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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Has Dance Become Definable?

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Abstract

This dialogue begins with Egil Bakka's proposal for a science-based definition of dance. Bakka identifies four principles to structure the definition which are (1) drawn on methodologies from studies of dance as culture, (2) informed by the natural sciences, (3) influenced by a relation-based approach adapted to computer science, and (4) based on methods used in constructing dictionary definitions. Following peer review, we solicited public responses to gauge scholarly receptivity to the initial essay. The result is a single-authored proposal by Bakka followed by four independent responses by Kunej, Sarkar Munsi, Savage, and López-Yánez, respectively, ending with a response to the comments by Bakka.

Keywords: Dance anthropology; ethnochoreology; nature and culture

Principle 1. Culture-based definitions: What is dance?

Egil Bakka

An article written by cognitive biologist W. Tecumseh Fitch triggered my article. It gave me the idea to propose a biologically based definition of dance. This definition is the core of my article. My main questions are: Can our many cultural definitions of dance have universal validity? Can the human species' unique skills and abilities have more potential to tell us something universal about dance? Can the dictionary and the ontology principles work across languages and help decolonisation?

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Many experts from different disciplines and backgrounds have tried to explain what dance is (about) or have attempted to define dance. In 1983, the people from the dance art published a comprehensive anthology entitled "What is dance?" (Copeland and Cohen 1983). It compiles many articles written in many different contexts spanning two centuries. Even if the volume uses "dance" with few reservations, the book deals mostly with dance as art, and there is not much on other kinds of dancing.

Another group of experts, the anthropologists of dance and the ethnochoreologists, does not have any similar work to show for themselves. Still, several of them have discussed the topic in individual works. Andrée Grau and Georgiana Wierre-Gore discuss the genesis of the discipline in their book, which includes the understanding of what dance is in that context (Grau and Wierre-Gore 2005). Judith Lynne Hanna's book *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication* contains an explicit and complex attempt to define dance and discuss its problems (Hanna 1987). Joann Kealinihomuku, Roderyk Lange, and Adrienne Kappler are examples of the many who have also contributed from this disciplinary perspective (e.g. Lange 1975; Kealiinohomoku 1983; Kaeppler 2000). It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the wealth of earlier works; the aim here is to look briefly at some of the principles generally used for their definitions.

Dictionary definitions

Copeland and Cohen's 1983 anthology starts with a question: "Can we formulate a definition comprehensive enough to cover the wide variety of activities routinely referred to as dance?" (Copeland and Cohen 1983:1). Dictionaries of British or American English do list how the word is used. A search in *The Oxford English Dictionary* online yields 7989 results for dance in eight categories, including how the word has been used in writing from around the year 1300 until today.[1] Dance researchers in the UK and the US can, I would believe, give a different and fairly exhaustive list of activities referred to by the English word dance within their cultural environment in the early twenty-first century. Native English speakers may even have relatively uniform feelings about what they consider to be dance in other cultures. I will call this the *dictionary principle of defining.* This principle works for one language at a time and can only have a universal bearing if information taken from all languages is included. Even if words such as *der Tanz* (German), *la danse* (French), and *dansen* (Norwegian) seem to cover the same phenomenon, there are still differences in how they are used in different contexts. It is not easy to access information in languages one does not know, many languages do not have much literature published as text, and some even lack dictionaries.

The dictionary entries about dance are, of course, not what the authors of the 1983 anthology meant to ask for. Most discussing of the issue in the anthology do not specify whose routine references to dance they would like to cover with a definition. Do they mean references from all humankind, from all (native)

[1] https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=dance, 15 March 2024.

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speakers of English, or from English-speaking adherents of Western concert dance? The way they situate the question may seem they are talking about all of humankind, whereas the answers more often depart from just a small part of the world's cultures.

It is easy to understand that an answer from the dictionary principle does not satisfy the wish to discover what dance is. The question is, instead, what does dance mean to a human? What are its core values and its appeal? If something unites all humans in their relationship to dance, I assume it would have to be something laid down in our genes; it would belong in the study of humans as part of nature, as a species. We then encounter questions about how we deal with and relate to knowledge about nature compared to that of culture, often connected to so-called universalist and relativist perspectives (Evanoff 2004). Nature does not arise from human invention, even if we can influence it, and research has pointed to governing rules of nature with universal or at least global validity. Culture is mainly a human invention, even if it is influenced by nature. Even if social sciences have looked for governing rules in culture throughout their history, the results are meagre.[2] At least the material diversity of nature on our globe is already quite well investigated. Its diversity patterns are built on principles other than the diversity of culture. For both those reasons, it is much easier to generalise and survey the diversity of nature. The dancing of the world is less investigated, and the principles for its diversity, particularly the way humans conceptualise it, use it, and enjoy it, are still, to a large part, unknown at any depth. Therefore, there is, in my opinion, not enough knowledge to support universally summarising definitions of dance as a cultural phenomenon. Judging from the aforementioned anthology, it seems that even Western dance theatre scholars have problems finding any unifying description of their sphere of activity.

