Typically abstract words are defined as those words which do not have a material object as referent. We will re-define the distinction between concrete and abstract words referring to the different bodily and social contexts in which they are acquired. We intend Words As Tools (WAT), that is tools that allow us to act and operate in a social context (Wittgenstein, 1953; Clark, 1998).

Our proposal extends embodied views assuming two sources for developing a thorough theory of word meanings: an individual one, the embodied individual experience, and a socially embodied one. This second source is crucial in particular for abstract words. While we could construe the embodied concept BALL without any help from language, the same situation does not hold in the case of “freedom” (Borghi & Cimatti, 2009).

Being able to explain abstract words is a major challenge for embodied theories (Barsalou & Wiemer-Hastings, 2003; see a review in Glenberg et al., 2008). Embodied accounts assert that both abstract and concrete words are grounded in the sensorimotor system.

However, evidence in favour of these views, though compelling, is confined to domains that are quite specific. It is primarily the linguistic experience that helps us in collecting a variety of bodily states, internal and external experiences, etc. These bodily states and introspective experiences emerge and are recognized once they are named. This naming typically takes place in a social context.

This view can explain a number of empirical findings:
- results showing that abstract words are acquired later than concrete ones (McGhee-Bidlack, 1991)
- results on Mode of Acquisition (MOA) showing that in the first grades acquisition is mainly perceptual, later it is mainly linguistic (e.g., Wauters et al., 2003)
- studies highlighting the role played by social emotions for abstract words (Kusta et al., 2009)
- data for brain imaging studies showing that left hemisphere areas, and especially Broca’s area, are more active for abstract than for concrete words (Sabsevitz et al., 2005)
- results of studies with patients and of behavioural studies showing that abstract and concrete words are characterized by qualitatively different principles of organization: abstract words rely more on semantic associations, concrete words more on semantic similarity (Crutch & Warrington, 2005).
- data for brain imaging studies showing that left hemisphere areas, and especially Broca’s area, are more active for abstract than for concrete words (Sabsevitz et al., 2005)
- results of studies with patients and of behavioural studies showing that abstract and concrete words are characterized by qualitatively different principles of organization: abstract words rely more on semantic associations, concrete words more on semantic similarity (Crutch & Warrington, 2005).
- studies showing that the influence of the different spoken language is stronger for abstract than for concrete words (Boroditsky, 2001)
- At a theoretical level, our work is in line with the idea that abstract words activate both simulations and linguistic information (Lougher & Ejerfalk, 2008; Barsalou et al., 2008; Prinz, 2002).

Need for further empirical evidence, in particular:
- Cross-linguistic, cross-cultural: abstract words should be more variable and influenced by the different cultures and spoken languages.
- Developmental: abstract words should be acquired more frequently in linguistic contexts compared to concrete words (different MOA).

References: