

Dance as a Language

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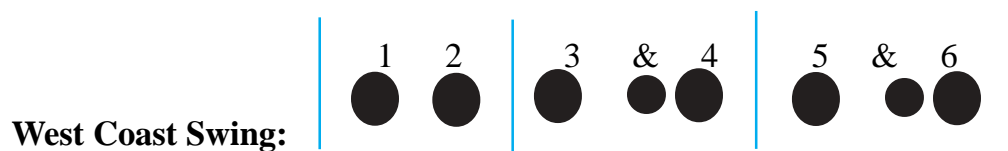
“**Language** exerts hidden power, like a moon on the tides.” - Alcaeus

When we speak, we are communicating with others. There are many methods of communication that are used in the world today. Body language, Sign Language, gestures, and expressions are all used for the purpose of communication. So is dance. Dancing is an art form, which captures the mind and inspires awe with creative movements and expressions. Humans around the world immediately think of dance as a performing art; all the while envisioning tales told through methods of modern dance, or ballet. At the opposite end of the spectrum is another form of dancing that takes place in social settings. Social dancing is not choreographed, and can be viewed as a language of communication and interpretation of music.

According to Webster's Dictionary, the word 'communicate' means to "cause others to partake or share something." This definition says nothing about speech or writing, which "are by no means our only system of communication" (Cherry 4). Charles Morris called the study of language and sign systems, the 'theory of signs' that is divided into three parts: syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic rules. First, there are syntactic rules of syntax that is the associations between signs. In dancing, this will include the positioning of the body at any given time and the leads to different patterns. Second, are the pragmatic rules that are the associations between signs and its users. The pragmatic rules are the ways dancers interpret the music and each lead. Finally, semantic rules are the associations between signs and each thing, action, relationship, and quality of the system (Cherry 9). Semiotics is the study of any system of signs that justifies meaning. The semantic rules of dance include the setting, the relationships between dancers and how the system is used. The system of lead-and-follow dancing is a text. According to Chandler, "a 'text' can exist in any medium and may be verbal, non-verbal, or both," and is "an assemblage of signs constructed and interpreted with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and in a particular medium of communication." Chandler's definition of a 'text' demonstrates that with evidence anything, including dance, can be defined as a language. A dance becomes a text when multiple rhythm patterns and variations, syncopations, and styles are used in time with the music. Social dancing is described as a language and a means of communication since each linguistic rule can be applied.

Social dancing takes place between two people, a leader (traditionally male) and a follower (traditionally female). There are a variety of different types of social dancing, including Swing and Salsa. Regardless of the type of dance, all dances have intentional rhythm, and contain culturally patterned sequences and nonverbal movements in order to communicate (Schrader 10). Body movements, expressions, and codes are essential to dance and communication. "Everything that we know about the body, that we

understand, is based on codes and language” (Lepecki 133). Social dancers use the body to convey a series of signs and codes to communicate. They combine the use of each of the senses in order to acquire information and decipher each sign, or lead, from their partner. At the same time that signs are interpreted by dancers, body movement is used to reveal feeling through the music. The way in which dancers communicate to each other is through movement of the body. The foundation of dance arises from the actual dance steps. “They start with a particular rhythm pattern and then add and expand to include rhythm variations, syncopations, and style variations” which dancers use to make a dance their own (Blair 55). The word ‘rhythm’ refers to the steady beat of music. Each rhythm pattern is broken down into rhythm units, or weight changes that occur in a dance pattern. Since a unit contains only two beats of music, there are only a certain amount of steps one can make in a rhythm unit. Music is composed of down beats and up beats. A rhythm unit consists of a down beat followed by an up beat. Waltz is the exception. In Waltz, a downbeat is followed by two upbeat producing a three beat unit or a Waltz measure. In Skippy Blair’s Universal Unit System, units are categorized as being a single, double, triple, or blank rhythm. A blank rhythm contains no weight changes. A side pass in West Coast Swing contains three rhythm units, a double rhythm and two triples, which complete the basic rhythm pattern.



(Circles signify steps, or weight changes, and slashes signify holds)

In Salsa, the basic rhythm pattern is divided into four rhythm units; a double rhythm, a single rhythm, a double rhythm, and another single rhythm.



