



LEXICAL AND CULTURAL MEANING OF BODY PARTS: EXAMPLES FROM JORDANIAN ARABIC

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this paper is to investigate the difference between lexical and cultural meaning of certain expressions related to body parts used by Jordanians, and to find cultural and linguistic explanations for these usages. It has been recognized that different parts of the body are used intensively in Jordanian daily speech to express that certain meanings differ from their conceptual meanings. Such meanings are linguistically described as the connotative, associative or cultural meanings of words. 200 subjects participated in this study. A questionnaire was applied to reach the aim of the paper. It was so interesting that most of the subjects use the associative or cultural meanings rather than the lexical ones. Moreover, the lexical meanings of such expressions were ignored.*

KEYWORDS: Lexical Meaning, Associative Meaning, Connotative Meaning, Cultural Meaning, Body Parts, Arabic

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of words and expressions is an attractive field of study. The traditional assumption is that words have sense-units, or ‘meanings’, which are typically known as static ‘lexical entries’ (Allwood 2003). These lexical entries combine in accordance with grammatical rules to form meaningful sentences.

It has been known that words contain additional meanings beyond their lexical or dictionary meaning. Generally, when dealing with words, a distinction has been made between ‘lexical, conceptual or denotative’ meaning and ‘connotative or associative’ meaning. The former refers to the meaning described in dictionaries. It is the basic literal meaning. Whereas the latter refers to other meanings associated with the word in certain cultures or contexts. For instance, the lexical or the denotative meaning of the word ‘snake’ in Merriam Webster dictionary is "any of numerous limbless scaly reptiles (suborder Serpentes syn. Ophidia) with a long tapering body and with salivary glands often modified to produce venom which is injected through grooved or tubular fangs." In addition to this conceptual meaning, the word ‘snake’ could have many other associative or connotative meanings attached by different people such as ‘evil, danger, killing, etc.

Connotation has a strong correlation with culture. The feelings, images, and memories exist in a certain culture about a word make up its connotation.

This is why the connotation of a certain word could differ from one society to another. For instance, in Arab culture, one of the connotations of ‘the moon’ is beauty or a beautiful girl. So, if a person has seen a beautiful girl, he can say ‘I have seen a moon’. However, this connotation for the moon is not available in Russia and most of western societies. According to Wikipedia (2012) “A connotation is a commonly understood subjunctive cultural or



emotional association that some word or phrase carries, in addition to the words or phrase's explicit or literal meaning, which is its denotation". This is why it has been agreed that learning a new language is not independent from learning about the culture it is used in.

The language of the people reveals a lot about their culture. The relationship between language and culture is a unique one. The effect of culture on language is undeniable. Evans (2006:509) points to this relation and uses the expression "cultural-specific lexical concepts" to refer to words and expressions which cannot be understood by language learners of other cultures. Culture is shared and maintained through the use of language. It is reflected in language and language is reflected in culture. For instance, the linguistic terms used in different occasion, i.e. Greeting, congratulating, consolation, etc. are culturally oriented. Language, habits, behaviors, etc. are acquired from culture. It is a well known fact that language and culture are two interrelated concepts, as the language is a component part of culture. When dealing with language we find out that the social and cultural layer, or the component of culture, is a component of language or the background of its real existence (Wierzbicka, 1992). Generally, a cultural group is described as a speech community. That is, the language is used to identify a certain cultural group. Even in small communities and countries you can identify the subgroups according to their language. Gibbs (1999:153) argues that "theories of human conceptual systems should be inherently cultural in that the cognition which occurs when the body meets the world is inextricably culturally-based".

The difference between languages does not consist only in differences in pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar, but also in the usage of certain expressions which signals that community (Patricia, 1986). According to The World Intercultural Property Organization (WIPA) (2011), traditional cultural expressions (i)- are handed down from one generation to another, either orally or by imitation, (ii) reflect a community's cultural and social identity, (iii) consist of characteristic elements of a community's heritage, (iv) are made by 'authors unknown' and/or by communities and/or by individuals communally recognized as having the right, responsibility or permission to do so, (v) are often not created for commercial purposes, but as vehicles for religious and cultural expression, and (vi) are constantly evolving, developing and being recreated within the community. (report page 1)"

Accordingly, within the same language, you might find words and expressions used by a certain group within the language community but not by another group. Obama (2010) states that "Language is the mirror of culture, as it reflects not only real world around us, not only real life conditions, events, and experiences, but also a public conscience and self-conscience of the nation, mentality, national character, way of life, customs and traditions, habits, moral, system of values, vision, world outlook, and world perception."

