'Be quiet, play, and theatre will be born!', that could be our motto.

(Lecoq, 2001: 30)

Lecoq pedagogy is known for its commitment to the body in actor training, theatrical creation, and performance. This commitment to the body, however, is not at the expense of language. The body is situated as the starting point for, and foundation of, language. This priority of movement over language is key to Lecoq’s pedagogy and poetics, and it manifests in a developmental progression that prioritizes physical action over speaking or text. This is not to push actors toward performing in more physical styles of theatre or prevent them from working in text-based styles. Instead, this approach seeks to help actors build their aesthetic sensibility and skills from the bottom up. For Lecoq, starting from ‘the bottom up’ means to begin actor preparation by using the body to access and command one’s basal creative sensibilities. Then language, as one feature of creative arts, can emerge as an outgrowth of that foundation. Similarly, for embodied approaches to cognitive science, from ‘the bottom up’ means that basal cognitive sensorimotor abilities give rise to language. Just as a skyscraper must first have a foundation on top of which the floors can stand, I articulate Lecoq’s pedagogy, with respect to the body and language, as operating on two distinct but cooperative levels.

How the developmental progression works

Lecoq’s developmental progression functions on two major pedagogical levels: the basal and the executional. In the overall practice of theatre training, creation, and performance, the capacities of these two levels work in a dynamic, simultaneous, and intertwined way, like many of the foundational and higher-order cortical cognitive capacities that they engage. Lecoq pedagogy’s structure and exercises, however, deliberately operate at these two distinct levels to shape the actor-creator. The basal pedagogical level works at the actor’s very foundation where the actor develops general and underlying sensibilities and skills, such as using the body to engage rhythm and activate theatrical space and time. The basal level teaches
the actor to take charge of theatrical creation and offers the actor a flexible aesthetic that is applicable to a variety of styles. Working at the basal level trains creators to make theatre in parallel with the way in which human cognitive systems develop linguistic skills on top of sensorimotor skills. In this way, the pedagogy trains actors to communicate using the most foundational strategies of cognition in order to communicate to the widest possible audience. By centering around developmental cognitive strategies that are founded on the body, Lecoq pedagogy centers around that which people share – embodied cognitive systems. In this way, Lecoq pedagogy aims toward training actors to clearly communicate to a broad audience. In addition, working at this basal level serves a main goal of the pedagogy: to forge the actor-creator – a figure who is endowed with total creative agency for every aspect of the creative process.

While working at the basal level prepares and equips the actor with basic sensibilities, working at the executional level gives the actor tools to use in the actual execution of performances. While the basal level is meant to be general, the executional level is always specific – it is working in a particular style on a particular piece. Working at the executional level, Lecoq pedagogy addresses the relationship between the body and language in specific theatrical styles. These styles then propose a host of relationships between the body and language.

This developmental progression is practical, epistemological, and ontological. The progression is practical because it gives the actor access to tools of human cognition and meaning-making, which are founded on the sensory motor, as I will outline below. The progression is epistemological because it proposes a process of learning how language works in the theatre. The progression is ontological because it leads to the development of the actor-creator, the identity and state of a new figure distinct from the actor-interpreter.

**Working at the basal level in the studio**

The basal level is most consistently activated in the early stages of Lecoq’s pedagogy, yet it becomes a touchstone for his entire creative process. In the early stage of the pedagogy, often structured as the first-year material, Lecoq’s pedagogy teaches the actor how to create theatre through the process of identification. Identification is a process whereby the actor observes, embodies, and applies a host of physical dynamics (rhythm, tempo, weight) from a variety of sources, from elements to animals. The key step in this process, embodiment, teaches the actor about the object of identification. Through these foundational exercises, the actor is taught to place language in a secondary position. This prioritization of movement over language is taught as a strategy in both the development of the actor’s own skills and the development of theatrical material as a whole.

