

# Book Review of *Linguistic Bodies: The Continuity between Life and Language* by Ezequiel A. Di Paolo, Elena Clare Cuffari, and Hanne De Jaegher

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Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher's (2018) book may, at first glance, appear to be an unusual choice for a book review in *Human Development*, though I will argue that the volume has much to offer scholars of human development in that it touches on themes that are highly pertinent to developmental audiences. First, the book provides a detailed account of problems with the dualism challenge embedded in much psychology (including the developmental sciences), especially problems with drawing a distinction between the body and the mind. Second, the authors suggest the importance of studying embodied and dynamic processes, a view that has been growing in support not only in the cognitive sciences but also in some developmental circles. Finally, the book provides scholars interested in human development a first-rate discussion of the importance of a relational and dynamic view of language in theoretical and practical understandings of human life and its development. In this article, I will review the three major sections of the book in light of these themes and then focus on why the book provides important reading for developmental scholars.

## Bodies

Making up about a third of the chapters in the book, the first major section is entitled *Bodies*. The authors are clear that in establishing a focus on bodies, they do not want to fall into the tendency to separate the body from the mind. In contrast to the dichotomous view, the authors attempt a more holistic theoretical account with several fundamental claims. First, they are speaking of bodies (note the plural) as organic, sensorimotor entities that are part of complex and dynamic systems. That is, the authors do not want to fall into the trap of positing distinct bodies first that then have relations later. Rather, according to the theory developed in this section of the book, bodies are enacted; they are dynamic systems that are realized in the world and with others. In addition to being characterized as living and enacted, bodies are said to be part of a broader commitment to intersubjectivity. Not only do interactive experiences shape into a form of agency, but also "intersubjective bodies participate in sustaining and reproducing broader social patterns beyond the interactive encounter" (p. 84). In sum, across four chapters Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher argue for a nuanced understanding of bodies as embodied, a perspective in which individual embodied agents are considered, as well as norms of interactional dynamics in concrete situations between individuals in the everyday flow of interaction, and the broader patterns of habitus that inform these interactions.

## Linguistic Bodies

The second section of the book shares the same title as the volume. Its three chapters focus first on the kind of tool language provides humans and challenges views often represented in psychological research and studies of human development that have stressed the symbolic power of language to represent reality. In this chapter, following upon much prior work, the authors highlight the constitutive and constructive role of language. Here focus is placed on language not simply as a tool for thought, but the concept of linguistic bodies put forward allows for the enactive nature of meaning making. Language is not so much viewed as a window onto the mind but has a performative role in its construction. Bodies are transformed in and through the participatory use of language, and this allows humans the transformative experience to participate in linguistic communities. This dynamic view of language allows for participatory sense-making. The introduction of the construct of linguistic bodies pushes beyond organic and sensorimotor perspectives on embodiment and opens up a discussion of a third kind of embodiment: intersubjective embodiment. Linguistic bodies allow for the weaving of social and personal, leading to a new form of social autonomy – namely, the linguistic community. Language does not just provide a mechanism for ongoing interaction *between* humans. In addition to allowing for new ways of interacting, linguistic bodies also provide a way of “organizing practices and subjectivities” (p. 198).

## Living as Linguistic Bodies

The final section of the book explores the consequences of living as linguistic bodies. Arguing against a linear notion of development spanning prelinguistic to linguistic selves, the authors suggest that humans are always experiencing linguistic engagement and thus are never entirely prelinguistic in the strict sense. This leads to a consideration of questions of the boundaries of linguistic bodies, considering for example the case of autism and the spectrum of autism disorders. Rather than cognitive deficit models, the authors put forth a view of autistic embodiment and the study of how autistic individuals make sense of and participate in socially organized events. The authors also consider a wide range of other questions related to the concept of linguistic bodies including such ethical concerns as microaggression. Throughout this section, one finds a guiding theme of the importance of integrating academic knowledge and human practice, noting the importance of reflecting on humans’ engagement in the world to understanding the human condition.

## Relevance of the Volume to the Study of Human Development

While at first glance, a scholar studying human development might question the relevance of this book to the field, I would argue in contrast that the authors are dealing with three core issues that are central to our understanding of human development. First, as has been noted by Overton, Mueller, and Newman (2008), too often developmental scholars have followed Cartesian dualism considering concepts of mind and body. The book *Linguistic bodies* offers the reader a way out by discussing a nuanced theoretical account that takes precisely the kind of embodied perspective that scholars of human development need. Similarly, much research in the developmental sciences has been stalled by a tendency to look at human development in terms of valuative concepts (Lewin, 1931) rather than examining developmental processes and the developmental transformations of those processes (see Budwig, Turiel, & Zelazo, 2017). *Linguistic bodies* provide a dynamic framework of human development, one that looks holistically at the body as incorporating both mind and society. Third, scholars of human development will find an embodied view of language, one that goes beyond the tendency that is all too common in the field of the developmental sciences to look at language as a window onto the mind or an instrumental tool of social development. As argued elsewhere (Budwig, Turiel, & Zelazo, 2017) language when

viewed in terms of meaning making, has much to contribute to our understanding of human development.

This volume pulls together under one cover a framework that has much to offer scholars of human development. Steering clear of traditional dichotomies and instead focusing on the continuity between life and language, the authors provide a dynamic account of human development that place language and meaning making at the center. The authors build on prior accounts of dyadic interaction by providing a nuanced discussion of how individual agents participate jointly in the moment-to-moment flow of interactions leading to joint activities, and simultaneously also suggest ways these individual agents play a constitutive role in the formulation of social norms. This results in a comprehensive consideration of the role of individual agents, dynamic and open-ended norms of interaction, and broader habitus. The volume allows scholars of human development a space to reflect on the body as more than a physical object, bringing the embodied agent into relations with the world. In this sense, thought, body, agency, and society are brought into a holistic framework that provides a platform from which to create a nuanced understanding of developmental processes.

## References

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