Swiderski (1993) points out that mastering a language requires a great knowledge of the culture in which this language is used. Without that knowledge of culture, the ability of the learners is incomplete.

Arabic language is full of these expressions which are difficult to be mastered by learners of Arabic language, they are even difficult for native speakers of Arabic if they are not part of such sub-culture in which these expressions are used.

Allwood (2003: 43) provides an account of what he refers to as 'meaning potential', according to him, a word's meaning potential is all the information that the word has been



used to convey either by a single individual, or on the social level, by the language community.

The context has its importance in deciding the semantic value of words. Evans (2006) points out that the semantic values associated with words are flexible, open-ended and highly dependent on the utterance context in which they are embedded. That is, the meaning associated with a word in any given utterance appears to be, in part, a function of the particular linguistic context in which it is embedded (Croft, 2000) (in Evans, 2006:492). Ali (2006) points out that connotation is both text-bound and culture-bound. He adds that connotation is strongly related to culture.

Evans (2006:503-504) uses the expression 'lexical profile' to describe the associative meaning of a given word. He states that any lexical concept has a lexical profile,

“While any given usage of a lexical concept will have its own unique selectional requirements, general patterns ('tendencies') can be established, and form part of the conventional knowledge associated with a particular lexical concept. 3 general selectional patterns in lexical concepts, cognitive models and meaning-construction terms of semantic, collocational and grammatical tendencies are what I refer to as a lexical profile”.

To clarify his point, he gives the following example and discusses his lexical concept and lexical profile.

-His time (death) is fast approaching.

It seems that the connotative meaning of a word is generally connected or can be inspired from its lexicalized meaning. Lee & Dapretto (2006) points out that lexicalized meaning plays an important role in the figurative or connotative readings of a word.

Vainik (2011) argues that in every language there are lexical expressions using body parts to describe human emotion, feelings, reactions, etc. There is a general agreement that there is an interaction with both the physical and social environment in which body parts play a vital role. Nissen (2011) investigates metaphor and metonymy of 'mouth' in English, Danish and Spanish. In his cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective, he emphasizes that non lexical uses of mouth in these three languages are pervasive. His results support the view that metaphor and metonymy are powerful in generating figurative expressions which are connected with body parts.

Background and Scope of this study

Arabic is one of the Semitic languages (Arabic, Amharic, Hebrew, Tigrinya, and Aramaic) that is spoken by approximately 200 million people in Arab world which extends from the north part of Africa to southwest of Asia. Jordan is one of the Arab countries in the Asian part. All Arabs speak one language which is Arabic. However, a sort of variations can be found among these countries, this is why in linguistic studies scholars refer to regional varieties, such as: Jordanian Arabic, Saudi Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, etc. Jordanian Arabic exists only as a spoken variety. Jordan, like other Arabic countries, exhibits a diglossic situation with Jordanian Arabic as the variety used for informal settings and Standard Arabic as the variety used for formal settings. Within each country, it is possible to find some



regional or cultural variations according to certain cultural communities. Our data was taken from the north east of Jordan. The usage of body parts in this area (and many other parts) is distinguishable. Body parts are used to describe human emotion, behavior and all aspects of personal characteristics. Still, the lexical and connotative meanings of body parts lack a systematic study emphasizing the connotative or associative meaning and its relation with lexicalized meaning and culture. There are some attempts here and there to deal with the usage of body parts figuratively, metaphorically and in proverbs in different societies to express similar or different meanings. Lakoff and Johnson point to the metaphoric usage of body parts which they call ‘personification’. According to them, this type of metaphor is considered marginal for the European culture, namely, metaphors which regard objects as having a human body: “There are well known expressions like the *foot* of the mountain, a *head* of cabbage, the *leg* of a table, etc. (Lakoff & Johnson 2001, 54-55). This paper has nothing to do with ‘personification’. Moreover, this work emphasizes the relationship between lexical and connotative meaning as stated by Asher (2010), that the connotative meaning has its root or derived from the lexical meaning. “Linguists working on word meaning have discovered many fascinating facts about the meanings of words. In particular, they have described various sorts of what appear to be modifications of lexical meaning due to the demands of a certain predicational environment” (Asher, 2010: 1). That is, this work to my knowledge, is unique in its aim and scope.

Subjects and Methodology

The subjects of the study are Jordanian Arabic native speakers. All are from Almafraaq district (north east Jordan). 100 subjects aged between 30-50 participated in this work. Sex and educational level were ignored since we dealt with cultural bound expressions. Each was given 25 expressions and asked to give the meaning (what does it mean?). The questionnaire was carried out in an informal way to receive natural and spontaneous answers.

Data and Discussion

In this section, I will present some of the cultural expressions connected with body parts used in the north east of Jordan (some of them are used all over Jordan and in other Arab countries). These expressions deal with color, size, shape, etc. of some body parts. I will give a roughly literal translation to clarify the lexical meaning of these expressions. It is worth noting here that in Arabic the third person singular is used as a default pronoun. For instance, ‘eed’ (hand), ‘eeduh’ (his hand). Our examples can be used with all pronouns, for instance, instead of ‘eeduh’ (his hand), we can say ‘eedha’ (her hand), etc. The data are divided according to body parts.

1-eed (Hand)

The hand is the part of the body used to do, carry, catch things, etc. It is the instrument for performing manual work and jobs whether good or bad.

1-1-eduh Taweelah (his hand is long/he has a long hand).

All the subjects (100%) did not refer to the lexical meaning of this expression which means ‘he has a long hand’, the opposite of ‘short’. They interpreted it as ‘thief’ or ‘burglar’. This connotative meaning can be related to the lexical meaning. The ‘burglar’ uses his hand to steal and he can reach things wherever they are. The Arabic word ‘taweel’ stands for the



English words 'long or tall' which could be a good characteristic of persons to reach things. In some languages the hand is involved in the idea of burglar. In Thia, for instance, 'mue gaaw', lexically means 'a hand with glue on it'. The connotative meaning is 'burglar'.

1-2-eeduh fatHah (his hand is open).

Similar to the example in (1-1), all the subjects referred to the associative meaning of this expression. They interpreted it into (he spends money). The lexical meaning of this expression (his hand is open) was ignored. To spend or waste things cannot be from a closed thing it should be from an open one. That is, if you have money or anything in your hand and you keep it closed, you won't lose your money. But if you open it you will waste what is in your hand. Accordingly, the associative meaning of this expression is semantically related to the lexical meaning.

1-3-eeduh naDefah (his hand is clean).

Unlike the previous expressions, the lexical meaning of this expression was present. 30% of the subjects used the lexical meaning side by side with the connotative meaning. The connotation of 'eeduh naDefah' is that he does not steal or try to benefit from his position in an illegal way to gain money. Generally, this expression is used to describe honest people who occupy certain jobs or positions in the government or business men without making use of their position to gain money or properties illegally. Stealing and cheating are considered dirty behavior. Being clean (the opposite of dirty) is an indication of purity, from this idea the expression gains its meaning.

1-4-eeduh bayDa (his hand is white)

None of the subjects referred to the color. All the subjects gave the connotative meaning which is 'a helpful person'. That is, this expression is used to describe the person who helps others to overcome their problems or help them to find a job. The strange thing is that the opposite 'his hand is black' does not exist. It seems that the connection between white and purity and innocence could be beyond this usage.

1-5- eeduh xafefah (his hand is light (opposite of heavy))

Again none of the subjects referred to weight. Still this expression has more than one associative meaning. The first one is positive, it means 'skillful person', where as the second one is negative, it means 'burglar'. 40% of the subjects stated that it means 'skillful person'. 10% mentioned that it means 'skillful burglar'. The other 50% stated that it means both 'a burglar and a skillful person'. Still, all are related to the same idea (skillful person) whether in making things or stealing. 'Light' means easy to move. So 'light hand' indicates that it can move easily and quickly.

1-6- eeduh eOqelah (his hand is heavy)

The lexical meaning of this expression was absent in our subject's interpretations. There was agreement among the subjects that this expression means 'unskillful person' or so slow in doing things. As can be noted, this expression is in contrast with the previous one (1-2). Again the associative meaning has its root in the lexical meaning. It is not easy to move heavy things and heavy hands cannot be moved smoothly and quickly.



2- qalb (heart)

The heart is the most notable part which is used intensively to describe the state of the person, his feelings, thoughts, ideas, etc. It is interpreted as an index for all types of emotional states and behaviors.

2-1 qalbuh asswad (his heart is black)

All the subjects interpreted this expression according to its associative meaning. It means 'a vengeful person'. They agreed that this expression is used to describe 'bad person', the person who hates others and wishes bad and misery for them, Black, opposite of white, is a color which represents evil and bad things. Moreover, the heart is considered the organ of feelings and emotions. That is, when the heart is described as black, it means that it is full of evil things. So, this expression has a direct semantic connection with the lexical meaning of 'black'.

2-2 qalbuh abyaD (his heart is whit).

This expression has the opposite meaning of the expression in (2-1). It is natural, white is the opposite of black. It is used to describe a person who loves others and does not hide any evil thoughts about others. White is the color which represents honesty and purity. In the same sense, this expression acquired its meaning. That is when the heart is described as 'white' it means no evil, it means honesty.

2-3-qalbuh ekbeer (his heart is big)

None of the subjects refer to the size 'big' of the heart. The connotative meaning of this expression is that the person loves others, he is a loveable person, characterized by forgiveness. Traditionally, love is attributed to heart, and being wide or big means it can accommodate more and more. The combination between these two words means 'he loves others (many people)'. It implies that he hates nobody. This expression indicates the opposite meaning of the expression 'qalbuh aswad' in (2-1)

2-4 qalbuh mayet (his heart is dead)

Lexically it could mean death. But all our subjects used the associative meaning which is 'he has no feeling', no love, no sympathy, etc..... it should be noted here that this expression is not used in the case of negative feelings such as 'hate'. Generally it is used when the person shows no interest in a female or a female shows no interest in male. That the associative meaning is derived from the lexical meaning is clear. Death ends all sorts of feelings, and since, as stated above, feeling is connected with heart, the death of the heart means the end of all these nice feelings.

2-5 galbuh ?axDar (his heart is green)

This expression is almost the opposite of the one in (2-4). This expression means that his heart is full of feelings, looking for love, attracted to pretty girls. Generally, this expression is used when an old man shows a sort of interest in pretty girls or has a desire to get married. Green is a symbol of life, it is generally connected with grass or trees. So when we compare green grass with dried one, the meaning of 'green heart' is clear.



3- elsan (tongue)

The tongue is one of the most important organs in the human body. It is responsible for speech and production. It is described by many adjectives which reflect the type or quality of speech.

3-1 elsanuh Heloo (his tongue is sweet)

Sweet is a nice thing. When the tongue is described as sweet, and the tongue is the organ of speaking, it means it utters nice words. It is used when the person is good at praising, good at using nice words to describe his feelings. He is good at using words to attract others, mainly females. All the subjects agreed on this reading.

3-2 elsanuh Taweel (his tongue is long)

The denotative meaning was ignored. That is, none of the subjects talked about the size (length) of the tongue. This expression means that the person has the habit of attacking others and using bad words. He doesn't show respect to any and doesn't feel shy to use taboo words to attack others. Lexically, the long thing can reach more in comparison with the short. That is, his tongue can attack anybody.

3-3-elsanuh maqtuu? (his tongue is cut off)

This expression is used to describe the person who is not able to defend himself or respond directly when being attacked verbally by others. He does not like talking. The lexical meaning is not present in our subjects' interpretations. As stated above, the tongue is the organ for speech. When it is cut, the person cannot speak. From this lexical meaning, the associative meaning comes.

4- ?ayn (eye)

The 'eye' is the organ of seeing. From the look of a certain person we can have an idea about his feelings, whether he hates, admires, love, envy, etc. the thing or the person he looks at. It reflects whether he is happy, sad or angry.

