



Scandinavian semantics and the human body: an ethnolinguistic study in diversity and change



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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ethnolinguistic analysis of how the space between the head and the body is construed in Scandinavian semantic systems vis-a-vis the semantic system of English. With an extensive case study of neck-related meanings in Danish, and with cross-Scandinavian reference, it is demonstrated that Scandinavian and English systems differ significantly in some aspects of the way in which they construe the human body with words. The study ventures an innovative combination of methods, pairing the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to linguistic and conceptual analysis with empirical evidence from the Evolution of Semantic Systems (EoSS) project. This combination of empirical and interpretative tools helps to integrate evidence from semantics and semiotics, pinning out in great detail the intricacies of the meanings of particular body words. The paper concludes that body words in closely related languages can differ substantially in their semantics. In related languages, where shared lexical form does not always mean shared semantics, ethnolinguistic studies in semantic change and shifts in polysemy patterns can help to reveal and explain the roots of semantic diversity.

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1. Ethnolinguistics and the human body

This study explores the semantics of the human body in an ethnolinguistic framework, focussing on the meanings of the English words *neck* and *throat*, and related Scandinavian conceptualisations. Ethnolinguistics is the study of linguistics worldviews, or “the study of the world’s variety of worldviews, as expressed by ... linguistic communities” (Underhill, 2012: 229). The ethnolinguistic approach combines linguistic–conceptual analysis with culture–historical reflections. In his seminal study, *Ethnolinguistics and Cultural Concepts*, James W. Underhill says:

“The study of worldviews and the languages of ethnic groups requires an enormous investment of time and energy, and a scrupulous attention to both detail and to the role the individual part plays within the language and the culture as a whole. This effort is not always made by those who support and promote linguistic anthropology, and it is invariably neglected by those who contest the idea that consciousness and language are linked in any fundamental way.” (Underhill, 2012:27)

This paper applies an ethnolinguistic framework to the human body, by undertaking an in-depth semantic analysis of particular body words,¹ seeking to first analyse the meaning of these words, and then use the results to open up a broader

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¹ Surprisingly little previous research has been undertaken in the Danish semantics of the body. To my knowledge, ethnolinguistic studies are virtually non-existent. (On Danish body part meanings, see Nissen, 2011 for a recent cognitive-linguistic study, and Ruus, 1995 for an early corpus-linguistic approach).

culture-historical discussion. Initial semantic studies have indicated that the body words *nakke* (Danish) and *nacke* (Swedish) construe the space and relation between the head and body in a quite different way than English *neck* (Levisen, 2007; Majid 2014), but so far no semantic studies have dealt with this problem in depth. This study seeks to fill the void.

Bridging between the psycholinguistic tradition and conceptual semantics, I will make use of two main tools: a) stimulus-based tools developed by the Evolution of Semantic Systems (EoSS) project (Majid et al., 2011), and b) interpretative tools developed within the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to linguistic analysis (Wierzbicka, 2013; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014). Also, as a methodological innovation the paper seeks to combine semiotic evidence (evidence from pictures), with more traditional types of linguistic evidence such as grammatical and phraseological evidence.²

In the following, Section 2 gives an overview of key issues in conceptual semantics, focussing on the contributions of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to cross-linguistic analysis of the human body. Section 3 describes the data collection for the Evolution of Semantic Systems (EOSS) project and the psycholinguistic elicitation technique. In Section 4, an integrative analysis is presented based on the EoSS data and an NSM semantic analysis of the results. In Section 5, the findings of the paper are further discussed in a broad ethnolinguistic perspective.

2. Construing the body with words

In traditional thinking, the human body was made up of pre-existing concepts to which linguistic labels were simply extended. The body and its parts were thought of “brute facts”, rather than ethnolinguistic constructs. Adolf Zauner (1903), for instance, wrote in his monumental *Die romanischen Namen der Körperteile* that “*Körperteilen ... sind bei jedem Menschen in gleicher Weise zu finden*” ‘body parts are found in a similar way in every human’ (p. 341). The traditional essentialist takes on the body have been rejected by scholars working in cognitive and ethnolinguistic paradigms and by empirical studies in the semantics of the human body across widely different languages and cultures (see e.g. Wierzbicka, 1996, 2007, 2013; Senft, 1998; Majid et al., 2006; Sharifian et al., 2008; Majid 2010:59; Goddard, 2008b; Zouhair and Yu, 2011). Cliff Goddard (2011) says:

“From a semantics point of view, the important thing not to lose sight of is that even in relation to the physical world, meanings are not simply labels or names for what is ‘out there’. Rather they are (or represent) ways of thinking about what is out there”. (p. 276)

In a ground-breaking comparative study, of hitherto little studied languages, Asifa Majid et al. (2006) conclude:

“While much scholarly interest in the study of meaning has presupposed that the human body is a basic pre-linguistic source for conceptual structure ..., it may be that there are fewer points of convergence across language communities in the concrete vocabulary of the body than previously imagined”. (p. 146)

Arguably, the human body is construed partly in similar ways, and partly in different ways in the world’s languages. The complex task in ethnolinguistics is to account for both universal tendencies and language-specificity.

2.1. NSM analysis

In this section, I will discuss the advances in the study of the human body seen from the viewpoint of conceptual semantics. First, I will first introduce the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach and its contribution to the linguistic and cultural analysis of body words (Enfield and Wierzbicka, 2002; Wierzbicka, 2007, 2013). Second, I will discuss two central problems in the semantics of the body: polysemy and phraseology. Both phenomena add layers of complexity to the study of the body, but at the same time, if carefully handled, they also offer insights into the semantic analysis of body words.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) is a conceptual approach to linguistic and cultural analysis developed by the Australian semanticists Anna Wierzbicka, Cliff Goddard and colleagues (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002; Peeters, 2006; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014). The NSM approach is based on extensive research into the shared common core of all languages, and offers a toolkit for exploring meaning across cultures and epochs (for a review of the NSM approach in the current landscape of ethnolinguistic and lexical semantic research, see e.g. Underhill, 2012; Koptjevskaja-Tamm, forthcoming). A large number of empirical-analytical semantic studies across semantic domains, languages and cultures have been conducted within this framework (For an overview, see e.g. Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014; see also the NSM webpage at Griffith University, Australia).

The purpose of NSM analysis is to provide fine-grained semantic explications of word meanings in cultural contexts (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002; Goddard, 2008a; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014). Following the principle of reductive paraphrase, also known as the “Golden Rule of Lexicography” (Goddard, 2014), an explication aims for a high-resolution analysis. Cliff Goddard explains the reductive principle as follows:

² In linguistics, “big data” is usually associated with the use of corpus analysis.³ Corpus analysis is not as straightforwardly applicable in the study of body words as it is in other semantic domains, mainly due to the richness of phraseology and polysemy in body words. These 2 phenomena require in-depth analysis and eschew mechanistic treatments.

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