Principle 2. A science-based definition

This definition is based on the contention that dance is exclusively a human ability; other animals cannot dance. This contention, the basis for my idea of coining a new definition of dance, came from reading an article by the cognitive biologist W. Tecumseh Fitch, "The biology and evolution of rhythm: unravelling a paradox" (2011). The point of departure and the main argument in Fitch's article is to distinguish human musical behaviour from other kinds of periodic functions in nature:

> ...biology is rife with periodic functions including the familiar heartbeat and breathing cycles, but also including a set of biological clocks, tracking days and seasons, that are entrained to the physical timekeepers just mentioned. Such "biological clocks" are present in the simplest forms of

[2] In the field of preserving and safeguarding natural and cultural heritage, the diversity of nature —culture distinction has been challenged, but mainly from the perspective that one cannot be dealt with without the other in that field. (Pretty and others 2009 7(2), 100-112. 10.4103/0972-4923.58642)

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> life, such as bacteria, algae, yeast, and other single-celled organisms. Thus both periodicity, and entrainment of biological clocks to external, physical timekeepers, are ubiquitous in biological systems. (Fitch 2011:128)

Fitch then surveys many scientific studies of behaviour among animals, such as those of apes drumming or birds singing and performing mating dances, concluding that he has not found any convincing evidence for what he calls "musical behaviour" among animals. I do not have the competence to question his conclusion. I use it as a given, and it is not within the scope here to review it critically from a scientific perspective. We also need to remember that John Blacking, the British ethnomusicologist and social anthropologist, asked substantial questions about music as an ability belonging to humans as a species.

> There is so much music in the world that it is reasonable to suppose that music, like language and possibly religion, is a species-specific trait of man. Essential physiological and cognitive processes that generate musical composition and performance may even be genetically inherited and, therefore, present in almost every human being. (Blacking 2000:7)

A summary of Fitch's argumentation

My attempt to coin a dance definition only benefits from Fitch's research results; I do not in any way have the ambition to contribute to or discuss his results; it is only a question of application. It is worth noting that the volume where the article appears was developed from a large international conference in 2007 (Rebuschat et al. 2011). I searched for comments on Fitch's article, which is central to the volume, and there are many. I could, however, not find any striking or convincing disagreement with the parts of Fitch's article that I rely upon here.[3] I will partly quote and partly paraphrase Fitch's text through modest adaptations to make the summary as short as possible. Fitch starts his article as follows: "Periodicity is a ubiquitous feature of all living things, and coupled biological oscillators entrain to each other readily [...]. Despite this, humans are rare in our ability to entrain our musical motor output to that of others during singing, dancing, and playing in ensembles" (2011:128). So, even though living beings do coordinate movements with each other and with nature, what Fitch calls musical motor output seems to be found exclusively among humans. He considers human rhythmic behaviour to comprise several different components, each with its own biological basis and evolutionary history. They include periodic motor pattern generation itself and pulse (or "beat") extraction from complex patterns, which is a form of perceptual cognition. Finally, one entrains one's own motor output to this inferred beat.

Fitch uses the musicologist's concept of rhythm, which means more than mere periodicity and is intertwined with notions of beat, metre, and stress when

[3] The American ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Tolbert was probably the contributor to the volume who voiced most disagreement (Tolbert 2012, 121–127).

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a pattern of recurring events is structured into hierarchical chunks (phrases or measures) that follow certain rules of number, subdivision, and accent. He hypothesises that three components are necessary for ensemble playing and dancing: pulse extraction, beat entrainment, and motor pattern generation.

Pulse extraction is the first and most basic cognitive activity, which involves auditory processing only. It is the inference of a pulse or beat given a patterned and repetitive acoustic stimulus. This first cognitive requirement is as crucial for dancing as for playing along, and indeed, even passive listeners cannot be said to understand the music if they cannot accomplish this first non-trivial step.

Beat entrainment is Fitch's term for the next step, which is to entrain one's motor output to the extracted pulse. If one's motor output is simply tapping one's foot, this could be as basic as periodically tensing a single leg muscle "to the beat" and illustrates entrainment in its simplest form. More typically, for musicians or dancers, entrainment involves using the pulse extracted from a complex auditory stimulus to drive one's own *complex* motor output.

Motor pattern generation is the last component of human ability that Fitch describes. He says it is a perfect example of complex cross-modal integration.

> Information from one cortical domain (auditory cortex, centred in the temporal lobe) must be coherently propagated to another (motor cortex, in the frontal cortex just anterior to the central sulcus). It involves both an entrainment of one's own internally-generated pulse to that extracted from the acoustic stimulus, and the use of this to generate a (potentially highly complex) motor output.
>
> (Fitch 2011:77)

Fitch stresses that the output is not only a slavish reaction to, or acoustic mirror of, that extracted beat. He suggests that the phenomenon of entrainment can be cloven into two components. (1). The synchronisation component is where the listener's motor pulse is aligned with that inferred from an acoustic signal. (2). A pattern output component, where the internal pulse is used to drive the motor output. He also stresses that the motor output can be simple or complex. In the case of complex output, there are typically many different possibilities that are all, equally correctly, spoken of as "entrained" (Fitch 2011:77).

Further discussing the complexities, Fitch stresses that they can be present in the processes as well as in the sounds and movements produced; "The beat can be seen most directly by the footfalls of dancers responding to the music (and often of the players as well), but none of the instruments in the ensemble play a simple pulse on their instrument" (Fitch 2011:75).[4] I think many people from the field of traditional dance can confirm Fitch's idea that dancers' movements help an outsider to a tradition find a pulse and thereby understand unknown music. I would contend, however, that the Norwegian term *svikt* describes what corresponds most directly to the pulse in the music. The *svikt* is produced by

[4] Fitch is writing about his musical example: A West African 'agbekor' bell pattern, but I believe his finding is true for more music. I assume his term footfall means the sound of a person's foot hitting the ground as they dance.

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locomoting bodies when the dancer lowers and lifts the body to enable shifts of supports, that is, shifting the body weight from one foot to another. The lowerings and liftings produce more stable and consistent patterns than changes of support, and the latter also do not consistently produce sound. In complex footwork, one pulse can correspond to more or no-support change in contrast to usual svikt patterns.

