

Body Parts As Frames In The Perception Of Turkish Learners Of English

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to investigate conceptual frames of body parts, as perceived by native Turkish speakers while they learn English idioms that employ body-part components. The study is mainly based on the assumptions of the theory of frames by Minsky (1974), who proposed the frame system for the cognitive sciences. Vygotsky (1986) introduced conceptual frames in his theory of human development, and Fillmore (2006) operated with the term “frame” in his frame semantics. The abovementioned theories have been applied to make up a network of ‘nodes’ and ‘relations’ that Turkish learners of English built up while guessing the meaning of English idioms, with the focus on their body-part components. The experiment was conducted among first-year students with an intermediate level of English from the department of English Language Education at Middle East Technical University, Ankara. Participants were asked to fill in questionnaires and to guess the meaning of 15 English idioms that employ body-part components such as eyes, hands, head, heart, leg/foot, nose, and tongue. To ensure the validity and reliability of the experiment, interviews were conducted with five respondents and a think-aloud protocol was conducted with six other respondents. The qualitative data obtained in the experiment were analyzed, and the results showed that Turkish students build different frames related to body-part meanings based on their universal, cultural and personal world perception.

Keywords: frames, idioms, body parts, English, Turkish

Introduction

The notion of frames was introduced to cognitive sciences by Minsky (1974), who defined it as a network of notions and interrelated links; together, they represent a situation that comes to the human mind when required. He identified different levels of frames: the top ones are basic characteristics of the typical situation, and the lower ones have slots that are open for being filled in by situation’s specifics. In other words, a situation has both general and specific features, and a frame network depicts those fixed and varied instances. In cognitive linguistics, Fillmore (2006) suggested a term of ‘frame’ instead of such terms as ‘schema’, ‘cognitive model’, ‘script’, ‘scenario’, etc., and he defined it as a system of concepts understood as a whole structure, parts of which are closely related to and dependent on each other. His ‘frame semantics’ is based on the assumption that all words are represented by categories that are motivated by situations, and grounded by experience and knowledge. Vygotsky (1986) introduced conceptual frames to his theory of human development; he contends that the social aspect of language is closely connected to the society, and the environment plays a crucial role in the development of human beings’ thinking abilities. Newborn children acquire the surrounding world through conceptual frames; those concepts originate from personal mental models (mostly models of the physical world constructed by people) and cultural models (shared resources of the community formed by negotiation). Fillmore and Baker (2009) distinguish two types of frames: core (central concepts) and peripheral (circumstantial notions); however, they admit that there is a vague

distinction between them. They also name extra-thematic elements of frames irrelevant to any description of a phenomenon, situation or lexical unit.

English and Turkish languages belong to different language families; therefore, there are certain differences in the way body part components are structured and conceptualized in idioms, and how they are perceived and utilized in two languages. Those differences are justified by geographical, historical, political, social and cultural features of two nations. Meanwhile, a similarity may be found in the meaning of English and Turkish idioms as well as in conceptual representation of their body-part components due to common perception of the surrounding world by representatives of two nations and due to the universality of body-part functions.

Method of research

The objective of this study is to investigate the frames Turkish learners articulate while guessing the meaning of English idioms that employ body-part components. The data were collected by conducting an experiment among 20 first-year students with an intermediate level of English from the department of English Language Education at Middle East Technical University, Ankara. Participants were asked to fill in questionnaires that contained 15 English idioms that use components of body parts, such as eyes, hands, head, heart, leg/foot, nose, and tongue; participants had to guess the meaning of the idioms, which were culled from National British Corpus. The selection of idioms was based on the frequency of their usage, a wider representation of body parts as components, and the representation of English idioms not/having equivalent and analogous Turkish idioms. Questionnaires were designed to identify the meaning of idioms and to reveal background information about the respondents (gender, age, how long they had been learning English, mother tongue and family language). To ensure the validity and reliability of the experiment, interviews were conducted with five respondents and a think-aloud protocol was conducted with six other respondents.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the group of participants with an intermediate level of English were analyzed to find out how learners at this level of English tend to define idioms. The analysis is based on the results received from questionnaires, interviews and think-aloud protocols. The answers were classified according to their relation to idioms' components. Only two groups of responses were considered – those that directly or indirectly referred to body part components. The definitions identified as relating to other parts of idioms were not included in the analysis.

Eyes

EYES are associated with seeing/watching/observing, and its conceptual interpretation is SEEING IS KNOWING. A considerable amount of respondents attributed the notion of VISION IS CONTROL to the idiom 'To keep your eyes on the ball' (If you keep your eye on the ball, you stay alert and pay close attention to what is happening): a ball is round, so it can go anywhere, keep it in front of your eyes; gözünü toptanayırma; gözünü kırpmamak; gözünü bir şeyden ayırmamak; gözünü toptanayırmmamak; to focus on the subject; çok odaklamak, gözünü ayırmamak; gözlerini ayırmadankonuya odaklamak; gözünü dörtaçmak; göz kulak olmak. It is implied that if someone controls the situation, it will bring success, and vice versa: If somebody loses control, it will lead to failure. Two respondents attributed the notion of BEING BEWARE (to watch out); and one participant conceptualized SEEING IS UNDERSTANDING (to watch somebody carefully to understand what s/he is doing). One student indicated the notion of SEEING IS MOVING TO GOALS: always on the way to your goal. The eyes are given the function of 'seeing the goals' and 'stimulating a human being to move in their direction'.

