

A usage-based investigation of verbs derived from body part terms in Arabic

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Within the different varieties of Arabic, terms denoting body parts are deployed in multiple ways besides their basic referential uses. Similar to English, for instance, the terms *raʔs* ‘head’ can mark spatial relations as in *raʔs altawela* ‘head of the table’. The term denoting EYE, *ʕayn*, can be used metaphorically and metonymically in expressions such as *ʕayn alsʕawab* ‘eye of the correctness/rightness’, where *ʕayn* EYE is used to refer to ‘essence’ or ‘core’. Body part terms in Arabic can also serve as roots or stems from which verbs and other lexical items can be derived, as in the following examples.

1. **ʕa:yana** alatʕibbaʔ sittina mariðʕan
ʕayn:VF3:3SM:PERF the doctors sixty patient
The doctors examined sixty patients

2. **ʕayyanat** alhukuma waziran jadidan lilsihha
ʕayn:VF2:3SF:PERF the government minister new for health
The government appointed a new minister of health

3. **taʕayyana** ʕala haʔulaʔ alzuʕamaʔ ʔirðʕaʔ fuʕubihim
ʕayn:VF5:3SM:PERF on those leaders satisfaction people:GEN
It became obligatory for those leaders to satisfy their people

In (1), the verb *ʕa:yana* typically involves a typical use of the body part term, EYE. It therefore relates to SEEING in a way similar to the English ‘to eyeball something’, where the notion of examining and investigating is involved. Such usage conforms to the assumption that verb forms derived from body part terms normally signal bodily functions associated with these body parts. Eye is therefore typically associated with SEEING, ear with HEARING, nose with SMELLING, etc. We can see, however, that in (2) and (3) the relation to ‘eye’ is less transparent. These two instances, along with many others, show that meanings of such verbs in Arabic are not necessarily predictable, neither by the body parts they associate with nor by the semantic information presumably residing in the different morphological patterns of the Arabic verb.

This unpredictability of meaning extensions calls for scrutinizing the argument structure of the constructions that host these verbs. This involves selecting a wide range of verbs derived from body part terms in Classical and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), such as HEAD, FACE, EYE, EAR, NOSE, NECK, BELLY, TONGUE, ARM, etc. and examining their contextualized uses extracted from Classical (usage-based) dictionaries as well as MSA corpora. More specifically, I will be examining the syntactic properties of the argument structure (e.g. transitivity, collocation with prepositional phrases, etc.) as well as the semantic properties of the different arguments, for instance whether a certain verb favors human or non-human agents. Analyzing the interaction between these verbs and the various constructional elements they associate with should give us a better understanding of the patterns of coercion of verb senses into the more opaque and complex senses.

References

Heine, Bernd, and Kuteva, Tania. 2002. *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press