Body Metaphors – Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture

Danica Škara

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Zadar, Zadar, Croatia

A B S T R A C T

This paper addresses the linguistic reframing of the human body in contemporary culture. Our aim is to provide a linguistic description of the ways in which the body is represented in modern English language. First, we will try to focus on body metaphors in general. We have collected a sample of 300 words and phrases functioning as body metaphors in modern English language. Reading the symbolism of the body we are witnessing changes in the basic metaphorical structuring of the human body. The results show that new vocabulary binds different fields of knowledge associated with machines and human beings according to a shared textual frame: human as computer and computer as human metaphor. Humans are almost blended with computers and vice versa. This metaphorical use of the human body and its parts reveals not only currents of unconscious though but also the structures of modern society and culture.

Key words: body, metaphor, contemporary culture

Introduction

The cultures of all times and places have always been vitally concerned with the body. In recent years there is an increase of interest in notions of embodiment, which coincides with enormous changes in modern society caused by the rapid development of high technology. This paper addresses the linguistic reframing of the body in contemporary culture.

Through the development of new technologies we have modified our environment so radically that we must modify our bodies and our language in order to survive in this new reality.

The whole body is structured to perform activities in order to reach information from our natural and cultural environment. The orientation of the *head, ears, eyes, mouth, nose* and *hands* depends on the orientation of the body as a whole to the earth as a whole. Our body has its own axes of reference, closely connected to gravity: *head-foot, right-left, front-back.* Not only our body structure,

but also our language mirrors reality and follows its changes. During the evolution of human languages, we have witnessed a common type of linguistic behavior. Well known areas of experience are often used to explain less known areas, e.g. land animals are used to explain the invisible underwater animal world, e.g. *catfish, sea horse, sea lion*, etc. Celestial bodies were explained in terms of animals and spiritual beings, e.g. Mars – the Roman god.

From the very beginning the human body was not widely used as the model structure since it was a quite unknown area. At that level of development we knew little about our body, especially our inner structure. But in modern society it seems that human body is often used as a measure for non-human world. It becomes the main source of reference in this process of linguistic and cultural changes and adaptations. New words, aimed to define technical devices, are borrowed, mostly from the human field of reference (e.g. *windows, cookies, offices,* etc.).

Widespread use of body metaphors probably results from the fact that human beings give central importance to their bodies, especially in modern society. But modernity requires different attitudes towards the human body. It has to be dismembered, or cut to pieces, analyzed and transformed according to the needs of the modern society. We have to point out that this view is primarily based on Western views, nowadays spread all over the world[1]. This situation includes the rise of new metaphorical projections, new word linkages. It also provokes disputes since many words associated with the human body are used to define non-human, technical world. Not only in technology we use body parts as a general system of symbols for the outside world. The biggest group of body parts terms has been used to conceptualize the inanimate (outside) world, e.g.

– the arm of a chair
– the leg of a table
– the foot of the mountain
– head of the table/a sail/a nail/a letter/a river/a coin
– the neck of the bottle
– the eye of the typhoon/needle
– an ear of grain/corn
– the heart of a lettuce
– a banana skin/tomato skin/sausage skin
– face of cloth/leather/a mountain/a clock/a watch

Many different languages share the same conceptual framework referring to the body parts and outside world, e.g.

Eng. leg of a table/bed (*Cro*. noga od stola/kreveta)

Eng. foot of the mountain (*Cro*. podnožje brda)

Eng. head of the salad (*Cro*. glava salate)

Eng. neck of the bottle (*Cro*. grlo boce)

Eng. heart of a lettuce (*Cro*. srce od salate)

Not only the inanimate world, but also some physical units are derived from dimensions of the body, e.g.

a foot (the length of an adult foot)

a yard (a single stride)

an ell (a former English unit of length equal to 45 inches or the length of an elbow)

The beginnings of our numerical system are rooted in the parts of the human body. Our decimal system is based on it, and Roman numerals, unquestionably, first represented human fingers. The digital system is based on the Latin word *digitus* (finger).

The following words, pertaining to human beings, are used to define computers: *virus, bug, office, window, cookie, superhighway, surfing, net, etc*. With the appearance of each new word, a new threshold is crossed in the perception of the human body.

Because of the above mentioned assumptions it is our aim to describe the ways in which the body is represented in language. We will consider a cluster of metaphors centered on the main parts of the human body. This research is based on the sample of 300 words and phrases. We assume that we can gain some knowledge of the complex world by studying the simple structures of embodied meaning.

