

Body Parts We Live By in Language and Culture: The *raaS* ‘head’ and *yidd* ‘hand’ in Tunisian Arabic¹

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Abstract

It is now widely documented across languages and cultures that body parts are used to conceptualize mental faculties, emotions, character traits, and cultural values. The languages studied and documented in these domains of knowledge cut across different families of languages and cultures such as Arabic, Basque, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, German, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Persian, Spanish, Thaayorre, Turkish, etc. As a follow-up of work done on body parts in Tunisian Arabic (henceforth, TA), I argue that a motivated division of labor between the various parts of the body is active in many languages and cultures. Such a division, however, does not prevent overlap between some body parts in terms of what domain of knowledge they are culturally made to conceptualize. I also argue that internal body parts in general are more likely to be based on metaphor and get involved more in mental faculties and emotions and less with character traits and cultural values. However, external body parts are more likely to be based on metonymy and get involved more in character traits and cultural values and less with mental faculties and emotions. In the current chapter, the body parts, *raaS* (head) and *yidd* (hand), will be dealt with in TA to show part of such a division. Unlike the heart and the eye that have been shown to conceptualize mental faculties, emotions, character traits, and cultural values to different degrees, it will be argued that, owing to their salient place in the body and their saliency in some types of cultural experience, the *raaS* (head) and *yidd* (hand) in TA are mostly used to conceptualize character traits and cultural values.

Introduction

The embodiment thesis is the backbone on which cognitive linguistics rests. More than allowing for the body to get into the mind, embodiment is impor-

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tantly part-and-parcel of a theory of human understanding—"indirect understanding via metaphor" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 178). The embodiment thesis is motivated by pre-linguistic image-schematic structures arising from personal and socio-cultural embodied experiences, held to have "a figurative character, as structures of embodied imagination" (Johnson, 1987: xx). Thus, "the centrality of human embodiment directly influences what and how things can be meaningful for us, the ways in which these meanings can be developed and articulated, the ways we are able to comprehend and reason about experience, and the actions we take" (Johnson, 1987: xiv). This has a consequence for the mind, which is "not merely embodied, but embodied in such a way that our conceptual systems draw largely upon the commonalities of our bodies and of the environments we live in. The result is that much of a person's conceptual system is either universal or widespread across languages and cultures" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999: 6).

Embodiment via body parts has started to gain momentum in cognitive linguistic studies thanks largely to two full-length edited volumes (Sharifian et al., 2008; Maalej & Yu, 2011). The two publications investigate the conceptualizing role of internal and outer body parts respectively, concluding that they target knowledge domains such as mental faculties, emotions, character traits, and cultural values (Aksan, 2011; Foolen, 2008; Gaby, 2008; Geeraerts & Gevaert, 2008; Goddard, 2008; Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2008; Ikegami, 2008; Maalej, 2008, 2011; Marmaridou, 2011; Nagai and Hiraga, 2011; Niemeier, 2008; Nissen, 2011; Occhi, 2008, 2011; Sharifian, 2008, 2011; Siahhaan, 2008, 2011; Vainik, 2011; Yoon, 2008; Yu, 2002, 2004, 2008a–b–c, 2009, 2011). Most of these researchers studied the body parts of heart, eye, liver, and stomach in their respective languages. Very few, however, focused on the *head* (Aksan, 2011; Siahhaan, 2011), and no work was devoted to the hand in these two volumes.

In English, the *head* is used in expressions such as the following, most of which do not make sense to speakers of Tunisian Arabic (TA) but are intelligible to them as will be shown through expressions using *raaS* 'head' in TA:

head to head = in a race, when two contestants are doing as well as each other: "They are head to head in the polls."

off the top of your *head* = when you give an answer to something without having the time to reflect: "What's our market strategy?" "Well, off the top of my head, I can suggest . . ."

have a good *head* for = be good at something: "He's an accountant and he has a good head for figures."

have your *head* in the clouds = dream: "He's always got his head in the clouds—he makes all these impossible plans."