



AIA 33

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Sapienza Università di Roma

**Embodied Understanding:
Exploring Language, Translation, Literature and Culture
through the Senses**

Over the past decades, the concept of embodiment has moved from a marginal corrective to a foundational paradigm across the humanities and cognitive sciences, radically reshaping how meaning, cognition, and interpretation are understood. Against long-standing dualisms that separate mind from body, language from experience and representation from action, embodied approaches posit that meaning is not an abstract, amodal construct but an emergent, situated and materially grounded process. Understanding is thus inseparable from the living body: it arises through sensorimotor engagement, affective attunement and dynamic interaction with both physical and socio-cultural environments (Shapiro 2019; Durt et al. 2017).

The analysis of figurative language, narrative perspective, characterisation, humour, spatial representation, learning, and multimodal communication demonstrates how linguistic and cultural meanings are grounded in bodily experience while remaining shaped by historically and socially situated forms of cognition (Stockwell 2002; Semino 2008; Tsur 2008). Thus, to explore *embodied understanding* means not only to recognise the corporeal grounding of meaning, but also to interrogate how bodies and senses are configured, disciplined and reimaged across different linguistic, literary, translational and cultural contexts, bearing in mind that corporeality is fundamentally plural, encompassing different forms of specificity (Balirano and Parlatti 2024).

If the word finds its physiological foundation and means of communication in the body, this is particularly true of literary and poetic language, which amplifies its message through forms that appeal to all the senses in order to forge a deeper connection with readers, listeners and viewers. In literary texts, more generally, the immateriality of words and the imagery they evoke can become tangible matter that can be seen, touched and tasted thanks to rhetorical devices such as synaesthesia, which cause the senses to converge and collide within the text, as in Shakespeare's Duke Orsino's famous opening line: 'If music be the food of love, play on' (*Twelfth Night*, Act 1, Scene 1) (Brannon 2023; Van Praet 2026).

A similar perspective has informed studies of narrative, where work on visuality, consciousness and descriptive language has often interrogated the role played by sense representation and the feedback loop between perception and consciousness, taking its cue from literary works (Kukkonen 2020; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021; Kern-Stähler and Robertson 2023). Moreover, established critical notions such as "realism" and

“impressionism”, key to understanding the aesthetic culture of British modernism, often imply a sustained focus on sensory representation, bringing literary, media and visual cultures into dialogue (Acton 2025). In this context, the study of sensory and embodied experience has been – and continues to be – fruitfully aimed at investigating the relation between culture and philosophies of mind, the evolution of genres, and the theories and practices of novelistic realism (Kukkonen 2019).

Sensory studies have also become increasingly central to the exploration of English theatrical cultures. As an example, “the study of Shakespeare and the senses”, in Simon Smith’s words, “has developed from a vibrant but somewhat marginal scholarly pursuit into a core area of inquiry”, taking account of the “methods, approaches, and insights of sensory studies almost as a matter of routine” (Smith 2020). From here emerges the study of specific dramatic forms through a sensory lens (Karim-Cooper and Stern 2013), an approach that, in the more specific context of Elizabethan tragedy, has drawn attention to staging conventions that foregrounded specific colours, set gestures and sounds, as well as conventional plots and modes of characterisation.

Within linguistics, embodied approaches have a long tradition and have found application across a wide range of areas, demonstrating that language is deeply grounded in sensorimotor experience and emerging from recurrent patterns of interaction between speakers and their environments (Baicchi et al. 2018; Langacker 2008). Cognitive linguistics, construction grammar, and interactional linguistics have all contributed to this shift, highlighting how meaning is dynamically constructed through bodily engagement, multimodal resources (gesture, gaze, prosody, proxemics), and contextual affordances (Bybee 2010; Di Paolo et al. 2018; Zlatev et al. 2021). Research on metaphor and conceptual mapping further shows how abstract reasoning is rooted in embodied schemas (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kövecses 2000, 2005), while recent work in multimodality underscores the integration of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources in meaning-making. In the domain of translation, the wealth of synaesthetic potentialities inherent in interlinguistic and intersemiotic translation, as well as in audiovisual translation, has been explored by various scholars, who have highlighted the fluidity of semiotic boundaries (Campbell and Vidal 2018). In particular, intersemiotic translation (Jakobson [1959] 2000) foregrounds the dynamic and complex transfer of information across different codes.

