

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTUALIZATION IN ENGLISH AND HUNGARIAN IDIOMS

Abstract

The dissertation aims at analyzing the conceptual motivation of a specific set of English idioms and their Hungarian equivalents. This set includes the most frequently used English idioms that contain human body part words such as *hand*, *head*, or *heart*, and their Hungarian equivalents. The research focuses on the conceptual metaphors and the conceptual metonymies that motivate the given idioms and their equivalents in English and Hungarian. The idioms and their equivalents are analyzed following the cognitive linguistic method of analysis as proposed by, for instance, Lakoff & Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987), and Kövecses (2002).

The goal of the research is to examine the similarities and the differences in the metaphorical and metonymical conceptualization of the human body and related domains in English and Hungarian. It is argued that English body part idioms can be analyzed together according to the specific body part areas they belong to since body parts in the same areas usually share several target domains. The analysis of body part idioms in English shows that there are five major body part areas, which appear to be the most important areas based on frequency data. These include (1) the head and its parts, (2) the trunk area, (3) the arm and its parts, (4) the leg and its parts, and (5) the inside of the human body. These different areas help understand separate target domains, while their constituent body parts usually help conceptualize similar targets. These areas coincide with a natural grouping of body parts, and they are thus consistent with our conventional way of thinking of separate areas of the human body.

On the basis of a detailed analysis of the conceptual metaphors and metonymies motivating the given set of English idioms and their Hungarian equivalents, the general tendencies of universality and variation are examined. There are both similarities and differences between English and Hungarian idiomatic language as far as the analyzed set of equivalents is concerned. The systematic comparison shows that most often similarity between idioms and their equivalents exists on a generic level, and differences are present on a specific level, or result from cultural priorities. The premises of the embodiment hypothesis are shown to be valid in the case of human body idioms and their equivalents in the two unrelated languages. In general, universality allows for alternativeity, and each of the alternative means of conceptualization is well motivated.

There are several similarities between English idioms and their Hungarian equivalents. The analysis of the idiom database shows that embodied experience has an enormous role in the similarities between English and Hungarian idiomatic language. Thus, several of the conceptual metaphors and metonymies, and much of the conventional/cultural knowledge about concepts are shared by the two languages. Since the majority of the most frequent generic-level metaphors and metonymies are common to English and Hungarian, it is argued that the choices are constrained because of the universal nature of embodiment, and the common experiential bases employed.

There are several major differences between English idioms and their Hungarian equivalents. The present analysis suggests that cross-cultural variation can be manifested in various ways in the two languages. Cross-linguistic differences can primarily occur in literal meanings and conceptual mechanisms. On the basis of the idiom database, the most common case for the expression of the same figurative meaning is using different word forms, similar literal meanings, and similar conceptual mechanisms in English and in Hungarian. Idiom–equivalent pairs in which more differences occur with respect to literal meanings and conceptual mechanisms rank lower as they occur less frequently.

The results of this cognitive linguistic study are useful for further studies on alternative ways of conceptualization and cognitive semantics in general.

References

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