What is Human Body?

Since the posture of the human body and its structure (symmetry, balance, left-right, up-down, etc.) directly influence what and how things can be meaningful for us, we find it important to define the linguistic landscape of the human body.

Basic image schemata of the body

The name BODY is of larger signification than the word MAN. It is a source of patterned symbolism. It covers a huge portion of our experience. Many concepts are defined in relation to the body, e.g.

– *a legislative body (*a group of individuals organized for some purpose)
– *the body of the discussion* (the main, central, or essential part)
– *body clock* (body's natural needs to sleep, eat, etc. at particular times)
– *body language* (non-verbal communication, gestures)

The body as a container

The view of the body as a physical object presupposes its 3-dimensional form (container, box) in space and time. A container schema has its structure: an inside, a boundary, and an outside.

We conceptualize the interior of the body as a kind of space or container, which consists of many entities: *mind, soul, words, emotions, thoughts*, etc. It is generally believed that what is inside is more important than the physical body (outside): *Beauty is only skin deep. Appearances are deceptive*. In western discourse, 'body' has been constructed traditionally as the negative other of 'mind'. It is experienced as confinement and limitation to our mind and our spirit. This view dates back to foundational philosophy of the Greeks. Human body is bounded with its skin. This view generates metaphors such as: *to jump out of one's skin, to get under someone's skin, to be in somebody else's skin*. This spatial conception of the body as physical object generates many metaphors based on the form of the following image schemata: IN-OUT, FRONT-BACK, UP-DOWN, LEFT-RIGHT…

In-out orientation

The IN-OUT schema which applies prototypically to spatial orientation is often metaphorically projected into the cognitive, abstract domain, e.g. *to open one's heart* (to reveal one's inmost thoughts), *to have rocks in one's head* (to be stupid*), to get stars in one's eyes* (to be obsessed with) …

The combination of our perceptual capacities and the circumstances of our perceptual environment give rise to a massive complex of concrete and abstract linkages. An abstract entity (mind, love, sight, idea) is often transformed into a concrete object. Such a concept (abstract > concrete) provides for one entity a possibility to be contained, entered, floating. That was the only way that we could make sense of it. The following examples show such transformational procedures:

They are in love.

In my opinion…

To be in doubt.

Ideas were floating inside his head.

An example of IN-OUT orientation can be seen on the projection of the human mind functioning as a container (physical

185

space). The mind is represented as open *(open-minded person)*.

– Out of sight, *out of mind*.
– He is *out of his mind*.
– *In the back* of one's mind
– To put an idea *into someone's mind*.

Because of its abstract meaning human mind is presented as if it had its own frame *(frame of mind)* like any other physical object in our reality. Accordingly we can easily *keep that in mind* (in memory) or *run through your mind/head*. Mind is often associated with the wind, air (e.g. *to blow someone's mind, breadth of mind)* or with a group of people embodying mental qualities (*the public mind)*. Our thoughts are also conceptualized in the form of fluid, water: *deep thoughts, stream of consciousness.*

It is confirmed by many scholars that this equation of the physical self and inner self is pervasive in many languages[2,3]. All actions in real space are taken over analogically into the space of mind: *to reach their understanding, slow minded person, He was touched by his actions,* etc. Our mental activities get more transparent or cognitively accessible if translated into the language of embodied meaning.

Front-back

Our experience of space is firmly based on the FRONT-BACK schema. The posture of our body is such that we see from front, move forward rather than backward, and interact with people and our environment using our front part of the body. Our senses are dominantly directed forward (eyes, ears…). Western speakers project fronts into the future, progress, dignity, frank behavior, seeing, e.g. *to one's face* (frankly), *He was afraid to lose face* (dignity), *Let's face it* (to see), *the whole future is in front of him.* Such perception supports the view, expressed in many metaphors that one who is in front seems to be most likely to succeed.

Front part is the conscious, clear and rational part of the mind: *with an eye to the future* (view).

The space inside the front contains clear images of the world. Quite contrary, *in the back of one's mind* means the remote part of one's brain where thoughts are stored and forgotten. Front part is closely connected with face, and face is perceived as a 3-dimensional form where emotions are stored (fear, dignity), e.g. *in the face of danger*.