Working at the basal level of Lecoq’s actor training is where the pedagogy prepares the actor-creator to be an originator of work, not just an interpreter. Here, movement is an access point to the theatrical materials of time and space. Therefore, time and space (rather than text, a common starting place for mainstream theatre) are figured as the foundational materials of theatrical creation. Both Kemp (2012) and I have outlined how Lecoq pedagogy proposes a system that is parallel to the way that some cognitive scientists and cognitive philosophers articulate the development of language through and on top of sensorimotor experience. I call this creating a cognitive augmentation aimed for creativity, or in effect, the development of a specific kind of creative cognition (Murphy, 2013). This is contrary to the notion that body-based training is merely in service of physical skill acquisition that will be
performed in the context of a specific role. At this foundational stage, Lecoq is very clear that
language must come after movement:

We begin with silence, for the spoken word often forgets the roots from which it
grew, and it is a good thing for students to begin by placing themselves in the posi-
tion of primal naïveté, a state of innocent curiosity. . . . Some feel under constraint,
forbidden to speak, whereas in fact I forbid nothing, I simply ask them to keep silent,
the better to understand what lies beneath language.

(Lecoq, 2001: 29)

In other words, Lecoq posits that underneath all language is a stratum of movement. To break
down the creative process into developmental stages and attend to the most foundational
stage means to prioritize the movement stratum underneath language. In human life, the sen-
sorimotor stratum has been cultivated since the human was in utero.6 In actor training, Lecoq
cultivates movement as the foundation of creativity through the precise series of exercises he
introduces.

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff and cognitive philosopher Mark Johnson demonstrate
that language arises from the sensorimotor: ‘The structure of language is inherently embodied.
Both basic grammatical categories and the very structure imposed by constructions derive
from the structure of our embodied experience’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 506). Kemp and
I have gone on to explain how this functions in the context of Lecoq’s actor training (Kemp,
2012; Murphy, 2013). Kemp has also explained how Merlin Donald uses cognitive evolution-
ary theory to hypothesize how mimesis provides the ‘scaffolding’ (Donald, 2005) for language
(Kemp, 2012). Donald’s work explains that mimesis is a cross-cultural phenomenon (Don-
ald, 2005). Lecoq pedagogy mimics this cognitive and evolutionary process throughout the
course of the training: it starts by first emphasizing sensorimotor engagement of space, time,
and imagination, and only from there teaches language as an outgrowth of bodied engage-
ment.7 The Lecoq pedagogy’s identification process is very similar to Donald’s explanation of
mimesis, because it focuses on learning about something through embodying it. When Lecoq
is teaching foundational exercises, he is cognitively exploiting our ability to make meaning
based on our bodied contact with the world. Cognitive or neural exploitation means to hijack
cognitive structures and abilities for a task that they were not originally developed to serve
(Gallese & Lakoff, 2005). Lecoq pedagogy, in other words, hops on top of cognitive structures
meant to make meaning in the quotidian world, and puts them to use in the aesthetic world
of the theatre. In practice, it shows actors how to create the foundations for meaning and
structure that humans can, in a cognitive sense, easily and smoothly understand. For Lecoq
pedagogy, this level is the foundation for everything else to come. At this stage, Lecoq keeps
language out of the process.

Working at the executional level in the studio

Instructors do work at the executional level during the first year of training, but they also
address it in the second-year material that engages specific styles such as melodrama, clown,
tragedy, and Commedia dell’arte. At this level, the relationship between the body and language
in performance depends on how the style configures that relationship. Because Lecoq pedagogy
fashions an actor-creator who can not only work flexibly within styles but can also create his
or her own, it focuses on leading the actor to cultivate the necessary tools to understand how
different kinds of theatrical languages work. In pantomime blanche, for example, formalized
physical gesture replaces language altogether (Lecoq, 2001: 100). As Rick Kemp has shown, Lecoq pedagogy can help the actor to integrate language and movement in styles such as psychological realism, where the body and language need to work hand in hand (Kemp, 2012). Kemp elucidates how popular Western actor training has neglected non-verbal communication (nvc), despite the fact so much of communication is conveyed through corporeal means, and that Lecoq pedagogy inherently addresses this for the interpretive actor (Kemp, 2012).