The idiom ‘Blink of an eye’ (If something happens in the blink of an eye, it happens so fast it is almost impossible to notice it) also refers to VISION IS CONTROL: closing the eyes indicates a loss of control, but the action happens so quickly that control is still underway and has never been lost. Answers of some respondents related to the function of EYES FOR SEEING: *birbakışatmak*, seeing just a second. Six respondents referred to the Turkish idiom ‘Gözkırpmak’ (to wink); one learner extended the latter meaning to, ‘To close and then quickly open the eyes to approve something’ – EYES FOR APPROVING. One participant attributed an evaluative function to the act of seeing – EYES ARE EVALUATION: *gözünükararması*. There were also answers that can be referred to peripheral frames: something valuable/important for somebody; something that is very close to us; and to an extra-thematic one: being happy.

Mouth

The idiom ‘To put your foot in your mouth’ (If you put your foot in your mouth, you say something stupid or embarrassing) is more related to the image-schema of ‘mouth’ as a CONTAINER rather than ‘foot’ as a means of movement. When a container is closed by another object, then the way is blocked and nothing can be taken out of it, nor can be taken easily. If the path for verbal articulation is not free, the mouth, as a container, produces defective utterances, i.e. says stupid things. An overwhelming number of participants provided answers related to MOUTH IS (NOT) FOR SPEAKING: talk considerably; *mantıklıkonusmak*; *düşünüptaşınarak*, tartarak konuşmak; *ağzınıhayra açmak*; shut up; not to talk about a secret; to withhold permission for somebody to speak; not to say anything, trying to hold yourself back from saying it. There was also a metonymical shift of ‘mouth’ to ‘lips’ and their engagement in producing an act of smiling with further extension to the state of ‘happiness’ – MOUTH IS SMILING → BEING HAPPY: *ağzıkulaklarınavarmak*, to be quite happy. And one answer was absolutely disassociated with whole framework of the MOUTH concept based on situational experience of the respondent: *canınıdişinetakmak* (a Turkish idiom – to take one’s life in one’s hands).

Nose

In the idiom ‘Pay through the nose’ (If you pay through the nose for something, you pay a very high price for it) the nose is connected to the frame of PATH through which the air passes. If the passage through the path is difficult, the movement is hindered, and the destination is not reached. Also, the nose is related to the source-concept of LIFE: the movement of the air along the path, i.e. the nose, implies staying alive because air is a condition of life. So, if the path is blocked, i.e. you pay through the nose, then it may cause you difficulties or even death. Participants provided different meanings to the idiom giving an extended range of explanations based on functions of the nose – NOSE SMELLS: *burnunakokulargelmek*, *sezmek*, to guess beforehand (lit. smell comes to the nose); smelling bad; and NOSE SNOTS: *burundanahilahlıgelmek* (to come from the nose in large amounts). Nose is associated with BEING GRUMPY: *burnundankılaldırmamak* (lit. not let a hair be taken from the nose); and TO REGRET: *burnundangetirmek/ gelmek* (to regret things that have been done); *inatlaşmakveburnunsonucunakatlanmak* (lit. to be obstinate and to suffer from that); difficulty in doing something back. Two respondents based their definitions on the frame of NOSE IS CONTAINER/OBJECT - be beaten, having a broken nose; *her işburnunusokmak*. Associations have been developed either in connection with the difficult conditions of executing any actions through the nose, or emotions related to those situations.

Ears

Ears also refer to the notion of PATH; the sound goes in and out along the path, i.e. ears, to reach the destination. When the path is free, the movement is easy and fast. Almost all respondents referred to

the frame of EARS FOR HEARING/LISTENING while guessing the idiom ‘All ears’ (If someone says they're all ears, they are very interested in hearing about something): listening carefully; all people are hearing something; can kulağıyladinlemek kulak kesilmekdikkatledinlemek. Two participants extended the act of ‘listening’ to EARS FOR KNOWING: knowing/being aware of everything; to know everything.

Hands

Hands are means of taking and giving, and the concept is motivated by the metaphonymies of HOLDING IS CONTROLLING and CONTROL IS PHYSICAL GRASP. Kövecses (2010) suggests the following conceptual metaphors for Hands: HAND STANDS FOR CONTROL, HAND STANDS FOR THE ACTIVITY, and HAND STANDS FOR THE PERSON. When processing the idiom ‘Play into someone’s hands’ (If you play into someone's hands, you do what they were expecting you to do and take advantage of this), participants produced the definitions based on the concept of HOLDING IS CONTROLLING: birininelindekuklaolmak; birininelindeolmak, birşeyebağlıolmak, to be up to somebody/ something; kaderielindeolmak (to hold the fate in someone’s hands). Two participants referred to the palm of the hand: avucundaoynatmak; avucununiçindeoynatmak.