Defining dance as unique to humans

In summary, Fitch suggests that "at least three separable components [are] underlying the human capacity for rhythmic behaviour" (Fitch 2011, 73). He describes their functioning and identifies dancing and playing music together as the two major expressions of this behaviour. In this way, he offers a precise and intelligible definition of what he calls rhythmic behaviour. The behaviour has two versions. In one of them, sound production is sufficient, and in the second, the production of sound and movement is juxtaposed as equally important. I propose to base a definition of dance on that perspective as follows: Dance is human rhythmical behaviour where movements are synchronised to sound pulses and where the two are of similar importance to perception. Fitch describes the human ability to interact rhythmically with others as resulting in dancing or playing music together. Producing sound or movement independently without extracting a pulse from an external source and without synchronising one's movements to such a pulse should then, in principle, be something different. It is also what animals can do. We, in principle, produce sound through movements, such as by using our hands, our vocal cords, or our breath. Therefore, movement is always the basis for human expressions. Even movements aiming only at sound production will count as a kind of movement that can be synchronised to an external source.

As stated above, dance without music and music not rhythmically synchronised with another sound source is, therefore, in principle, another phenomenon. Animal behaviour is just in that category. I would argue, however, that in most cases, such human expressions are still organised according to an internal pulse and could still be seen as derived from musical behaviour rather than being parallel to animal behaviour. Still, Laban's manifest on the benefit of liberating dance from music brought about expressions that, by intention, fall outside what Fitch calls rhythmic behaviour: "In any case, dancing without music is a legitimate art form, which, by the way, has already made many friends" (Laban 1920:186). This may be a reason why dance without music did not become dominant in dance art. Contemporary theatre dance often creates performances where movement and sound are kept apart as independent expressions. In other words, there is no intention of synchronising the movement to any pulse in the sound. Therefore, they also fall outside of Fitch's definition. I want to suggest that the synchronisation of movement to pulses in sound was and is the core attraction of dance, even if much of theatre dance and dance art, according to my impression, tends to move away from it.

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Dancing not based on musical pulses

I have experienced my most intense dance pleasure while dancing Norwegian traditional dance. I believe that my sense of movement, that is, my proprioception—how my body parts are placed and how they move—is one component of that pleasure. The other even more essential component is how I can manage to shape my movements so that they are in rhythmical harmony with and interpret the music. The aim is to make them correspond, often in complex ways, to dense patterns of musical pulses. I believe that I share this kind of pleasure with most practitioners of participatory dance and even with many of those in presentational dance. It is an intense and dense choreo-musical satisfaction. I propose that the defining core in the special human ability for musical behaviour gave early humans a compelling urge and pleasure from moving to pulses of sound, as defined by Fitch. If Fitch is right that moving in time with pulses of sound is a special gift for humans, shared by most of us, it offers a precisely defined criterium for most kinds of what has been called dance.

So why do I say most kinds of dance? Already, European choreographers of the 18th century felt the need to distinguish their ballets from social dancing, particularly from the dancing of the lower classes. Much of social life was about the upper classes' need to distinguish themselves from those below them through dress, bodily appearance, and dance. The ballet even needed a distinction from all dance of amateurs to what was shown on stage. I believe one of the tools used was to develop the dance–music relationship from a precise and direct dance response to a pattern of dense musical pulses into something less precise and direct. The resulting often slower and more floating movements that did not stress the pulse so directly may be more appealing to an audience than to practitioners. I think some kinds of presentational dance loosen and open the dance–music relationship and even take dance and music wholly apart. In modern and contemporary dance, this is very common (e.g. Fiskvik 2008). There are also similar examples in classical non-Western presentational dance in other parts of the world (e.g. Rann 2015).

Principle 3. Relation-based definitions: typologies, taxonomies, ontologies

After reviewing and discussing definitions based on culture and science, let us turn to definitions based on ontologies. The use of the term ontology in computer science is attributed to Thomas Gruber. However, the principle is much older and was used under names such as typology or taxonomy. Gruber states, "Formal ontologies are viewed as designed artefacts, formulated for specific purposes and evaluated against objective design criteria." (1995:907). Whereas the other principles we are discussing attempt to define one phenomenon, such as dance, separately, the ontology principle defines it as part of a system.

The philosophers David Ludwig and Daniel A. Weiskopf explain: "By 'ontology' here, we mean the way that the world is organised according to a particular cultural group. Ontologies include an inventory of the types of things that exist, the classes that they sort themselves into, the properties they have, and relations

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they stand in" (Ludwig and Weiskopf 2019). A term such as dance can be defined through an inventory of dances that it covers. An example is the Nordic typology of published folk dances, or *folkedanstypologi*, where all these dances are classified into a hierarchical taxonomy (Bakka 1997; Bakka 2019). Another example is the Hornbostel-Sachs systematic categorisation of musical instruments (Von Hornbostel and Sachs 1914). Dance can also be defined as one item among others in an ontology. The French anthropologist Marcel Mauss classified the techniques of the body. Some of the items he lists are *marche*, *course*, and *danse* (walking, running, and dancing) (Mauss 1936:17), but I do not know many examples of that principle.

One problem with definitions in ontologies is that they are mostly made "according to a particular cultural group," as Ludwig and Weiskopf stated. To overcome this, Ludwig and Weiskopf "propose a model of cross-cultural relations between ontologies beyond a simple divide between universalist and relativist models" based on a discipline they call ethnoontology. They consider that "The study of ethnoontology presents an opportunity to address links between general issues in philosophical taxonomy and applied questions about pressing global challenges ranging from conservation of local environments to the self-determination of Indigenous communities" (Ludwig and Weiskopf 2019). This could be a vital stepping stone in efforts towards decolonisation.

Principle 4. Definitions based on the dictionary principle

I return here to my preceding discussion on dictionaries. Several large, old dictionaries were compiled by excerpting pieces from available text collections. Each excerpt was then analysed, and the meaning of the word in that excerpt was defined. Let us compare two imaginary excerpts: (1) He went to a *dance*; (2) most of Mozart's German *dances* were written [...] The first excerpt uses dance as meaning a dance party; in the second, the word means a dance music composition. A definition in a dictionary is a list of the different ways that a word is used in all kinds of contexts, not least in daily life. They are based more on written than spoken language and may not consider dialects but still mirror the unruliness of the spoken language.

