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Embodiment and Metaphor in Symbiosis: A Book Review of *Our Metaphorical Bodies: Why Metaphor May Be Everywhere*

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Abstract

This book review evaluates Raymond W. Gibbs Jr.'s *Our Metaphorical Bodies: Why Metaphor May Be Everywhere*. Gibbs proposes two hypotheses to challenge the conventional view that the body acts only as a literal source for metaphor, contending that the body can also be metaphorically interpreted. Drawing on cross-linguistic, medical and performative evidence, the work advances a layered account of embodiment and highlights cultural variations of bodily metaphors, facilitating interdisciplinary research. Still, it suffers from insufficient empirical support and ambiguous theoretical boundaries relative to Conceptual Metaphor Theory. Though not empirically conclusive, this thought-provoking book broadens metaphor studies and inspires further reflection on body-metaphor relations.

Keywords

Embodiment; Conceptual Metaphor; Bodily Experience; Book Review

1. Introduction

Raymond W. Gibbs Jr.'s *Our Metaphorical Bodies: Why Metaphor May Be Everywhere* reconsiders an assumption in cognitive metaphor research that bodily experience provides a relatively literal and nonmetaphorical basis from which abstract thought is constructed. Against this assumption, Gibbs argues that the body is not merely a source domain for metaphorical projection but also an object of interpretation, as its sensations, actions, and disorders are frequently understood through metaphor. He develops this claim through two linked proposals. The Metaphorical Embodiment Hypothesis holds that metaphorical language and expressive action can reveal largely unconscious understandings of the body, whereas the Body-Metaphor Contiguity Hypothesis maintains that bodily sensations and actions may evoke metaphorical meanings because bodily and symbolic dimensions are dynamically contiguous in lived experience, rather than being connected only through mappings between separate conceptual domains (Gibbs, 2026, p. 14).

I argues that the book's principal contribution is theoretical rather than demonstrative. Drawing on diverse materials such as cross-linguistic case studies, historical medical sources including patient narratives, and physical performance, the book suggests that metaphorically mediated understandings of the body are culturally variable and historically fluid rather than static and universal. Bridging cognitive linguistics, cognitive psychology, and medical anthropology, the book extends and qualifies Lakoff's model of cross-domain mapping by showing that the body can function not only as a source of metaphorical meaning but also as a target of metaphorical interpretation. Consequently, the book is best understood as a provocative research program that expands the scope of metaphor studies while leaving important empirical and methodological questions unresolved.

2. Overview of the Book

In the framework associated with Lakoff and Johnson, recurrent bodily experience structures abstract concepts through systematic mappings. Vertical orientation helps organize evaluations such as GOOD IS UP, physical journeys structure life and purpose, and containment structures emotion and selfhood (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, 2003). This tradition decisively challenged the view of metaphor as a merely decorative device of language. Nevertheless, it often treated bodily experience as the comparatively concrete from which metaphorical conceptualization proceeds. Gibbs retains the embodied orientation of CMT but questions the presumed literalness of that ground. His central move is therefore not a rejection of embodiment, but a radicalization of it: if cognition is embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended, then the body itself must be interpreted within cultural, historical, linguistic, and interpersonal contexts.

The book's six chapters follow a broadly thematic and cumulative structure. Chapter 1 introduces the two hypotheses and situates them within debates on embodiment. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 collectively explore how metaphor shapes our understanding of the body across different contexts. Gibbs examines ordinary bodily experiences, pathological conditions, and performative expressions to demonstrate that metaphor is a pervasive and integral framework for conceptualizing embodiment. He argues that metaphors not only influence how we perceive and articulate bodily experiences whether routine or dysfunctional, but also actively shape psychological processes, interpersonal communication, and even physical actions. Together, these chapters build a comprehensive case for the central role of metaphor in bodily cognition and communication.

Chapter 5 addresses criticisms of the claim that metaphor is everywhere. Rather than insisting that metaphor permeates all cognition equally, Gibbs proposes theoretical boundaries, suggesting that metaphor is particularly salient in contexts characterized by disruption, conflict, uncertainty, or perceptual imbalance.

In the concluding chapter, Gibbs offers the suggestive terms "metaphorical body

imperative" and "conceptual entanglement," dissolving the binary opposition between abstract concepts and concrete bodily experiences. He leaves readers with the "Metaphor May Be Everywhere Challenge," encouraging open-ended reflection.