Legs

LEGS and FEET are parts of the body responsible for walking; they are based on the frame LEG/FOOT FOR ABILITY TO WALK. They are also related to metaphor WALKING FORWARD IS PROGRESS, a reverse action (inability to move) is understood as failing to achieve success. The idiom ‘To pull someone’s leg’ (If you pull someone's leg, you tease them, but not maliciously) indirectly relates to the abovementioned metaphor: if somebody pulls your leg you will not be able to walk, and it will definitely hinder your progress. But the implication for this idiom is that pulling somebody’s leg is perceived as a minor disturbance and a slight annoyance that occurs among friends for fun. Two respondents provided the frame of WALKING to the idiom: to trip up; birineönayakolmak. Eight participants referred to PREVENT FROM WALKING: to displace somebody; birineengelolmak; (birinin) ayağınıkaydırmak; birinezararvermek; ayağınıkaydırmak, to make somebody worse; birkişininişiengellemek.

Head

Five learners provided the meaning of ‘Hit the nail on the head’ idiom by referring to HEAD FOR THINKING: to think about; to think deeply; to think carefully; karakaradüşünmek (fig. to brood over); düşünmek. Five respondents extended the process of ‘thinking’ to other mental operations – HEAD FOR UNDERSTANDING: make somebody remember or understand by giving clues/examples; jetondüşmesi; jetondüşmek, understand immediately; ‘coming immediately to one’s mind: birandaaklinagelmek; and HEAD FOR REFERRING önemlibirnoktayadeğirmek.

Heart

The HEART is typically associated with emotional spheres, and metonymically motivated as HEART FOR FEELINGS. It also has an image-schema of a CONTAINER FOR CONTENT; the content is a range of emotions people usually have towards each other. The idioms ‘Wear your heart on your sleeve’ (Someone who wears their heart on their sleeve shows their emotions and feelings publicly) and ‘Eat your heart out’ (If someone tells you to eat your heart out, they are saying they are better than you at something) refer to the abovementioned concepts: if the heart is worn on the sleeve, it is

exposed to the outer world and feelings are not hidden; and if other people are better than you at something, you would better eat your heart not to display bad emotions concerning that fact.

Most learners gave definitions to idioms based on the concept HEART FOR FEELINGS - to 'Wear your heart on your sleeve' idiom: do not be heartless; to behave like you do not have a heart; duygusal davranmak, mantığıyla değil, duygularıyla davranabilmek; kalpkırmamaya dikkat etmek, duygusal davranmak; kalbini ellerine vermek, it is like kalbimsenindir; and to 'Eat your heart out' idiom: to be very emotional; you are a heartless person; kalbinin sesini dinlemek (lit. listen to the sound of your heart); acımasız, kalpsiz; acımasız olmaz (it is not possible without pain). An exposure of the HEART on the sleeve is perceived as its OPENNESS to public: her şeyi açıkça yapmaya da söylemek (lit. to do and to speak openly). HEART removed from its location implies logical and unemotional actions: to think reasonably, not emotionally; HEART eaten implies LOGIC and COMMON SENSE: düşünesizce davranmak (to behave thoughtlessly); being romantic, but logical; to follow common sense; to think about something so much and make it a problem inside. Two learners matched the English idiom with the Turkish one – a semantic shift from HEART to SOUL: canımdışı netakmak - (fig. to take one's life in one's hands). One answer was associated with an impossible task, similar to wearing the heart on the sleeve: to try hard to accomplish something. Lastly, participants referred to characteristics of human beings: always being in a nervous situation/to be nervous all the time – an association with STRESS; elini vicdanına koymak, to be honest; kalbinieline almak, cezaletlifalan; to be brave/being brave – an association with MORALE/ SPIRIT - moral/spiritual features of a human being; to be merciful; to be kind, understanding.

Conclusion

The qualitative data obtained in the experiment were analyzed, and the results showed that Turkish students provided different frames of body-part meanings based on their universal, cultural and personal world perception. EYES are associated with the ability to see and understand the surrounding world, accept and approve it, to be able to control the situation and evaluate it, to see risks and be able to guard yourself against dangers. MOUTH is for speaking and smiling, and as a consequence, feeling happy. NOSE is a container/object that provides the ability to smell, as well as snot; at the same time, it is related to the condition of being grumpy. EARS are for hearing and listening; through them, people learn about the world. HANDS are associated with holding something and, consequently, controlling it. LEGS represent the ability to walk/not walk; HEAD is related to the mental functions of thinking, understanding and identifying similarities and differences in people and things. Lastly, HEART is referred to feelings and soul, expressing feelings and displaying human features openly.

Respondents mostly presented core frames to body parts while guessing the meaning of English idioms. Since body parts function similarly in all human beings, particularly the five senses through which people experience the world, there was universality in the way representatives of Turkish culture perceive them. There were also some peripheral frames that represent facets of cultural knowledge. There were also some extra-thematic notions that were mostly grounded on the experience and knowledge of respondents. The respondents' perception of idioms that use body-part components offers insights about their experiences, values, and culture. This knowledge contributes to an understanding of young Turkish people's interpretation of body parts.

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