Each two beat unit rhythm can be divided into six parts to help dancers identify and outline a syncopation or body movement, that can be counted: & a 1 & a 2. In a dance, the basic rhythm pattern continuously repeats itself. “Redundancy is a property of languages, codes, and sign systems which arises from a superfluity of rules” (Cherry 19). Redundancy is only one of the many ties that demonstrate the correlation between dance and language.

In social dancing, dancers remain in contact with each other to keep “immediate and ongoing attention to another’s body as it relates to the articulation of one’s own movement and the experience of one’s own dancing self” (Summers-Bremner 101). When a leader and a follower dance together, they must have a continuous connection between them in order to understand each other’s movements and leads. “Dancing and body movement is described by Barteneiff and Lewis as ‘coping with our environment.’ The dancer . . . is constantly caught up in tensions and changes that lead to transformations of movement” (Worden). Connection between two dancers is achieved by feeling the slight weight of contact between hands and/or bodies. All movement, balance, and connection originate from a person’s center point of balance, which is located between the waist and chest.

Without connection, there is no way for each dancer to be informed about what the other is doing or which direction they are moving; it would be impossible to dance together as one to establish body flight. There are two types of connection, which are: compression (press) and leverage (pull). In open position (hand to hand), compression can be recognized in Salsa and East Coast Swing, while leverage can be identified in West Coast Swing.

Communication in dancing is brought about by a series of actions and reactions. Both actions and reactions transpire due to “body-to-body contact with other dancers and reciprocal awareness of the shift of weight and feel of sensations on the skin” (Worden 101). A simple example of an action in West Coast Swing is on count one when the leader steps backwards; if there is a leveraging connection, the follower’s reaction is to step forward. There are a series of actions, or signs, that are used in dance for the purpose of communication and leading. Linguists call the study of signs ‘semiotics’, which includes signs such as sounds, body language, and “anything which stands for something else” (Chandler). In dance, the “signaling system is constructed in such a way that an enormous number of messages may be conveyed and acts performed by the use of a finite repertoire of signals . . . possible by the use of symbol combinations to convey information;” by rearranging the order of leads, or signals, it “may convey a different meaning” altogether (Clarke 108). One lead can be used in many different patterns for the purpose of moving the follower in a certain direction or causing a particular reaction.

It is important to remember that every dance movement has meaning. “Meaning arises from the *differences* between signifiers” there are two differences that can be classified as paradigmatic and syntagmatic (Chandler). Both Syntagms and Paradigms provide the structural context in any language. Within the structure, signs are arranged into codes to produce meaning. Paradigmatic differences between signifiers concern substitution. A ‘signifier’ is the actual symbol that is associated with, and has meaning only because of the actual concept, which is the ‘signified’. Any action is a paradigm or, according to Chandler, a “set of associated signifiers or signifieds which are all members of some defining category.” These codes can be rearranged in dance to bring about different meanings, leads, and patterns. A social dance pattern is syntagmatic. A syntagm is sequential, temporal, and—in dance—spatial. A syntagm is an “orderly combination of interacting signifiers which forms a meaningful whole within a text” (Chandler). Syntagms have to do with the positioning of the paradigms, or the symbols. A social dance pattern makes up a series of paradigms, or leads that form the structure of a dance.

A hierarchy structure exists in the actions of dance communication. Clarke explains in *Language and Action*, that there are smaller parts of language, and communication that combine to create a complete action. “At any one level of description, one event succeeds the next, while each is composed of smaller units, and contributes to large ones” (136). Each stage affects the next, just as “all signs are subsumable under one or another” (Davis 196). During a dance, both the leader and the follower must continuously be thinking, counting, and feeling. At the beginning of every dance pattern, before count one, a dancer must begin in the proper foot position (First position—Salsa, Third position—West Coast Swing). A prepare lead, or ‘get ready’ signal, precedes each of the leads that combine to produce a pattern. A pattern takes place within four, six, eight, ten, and so on, beats of music in 4/4 timing—which does not include Waltz.

