

# What Hands/Arms Can Say: A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Swahili Body-Part Terms *Mkono* and *Mikono*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The present chapter deals with the conceptualisations of the body part terms *hand/arm* in Swahili, a Bantu language spoken in Tanzania and Kenya, and as a lingua franca within the surrounding area.

The study presents an array of grammaticalised expressions, embodied metaphors and metonymies activated in order to interpret some aspects, entities and experiences both of a concrete and an abstract nature that are not immediately related to bodily experiences but which make use of body-related references. The analysis is done by observing the results of corpus-based research. The identification of patterns of usage associated with a particular term and the subsequent identification of potential and recurring meanings of each pattern helps in identifying metaphorical and metonymical meanings of the terms analysed.

## Outlook

The bodily experience is a favoured term of reference to conceptualise the experiences we have every day as a result of our interaction with the physical and cultural environment (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987). In our human experience the body is the first object we perceive and explore and it becomes the tool we use to make contact and, therefore, to comprehend what we see, what we feel and what we do. The body naturally

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provides a source domain for deriving extended concepts and structuring numerous other domains.

The present study is a corpus-based analysis of the Swahili body part term *mkono* (cl. 3, 'hand, arm') and its plural *mikono* (cl. 4), as well as the locative forms *mkononi* ('in the hand') and *mikononi* ('in the hands/ arms'). The behaviour of such terms within both nominal or verbal constructions is scrutinised in order to detect some metaphorical and metonymical extensions used in the conceptualisation of abstract entities and experiences, as well as the categorisation of concrete entities.

The approach adopted for the analysis follows the cognitive linguistics guideline that looks at metaphors as useful tools for the comprehension and interpretation of the world.

The research identified the uses of the terms *mkono* and *mikono*:

- a) in the description of the world—in particular through the definition of objects and space;
- b) in the description of interpersonal relationships—as a symbol of social interaction and participation in collective life;
- c) in the conceptualisation of the notion of POSSESSION, DOMINION, AUTHORITY.

### *The Research: Methods and Tools*

The data for this research has been collected from an electronic corpus, the advantage of which is that it contains both a large amount of data and, above all, authentic texts.

The search for concordances, namely the occurrences of a word within a text and the indication of the frequency with which such a word occurs together with the preceding and following linguistic context, can help in finding the sequences of words that occur more frequently; thus, the procedure rapidly provides information about the specific uses of a word (Tognini Bonelli 2001: 3–4).

A frequently cited shortcoming of such an approach is due to its nature: a corpus is a finished object or, in other words, it consists of a closed and countable set of texts. Therefore, it will inevitably exclude lots of actually produced performances.<sup>2</sup> However, this kind of approach does give indications about

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2 For a more detailed discussion about the criticism on corpus methodology and the subsequent responses by corpus linguists see McEnery and Wilson 2001: 5–13; McEnery et al. 2006: 131–144.