

## Faces and Limbs from Apache to Ngwi: On vertical meronymy and proportional harmony

### Abstract

This paper draws attention to embodied relationships shared between upper-and-lower membership analogues – especially involving part-whole relations between upper and lower ‘limb’ memberships and upper and lower ‘facial’ memberships. Evidence for both meronymic sets can be found in languages around the world, suggesting that the neglect of these relationships in semantic research may be rooted something deeper than the data. Indeed, Western cultural biases favor left-right (sagittal) symmetries over part-whole analogies. Hon & Goldstein (2008) demonstrate that by the late 18th century Western thinkers had already begun to lose an explicit, conceptual awareness of vertical/transverse symmetries founded on an appreciation of part-whole relations. Once known as “proportional harmony” or *summetria*, this mode of semantic/conceptual organization was once taken for granted; in fact, our present understanding of symmetry was apparently unthinkable prior to the European renaissance. Not only have contemporary Western minds reversed this scenario in favor of horizontal/sagittal symmetries (also known as enantiomorphs), we now experience difficulty in appreciating or recognizing transverse meronymies, whether in semantic research or in embodied reflection (see e.g., Norrman 1999: 67-68). Nevertheless, traditional societies and highly technologized societies alike appear to maintain lexicalized semantic evidence that transverse analogical mappings between upper and lower embodied relations are (or once were, as the case may be,) salient in human experience.

In support of these claims, entrenched lexicalizations in English are combined with evidence from first-hand fieldwork on the Southeastern Ngwi languages of China (Tibeto-Burman > Burmic) and a review of published evidence from diverse languages such as Apache, Sherpa and Yiddish. Consider, as an example, the novel Western Apache conceptual analogy for automobiles (data from Basso 1990), in which a spatially embodied source domain – 1) VERTICAL BODY PARTS: A. *bikee'* ('feet') : B. *bikai'* ('hip/buttocks') :: B'. *biwos* ('shoulders') : A'. *bigan* ('hands') – is meronymically projected onto an analogous target domain – 2) ANTERIOR-POSTERIOR CAR PARTS: A. *bikee'* ('rear tires') : B. *bikai'* ('rear fender') :: B'. *biwos* ('front fender') : A'. *bigan* ('front tires'). Though this may be a novel extension of upper-lower limb relations, natural linguistic tendencies in person-part semantic shifts noted in Wilkins (1996: 273–274) show similar patterns, and tendencies to lexicalize iconic relationships between the upper and lower “faces” of the human body are widespread. Consider, again, the entrenched English lexicalizations A. facial ‘cheeks’ : B. oral labia/lips :: B'. vulval ‘labia/lips’ : A'. butt ‘cheeks’ (see also Matisoff 1978: 157–165).

Data analysis is followed by a discussion of the dual nature of these mappings, which seem to require both global analogy explanations and localized shape/place relations. A unifying account is suggested by revisiting Johnson’s (1987) description of image schemas with these distinctions in mind – BALANCE and EQUILIBRIUM schemas in particular – experiential gestalts that are not only visually projected, but more importantly, kinesthetically and proprioceptively embodied.

## References

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