Cognitive psychologist David McNeill situates gesture in a dialectical relationship to spoken language, and Kemp applies this to theatre (Kemp, 2012). I build off Kemp’s application of McNeill’s work to theatre to suggest that gesture is working at this executional level of Lecoq’s pedagogy – the level where language resides. Therefore, for Lecoq, gesture, like language, is an outgrowth of basal movement, on a different level than basal movement altogether. Lecoq’s basal movement and gestural movement are not working in the same way or for the same purposes.

Lecoq’s multilingual exercise with the verb ‘to take’ demonstrates ways in which he works with gesture at the executional level. In the film Les Deux Voyages de Jacques Lecoq, Lecoq divides the actors into groups based on their native language (Roy, 1999). He then invites them to say the verb ‘to take’ in their language, and to develop a common gesture that embodies the spoken verb. The actors then say the word and perform the gesture at the same time. While the meaning of the verb is the same, each language group has developed very different gestures. The American English-speaking group performs ‘to take’ as a possessive, greedy act, as they are not just taking but seizing upon and gathering the object of possession into their bodies. When the actors from the UK perform the gesture, also speaking in English, they do essentially the same gesture as the Americans, but it is softer, gentler, and less possessive. The entire room erupts into laughter, because this juxtaposition points out the aggressiveness of the American version of the gesture. The French, on the other hand, perform a version of ‘to take’ (‘je prends’) where they take possession but do not gather the imaginary object of possession into their bodies. They just claim. The exercise suggests that the physical expression of the language communicates just how that culture understands the notion of ‘taking’. The words literally meant the same thing, but the body revealed the attitude toward the verb itself. The body told the cultural truth. Here, at the executional level, gesture is working together with language to present both an action and a very specific and complex attitude about that action.

Lecoq pedagogy treats text as a further abstraction of spoken language operating on this second level of execution. As Kemp suggests, in many text-based traditions, the actor’s job is to go backwards from the text ‘to discover the impulses that provoke action’ (Kemp, 2012: 210). I link these ‘impulses’ to human meaning-making, as the actor will be communicating to, and therefore offering meaning to, an audience. Embodied cognition explains how meaning-making is a cognitive act accomplished through the entire body, not just the embrained mind. To look for the impulse behind the words is to reach back toward sensorimotor material responsible for cognition. Mira Felner concurs, suggesting that ‘[t]he goal of Lecoq is to send his students back to the level of cognition’ (Felner, 1985: 150). Therefore, the actor must go backward from the text to the cognitive bedrock of the performance. Lecoq’s exercises lead the actor backwards into the basal stratum so that the actor can have a full understanding of where the words come from, or access ‘the roots from which [they] grew’ (Lecoq, 2001: 29). For Lecoq, the actor’s task is to find the ‘body’ of the words. While minimal improvised language may erupt out of silent improvisations, language is directly addressed first through verbs and then through poetry (Lecoq, 2001: 50). Poetry, like elements and animals, is also investigated through the identification process. This process
begins by identifying with the sounds— not necessarily the sense— of the words. The assumption is that sounds will lead the actor more directly to the movement stratum underneath the words, and that sense is an outgrowth of the movement. Because the pedagogy’s first textual engagement is with poetry, an abstracted form of text, it is clear that when the pedagogy first embraces language, it is in a measured way. By introducing language through an abstracted form, the pedagogy ensures that the actor is not straightjacketed by the concrete meaning and structure of language. In these exercises, the actor first memorizes the text, then embodies the sounds of the words, and finally performs the poem both with and without the embodied movement found in the previous step. The final stage of finding the body of the words is to simply to speak the poem without movement. Actors often find that after having gone through this process, the poetic recitation—even without movement—is more rich and full than it had been when they first recited it. The implication is that once the body of the words is discovered, the basal level of the movement underneath the words still animates even a simple recitation. This also means that the final step is not just for the sake of featuring language over movement, but for the sake of clear communication: the audience will better understand words that have come from and therefore resonate with them at a basal, cognitive level. Even here at the executional level, the pedagogy teaches that to successfully use language, the actor must first come into contact with the foundational level of the very words themselves, or in a cognitive sense, re-sensitize him/herself to the foundation that is already (and has always been) at work in the actor’s words.

