

Embodied Lexicon in Cape Verdean Creole: Polysemy, Metonymy, and Semantic Drift in Body Part Terminology

The human body constitutes a fertile domain of inquiry within Cognitive Linguistics and Linguistic Anthropology. Body part terms are known to be highly polysemous, frequently serving as source domains for semantic extensions into other conceptual domains. The study of these extensions allows for an investigation of universal tendencies along with language-specific cultural models. Furthermore, body part lexicon provides insights into how languages develop strategies to cope with high degrees of polysemy and how disambiguation is achieved in use. Thus, body part terms are especially well suited for investigating patterns of semantic change and the interaction between language, culture, and usage (Kraska-Szlenk, 2020).

Cross-linguistic data show that smaller or less salient body parts are often designated by more complex expressions, frequently involving metaphor. For example, Cape Verdean Creole (CVC) employs metaphorical compounds such as *odju'l pé* ('eye of the foot') to refer to the ankle bone. In some cases, the naming of small body parts appears to be highly language-specific and motivated by particular cultural needs. Moreover, the partitioning of the human body does not align neatly across languages (Enfield et al., 2006). In CVC, for instance, *totís* refers specifically to the back of the head (the occipital area), while no distinct lexical item exists for the back of the neck, unlike English *nappe*. Another recurrent pattern involves metonymic PART-FOR-WHOLE extensions, as seen in the use of *mó* to denote both 'hand' and 'arm', and *pé* to refer to the foot as well as part of the leg. As it was found for Japanese and Ryukyuan languages (Huisman et al., 2021), facial terms—particularly cheeks, jaw, and chin—exhibit considerable variability in both semantic extension and speakers' intuitions. For instance, some speakers treat *butxexa* and *kexada* as synonyms, while others distinguish the former as 'cheeks' and the latter as 'jaw.' Additionally, a number of lexical items derived from Portuguese appear to undergo semantic drift, e.g. *coxa* denotes the thigh in Portuguese whereas *koxa* refers to the waist in CVC.

This research contributes to the typology of body part semantics, offering novel insights into both universal and culture-specific cognitive-linguistic models in CVC. It lays the groundwork for future studies on embodiment, semantic extension, and grammaticalisation (Lehmann, 2016). It also opens pathways for comparative analyses with CVC's superstrate (Portuguese) and substrate languages, advancing our understanding of creole evolution and contact-induced change.

References

Enfield, N. J., Majid, A., & van Staden, M. (2006). Cross-linguistic categorisation of the body: Introduction. *Language Sciences*, 28(2–3), 137–147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2005.11.001>

Huisman, John L. A., Roeland van Hout & Asifa Majid. (2021). Patterns of Semantic Variation Differ Across Body Parts: Evidence from the Japonic Languages. *Cognitive Linguistics* 32(3). 455–486. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cog-2020-0079>.

Kraska-Szlenk, I. (2020). Body part terms in conceptualization and language usage.

Lehmann, C. (2016). Foundations of body-part grammar.