"The world in dance words" is a project connected to the International Master in Dance Knowledge, Practice, and Heritage programme offered by Choreomundus, which I set up and now lead with my colleague Georgiana Gore.[5] The aims are formulated as follows: "This project examines how human movement structured to music is conceptualised and labelled in different languages. The aim is to obtain a broad set of concrete and detailed samples that may eventually come to represent how people worldwide have conceptualised this aspect of their culture."[6] From its modest beginning with entries from some 20 or 30 countries, we can see the striking difference between languages in how they conceptualise

[5] choreomundus.org/, accessed 25 September 2024.

[6] Information on the project is currently stored at the following private source: http://Dancewords.Pbworks.Com/w/Page/147993360, accessed 10 March 2025.

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human movement structured to music. Many European languages lack a word that signifies dance and music as a unit, whereas languages from other parts of the world may not have terms to refer to the movement component of the dance/music unit.

Applying definitions

Fitch's article starts with the subtitle "Introduction: why can't dogs dance?" I could jokingly answer, "But in Norway, they can" and even support that; I searched the databases of texts written in Norwegian in the Norwegian National Library, which has 639,254 digitalised books. My first search was for *hunden danset* (dog danced), which resulted in 148 hits for books, 51 for newspapers, and 9 for periodicals. This suggests that Norwegians quite often have characterised the movements of dogs as dance. Well, not all Norwegian animals dance; there were 2532 hits for *hoggormen* (viper snake) but none for *hoggormen danset* (viper snake danced).[7] Certainly, more advanced and detailed searches would have nuanced the picture, but there seems to be a different understanding of the movements of dogs and snakes when it comes to dancing.

Unsurprisingly, the unruly language of daily life does not correspond to or depend upon experts' definitions. Whereas our science-based definition of dance comes from studies of humans as a species, the dictionary definitions tell us how our ability to speak and think has enabled us to label the phenomenon with a word having a large cluster of meanings. Our dance word project has shown us that even the meaning clusters behind, for instance, the Norwegian *dans*, the French *danse*, and the English dance are somewhat different.

The culture-based definitions come from dance experts representing different dance genres and disciplinary specialisations. Their views and ideas about the phenomenon are formulated into definitions that often implicitly pose as representing humankind but are necessarily restricted due to a lack of knowledge supported by research. This article also intends to remind us that the world's languages conceptualise our shared ability for musical behaviour and its value in very different ways. If we accept that all humans should have a say, it requires that we all be modest and formulate precisely on whose behalf we are talking when we define words such as dance or describe their meaning or value.

Conclusion

This essay proposes and discusses different ways of defining dance. One general motivation for writing the article is a worry over the consequences of the increasing dominance of English and a few other world languages in scholarly discourse. I strongly believe that our *umwelt*, the way we perceive and experience the world around us, is understood and conceptualised differently in different languages. It is not by chance that many words, such as Umwelt, do not lend themselves to translation. Therefore, I consider it essential for disciplines such as

[7] This search was conducted in 2024 using their online catalogue: https://www.nb.no/search.

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dance to find ways of defining themselves independently from the understandings carried by one or a few languages and cultures. This article suggests ways of working towards that aim. Those of us working with dance as culture should try to estimate how far the validity of our definitions of dance can reach. If Fitch's contentions can allow us to define dance as a specific skill of the human species, we can avoid language dependency. In the world of ethnoontology, cross-cultural relations between ontologies are intended to milden the effect of world language dominance. Finally, through efforts to map words for human movement to music in as many languages as possible, according to the dictionary principle, we might eventually get an understanding of how this phenomenon is conceptualised throughout the world.

The earth is dancing, the world is rotating

Rebeka Kunej

The importance of the proposal by Egil Bakka lies in the fact that it points out the pitfalls encountered when defining dance. Given the long-standing aspiration and initiative of the ICTMD Study Group on Ethnochoreology to include dance in the name of the council, which was realised in 2023, this article can also be seen as a celebration of this achievement and an effort to broaden ethnomusicological discourse. At the same time, the article draws attention to several other general aspects that have been reconsidered by ICTMD members throughout the long history of the council and continue to be debated today. It seems that adding dance to the title of the council has contributed to a deeper self-reflection of members on our collective mission. The focus of this discourse is on the relationship between dance, music, and tradition. In the end, the initiative of the Study Group on Ethnochoreology did not lead to a simple addition of "traditional dance," but rather to "traditions of dance."

In his article, Bakka proposes a biologically based definition of dance, derived from W. Tecumseh Fitch's definition, according to which "Dance is human rhythmical behaviour where movements are synchronised to sound pulses and where the two are of similar importance for perception," thus pointing to the reciprocity of music and dance, or more precisely, of sound and the coordinated movement to it.

The first part of the article includes a reflection on what dance is. What Bakka refers to as "the dictionary principle of defining dance" is an ever-present warning that caution is needed when transferring dance-related concepts from one culture and different contexts to another linguistic code. Those of us who study the dance–music practices of non-English-speaking communities, or those of us who, as researchers, are non-native English speakers are acutely aware of this challenge.

Dance is not to be viewed merely as art; in fact, it can also be understood in a much different, much broader sense, as pointed out in the article. In ethnomusicological and ethnochoreological circles, there is a sense of going beyond the understanding that dance/music is not only a stage performance, art, or economic category. Can this be understood as an appeal to pay more attention to the

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dance-making contexts and processes than to the product itself? Furthermore, I have also been wondering whether the singular form is appropriate when discussing dance, or if the plural form may be more suitable. The conceptual relationship between music-musics can be considered analogous to that in dance(s). However, ultimately, it is the use of the singular that shows that for an individual all performance practices can be one. As you are only one being, an entity, in the same vein, in all dance and movement expression as an individual, you are only one, a dance-moving individual.

