

***Transferred Meanings of the Words for
Parts of the Human Body in Spoken Syriac
with Reference to English***

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that similarities in the use of words for parts of the human body in language do exist in both Syriac and English though they belong to completely different families, viz. Semitic and Germanic, respectively. The researcher assumes that differences in the use of such words do not always arise from the language determinacy on how people see the world around, but from the cultural needs and the context in which such words are used. Therefore, the transferred meanings of the words for parts of the human body in Spoken Syriac depends on the language user's ability to decide (through his cultural and social background knowledge and experience) to decide what is in the language and what is in the world.

One of the conclusions that this study comes up with is that the linguistic as well as the pragmatic contexts are among the main

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determinant factors behind accurate identification of different meanings of words for parts of the human body.

1. Introduction

A careful field study of the various metaphoric and non-metaphoric uses of the words for parts of the human body showed that their use is determined by socio-cultural considerations. For instance, one of the common uses of words such as 'head', 'face', 'eye', 'mouth', and 'teeth' in Syriac is to denote things or objects with the same shapes as those of the above mentioned parts of the human body:

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|-----------------------|---|
| 1. riishid pi'iltha | (Lit.) The head of a radish |
| 2. salmid waraaqa | The face of a paper |
| 3. enid mkhaata | The eye of a needle |
| 4. lishaanid zargulta | (the strip of leather under the laces of a shoe) |
| 5.nithyamid talma | The ears of ajar (the ear-shaped handle of a jar) |
| 6.kummid tanurta | The mouth of a clay-made oven |
| 7.kaakid masirqa | The teeth of a comb |
| 8.aqlid ?r?a | The leg of the land (a strip of an agricultural land) |

Parts of the human body used metaphorically to denote different objects could not be always transferred to the relevant objects. For instance, a 'jar' may have ears or even a mouth but it has no eyes. However, a metaphor as Palmer (1976: 103) points out is fairly haphazard; it may seem obvious that 'foot', for instance, is appropriate to mountains in English, but not in Syriac or Arabic.

2. Aim and Hypotheses

This paper aims at stressing the notion that "language is socially maintained and socially functioning institution"(Fromkin and Rodman, 1981:267). Building on this fact, one is not inclined to agree with the assumptions of the Whorfian Hypothesis or Britton's (1970: 7) claim that "we use language as a means of organizing a representation of the world-each for himself-and that the representation so created constitutes the world we operate in, the basis of all predictions by which we set the course of our lives". However, this depends on one's ability to decide what is in the language and what is in the world. Therefore, it is hypothesized that the linguistic as well as the pragmatic contexts are among the main determinant factors behind accurate identification of different meanings of word for parts of the human body.

3. Data collection and Procedure

The variety of Syriac (itself a variety of Aramaic) chosen for analysis is the Spoken Syriac of Bakhdeda -32 kilometres southeast of Mosul. This variety is known as 'Surath' and is widely used by Syriacs, Chaldeans and Assyrians.

The rarity of works in this domain was the main reason behind our total dependence on the field in collecting the required data. The data on which this work is based are collected from one hundred idealized native speakers of Syriac. These informants were asked to illustrate whatever expressions containing parts of the human body that they frequently use in their everyday interactions. The data were examined by the researcher (himself a native speaker of Syriac) and verified against other similar data obtained from a few ideal informants (e.g. clergymen and teachers). Due to the limitation of the space (the huge number of data) only one part of the human body is tackled, viz. HEAD.

4. Linguistic Relativity

The question that has been raised during the second half of the past century is whether speakers of different languages think differently. That is, language users think the way they do because of the language they use (whorf,1956).

This deterministic extreme view, since the emergence of the Whorfian Hypothesis, faced objections at the philosophical and communicative levels. At the philosophical level, one can find no reasonable justification why we think the way we think because of the language we use (cf. Keller and Keller, 1996). At the communicative level, on the other hand, the Whorfian Hypothesis would make, for instance, the process of learning a foreign language and translating from one language to another difficult if not impossible.

Lakoff (1987:311), among many other scholars in the field of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics, provides a plausible solution, that "differences in conceptual systems do create difficulties for translators" but they do not block it.. This view, as Bahar (2001:21) maintains, draws a distinction between translation and understanding: "Translation requires mapping from one language to another. Understanding is something that is internal to a person". This softer view of the Whorfian Hypothesis, however, sheds some doubts about the effectiveness and success of the act of translation between languages. For different arguments for and/or against the Hypothesis, see Bahar's (2001)' Linguistic Relativity : Revisiting Whorf in the Postmodern Era'.

5. *Linguistic Context*

The main objective of this study is not to give a detailed account of the role of linguistic context in determining the meanings of the words for parts of the human body and how these are transferred to relevant objects in the world. Rather, the pragmatic contexts are concentrated on to show how language users of both English and Syriac conceptualize the meanings of these words.

One can easily distinguish between different meanings of words depending on the linguistic context. The following are among the main meanings in which the linguistic context plays a major role:

- 1 . riisha raaba (Lit.) A big head
riishid khuwwiitha The head of a serpent
(The source of evil)

(as a compound word to mean ' a responsible or an authority' or a modified noun to mean different things).