The interplay between linguistic and non-linguistic codes – visual, oral, gestural, and beyond – is central to audiovisual translation (AVT), in which purely verbal codes constitute only a minority of the elements that an audiovisual translator needs to take into account (Chaume 2004). The iconographic, photographic, sound and musical codes, to name but a few, engage different senses and forms of sensory experience, while also pointing to the diversity of audiences and of the ways in which audiovisual texts are perceived and experienced.

Media Accessibility, the sub-area of AVT concerned with translation modes such as subtitling for the deaf and hard of hearing (SDH) and audio description, engages directly with this diversity. Subtitling – and particularly creative subtitling (Nornes 1999, 2015; Díaz Cintas 2018; Baños and Díaz Cintas 2023), in which subtitles may be creatively positioned, coloured, or sized on screen – offers a revealing example. By exploiting the visual and spatial affordances of the screen, creative subtitles can make multimodal and multilingual communication accessible to audiences across different levels of hearing ability (Butler 2026), while at the same time revealing the potential for engaging multiple senses in the construction of meaning. Media Accessibility thus offers a compelling illustration of “embodied understanding”, as individuals with different sensory capacities access, perceive and make sense of audiovisual texts in different ways.

A further domain in which the role of sensory and embodied experience has come increasingly to the fore is foreign language teaching and learning. Here, cognitive and output-oriented perspectives have long played a central role, with particular emphasis on the processes and measurable outcomes of language acquisition. The concept of embodiment offers an alternative view, arguing that learners actively construct meaning through their interactions with the environment, while the environment presents opportunities for action that engage specific sensory and motor systems. From this perspective, language learning is not simply a linear process of receiving input and producing output to store information in the brain. Instead, it depends on the dynamic interplay between cognition and the learner's bodily sensory and motor experiences (Witte 2026).

By bringing these perspectives into dialogue, this conference seeks to explore embodied understanding as a cross-disciplinary framework that foregrounds the inseparability of mind, body, and environment in the production of meaning. We particularly encourage contributions that bring linguistic, literary, translational, and cultural approaches into productive conversation, and engage with the sensory, affective, and material dimensions of communication.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Literature and philosophy of mind: influences, exchanges, analogies
- Senses and consciousness in modernist fiction
- Styling the senses: the "sensory signature" of individual styles
- Understanding genres through sensory patterns
- Narrative immersion, sensory representations and cognitive poetics
- Measuring emotional temperatures in drama
- The sensory construction of tragic affect on stage
- Visual and acoustic stylistic devices (enjambment, poetic layout, experiments, rhythmic choices, alliteration etc.)
- Multimodality, gesture and interaction
- Cognitive poetics and embodied reading
- Digital environments and reconfigured sensory experience
- The role of embodiment in foreign-language learning
- Affect, perception and narrative experience
- Sensory metaphor and conceptual embodiment
- Embodied and usage-based approaches to language
- Embodiment in translation processes and practices
- The translator's body, voice and agency
- Intersemiotic translations and adaptive strategies
- Audiovisual Translation
- Media Accessibility studies
- Embodiment in Cognitive Translation Studies
- Music, sound and song translation
- Performance arts and translation
- Food Studies and sensory cultures
- Disability studies
- The embodiments of queerness
- Cross-cultural perspectives on embodiment and the senses

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DEADLINES

PANEL PROPOSALS

AIA members are invited to submit panel proposals (max 500 words, excluding references). Please submit your proposal as a word file and format your in-text and bibliographic references according to APA7.

Proposals can be submitted jointly by a minimum of one to a maximum of two convenors to: **aiasapienza33@gmail.com** by **1 February 2027**. Proposals should also include a **short bio** of each convenor (maximum 150 words).

Notification of acceptance: 15 March 2027.

The full list of Panels with outlines and contact addresses of convenors will be published on the conference website by the end of March 2027.

PAPER ABSTRACTS

AIA members are invited to submit abstracts (max 300 words, excluding references) for single-author or co-authored papers.

Please submit your abstract as a word file and format your in-text and bibliographic references according to APA7.

Paper abstracts should be sent to the panel convenors by **23 April 2027**. Abstracts should also include a **short bio** of each convenor (maximum 150 words).

Download the Book of Panels with the convenors' email addresses ([link provided by the end of March 2027](#)).

Notification of acceptance: 15 May 2027.

Participants must be fully paid-up AIA members.

IMPORTANT DATES

Submission of panel proposals: 1 February 2027

Notification of acceptance: 15 March 2027

Submission of paper proposals: 23 April 2027

Notification of acceptance: 15 May 2025

Further information on the conference and the registration procedure will be available soon on a dedicated website

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