How the pedagogy reinforces movement as foundational to language

Lecoq pedagogy reinforces movement as the foundation of language in a few ways: it deliberately begins with silent exercises; it always situates movement as primary; and in the first stages, it actively works to keep language at bay. Because the first stages begin in silence, the first exercises necessitate little to no language—featuring themes like ‘waiting in a doctor’s office’ or ‘entering the home of your childhood by yourself’. These themes take place in locations where, even in a theatrical style of psychological realism, language is not yet necessary. The aim of these initial exercises, taken as a whole, is to delay the use of the spoken word. The imposition of silent performance leads the students to discover this basic law of theatre: words are born from silence.

(Lecoq, 2001: 36)

Lecoq describes working in these ways as an investigation into ‘what lies beneath language’ (emphasis original), therefore clearly orienting people toward the basal stratum (Lecoq, 2001: 30). This work cultivates a sensibility that is general enough to apply to multiple styles, because it is working through basic levels of human cognition, not through the specificities of style. By working in silence, these exercises force the creator to focus on space, time, and movement. This puts the actor in an empowered position—the actor is allowed to discover and invent rather than just interpret.

Even when working with text, Lecoq pedagogy continually situates movement as primary. Lecoq morphologizes—not to mention anthropomorphizes—language when he writes, ‘Words contain (inner space) in their sound the dynamic of materials, images, and action which they more or less remember’ (Lecoq, 2006: 92). The pedagogy forces the student to confront this in exercises, such as finding the ‘body’ of words, and in the performance of Greek choral work. When legions of students and performers read Greek drama, the chorus inevitably conjures
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up an image of a group of people speaking together. However, the Lecoq pedagogy approaches choral work first and foremost as a group movement task. Language is included as an extension of its inherent embodied dynamic. Lecoq outlines a host of physical exercises that initiate this work but do not require the group to use language at all (Lecoq, 2001: 126–141). When Lecoq pedagogy finally approaches text, it is ‘through the body. We never sit around and discuss, but adopt the mimodynamic\textsuperscript{10} method . . . relating to it does not involve interpreting it’ (Lecoq, 2001: 137). In this process, the actors gradually refine the gestures, and only then begin to add voices speaking together. Even at this stage, working with voices does not necessitate interpreting the meaning of the words (Lecoq, 2001: 140). For tragedy, Lecoq defines the necessary choral voice as a ‘body voice’ (italics original), a voice that encompasses the whole corporeality of the actor (Lecoq, 2001: 141).

The productivity of restricting language

Many actor training systems use improvisation in a way that depends on language. While the Lecoq pedagogy is not anti-language, many of the approaches restrict language. While language structure emerges from the body, according to Lakoff, Johnson, and McNeill, rendering sensorimotor material into language linearizes it. Kemp cites McNeill to explain what the actor must do with linearized language in a script: ‘When an actor speaks from a script, the challenge is to transform this “string of segments” into apparently instantaneous thought’ (Kemp, 2012: 64). Thought structures, or concepts, according to embodied accounts of cognition, are made possible by the body’s most basic sensorimotor abilities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Therefore, the sensorimotor provides the foundation for thought, which is organized in a more ‘instantaneous’ way, different from the organizational structures of language. If the improvising actor relies on language to organize the unfolding theatrical structure, the actor simply relies on the linear structure to dictate theatrical structure, instead of inventing a structure germane to the theatrical task, or the creative impulses or thoughts that occur to the actor. In other words, the actor who relies on language cannot exercise the agency of an actor-creator, but merely interprets language. Restricting language keeps the actor from working only in response to the kinds of structures that language proposes. The utility of Lecoq’s foundational mask work – such as neutral and larval mask work – is not only in the fact that it foregrounds the body, but also in that it restricts language by literally covering the mouth and preventing speech. By prioritizing movement, Lecoq exercises, in turn, restrict language. In so doing, the actor is left to reckon with, and therefore learns how to shape, theatrical space and time, because language is not available to the actor. In addition, Kemp writes about how doing table work (intellectual textual analysis) before movement work stunts the actor’s ability to create based on imagery: ‘[Table analysis or table work] inhibit[s] unconscious imaginative responses to the fictional world of the script’ (Kemp, 2012: 144).\textsuperscript{11} Because gesture (movement at the executional level) is working on the same plane as language, gesture is also restricted at this stage.\textsuperscript{12} This restriction is also applied to any kinds of specific and codified gestural languages, such as ballet or martial arts.\textsuperscript{13} Ultimately, restricting language keeps the actor working at the basal level for as long as possible until the creative cognitive foundation has been established.