2. riishih shakhiineli His head is hot
itla riisha haziiqa She has a hard head
(stubborn)

(as a statement used either to inform or to ridicule, or even to praise).

3.driili briisha qamaaya	Put me at the first head (First turn)
qloo' mriishi	Get lost from my head (Get lost)
twoor riishid sataana	Smash the head of the Devil (Calm down!)

(as an imperative sentence or request)

6. Data and Discussion

The word 'riisha' in Syriac is used generally to refer to the following:

A. Things that have rounded shape and/or enlarged end or top:

1. riishid lahaan	(Lit.) The head of a cabbage
2. riishid khaasa	The head of a lettuce
3. riishid dambuz	The head of a pin
4. riishid bismaara	The head of a nail
5. riishid zirqotta	The head of a boil
6. riishid khittiitha	The head of wheat (The best wheat)

The use of 'riisha' is not restricted to vegetables that have mass of leaves as in (1) and (2) above; rather, it is used with all vegetables that have a shape similar to the human 'head', e.g. 'onion', 'garlic', 'paprika', etc. Our data, however, did not reveal the use of any kind of fruits with "head". The only justification for such exclusion is that they do not have tails and heads, e.g. orange, apple, apricot, etc.

Syntactically, such phrases comprise two nouns annexed to one another; that is, they are used in the genitive case.

B. 'Riisha' is also used in spoken Syriac to refer to the top part or the highest part of anything as it is illustrated in the following examples:

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|------------------------|--|
| 1. riishid tuura | (Lit.) The head of the mountain
(The peak) |
| 2. riishid bidirwaatha | The head of the staircase
(The last step on a staircase) |
| 3. riishid deda | The head of the breast
(The nipple) |
| 4. riishid waraaqa | The head of the paper
(The upper part of the paper) |
| 5. riishid tanurta | The head of the kiln
(The terrace which surrounds the
mouth of the kiln) |

In these examples and also in the examples below, there is nearly total similarity between Spoken Syriac and Standard English, 'riisha' in examples 6-8 refers to the first rank or position that someone may occupy:

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|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| 6. riishid dasta | (Lit.) The head of playing cards |
| 7. riishid sippa | The head of the line (class) |
| 8. riishid khigga | The head of folk dancing |

Generally, such expressions in Spoken Syriac are realized by full noun phrases (genitive case); whereas in Standard English they may be realized by a single word as in (1) and (3) above 'peak' and 'nipple', respectively.

Another use is related to the source, origin or the beginning of something whether abstract (as in 9 and 10) or concrete (as in 11, 12 and 13) below:

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|-----------------------|---|
| 9. riishid balaaya | (Lit.) The head of the problem
(The source of the problem) |
| 10. riishid ikhtiitha | The head of the sin
(The origin of the sin) |
| 11. riishid chaqiitha | The head of the stream
(The place where a stream
of water starts flowing) |

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|-------------------|---|
| 12.riishid chaata | The head of the year
(The New Year Day) |
| 13. riishid jaada | The head of the street
(The upper end of the street) |

C. The word 'riisha' is widely used in various expressions as a unit of measure or as a number- indicator:

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|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. gzaayidla kha' riisha | He is a head taller than her |
| 2. taa'il kha' riisha bas | Play only one round |
| 3. ikma riishawaatha qislukh? | How many sheep have you
had their wool cut? |
| 4. ikma riishid baaqur itlukh? | How many heads of cattle
do you have? |

'Riisha' is always used to enumerate animals especially the domestic mammals. But it is used sometimes ironically or in sense of humiliation:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 5. plitlan riisha briisha | We came to be equal |
| 6. ikma riishawatha wuthlukh? | How many times have you
made love (with her)? |
| 7. zilli tre riishi Imosil | I went twice to Mosul (by car) |

'Kha riisha' has also another common use to mean 'directly' or 'soon':

8. zilli kha riishal beetha I went home directly

D. The last use of 'riisha' in nominal groups is to indicate the place of honour or position of command. It may refer to a person as being a ruler, chief or leader. Here, one may find total similarity between the Spoken Syriac and Standard English:

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|---------------------|---|
| 1. riishid betha | (Lit.) The head of the family
(bread winner) |
| 2. riishid 'askar | The head of the army
(The commander) |
| 3. riishid maatha | The head of the village
(The mayor) |
| 4. riishid malaakhi | The head of the angels
(The archangel) |
| 5. riishid ghlaami | The head of the servants
(The butler) |

V. 'Riisha' is usually postmodified by some adjectives to indicate various shades of meaning. These adjectives become part of the meaning of 'riisha'. In other words, some adjectives keep

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company with 'riisha' to realize different meanings in different situations:

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|-------------------|---|
| 1. riisha raaba | (Lit.) A big head
(Responsible or a very important person) |
| 2. riisha haziiqa | A strong head
(Stubborn, obstinate or self-willed) |
| 3.riisha spiiqa | An empty head
(Empty-headed or stupid) |