This can also serve as a starting point for reflection on the relationship between music and dance. Are dance and music one, could the dancing musician and musicking dancer be understood as a single entity, all-encompassing in a given performative moment and space that is shaped by everyone, by passive and active participants? Is it even appropriate to divide a so-called dance event into two entities? Is this a practice that goes beyond the dance–music binary? Would it be possible to avoid misunderstandings and misleading or even false conceptualisations by not using these two terms? What term could even be used in English (and in Western culture) to refer to what dance/music means to us and to go beyond a dualistic view? —As pointed out by Bakka, "it may seem they are talking about all of humankind, whereas the answers more often depart from just a small part of the world's culture." This is a warning given by the Euro-American (and English-speaking) academia, rooted in European philosophy and art, in which music and dance are seen as two separate arts, which results from the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body.

While listening to Olabode Omojola's keynote address at the 2023 World Conference of our Council in Ghana, I could feel his concern and desire for the African continent to be decolonised from the global West. And during his speech, I recognised similar feelings and concerns in myself, except that in my case, the feelings were about traditional music and dance being decolonised from the arts. —I turned to the person sitting next to me and whispered to her my shocking realisation about my parallel feelings, and she—a traditional dance researcher from the other end of Europe—whispered back that she felt much the same way. Was this a subtle personal call for the decolonisation of traditional dance practices worldwide?

I agree with Bakka that there is not enough knowledge to define dance as a universal humankind phenomenon. In fact, on our planet, there is not a single world; there are many worlds. Although sometimes these worlds of music and dance intersect, and the sound and movement practices intertwine, we are always part of a geographical area and a cultural landscape, as well as different conceptualisations in various cultures and languages.

The entire renaming process and all the challenges related to it resulted in a name that now declaratively includes dance, i.e. The International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance (ICTMD), as well as a redesigned visual identity that is no longer indicative of the Global North, although for my part, I can say it makes me think of the dominance of the Western Hemisphere. Throughout the renaming process and all the related challenges, I often wondered: would we be getting ahead of ourselves if we started using "sounds and movements" in the name of the Council now, and replaced "traditions" with "practices"? After all,

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we continue to research, study, and look further into musicking and dancing as a constantly changing creative process in human society. In the meantime, our planet will keep on rotating eastwards, and we will keep on living in different worlds on this Earth. Some worlds will include music and dance, sound and movement, and in each of the worlds, traditions will arise from contemporary reflections on what from the past is worthy of being preserved for future generations.

Suggesting cultural and functional specificity as modes of decolonisation

Urmimala Sarkar Munsi

Egil Bakka, in his essay "Has dance become definable?", contemplates the possibilities of understanding the unique skills and abilities of the human species by thinking about the universal validity of dance among all humans and the possibility of decolonising through this process.

Bakka's essay proposes a scientific definition of dance as culture. While I appreciate the vast reference and research that the author has engaged in, my response is from an anthropologist's point of view, from a former colony, India, which has a diverse array of embodied practices officially identified as dance. Looking at the range of complex physiological, psychological, social, political differences and the colonial and post-colonial responses to the innumerable dance forms and their functions, I see decolonisation as a futile exercise that neither has the capability nor the intention of understanding the effects of external colonisation of the past and the international colonisation that continues from within.

Today's world is no different. Dance is individual, but it also has the capacity to create an ensemble out of strangers. It is a tool for celebrating unity in some community, while it helps and lends strength to people for resisting oppression and marginalisation in the most expressive manner. It is therefore specific to space, time, and functional requirements.

Often seen as a form of thinking, dance is a form of human capability or a response to engage with everyday life and the social and political ecosystem. It is a way to experience the world through non-verbal, often sensory aesthetics through the engagement of mind and body. Dancing is more than just the motor or emotional response or movement to music. It is also much more than what was identified by the colonisers all over the world as stylised movement systems. Such generalised definitions have often led to the exclusion of trance-like or ritual movements, or the movements and rhythm-based ensemble expressions of community identity from the coloniser-defined category of dance. The initial identification of embodied cultural expressions as dance has often been the contribution of colonisers. Their perceptions were based on their own understanding of dance, without understanding or considering the functional specificities of the colonised people.

My teaching of dance studies or ethnochoreology in postgraduate degree courses and research universities entails the task of unpacking the term "dance," as well as the ways in which dance has been researched and defined from different subject, cultural, or contextual perspectives. When teaching dance

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studies in the Indian context as well as courses on dance anthropology, I have found it useful to refer to the conceptual and empirical premises of dance research in the arts and humanities more broadly from the perspectives of history/historiography, ethnography, cultural studies, philosophy, and movement analysis. Rather than trying to define dance commonly across the world, this research has led to some consistent questions that can be applied to studies of other human groups in variety of locations:

- Which of the practices of the performing arts are eligible to be identified as dance? And why?
- Which of the embodied practices are dance like enough to be identified as "dance"?
- What are the possible disciplinary lenses through which dance may be set apart from other embodied practices such as sports, fitness regimes, yoga, martial arts, if at all?
- What are the functions of dance in the everyday lives of people?

To emphasise my point on the importance of dance as a tool for socialisation and a response to sociopolitical ecosystems, I would like to quote Mark Franko on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968:83–84). He writes,

> Phenomenological description of dance relied not only on the visual, but also on what would come to be known in dance as both proprioception and kinesthetic relation. What I would like to call the kinesthetic-visual pact of phenomenological description when applied to dance facilitated the integration of the performer's discourse of sensation with the spectator's discourse of visual reception: an anthropology with an aesthetics.
>
> (Franko 2011:1)

I would like to emphasise that apart from dance being culturally specific, it is functionally shaped and utilised as an expression of emotions, ritual communication, activities that are competitive, and the bodily display of patterned and learned skills. The anxiety to define dance comes from communities which have already established a form of formal training for certain forms of embodied activities and teach those forms as skills and related pedagogies through a formal knowledge transfer system.

