

Meronyms in Conception and Grammar

Soteria Svorou
San Jose State University

Although traditionally meronymy is generally understood as a static lexical relation that holds between a part and a whole, in this presentation I will attempt to discuss meronymy as a dynamic conceptual process by which speakers distinguish parts of wholes and name them linguistically. This approach is inspired by a Cognitive Linguistics position, according to which words are access points to conceptual structure and meaning is dynamic, constructed at the moment of interaction with input from context.

Because of their crucial role in the historical process of grammaticalization of spatial terms, body part terms, but also certain landmark terms, have received particular attention as examples of meronyms. Despite the universal nature of the physical body, evidence from cross-linguistic studies on body-part terms has revealed that languages, i.e., their speakers, may partition the body differently (e.g., the Tarascan forehead includes the nose), suggesting that **meronymy** is not simply a transitive logical lexical relation based on perceptual discontinuities but in fact the designation of a part on a whole involves a construal operation (Croft & Cruse 2004) on the part of a speaker, which may eventually become institutionalized within a community. One way of identifying the kind of construal operation involves the consideration of the evolution of body part terminology in a language. Body part terms have their sources in various actions (Spanish oído 'ear, hearing' < oír 'to hear' < Latin 'audire'), which points to **metonymy** ACTION FOR PART EFFECTING THE ACTION as the conceptual operation and the basis of this lexicalization. Another strategy for naming body parts extends the area that an existing body name to a contiguous one, usually from a smaller part to a larger part (Halia mata 'eye' > 'face'; Greek pous 'foot' > poði 'leg'; Maasai enjkorion 'spine' > 'back'). This again involves metonymy, PART FOR REGION ADJACENT TO PART. A third strategy involves **metaphor** that leads to a construal of a body part as an object with similar shape (Polish czaszka 'skull' < Church Slavonic 'tjafa' 'cup'; Gothic kwairnei 'skull' < Old Norse hverna 'cooking vessel').

Extensive cross-linguistic evidence suggests analogical schematic extensions of body part terms to relational object parts (e.g., Halia, mata 'eye' > 'face' > 'front'; Papago ʔeʔeda 'heart' > 'interior'). Such terms may subsequently be used in relational morphosyntactic constructions and metonymically refer to a spatial region adjacent to the object part. A relational construction constitutes an ecology that facilitates the micro-steps that lead to an increased level of grammaticalization of relational spatial terms. Understanding the abrupt meaning changes that body part terms undergo in lexicalizing into relational object parts and the slow micro-changes they undergo in grammaticalizing in relational constructions can lead to a way of better understanding the nature of meronym and the diverse cross-linguistic patterns.

References

Croft, W. and A. Cruse. 2004. *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.