4-1-?aynuh Hamra (his eye is red)

The lexical meaning appears here side by side with the connotative meaning of this expression. 70% of the subjects used both readings, the lexical (his eye is red) and the connotative (he is a brave or courageous person). The other 30% of the subjects used only the connotative meaning. It should be noted here that if we use the plural form 'his eyes' we mean the color and no connotative meaning. It seems that some animals as the wolf or dog when getting angry or ready to attack, his eyes are getting red. So, being brave and courageous are connected with redness.

4-2-?anuh Harah (his eye is hot (chili))

The lexical meaning of the above expression was ignored. All subjects used the connotative which means that 'he envies others'. Culturally, the person who envies others could harm them. As soon as he looks at a certain attractive part, that part will be damaged or



deteriorated. Hot is connected with pepper which could be harmful or cause troubles when taken. It seems that the connotative meaning comes from this idea.

4-3-?anuh bardah (his eye is cold (not chili))

All the subjects used the connotative meaning. This expression is the opposite of the previous one (4-2). It means that this person does not envy others or cause harm to them when looking at them. It seems the connotative meaning comes from the fact that cold is the opposite of hot, hot indicates harmful, by analogy, cold means harmless.

5-Øum (mouth)

The mouth is the organ or the cavity which is important for production and for eating. Both reflect the personality and the characteristics of the person.

5-1- Øumuh fateH (his mouth is open)

Both lexical and connotative meanings were used here. The connotative meaning is 'he needs more and more (what he has is still insufficient)'. Generally, when this expression is used to describe a person, it implies that he needs financial help). 55% used the connotative meaning to explain this expression, 45% used both. However, this expression doesn't mean he is 'greedy'. Open implies that you can fill or add. If the door is open, you can enter. If a box is open, you can add or fill it with things, etc. From this lexical meaning, this expression acquires its connotative meaning.

5-2 Øumuh waase? (his mouth is wide)

80% of the subjects used the associative meaning (i.e. he always needs more and more. Cannot be satisfied) to explain this expression. 20% of the subjects use both lexical and associative meanings. It seems that the connotative meaning comes from the fact that 'wide and big' things cannot be filled easily. They need more and more. The difference between both expressions lies on the fact that the second implies the first. That is, either what he has is insufficient, or he is greedy.

6- asnan (teeth)

The teeth are the parts of the body which help in cutting food. Moreover, they are considered as an indication of age. In most cases, when we get old, the person starts losing his teeth.

6-1 asnanuh Haatah (toothless person) (his teeth fell down)

92% of our subjects use the associative or connotative meaning to explain this expression which means he has an experience. Only 8% use both lexical and associative meaning. Losing teeth is connected with age, that is old people lose their teeth. Moreover, old age is connected with having experience. So, as can be noted, connotative meaning has its root in lexical meaning. If somebody tries to deceive or cheat somebody else, the other person touches his teeth and says 'isnaani Haatah' (my teeth fell down) to show that he has an experience with such tricks and cannot be cheated.



6-2-sinuh Tayb (his tooth is good)

The lexical meaning of this expression is that he has no problems in his teeth or tooth. The associative meaning which all the subjects point to is that ‘he eats a lot’ (good in eating or he likes food). So, if you look at somebody who eats more than expected, you say ‘sinnuh taybah’ (his tooth is good). Of course the ability to eat is connected with teeth. If you have any problem with your teeth, definitely, you will have a problem with eating. That is, the associative meaning has its semantic relation with the lexical meaning.

7- ?aDum (bone)

Generally the appearance of the person depends on his skeleton. If he suffers from any problem in any part of his skeleton, it definitely will affect his shape and his normal life. Strong bones means strong person, weak bones (or who suffers from osteoporosis) means weak person.

7-1 ?aDmuh gasi (his bone is hard)

All the subjects use the connotative meaning to explain this expression. The connotative meaning is that he cannot be defeated or failed, he can face all types of problems and situations and get out safely. Here generally, it does not mean physical strength, it is used in all types of situations, for instance, having a financial problem, one of his beloved died, he lost a fortune, etc. That is he can cope with and overcome such situations. ‘Hard’ means strong, which means it cannot be broken easily. That is, the connotative meaning is derived or semantically related to lexical meaning.