It is to be noted that 'riisha raaba' in (1) above is used sometimes ironically to mean 'empty-headed or stupid'. This, of course, depends on the pragmatic situation in which it is used. It is also worth noting that the opposite of the above mentioned expressions also can be used to serve the same purpose. Other examples are:

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|---------------------|--|
| 4. riisha rfii'a | A raised head or with head erect
(A man with dignity) |
| 5. riisha kiipa | A lowered head
(A man of self respect) |
| 6. riisha shakhiina | A hot head
(Zealous) |
| 7. riisha qariira | A cold head
(indifferent) |

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3. tmiisheli mriisha hal tupra (Lit.) He is sunk from tip to toe
(He is completely in debt/
love)

4. lamo'litla briishi Don't insert it in my head
(Don't suggest or make me
believe 'this idea')

5. paalitla mriishukh Put it out of your head
(Stop thinking about it)

Sometimes 'riisha' is replaced by 'mokha'(brain) when 'addressing a person of equal or similar rank or position. 'Mokha', however, is usually used (and preferred) in intimate situations.

6. lamigijid riishukh Don't make your head giddy
(Don't trouble yourself; or
don't give attention to)

7. nqosh riishukh bguuda Knock your head against the wall
(Do what do you wish, I don't
care)

Though 'riisha' in the above examples is still 'head', its figurative meaning is completely different from its original meaning.

The use of metaphors is usually a reaction to the emotional impulses and internal attitudes of the individuals towards the images of the world. If we consider the metaphor 'riisha ni'mili'(the head is grace), we can observe that it is systematically reflected in everyday language:

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| 3. itli riisha | I have a head
(I have the power to think) |
| 4.'rii riisha | Catch the head
(Control the activity) |
| 5. halla riisha | Give her a head
(Let her act freely)
or
(Have it off!) |
| 6. latla riisha | It has not a head
(It is not well organized) |

This way of conceiving 'riisha' influences the way language is used by native speakers in such a way that any activity can be considered metaphorical.

From the above mentioned metaphoric images, it is evident that the way people visualize metaphoric images in spoken Syriac is nearly the same in English; that is, their use is determined by the

emotional side of the language user and his/her internal attitudes towards the images of the world.

I. The role of language in the Syriac community is embodied in the frequent use of proverbs which reflect the wisdom and the broad experience of the people. Our data comprised a number of proverbs containing the word 'riisha'; unfortunately their use in daily conversation is restricted mainly to the elderly.

There is also some contradiction in the use of proverbs. For example:

1. kha riisha gmaali distiitha (Lit.) One head fills the pan

(A one-man show will do)

indicates that one person may equal a group or even a nation in strength, patience, or wisdom. The negated form of the same proverb:

2. kha riisha lagmaali distiitha One head does not fill the pan

(Two heads are better than one)

indicates that opinions, advice, etc. of a second person are valuable.

These two Syriac examples with their exact English equivalents is a clear evidence of the failure of the Whorfian Hypothesis; that is, how it comes to happen that Spoken Syriac and

Standard English have the same picture of the universe though their linguistic backgrounds are different?

7. Conclusions

This paper tried to show that words for parts of the human body are widely used in Spoken Syriac. The criteria used and the data confirm that the word 'riisha' (head) may make a sentence or, more precisely, a sentence realized by one clause. The interpretation of 'riisha' depends largely on pragmatic knowledge, especially the way the context shapes its meaning. Moreover, the shared background knowledge between the speaker and the hearer plays a great role in identifying and interpreting different meanings of this part of the human body. In short, the message conveyed by such transferred meanings in spoken syriac is usually interpreted in terms of a salient feature (i.e. the most important feature among a number of features) in a face-to-face interaction.

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ملخص

انتقال معاني المفردات الدالة على أعضاء جسم الإنسان في اللغة السريانية مع الإشارة إلى اللغة الإنجليزية

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تهدف الدراسة إلى بيان التشابه في استخدام المفردات الدالة على أعضاء جسم الإنسان في اللغتين الانجليزية والسريانية برغم أنهما تنحدران من سلالتين لغويتين مختلفتين، أي الجرمانية والسامية على التوالي. يفترض الباحث أن الاختلاف في استخدام مثل هذه المفردات لا ينبج عن تحكم اللغة في كيفية رؤية الناس للعالم من حولهم دائماً وإنما عن الاحتياجات الحضارية والسياق الذي تظهر فيه المفردات. لذا فإن انتقال معاني المفردات الدالة على أعضاء جسم الإنسان إلى مفردات أخرى في اللغة السريانية المحكية يعتمد على مقدرة مستخدم اللغة أن يقرر لنفسه من خلال خزينه المعرفي الحضاري والاجتماعي وخبرته أهمية دور اللغة والعالم من حوله في انتقال معاني هذه المفردات.

ويخلص البحث على أن السياق اللغوي والسياقات البراغماتيقية من بين العوامل المؤثرة في تحديد دقيق لمختلف المعاني التي تحملها المفردات الدالة على أعضاء جسم الإنسان في اللغة لمختلف المعاني التي تحملها المفردات الدالة على أعضاء جسم الإنسان في اللغة.

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