



Bodies and their parts: An NSM approach to semantic typology

Anna Wierzbicka

Australian National University, School of Language Studies, ACT 0200, Australia

Received 5 May 2006; accepted 10 July 2006

In memory of Uriel Weinreich, 1926–1967

Abstract

This paper puts forward, on the basis of evidence and analysis, seven general principles of conceptualization of the body, reflected in the semantic organization of the ‘body and body-parts’ field across languages. It supplies a large set of semantic explications of English body-part terms, and it shows how ethno-anatomies can be described and compared through the use of the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM). It also returns to the controversial issue of the body-centric character of language and cognition. The paper is, to some extent, a reaction to the Special Issue on “Parts of the body: cross-linguistic categorization” (*Language Sciences* 28:2–3). One of its goals is to vindicate well-established semantic universals such as body and part, which the Special Issue questions on the basis of raw data, discussed (as is it is argued) in a theoretical vacuum. More generally, the paper argues that semantic typology requires a semantic methodology and it shows what a theoretically-anchored semantic typology can look like.

© 2006 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Body-part terms; Language universals; Linguistic typology; Lexical semantics; Cross-linguistic semantics; NSM; Anthropocentrism and bodycentrism

E-mail address: anna.wierzbicka@anu.edu.au

1. Introduction: reopening the debate¹

The Introduction to the recent Special Issue of *Language Sciences* (Majid, Enfield and van Staden (Eds.), 2006) entitled “Parts of the body: cross-linguistic categorization” states that “the domain of the human body is an ideal focus for semantic typology” (Enfield et al., 2006, Abstract), and I agree. As I would argue, however, this is so not for the reasons offered by the authors of that introduction: “the domain of the human body is an ideal focus for semantic typology since the body is a physical universal and all languages have terms referring to its parts” (Enfield et al., 2006, Abstract). What does it mean that the body is a “physical universal”? Earth, water and air are also “physical universals” (they are everywhere where there are people), but they are not an ideal focus for semantic typology.

The domain of the human body is an ideal focus for semantic typology and, I would add, cognitive anthropology, because the body is, almost certainly, a *conceptual*, rather than “physical”, universal (see Section 3), and because it is of special interest and importance to speakers. Furthermore, rigorous semantic analysis suggests that this object of unique interest and importance – the human body – is universally *conceptualized* in terms of “parts” (see Section 4). What matters is not that “all languages have terms referring to its parts” (Enfield et al., 2006, Abstract), but that despite a good deal of variation in the lexical details, everywhere in the world people appear to think about the human body in terms of certain parts, such as, roughly speaking, eyes, ears, nose and mouth, and head, hands, arms and legs.

According to the Special Issue on “Parts of the body”, however, there are languages which have no word for ‘body’, no word for ‘head’, no word for ‘hands’, no word for ‘eyes’, no word for ‘mouth’, and, moreover – some articles claim – no word for ‘part’.

In their introduction to the Special Issue, Enfield et al. (2006, p. 145) note: “Among proposed universals in this domain are that there will be distinct terms for ‘body’, ‘head’, ‘arm’, ‘eyes’, ‘nose’ and ‘mouth’”. They then reject the validity of these previously proposed universals: “Several languages do not have a general term meaning ‘body’. (...) There is no term meaning ‘arm’ in Lavukaleve, and no term meaning ‘mouth’ in Jahai.”

In the same Special Issue, Levinson (2006, p. 222) claims that the Papuan language Yéli Dnye has “terms for upper and lower leg but no ordinary term for the leg as a whole (...), and there is no simple expression for face (and none at all for hand or foot)”. Another contributor (Burenhult, 2006, p. 169) suggests that in the Mon-Khmer language Jahai there is no word for ‘head’.

These are startling claims indeed, and if true, they would have important implications for the on-going debates concerning human universals and the extent of conceptual diversity among human groups.

The authors of the Introduction to the Special Issue (Enfield et al., 2006, p. 146) write:

We offer this collection as a step in reviving interest in the empirical study of the way in which human beings **conceptualize** and **categorize** their bodies as physical entities with parts. While much scholarly interest in the study of meaning has presupposed that the human body is a basic pre-linguistic source for conceptual structure (feeding

¹ The analyses presented in this paper owe a great deal to extensive discussions with Cliff Goddard and in most cases have been arrived at jointly. The explications in Section 8 represent our joint work.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1103696>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1103696>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)