The dance music is also broken into parts. The timing is important since it is the control of the action speed. In the music, a basic mini phrase is one 'set of eight' beats of music in 4/4 timing. This does not include Waltz music since it is composed in $\frac{3}{4}$ timing. The 4/4 musical timing simply means that there are four beats in a measure of music, and that a quarter note is counted as one beat. Music has a strong measure & a light measure in a mini phrase that equals eight counts of music. One step above a mini phrase is a major phrase. A major phrase contains a specific number of mini phrases that form a chorus, or any musical grouping that completes a musical thought. Most minor phrases include sixteen beats (two mini phrases), and most major phrases include Thirty-two beats of music (four mini phrases). All musical phrases have a specific musical frame. Learning how to discern between each musical phrase, allows a dancer the opportunity to be creative and with the music. Dancing to music is "an effective mode of communication" that applies rhythmic movements to the beat of music (Worden). Dancers improve their interpretation of the music by enhancing their understanding of it. As with any method of communication, practice increases ability and fluency.

In the social dance community, dancers get satisfaction and pleasure by advocating individualism while they dance. Eliot D. Chapple commented on the individual's expression in *Movement and Sound*, saying, "variations within a semiformalized framework provide[s] great opportunities for highly individualized performances of expressive rhythms" (Davis 38). Dancers have the opportunity to play with the music by syncopating rhythm patterns and adding rhythm and style variations. Syncopation is merely a rearrangement of the metered beat of music.

Individually, each dancer projects an image and a particular style in their dance. A dancer's image is what others see. This includes a dancer's balance, bodyline and position, and whether or not the hands are graceful, or the legs are together. A dancer's style is the "instrument used to make an impression with movement" which integrates skill, sensation, and emotion within a dance pattern (Schrader 112). There are many types of style one can adopt. For example, a dancer can be known for being smooth, funky, or graceful. The posture and attitude of a dancer also affects his or her image. "While the basic form of the dance should conform to some degree . . . the style one chooses should be as individual as the clothes one chooses to wear" (Blair 113). A dancer's style can be compared to a person's signature. Each individual has a particular scribble that they use to sign their name, just as each individual has a particular projection of himself or herself while they dance.

Playing with the rhythm of the music also includes stealing and breaking. Lady's, or followers, have the opportunity to prolong a dance pattern, or steal the lead for a pattern. When a dancer prolongs a pattern, their movements are deliberate to capture attention and add style. Changing the pattern is an expression that can provide "a means of cultural expression for female sexualities and forms of embodiment [that] is related to the dancer's 'material being' and 'physical moves'" (Summers-Bremner 94). When a follower steals, or takes over the lead, the dance pattern is altered and transformed into something new. At that moment, the leader is at the mercy of his partner. As in any move, in order to lead a steal the follower must communicate her motive to her partner. Once the stolen pattern is complete, she must communicate this fact to her partner and prepare to follow once again by returning to the proper foot position (third foot position in West Coast Swing) and connecting to the leader. A break in the music is a sign to

pause the dance “when contending forces achieve a momentary balance”—however, a break can be initiated at any time by the leader or the follower in a dance (Kassel 186). A hold, or break, is perceived as semiotic as “any upsetting of the rhythmic regularity is perceived as semiotic” (Davis 197). The reason is due to the atypical quality of pausing, which demands attention and inspires interest.

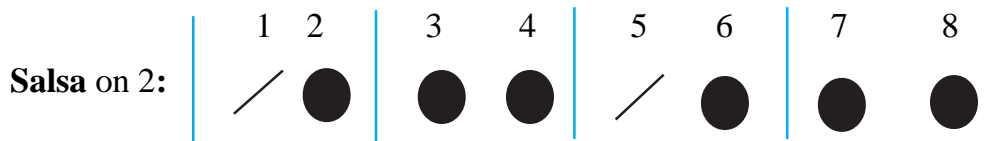
Each dancer wishes to be perceived in a certain way. Salsa dancers do not want to look like West Coast Swing dancers, and Two-Step dancers do not want to look like East Coast Swing dancers. Each dance has a look just as each particular dancer has a look. “Appearance sends only one main kind of signal—information about the person” (Benthall 154). The outward appearance of the dancers sends messages to other dancers. If a dancer is wearing expensive dance shoes—as opposed to tennis shoes—generally, other dancers take this to mean they are not a beginner and will be a good dance partner. Salsa dancers project an outer image of sexuality while West Coast Swing dancers appear sophisticated. Female Salsa dancers generally go dancing in tight pants and half a top, or a clingy dress with their hair down; the male dancers dress up in black suits. West Coast Swing dancers generally shoot for flashy, but comfortable outfits with long, loose fitting black pants. East Coast Swing and Lindy dancers dress up in the retro style of the 1940s and ‘50s, two-toned shoes and all. Similar to Swing and Salsa, each dance has individually formed its own community of social norms.