3. Major Contributions

3.1. The Theoretical Innovation

The book's theoretical contribution needs to be formulated more carefully than a wholesale rejection of bodily experience as a preconceptual basis for cognition. Johnson (1987) characterizes image schemas as recurrent structures emerging from bodily interaction before fully developed propositional conceptualization. Preconceptual experience refers to recurrent sensorimotor organization available before, or independently of, explicit conceptualization. Some bodily relations clearly have this basic status: the feet are located at the lower end of the upright body, maintaining an erect posture requires balance, and bodily movement repeatedly instantiates such patterns as VERTICALITY, BALANCE, RESISTANCE, and CENTER–PERIPHERY. Gibbs's discussion of standing supports rather than displaces this level of embodied grounding: different postures make different image schemas salient, and an upright stance is experientially associated with being alive, healthy, stable, and able to resist force (Gibbs, 2026, pp. 47–49). These basic bodily regularities can therefore function as preconceptual constraints on later metaphorical mappings.

Gibbs's more defensible innovation is thus not the claim that all bodily experience is already metaphorical, but a layered account in which basic and complex bodily experiences must be distinguished. At the basic level, recurring sensorimotor patterns ground image schemas and help structure abstract concepts. At a more complex level, however, bodily sensations become objects of attention, reflection, narration, and cultural interpretation; here metaphor may feed back into how the body is understood. The chronic-fatigue narratives cited in the introduction illustrate this second level, not bodily experience in general. Because they concern disordered bodies in a medical context, descriptions such as feeling run over or struggling against waves cannot by themselves establish that normal, immediate bodily experience lacks a preconceptual foundation (Gibbs, 2026, pp. 9–10). They show instead how an unfamiliar, persistent, and difficult-to-express illness experience may be organized and communicated through metaphor.

Read in this qualified way, the Metaphorical Embodiment Hypothesis complements established embodied cognition rather than simply overturning it. Gibbs explicitly states that people do not necessarily always view their bodies metaphorically (Gibbs, 2026, p. 10). His Body–Metaphor Contiguity Hypothesis is valuable because it draws attention to a bidirectional relation: bodily patterns can motivate metaphorical meaning, while established metaphors can shape reflective interpretations of particular bodily states. The body may consequently operate as a source domain in

one case and as a target of metaphorical interpretation in another. The theoretical advance lies in specifying this interaction between preconceptual bodily grounding and culturally mediated bodily understanding, rather than denying the existence of preconceptual bodily experience.

3.2. A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Another major strength of Gibbs's book lies in its cross-cultural perspective, which demonstrates that bodily metaphors are shaped not only by shared embodied experiences but also by culturally specific conceptual systems. Rather than assuming that bodily experiences give rise to identical metaphorical expressions across languages, Gibbs highlights how different cultures interpret and linguistically represent the body in distinct ways.

At the linguistic level, Gibbs compares bodily metaphors across languages to illustrate this interaction between embodiment and culture. For example, whereas Western cultures commonly associate emotions with the "heart," Malay uses the "liver" (hati) as a comparable emotional center, while traditional Japanese culture associates thought and willpower with the abdomen (hara) (Gibbs, 2026, p. 28). These examples demonstrate that, although bodily experiences provide a shared experiential basis for metaphor, the meanings attributed to particular body parts vary across cultural contexts. Such variation challenges overly universalistic accounts of conceptual metaphor and underscores the importance of examining metaphor within specific linguistic and cultural frameworks.

The book's cross-cultural perspective thus adds an important dimension to the study of embodied cognition. By acknowledging both the commonalities and differences in how people conceptualize the body, Gibbs offers a more nuanced account of the relationship between bodily experience, metaphorical thought, and cultural meaning. Compared with Lakoff and Johnson's emphasis on English-language data, this broader perspective strengthens the argument that metaphor is grounded in embodied experience while remaining sensitive to cultural universality.

3.3. Interdisciplinary Contributions

Beyond its cross-cultural perspective, Gibbs's book makes an important interdisciplinary contribution by demonstrating that bodily metaphor is relevant not only to linguistics and cognitive science but also to medicine, health communication, sports, the arts, and semiotics. By examining metaphor across these fields, Gibbs moves beyond a narrow focus on linguistic expressions and presents metaphor as a cognitive, communicative, and embodied phenomenon. This interdisciplinary approach broadens the scope of metaphor research and highlights its relevance to both theoretical inquiry and practical applications.

One significant contribution concerns the role of metaphor in illness experiences

and doctor-patient communication. Gibbs's analysis of pain, cancer, and psychological trauma illustrates how metaphors provide interpretive frameworks through which patients make sense of suffering, treatment, and recovery. For instance, war metaphors such as "fighting cancer" and being a "cancer warrior" may foster resilience and agency in some patients while generating pressure or feelings of failure in others. Similarly, journey and dance metaphors can help patients organize complex experiences and reconstruct a sense of meaning and control (Gibbs, 2026, pp. 105–112). These examples demonstrate the practical value of integrating cognitive and linguistic insights into medical communication: rather than eliminating metaphor, healthcare professionals should consider how different figurative framings correspond to individual patients' experiences and preferences.