Faced with danger and fear we quite often turn away in order not to see it. Such experience associates the back side with negative feelings and helps rising the following metaphorical projections of the BACK:

– to *stab someone in the back* (to betray)
– *to have one's back to the wall* (to be in defensive position)
– *Get off my back!* (back meaning the seat of one's awareness of duty or failings)
– *behind one's back* (without one's knowledge, in secret)

These embodied linguistic patterns do not remain private property of the person who experienced it. They become shared cultural and linguistic models of experience. Because of the fact that many European languages share common cultural background, the existence of common metaphorical projections are likely to appear. European speakers project truths into the future, progress. At the same time some non-Western languages put the past in front and the future behind. So the past time is defined as *eye year* or *front year*. Obviously, their metaphorical projections are different and based on their own cultural values.

Up/high – down/under

The verticality schema emerges from our tendency to employ an UP-DOWN orientation in picking out meaningful structures of our experience. We grasp

this structure of verticality repeatedly in thousands of perceptions and activities we experience every day: *the sense of standing upright, climbing…*

Due to the *backbone or spine* we can achieve standing position. Such an experience generates the view that the backbone is conceptualized as *strength, bravery,* e.g. *They have been the backbone of the local golf club for years. The new prime minister isn't showing much backbone so far.* Someone who is *spineless* lacks determination and the willingness to take risks.

Figuratively speaking, UP means towards a higher value, an improvement, e.g. *Up* with freedom, *down* with repression.

A person who is *up and coming* is likely to achieve success. In most languages the object of respect is UP or HIGH, e.g.

– We value him *highly*.

– to hold one's *head up*

– to *get up* enough nerve to do something (to get brave enough)

Similarly, *to be on one's feet* means to be in standing position or recovered position, and, on the other hand, to *be on one's knee* means to be in a state of submission or defeat. In Roman times *Thumb up!* meant to live. In many cities of the world people use the word DOWN in the meaning of South, and UP as North. The Gods live up in heaven while evil doers went DOWN to hell or to the infernal part. The term *infernal* derives from the Latin *infernus* (underground).

Metaphorically, if someone is DOWN/UNDER it means a weak, desperate position, e.g.

– She has been really *down* and depressed since her husband died.

– The computer will be *down* for an hour.

– to get someone *under* one's thumb (to get control over someone)

– to keep one's head *down*

– to throw oneself at someone's feet (humiliating behavior)

It is quite evident that the above-mentioned metaphorical projections are not arbitrary but rather highly constrained by our bodily posture and our experience of it.

Balance-symmetry (left-right)

Human body is perfectly symmetrical and balanced. It can be folded over in the middle into left and right halves (vertical axis). There are two sides of the body with parts that are in balance (eyes, hands, ears). Left-right axis is closely related to our body balance and symmetry. The experience of balanced posture or physical equilibrium within our bodies gives rise to following metaphors: *balanced personalities, balanced views, the balance of power, justice, balanced judgment, inner balance, balanced news*, etc. Balancing behavior is evident from the following expression: *On the one hand we can appeal for peace and on the other declare war* (hand=side).

The institutions of justice are founded upon a basic notion of balance. In proverbs and phrases, based on tradition and the Bible, balance is promoted: *An eye for an eye…* Our cultural ideal is a balanced personality. We have to balance our emotions in order not to violate the constraints of our cultural norms.

Let's look at some examples how our body's vertical axis (left-right) organizes the way we talk. Metaphors generated by LEFT-RIGHT experience of the body posture (the right hand is stronger in most people) support the view that *left* is clumsy, awkward, insincere, e.g. *left-handed compliment (*a remark that seems to say something pleasant about a person but also could be an insult). In American Eng-

lish if someone is *out in the left field* they are completely wrong. Metaphorically, *right* means suitable, morally acceptable, correct, true, authentic, conservative, prominent side of an object.

– *to get off on the right foot* (to make a successful part)
– *right-hand man* (the most trusted or reliable)
– *right-minded thinking* (having sound principles)
– *right conduct* (being in accordance with what is just, good, or, correct)
– *upright* (honest and just)
– *time proved her right* (acting or judging in accordance with truth or fact)

Reframing of the Human Body in Modern Society

The coming of electronic media and technology have generated new descriptions of the world which stands in opposition to existing cultural descriptions of our reality, e.g. *mouse* is not only an animal. The frame of reference of the word *mouse* (animal) is expanded and the word acquires a new meaning (technical device).