When changing dances, the music changes as well. Music is the heart of each type of dance. Salsa is danced to Latin Club music. East Coast Swing and Lindy is danced to the Big Bands, while West Coast Swing is danced to either Classic Swing or smooth, modern, and funky music. Country Western Two-Step is danced to County music that has a distinct quick, quick, slow, slow rhythm (a double and two singles). Nightclub Two-Step, on the other hand, was recently created to dance to ballads and slow, modern love songs. The music was fashioned before the dance, and has introduced entirely new communities of music and dance lovers within human society.

Miller and McNeil are psycholinguistics that made the distinction that “language is a social norm, a part of culture,” and “is the cognitive component that a language user must know,” (Clarke 110). Dancing has played a large part in human history. People have danced for religious reasons, celebration, and entertainment. Dance has become a social norm, and continues to be a favorite pastime for many people around the world. However, to take part in social dances like Swing, Salsa, and Country Western Two-Step, the dancer must have at least a basic knowledge of the fundamentals of the dance in order to lead or follow. It is necessary for followers to maintain a solid frame and have a basic knowledge of what the leader’s signals are. Leaders must have a basic knowledge of how to gently lead in order for the follower to respond. Also, both the leader and the follower must have some knowledge of the basic rhythm pattern.

Colin Cherry comments that “Languages are in a continual state of change, as social conditions change; as contacts between classes, peoples, and races touch and go, as ideas pass and repass” (77). Many words that are commonly used now have been added to the English dictionary. Word meanings have changed over time; Americans has set a different standard for English. Different geographical locations speak with a different accent or have different meanings for a single word. Like language, dance is constantly evolving and changing over time when new syncopations and music arrives on the scene. Each decade encounters a fad dance to fit the music. West Coast Swing has derived from

Lindy, which was danced to big band music, when smooth and bluesy music was introduced. Now, a new generation of Swing dancers have landed to create a Funk Swing that is danced to the funky sounds on the top forty charts. All aspects of culture evolve from, and are structured by, our “somatic interaction” with the environment around us. “Our reality is shaped by the patterns of our bodily movements, the contours of our spatial and temporal orientation, and the forms of our interaction[s]” (Sellers-Young 180). It is also true that dances vary geographically. The Salsa rhythm pattern noted above contrasts the Salsa rhythm pattern danced in other locations, such as New York. In New York, Salsa is more commonly danced on count two instead of count one.



There are also different looks, or styles, of certain dances. For instance, Lindy is danced either Smooth or Savoy style, depending on where the dancer learned. In Smooth Style Lindy, count one comes forward similar to West Coast Swing and the bounciness of the dance is reduced by half. Savoy style begins with a rock step (one step back and one step forward) and contains more exaggerated movements like the dancing found in Hollywood movies. With the varieties of dances and styles, and the changes that are constantly occurring in the dance world, there is always something new to learn about social dancing.

“We learn from semiotics that we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organized” (Chandler). Language users, as well as dancers, use a system of arranging signs and codes in order to understand each other. The “key” to the dance steps in any dance pattern is found in the Universal Unit System that divides possible weight changes into a two beat unit of music. Many elements of music and movement combine to influence a dance, allowing it to become understandable. Together, dancers have found a place in society. Drawn together by the music and love for dance, dancers often frequent the local and popular nightclubs, dance halls, and dance events. Dance lessons are given in schools and at Park and Recreation Districts across the country for the purpose of spreading this art of communication and music interpretation. Social dancing **is** a human interaction that is a language and a method of communication.

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