It may seem that by first distinguishing movement and language, and second prioritizing movement over language, Lecoq is articulating a movement/language relationship where language is subservient to the body. However, by understanding this pedagogical process and its resonances with embodied cognitive studies, the purpose of Lecoq’s approach to the body/language relationship snaps into view: optimal smooth communication between creators and spectators, regardless of theatrical style.
Notes

1 While much of this work is conducted consciously, through practice these abilities manifest without conscious reflection so that they appear ‘automatic’. (See Gallagher’s comments on dancers and athletes [2005: 35].)

2 This process, of course, is unconscious. See Lakoff & Johnson (1999) and Gallagher (2005).

3 Note that I am articulating a process that happens in time (progression) into a metaphor of space (levels). This is to describe the Lecoq pedagogy’s body-language relationship such that language ‘needs’ the body on which to base its operations.

4 When I write about ‘low’ and ‘high’, I am doing so in the sense of lower and higher cortical functions. In this case, ‘low’ and ‘high’ do not designate less or more value. Rather, this distinction refers to how lower functions must be engaged before the higher functions can operate. ‘Low’ and ‘high’ can bring us back to the architectural metaphor where the foundation must be set first in order to create a 100-floor skyscraper. If you don’t have a foundation or you don’t have the 100 floors, you don’t have a building. Neither is more valuable than the other. ‘Low’ and ‘high’ designate a prioritization in time and sequence rather than a prioritization in value.

5 See Kemp (2012) and Murphy (2013).


7 Kemp identifies space, time, and story as the three elements of the theatre (Kemp, 2012: xvi). I identify space and time as fundamental, but leave out story (sometimes replacing it with imagination) to think of theatre in broader terms, encompassing theatre that can exist beyond narrative-based forms.

8 Specifically, Kemp explains the dialectic as ‘an imagery-language dialectic, in which gestures provide imagery’ (Kemp, 2012: xx).

9 ‘The constraint of silence forces one to make oneself understood without speech being involved: when words are no longer possible or are not yet possible, recovering the territory of the unsaid that the discourse of words had forgotten . . . [This develops] a sense of space for the actor improvising’ (Lecoq, 2006: 72).

10 ‘A method allowing the actor to discover physical movements which translate into bodily action the sensations aroused in them by colours, words, music’ (Lecoq, 2001: 166).

11 Kemp is applying the work of psychologists Jonathan Schooler and Tonya Engstler-Schooler to the actor’s process (Kemp, 2012: 144).

12 See Murphy with Sherman (2013: 121), where actors are stopped mid-exercise for introducing language-based gesture into neutral mask work.

13 In Lecoq’s words:

   Another distortion can be caused by premature apprenticeship in the formal gestures belonging to style or codes of classical dance or of fixed dramatic forms like those of oriental theatre. Such formal gestures, often insufficiently practiced, set up physical circuits in the actor’s body, which then become very difficult to justify, especially when the actor is young. In these cases, actors only retain the outer, aesthetic form.

   (Lecoq, 2001: 69)

References


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