I further would like to clarify my uneasiness about formulating a scientific definition by quoting Theresa Buckland where she welcomes the possibility of a development of community-specific anthropological studies of dance that might bring about the demise of ethnocentrism in dance studies:

> ..... there has been a clear transference from the study of dance as culture, in the Arnoldian sense to that of dance as social production. No longer is culture viewed as the singular mark of civilisation, but all cultures are plural and relative to the peoples who create and maintain them. This potentially results in the non-hierarchical treatment of all dance practices, from street

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> dancing to ballet and from Bhangra to Butoh.
>
> (Buckland 1999:3)

I thank Bakka for his energising thoughts on the universal validity of dance among humans. It encouraged me to think about ways in which one may want to differentiate between human physiological capabilities, as he has explained, from the psycho-social responses.

Toward non-anthropocentric definitions of dance and music

Patrick E. Savage

I was honoured to be invited to provide a perspective on Bakka's proposed definition of dance. As someone who generally advocates for comparative, scientific approaches to defining and studying music and dance, I commend Bakka for his ambition in attempting to propose a "science-based" definition of dance with "universal validity".

On the other hand, I cannot agree with the definition he has proposed: "Dance is human rhythmical behaviour where movements are synchronised to sound pulses and where the two are of similar importance to perception." In my opinion, this definition has two main limitations. One—he and the other commentators have acknowledged: it does not apply to all dance (e.g. dance that is not synchronised to a regular pulse). This limitation may be necessary for a working definition, since we are unlikely to find a universal definition that applies to every instance of dance in every culture (just as we are unable to define music in a way that can accommodate all music yet still exclude speech).

The more serious limitation, however, is that it is unjustifiably anthropocentric by excluding animal dance. Bakka justifies this by citing Blacking, but I have previously argued that Blacking's definition of music as "humanly organised sound" has similar flaws:

> There is no universally accepted definition of "music". Probably the most popular definition among ethnomusicologists is "humanly organised sound" (Blacking 1973), but I find this simultaneously both too narrow (doesn't allow for the possibility of animal musicality...) and too broad (doesn't distinguish between music and speech...) (Savage In press)

Bakka's proposed anthropocentric definition draws heavily on a 2011 book chapter by evolutionary biologist W. Tecumseh Fitch. But as Bakka describes, this chapter was prepared in 2007. This was before the landmark 2009 publication of two articles showing that humans were *not*, in fact, the only species that could dance to a beat. Instead, this ability was shared with several parrot species, including the cockatoo named Snowball, whose YouTube video of synchronised dancing to the Backstreet Boys delighted the world (Patel et al. 2009; Schachner et al. 2009). In fact, Fitch (2009) wrote a commentary on these findings titled "*Biology of music: Another one bites the dust*" describing how synchronised dancing to a beat was added to the list of traits (e.g. tool use) previously thought to be

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unique to humans, but now shown to be shared with non-human animals. In Fitch's more recent work, he and Rebecca Barnstaple have proposed their own definition of dance ("mindful movement") and made clear that they do not see this definition as restricted to either humans or synchronised pulses (Fitch and Barnstaple 2024).

While I disagree with Bakka's proposed definition, I support his attempt to combine science and ethnomusicology/ethnochoreology. In the spirit of constructive criticism, rather than simply criticising his definition, I will try to propose my own definition I think may work better (though it is surely still imperfect). We can build from a working definition of music I have proposed: "*sound organised into regular pitches or rhythms*" (Savage In press). Although this working definition does not apply to all music, it does apply to over 99% of the world's music (Savage et al. 2015), while not applying to most spoken language (Ozaki et al. 2024). If we modify this definition to replace "sound" with "movement" and "pitches" with "patterns", we might get a reasonable working definition to aid in the cross-cultural and cross-species study of dance: *movement organised into regular rhythms or patterns*.

There will undoubtedly still be exceptions, including dances that don't fit this definition and non-dance activities that this definition fails to exclude (e.g. the regular rhythms of running). But at least, this working definition would allow for the possibility of animal dance and thus allow us a broader comparative perspective on the biological and cultural bases of music and dance (Savage In press). I look forward to seeing Bakka and others make progress on this important work.

Moving towards the non-hierarchical inclusion of dance approaches worldwide

María Gabriela López-Yánez

In this response to Egil Bakka's essay "Has dance become definable?", I address some aspects with the aim of contributing to a wider discussion on the challenges and limitations of looking for a dance definition. I would like to begin by thanking Egil for his thought-provoking essay, which is an ideal opening for having such a discussion. First, I point out that the proposed definition should be expanded to include more dances. Second, I locate the undertaking of universalising a dance definition within a series of colonial attempts of reinforcing power structures. Afterwards, I share two suggestions, the first one related to an Open-Source Project and the second one to a politics of citation to include a diversity of science-based and indigenous approaches to dance in a non-hierarchical way. I end with a few questions which invite all of us, from our different roles, to actively contribute with the aim of diversifying dance approaches.

I would like to begin by pointing out a few ideas to widen the definition of dance proposed by the author. I argue that Bakka's proposed science-based definition of dance, although a valuable contribution, is more related to a partial set of characteristics of who can "dance" rather than a definition of dance itself. As an etic approach to dancing, it fails to acknowledge all the subjective nuances that are clearly present in the diverse contexts of those who dance worldwide.