Gibbs extends this interdisciplinary perspective to sports and the arts by examining Olympic protest gestures, athletes' celebratory movements, and dance performances as forms of bodily metaphor (Gibbs, 2026, pp. 158–160). His analysis suggests that metaphorical meaning can be conveyed not only through verbal expressions but also through bodily movements and performances. This broader conception creates opportunities for dialogue between cognitive metaphor theory, performance studies, and Peircean semiotics, particularly in exploring how bodily actions acquire meaning through different signifying processes.

Taken together, these discussions demonstrate that Gibbs's interdisciplinary approach is valuable not simply because it draws on diverse examples, but because it reveals how metaphor operates across different forms of human experience and knowledge. By connecting linguistic analysis with clinical practice, embodied performance, and theories of signs, the book expands the explanatory reach of metaphor research and establishes its relevance beyond the traditional boundaries of linguistics.

4. Limitation

4.1. Weak Empirical Foundations

Despite its theoretical originality, the book's limitation lies in its insufficient empirical support. The central methodological difficulty is not simply the absence of original quantitative experiments. Rather, the evidence does not always distinguish between metaphors that constitute bodily experience and conventional metaphors that speakers use retrospectively to describe an experience already felt.

The argument relies heavily on qualitative case studies and theoretical reflection. Although Gibbs frequently cites findings from previous cognitive and linguistic research, he conducts little original quantitative investigation and provides few statistical analyses or controlled experiments to validate his central hypotheses.

For example, while the Metaphorical Embodiment Hypothesis repeatedly asserts that bodily perception generates metaphorical constructions, the supporting evidence largely consists of patient narratives and daily language examples. The

book does not present experimental paradigms capable of establishing causal relationships.

As Fauconnier and Turner (2002) note, descriptive analyses of linguistic data alone cannot fully explain the cognitive mechanisms underlying metaphor. A substantial methodological gap remains between describing metaphorical phenomena and explaining how they function cognitively. Consequently, although the book's hypotheses are intellectually stimulating, they lack sufficient verifiability and falsifiability, limiting their status as scientifically robust theories.

4.2. Insufficient Engagement with Existing Theories

Although Gibbs questions the sufficiency of cross-domain mapping and criticizes the implicit mind–body dualism underlying some versions of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, he does not fully engage with the strengths or historical development of these positions. Nor does he clearly distinguish his framework's points of divergence from its underlying continuities with Conceptual Metaphor Theory. His argument is most convincing when it shows that the body can function not only as a source domain for abstract conceptualization but also as a target of metaphorical interpretation. Nevertheless, without a more systematic comparison with earlier theories, readers may find it difficult to determine the precise boundaries of his theoretical contribution.

Gibbs's claim that metaphor "may be everywhere" also needs to be distinguished more clearly from Lakoff and Johnson's earlier claim that metaphor is pervasive in everyday thought. Gibbs appears to extend the scope of metaphor by treating the body itself as a possible target of metaphorical interpretation and by emphasizing the dynamic contiguity between bodily and metaphorical meanings. However, the book does not provide sufficiently clear operational criteria for determining when this extended notion of metaphoricity goes beyond the scope already established by Conceptual Metaphor Theory. This problem should not be confused with the absence of methods for identifying metaphorical language, since procedures such as MIP already provide systematic criteria for scholarly analysis (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). The unresolved issue in Gibbs's account instead concerns phenomenological recognition: how ordinary individuals, rather than trained researchers, determine whether a particular bodily experience is metaphorical in nature. A clearer distinction between linguistic identification, conceptual analysis, and subjective metaphorical experience would therefore make the scope and testability of Gibbs's proposal more precise.

5. Conclusion

In summary, Our Metaphorical Bodies makes a substantial theoretical contribution by challenging long-standing assumptions about the relationship between body and metaphor. Gibbs's contribution lies not in refining and extending preconceptual

bodily grounding, but in showing how basic bodily structures and culturally mediated metaphorical interpretations may interact. Through the two hypotheses, Gibbs redefines the relationship between embodiment and metaphor, opening new fields of research in cognitive linguistics and related disciplines. At the same time, the book relies heavily on qualitative analysis and theoretical speculation. Questions of empirical adequacy, theoretical boundaries, and individual variation therefore remain insufficiently resolved.

Ultimately, the book should be understood as a work of theoretical inspiration rather than empirical resolution. For scholars in cognitive linguistics, embodied cognition, medical humanities, and intercultural communication, Gibbs's framework provides a valuable methodological reference and encourages renewed reflection on the intricate relationship among body, mind, and metaphor. For general readers, the book's rich array of everyday examples can also help them view the metaphorical thinking underlying ordinary language and bodily experience from a fresh perspective. As such, the book represents a significant and thought-provoking extension of established approaches to metaphor and embodiment.

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