement, the posture implies a dynamic. The different position of the two arms provides the possibility of differentiation. The provided figure should not look too ‘perfect’, to avoid discouraging those who are adding their own elements. Apart from a suggestion of fingers, no details (such as eyes, mouth or ears) are indicated in order to preserve the possibility of completion. In relation to the body, the head is drawn somewhat larger than real-life proportions (for adults this is 1:7), in order to leave sufficient room for additional drawing. The silhouette is placed in such a way on an A4 landscape format that the body figure does not appear to ‘float’ in an empty space, which might cause anxiety. To the right there is space for captions. Larger silhouettes, especially life-size, may be experienced as threatening by those who are drawing, in much the same way as a blank sheet. The silhouette provides a framework, and it permits a free interpretation ranging from creative design to rather schematized visualizations in the manner of a diagram.

6. Body image as a frame for metaphors

The success of the language portrait as a method is due not least to the fact that language is (also) a bodily phenomenon and that this dimension is addressed by the use of the silhouette. My linguistic repertoire, which I develop and employ in interaction with others, is part of the ‘body image’ which I have of myself, which is reflected to me by others, and which I enact situationally to others as “social portraiture” (Goffman, 1979: 6). The art scholar Martin Schulz (2005) views the body as an important reference point in pictorial representations, because it is an interface between the inner and outer world, between subjects who see pictures and, in turn, objects that are seen as pictures. The metaphorical transformation of the body into a picture facilitates, in his opinion, a momentum of self-distancing, which makes it possible to experience oneself as one’s counterpart. From a phenomenological viewpoint this possibility of self-distancing is vested in the duality of being a subject-body and having an object-body, which corresponds to different positionings in relation to the ‘world’: the subject-body as centre of the here-and-now, to which the ‘world’ is concentrically related, and the object-body as an observable phenomenon which offers the possibility of shifting from the subject position to an external perspective (Lindemann 1994: 80). The language portrait makes it possible to take up both stances alternately, of migrating between the experiencing subject-body and the observable object-body, between the ‘internal’ view informed by one’s own language experiences and linguistic dispositions, and the external ‘outside’ view on languages as objects and on linguistic-discursive patterns which one perceives as being part of one’s own linguistic

practices. Accordingly, one advantage of the language portrait would be that it can contribute to extending and modifying one's view of one's own linguistic dispositions.

In language portraits it is possible to observe various kinds of structuring that correspond to different frames for metaphors. The silhouette suggests a structuring according to parts of the body, which may refer to common metaphors such as the head as the place of reason, the belly as the place of emotions, the heart as the location of intimacy and the hand as the site of social activity. Structuring is also frequently achieved with the help of spatial metaphors – internal/external as metaphors for familiar and unfamiliar, above/below, for example, for current and more remote, large/small surfaces for important and less important. In drawings iconic elements (such as arrow, lightning, heart), symbols (national flag) or ornaments are also frequently used. Colours, too, or different colour shades, are employed partly in the sense of common connotations (e.g. red for the emotional, blue as a 'cool' colour, light for what has a positive, dark for what has a negative connotation), but also because they are associated with personal preferences (favourite colours) or aversions. It should be noted that there are no generally valid laws to account for the meaning of a particular colour. The way in which a colour is experienced is up to a certain point historically-culturally contiguous but it is not possible to match colour meanings and preferences to individual 'cultures'. Such meanings are often associated with particular types of surface, specific conventions and contexts (Gage 1999; Gekeler 2004). For a single person one and the same colour may be associated with multiple connotations, as Heller (2004) demonstrated in a large-scale questionnaire study. For example, green was simultaneously associated by several participants with hopeful, poisonous, bitter and soothing. What individual elements of visualization represent and what relationship they have to one another can, in the case of language portraits, not immediately be discerned from the picture, but only be revealed through the interpretation that is given by the author.



Figure 3: Example of language portrait

The language portrait that is exemplified here (Figure 3) is taken from a workshop with 17 to 18 years old students at a bilingual school (German and Slovenian) in Carinthia. In Peter's portrait the dominant feature was structured according to parts of the body. He characterized one foot as German and one as Slovenian ("the two pillars"), and in his words they also stand for the language of the mother and that of the father. In the heart he sketched in the Slovenian and the German dialect, while in the head "the German language is actually predominant,

because in Carinthia practically everything is German". To "stretch out a hand to my younger cousin" Peter learned a particular (Slovenian) local dialect which he drew in the raised hand. The Italian and English that he learned at school he placed on the shoulders, because they were a "burden", but there was also a "rucksack" that could be unpacked at need. But Peter also employed another kind of structuring: that between internal and external. For example he drew the two dialects spoken at home in the inside of the legs, and the 'standard forms' of the two languages around them. The choice of colours also plays a particular role. For the German-Carinthian dialect, in accordance with a frequently used symbolism, he chooses brown. In his colour scheme white stands for everything that is still "open" and "may still occur". A more comprehensive discussion of this (Busch 2013) and further language portraits may be found in Busch (2010, 2012).

The language portrait may be understood as a space which – in a pictorial-presentational and linguistic-discursive sense – is structured and configured by means of metaphors. Lakoff & Johnson (1980), in their works in the 1980s and 90s, demonstrated that metaphors are much more than linguistic-rhetorical figures. In their view, the human concept system follows, to a considerable extent, processes of metaphor-formation, where the meaning of one set of circumstances is transferred to another. From this point of view, metaphors are a constituent of the bodily-sensory system of orientation. As Lakoff & Johnson (1999) formulate it, they are rooted "in the flesh". In similar fashion, Langer (1948: 114) sees the formation of metaphors as a fundamental human capacity for the use of pictorial-representative symbols: "Every new experience, or new idea about things, evokes first of all some metaphorical expression". Karl (2006) argues in favour of extending Lakoff & Johnson's phenomenologically inspired understanding of metaphors in the sense of discourse theory, in order to understand metaphors also as a component of historical-cultural discourses and power-related modes of symbolization. The linking she suggests between metaphor analysis and discourse analysis can – in connection with the language portrait – contribute to tracing the influence of discourses or language ideologies on metaphorical concepts of self-constitution.

7. Summary

As a creative research method the language portrait draws both on image and language: in addition to a linguistic-discursive form of presentation, it produces a pictorial-presentational form that follows a differently organized mode of symbolization. Pictorial-presentational representation directs one's view to the whole and to the relationship of individual elements with one another. For this reason the language portrait is particularly suited to research that is interested in an exploration of a heteroglossic linguistic repertoire beyond discursively produced categories and dichotomies, such as those between first and second language, or original language and target language. Since the given silhouette provides a reference to a body, it evokes the bodily-emotional dimension of language. Representations of, attitudes to and positionings towards particular languages and language use, which are in turn subject to linguistic-ideological assessments, can be expressed invoking variously structured metaphor-frames. In that it permits inclusion of the internal perspective of the experiencing subject-body and the external perspective of the linguistically constituted object-body, the approach ultimately supports a reflection of one's own linguistic repertoire.

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