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For instance, there are numerous testimonies that affirm that the devil is the best dancer in the Afro-Ecuadorian traditional dances of Marimba Esmeraldeña and Bomba del Chota (López-Yánez 2020). The "more-than-human" (Abram 1996) world of Marimba and Bomba would challenge the idea of dancing as exclusively human behaviour. Something similar happens in specific dancing cultures where movements are not necessarily synchronised with sound pulses (e.g. in Butoh, a form of Japanese theatrical dance), not to mention improvisational moments in many social dances all over the world whose silences and pauses do not fit in the proposed formula.

Besides the limitations pointed out above, it is essential to also consider that universalising attempts have not been and perhaps will never be neutral, even if they are science based. Throughout history, these attempts have been strategies for control and domination. As has been widely argued by the Mexican thinker Enrique Dussel (2000), the Venezuelan sociologist Edgar Lander (2000) and the Indian sociologist Sujata Patel (2010) in their approach of knowledge production, universalising attempts have historically legitimised the centrality of Western thinking and disallowed the validity for definitions from the rest of the world. If universalisation has been part of a tendency to silence many non-Western voices, I believe it is much more urgent to focus our efforts on developing specific ways to actively acknowledge the diverse understandings of dance.

It is widely known that one of the principal arguments for not actively working on the inclusion of the diversity of approaches to dancing from non-Western locations lies in the belief that these approaches are not considered scientifically relevant or that they are not accessible enough principally due to language or geographical constrains. This belief has reconstituted the domination of Western approaches until the present day. Hence, a fair perspective of dance would be to contribute to building clear paths to non-hierarchically acknowledge the diverse representations of dance identities and to actively work towards their inclusion in academic discourses. The concept of *Ch'ixi* could be useful to challenge a unique definition of dance.

According to the Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera (2018), the Aymaran term Ch'ixi is a way of understanding the constant tension and negotiation between seemingly opposing elements that coexist and influence each other. For Rivera Cusicanqui, Ch'ixi serves as an alternative to a tendency of homogenisation. Instead, Ch'ixi embraces diversity and contradiction as constitutive of human and social experience. From this perspective, science-based and indigenous approaches to dance do not exclude each other nor they should be located hierarchically; rather, they can intertwine and dialogue in complex and dynamic ways.

A potential solution to reach the Ch'ixi diversity would be to create an Open-source Project so that people from all backgrounds could enter data regarding their situated perceptions around dance. From these data, one could extract important patterns that could perhaps be the source of a more universal definition of dance. Bakka does mention this initiative within Choremundus. I would add, however, that for this virtual space to be coherent, it should be constantly updated and commented, and it should include the great majority of dancing people around the world.

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A last input to expand the understanding of dance worldwide would be to acknowledge the fact that, in a globalised world where the issues of translation and of geographical location are rapidly dissolving through technology, having a politics of citation is essential. The British feminist Sara Ahmed has been able to write entire books citing specifically women of colour, even if these bibliographies are harder to find due to their history of invisibilisation. Ahmed (2017) overtly points out that citing thinkers solely from dominant regions and in colonial languages is a racist practice. Why not dream then with dance definition(s) which also includes non-English sources from the Global South? Are we willing to work towards fulfilling this dream at ontological, methodological, and theoretical levels? Are we, in our roles of educators, researchers, and fund managers, willing to critically decide what to study, how to study, how to distribute grants for research or scholarships to pursue higher education, the language of reflection, and ways of applying decolonial practices of research?

A Response to the Comments

Egil Bakka

I would first like to thank the editor, Lonán Ó Briain, for the excellent idea of framing this essay as a dialogue and for seeing it through. I am also grateful to my four colleagues for taking the time to read and respond to my proposal. Their willingness to engage with the text and contribute to the discussion is something I value highly. It is a real honour to have my short contribution included in such a carefully framed and thought-provoking exchange.

Let me first reiterate my main questions: Can our many cultural definitions of dance have universal validity? Can the human species' unique skills and abilities have more potential to tell us something universal about dance? Can the dictionary and the ontology principles work across languages and help decolonisation? And then one conclusion from above: If we accept that all humans should have a say, it requires that we all are modest and formulate precisely on whose behalf we are talking when we define words such as dance or describe their meaning or value.

I start by thanking Patrick E. Savage for his advanced comments on the core of my proposal.

I acknowledge that I should have found the research developments since Fitch's 2011 essay, particularly the findings on rhythmic entrainment in certain bird species, and I apologise for missing that. While Savage rightly challenges the limitations of species-specific definitions, his own proposal still hinges on the English word *dance* as a stable point of reference. This risks reintroducing the very problem I sought to highlight: if we base our definitions on one single language, we remain caught in a circular argument.

López-Yánez, Sarkar Munsi and Savage appear to interpret the proposal as a call to replace all earlier definitions with a single new one. I apologise if this misunderstanding arose from a lack of clarity on my part. I believe that definitions spring from different needs or purposes, which we, when defining, should explicate. Savage illustrates that brilliantly when he proposes a deeply grounded

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definition aiding "the cross-cultural and cross-species study of dance." My definition supports the essential interdependence of dance and music within traditional social dance, which Kunej also stresses so elegantly.

López-Yánez and Sarkar Munsi, as their main point, address how the new defining principle overlooks perspectives embedded in prior definitions. However, my central argument is precisely that different principles for defining dance will position and delimit it differently. I do not argue for one all-inclusive definition but for alternative ones, filling different needs and seeing the phenomenon of dance from different perspectives. I am glad that Kunej understood this intention and, thereby, also the rest of the points.

The title of López-Yánez's comment seems to be a wish for a "non-hierarchical inclusion of dance approaches worldwide." I do not argue for a legislative or normative definition that includes or excludes dance approaches. Those surely can be found in the context of copyright law or in school and university curricula. They inevitably prioritise certain dance forms while marginalising others. In academic contexts, definitions aim for linguistic precision and to serve intellectual processes of inquiry, critique, and knowledge production. My aim is to foster deeper understanding and critical engagement with the complexities of our fields, not to engage with questions of prioritising.