7-2- ?aDmuh Tary (his bone is soft)

This expression is almost the opposite of the previous one (7-1). only the connotative meaning is present in the subjects’ interpretations. The lexical meaning is clear, it indicates that his bone is not strong, it is easy to be broken. Soft bone is connected with infants or kids. The associative meaning of this expression is that ‘it is easy to be defeated, has no experience, he will fail, etc. It implies that it is difficult for him to face or come over any problem, or he has no experience to cope with difficult situations. The association between lexical and connotative meaning is clear.

Table one: the following Table summarizes the lexical and connotative meanings of the body parts under discussion

The expression	Lexical meaning	Connotative meaning
1-1-eeduh Taweelah	His hand is long	Thief , burglar
1-2-eeduh fatHah	His hand is open	Spend or waste his money
1-3-eeduh naDefah	His hand is clean	Does not steal or gain money illegally
1-4-eeduh bayDa	His hand is white	A helpful person
1-5- eeduh xafefah	His hand is light (not heavy)	Skillful person
1-6- eeduh eQqalah	His hand is heavy	Unskillful person
2-1 qalbuah asswad	His heart is black	Full of hate, wish misery for others
2-2 qalbuah abyaD	His heart is white	Full of love and purity



2-3-qalbuħ ekbeer	His heart is big	Love others
2-4 qalbuħ mayet	His heart is dead	No feeling-no longer loves the other sex
2-5 galbuħ ?axDar	His heart is green	Full of feelings, looking for love, shows interest in the other sex.
3-1 elsanuħ Heloo	His tongue is sweet	Use nice expressions, good in praising others
3-2 elsanuħ Taweel	His tongue is long	Attacks others, uses bad words, shows no respect to others
3-3-elsanuħ maqtoo?	His tongue is cut off	Not talkative, weak in defending himself
4-1-?aynuħ Hamra	His eye is red	Brave, courageous person
4-2-?aynuħ Harah	His eye is hot-chili-	Enviess others, causing harm to others as a result of looking to what they gain.
4-3-?aynuħ bardah	His eye is cold	Doesn't envy others
5-1- Øumuħ fateH	His mouth is open	Needs more, not satisfied
5-2 Øumuħ waase?	His mouth is wide	Cannot be satisfied
6-1 Asnanuħ Haataħ	Toothless person	Has experience
6-2-sinuħ Tayb	His tooth is good	Eats a lot, good at eating
7-1 ?aDmuħ gasi	His bone is hard	Strong person, can face all types of problems
7-2- ?aDmuħ Tary	His bone is soft	Affected by any situation

CONCLUSION

As can be noted, none of our above examples is interpreted according to its lexical meaning alone. That is the associative or connotative meaning is the dominant one. Moreover, the cultural impact is clear in such usages. That is, social beliefs, ideas etc. are reflected in the connotative interpretations of these expressions. The lexical and connotative meanings of the above given parts of the body are related to size, color, or certain types. Although the associative or connotative meaning is the dominant, the lexical meaning is present as the anchoring point to the connotative meaning. However, generally in their daily speech, the people use body parts instead of using adjectives directly. So if you ask about a certain person, instead of saying 'he is a burglar', they would say 'his hand is long'. Then if you say 'what do you mean?', he would say 'burglar'. It seems that color and size have the same semantic impact. For instance, 'Taweel' (tall or long) has a bad connotation whether we use it with 'tongue' or 'hand'. With the former it means 'a bad person who insults others and uses bad words', and with the later it means 'burglar' which means a bad person. Another example is the color 'white'. When used with the hand, it means 'a helpful' person, and when used with heart, it means 'a kind, lovable' person. both means a good person. This could be an indication that the connotative meaning has its root in lexical meaning.



Limitations of the study

This work is limited in its scope and aim. It covers only seven parts of the body although all parts of the body can be involved in the study. However, in this case, we need to write a book. Some of the above body parts and others could have a sexual connotation which is avoided in this paper. There is a limitation in the subjects of the study because it is assumed that these are cultural expressions and the number would not affect.

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