A brief overview of computational metaphors shows that human body and its environment are the main source of a huge number of metaphors dealing with computers and high tech.

In the majority of modern languages computers are presented as living beings with complex nervous system surrounded by animals, *(mouse, bat)*, home facilities, offices, etc. 'He' has his own *language, brain, memory, generation*. We can *travel / surf* with him through the Internet; he has his own *webpedia,* and *global fever*. He is *intelligent, smart*, he can *learn* and *remember*. He *eats* data (cookies, Spam, bytes) and crunches, and he can be infected by a *virus*.

This merger is an ongoing process in almost all modern languages. The computer assumes organic function and the body is redesigned through the use of new technologies. Soldiers are *killing machines*, human mind is a *calculating mind*. Equivalence between the computer and the man causes further changes in all languages exposed to it.

The American linguist Gozzi warns of the possible consequences of these changes of vocabulary[4]:

By attributing human qualities to machines, especially computers, we loose sense of what is human, have less understanding of how humans differ from machines, and construct an image of powerful machines and frail humans.[4]

The human-machine dualism

The widespread technological refashioning of the natural human body (mechanical replacements, cosmetic surgery, genetic alteration) made it harder to distinguish people from machines. Humans are de-integrated, dissolved or broken down into distinct parts like machines. The implications of this process are enormous. Humans are blended with machines.

The very line between living and nonliving beings became even more problematic. The human body becomes less organic and more artificial, increasingly machine like. Despite different views we assume that identical metaphors valid for human beings and computers are not likely to harm any language in such a way that it will become non-human, artificial, computer language. Such a gloomy perspective is not to be expected. It is rather a process in the development of language based on bodily perception of our new environment. There is no doubt that the future development of the language will find the way to avoid this merger of terms. Word specialization is likely to happen since language always answers the needs of its speaker.

Conclusion

Linguistic description of the human body tells us that there is an extensive subsystem of body metaphors, which are used to describe a huge portion of our experience of physical world and mental, inner world. It seems that man unconsciously projects himself into the external world, describing it in terms of his own measures, e.g. *foot of the mountain, eye of the typhoon*, etc. and that body parts are used to conceptualize the following:

– Non-human world (outside),

– Our inner world, mental structures are meaningful by virtue of their connection to our body parts: *heart, head, face, etc.*

It is evident that the human body and its structure (symmetry/balance, left/right, up/down, etc.) directly influence what and how things can be meaningful for us. It seems that one of the most important objects of knowledge is one's body. We could say that we don't see things as they are; we see things as we are.

R E F E R E N C E S

1. HILLMAN, D., C. MAZZIO: The Body in Parts, Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe. (Routledge, New York and London, 1997). — 2. FAUCONNIER, G., E. SWEETSER: Spaces, Worlds, and Grammar. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997). — 3. LAKOFF, G., M. JOHNSON,: Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought. (Basic Books/Perseus Books Group, New York, 1999). — 4. GOZZI, R., The Power of Metaphor in the Age of Electronic Media. (Creskill, New York, 1999).

D. Škara

Department of English Language and Literature, University of Zadar,
Obala kralja Petra Krešimira IV/2, 23000 Zadar, Croatia
e-mail: dskara@unizd.hr

METAFORE TIJELA – ČITANJE TIJELA U SUVREMENOJ KULTURI

S A Ž E T A K

U ovom se članku razmatra pitanje određivanja ljudskog tijela u suvremenoj kulturi. Cilj mu je jezično opisati načine na koje je tijelo predstavljeno u modernom engleskom. Najprije se govori o metaforama tijela općenito na temelju sakupljenog uzorka od 300 riječi i fraza koje funkcioniraju kao metafore tijela u modernom engleskom. Iščitavanjem simbolike tijela svjedoci smo promjena u njegovom temeljnom metaforičkom strukturiranju. Rezultati pokazuju da nove riječi povezuju različita polja znanja koja se tiču strojeva i ljudskih bića s obzirom na zajednički tekstualni okvir: čovjeka kao kompjutora i kompjutora kao metaforu za čovjeka. Ljudsko se gotovo stopilo s računalnim i obrnuto. Ovakvo metaforičko korištenje ljudskog tijela i njegovih dijelova otkriva ne samo tokove nesvjesnog mišljenja, već i strukture modernog društva i kulture.