In my opinion, a consistent academic definition requires a cohesive and well-justified choice of perspectives and criteria. Once these are selected and interpreted, the scope of the definition is determined by the logic and framework of the chosen perspective. Consequently, the elements included in the definition are not arbitrary or subject to the discretion of stakeholders but are instead constrained by the theoretical and methodological coherence of the framework.

López-Yánez "locate[s] the undertaking of universalising a dance definition within a series of colonial attempts of reinforcing power structures." This partly refers to the misunderstanding about a single definition, but also to the character of the new definition. In my understanding, universalising typically involves extending a principle, concept, or rule to be applied broadly, often in contexts where variability exists or the application is not naturally self-evident. When it comes to natural, self-evident facts, such as "humans typically have two legs," the term universalising is less applicable because these are widely understood and grounded in biological reality, not philosophical or societal constructs.

So, again, the proposal does not argue for a new definition to replace all others. instead, the new one is used to challenge and scrutinise existing principles of defining. It is then interesting to note that one highly profiled Western-derived phenomenon does not comply with the criteria resulting from the chosen principle. The new defining principle, explicitly based on Western-derived scientific paradigms, does not claim to be entirely free from colonial implications.

López-Yánez writes that the new definition "fails to acknowledge all the subjective nuances." Acknowledging such nuances is precisely what culture-based definitions typically aim to do. These definitions are generally built on emic descriptions—accounts of what dance means within each community and dance tradition worldwide. As long as each definition claims validity only within its own group or cultural context, I see no issue. What I criticise is the tendency of

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some dominant groups not to clarify the limits of their definitions, so they may be read as claims to general validity, overshadowing the definitions of other groups. I believe such unqualified claims are better examples of the "colonial attempts at reinforcing power structures" referred to earlier.

Sarkar Munsi, in the same vein, presents a list of seemingly emic descriptions as examples of what she finds missing in the new definition, yet she does not acknowledge that these fall under the culture-based definitions already outlined in my proposal. While these examples vividly express how dance is understood in particular communities, I would argue that their analytical validity depends on being explicitly framed as culturally situated, but—since they appear to be rooted in artistic contexts—they are likely to resonate more strongly there.

The example above, to me, illustrates a key difference between academic and artistic approaches to research, and underscores a persistent divide between dance understood as art and dance that falls outside—or positions itself outside—of that category. In my experience, non-art expressions often present themselves as situated within specific cultural contexts. Concert dance works tend not to address questions of cultural belonging explicitly (Buckland 1999; Kealiinohomoku 1983). Even when they do, they rarely embrace the constraint of remaining anchored in past traditions. This tendency may be related to a recurring idea in Western modernist and contemporary dance discourse: that dance art functions as a universally accessible language, grounded in abstract movement and the expression of universal human emotions. Such a view assumes a shared emotional vocabulary and risks overlooking the culturally specific ways emotions are embodied and interpreted. In this light, universalist narratives can intersect with colonial epistemologies by marginalising local knowledge systems and the questions they generate.

López-Yánez's examples of dancing devils are found in many communities and would be included under the dictionary-based definition I outlined—along with dancing without music, as well as metaphorical uses such as dancing waves or dancing animals. My new definition, by contrast, introduces specific criteria: movements not adapted to pulses would not be classified as dance. This particularly affects certain forms within modern and contemporary theatre dance. Social dances "with breaks and pauses," however, would still fall within its scope. When I recognised the biological basis for coining this definition, I also saw that it would support the importance of dance–music unity—a feature strongly emphasised by many African researchers, who describe dance and music as a single conceptual unit in their cultural contexts (Gwerevende and Mthombeni 2023: 401). Supporting that understanding became part of the definition's purpose. Kunej also notes this unity as a general characteristic of European social dance traditions, and makes the intriguing observation that the inclusion of *dance* in the name of our organisation (and journal) carries definitional and conceptual implications as well.

I am glad that López-Yánez likes the project *The World in Dance Words*, which is a small, voluntary initiative. It is worth noting, however, that the meanings of words in a language are shaped not just by personal understandings, but by patterns of usage that require careful linguistic analysis. For that reason, a fully

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uncurated, crowdsourced approach to what dance words mean would raise challenges in terms of consistency and reliability.

Interestingly, López-Yánez refers to the Aymaran term *Ch'ixi* as "a way of understanding the constant tension and negotiation between seemingly opposing elements that coexist and influence each other." This, to me, resonates closely with the tension and negotiation between the alternative definitions of dance I describe. From what I understand—albeit superficially—it even seems to articulate one of the proposal's core intentions. I thank her for introducing the idea.

I would also like to thank her for raising the point about the "history of invisibilization," referring to the persistent lack of references in mainstream research publications to scholars based in regions outside Europe and North America, or working in languages other than the dominant world languages. I fully acknowledge this shortcoming in my own research. I am aware that relevant sources exist and could have been included. With the help of artificial intelligence, it is now increasingly possible to engage with work written in languages one does not speak—something I hope to take better advantage of in future work.

I would like to end with Savage's view that the science-based definition I propose is unjustifiably anthropocentric by excluding animal dance. Speaking from where I am situated in European academic traditions, his resistance to isolating human dance for analysis reminds me of the idea of a "colourblind" society—the notion that ignoring difference will eliminate inequality. Just as such approaches risk concealing structural discrimination rather than addressing it, avoiding definitional boundaries may obscure essential features specific to human behaviour. I fully agree with Savage that it is important to study certain kinds of practices that combine the interrelated production of sound and movement across species. But we also need conceptual tools that allow us to examine human capacities on their own terms.

I hope this debate can help us to situate our own discourses and strive to give alternative and even opposing discourses their fair share of visibility rather than continuing the history of invisibilisation.

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