THE HUMAN BODY AS REFLECTED IN ENGLISH SOMATIC VERBAL IDIOMS

Mihaela Raluca IONESCU[G]

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to analyze the connection between the symbolic values of several body-parts and the global idiomatic meaning of the verbal idioms in which those particular body-parts are used. In this regard, the paper examines if there is a connection between the cross-cultural meaning of the body-part lexeme and its metaphoric value within the idiom; and if so, to what effect, how it can be explained, and if the possible explanation is mainly linguistic, due to its figurative significance, or cross-cultural or even both. To this end, for a clear terminological interpretation, firstly, this paper presents somatic verbal idioms' properties and secondly, it explains the metaphoric meaning of corporeality.*

In conclusion, this paper argues that there is a close inter-crossing between what the somatic verbal idiom conveys and what the body-part lexeme expresses in terms of its cultural and figurative values.

Keywords: *somatic verbal idiom, figurativeness, cultural value.*

1. Introduction

What is the value of corporeality in different English somatic verbal idioms? How, for that matter, could any two people (natives or non-natives) uttering the same somatic verbal idiom, perceive the same thing if as is generally claimed, the meaning of the idioms they may use cannot be deduced from an understanding of their parts? Is it only a common linguistic feature connected to the figurative meaning of idioms or is it a cross-cultural aspect linked to the symbolic and metaphoric significance of body-parts?

Trying to answer to these questions and following, mainly, Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* (2009) and Atkinson (2005) the aim of this paper is to discuss the symbolic values of several body-parts as they are reflected in English somatic verbal idioms.

Additionally, we will focus on examining somatic verbal idioms and what they stand for, afterwards, we will explain the metaphoric meaning of corporeality and why over the years, in most cultures different parts of the body or even some interior organs have gained an archetypal value. We will point out that not only "contemporary culture loves body-gazing" (Atkinson, 2005: 2) because if this were the case, the existence to this day of so many somatic verbal idioms could not be explained.

2. Methods and materials

The paper uses deductive and descriptive methods of analysis concentrating on proving that the meaning of somatic verbal idioms is sometimes motivated by the figurative and cultural significance of the body part it uses to convey its overall sense. It is without any doubt hard to discern what exactly is denoted by a certain body part in an idiom but this paper tries to demonstrate that the cultural and metaphoric associations of body part lexemes engrave on idioms' meaning. The data for the analysis, more precisely, all the idioms cited in this paper as examples are extracted from and may be

[*] No. 119 Secondary School, Bucharest (graduate of the *Languages and Cultural Identities* Doctoral School), stefanmihaelaraluca@yahoo.com

BDD-A24542 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:43 UTC)

retrieved in the "*Oxford Idioms – Dictionary for learners of English*" (Parkinson, Francis, 2010).

However, before proceeding, to clarify the status of idioms it is necessary to consider them as open-ended linguistic units with certain distinctive properties which need to be thoroughly analyzed. This fact will help us better understand that the meanings of idioms are sometimes motivated by the figurative sense of the body part; that is, the image or the archetypal value that speakers associate with that particular body part influences its idiomatic meaning.

3. Idioms as open-ended linguistic units

To start with, given the idioms' heterogeneous and idiosyncratic nature, these phrasemes should be best understood as open-ended linguistic units. Such a perspective is justified based on the fact that "idioms, although often viewed as the most reliable and definitive type of formulaic sequence, elude precise definition, and their nature becomes more complicated the deeper one delves" (Nunberg, Sag *et alii* 1994: 493). Hence, idioms do not have a prearranged limit or end in the sense of a widely accepted status nor do they conform to the requirements for a category of universal grammar.

However, idioms can be used to explain why certain apparently nonsensical units are acceptable, or why, for example, somebody can hardly "keep body and soul together" rather than "being poor", and for that matter, why he/she "is run down at the heels". The meanings of idioms is motivated by conceptual metaphors and the images that speakers associate with certain constituent parts. Idioms fall within the class of conventionalized expressions that speakers use within a linguistic community and it has been proven that they are not totally arbitrary associations between form and meaning.

4. Idioms: towards a clear terminological interpretation

Moreover, we would like to remark that mostly Anglo-Saxon linguistics uses the term "idiom" and "fixed expression" whereas Germanic studies usually operate with the notion "phraseologism" or more recently, "phraseme", and Russian and East European linguists, such as Veisbergs, Koonin, Amosova, and Vinogradov prefer the term "phraseological unit". Once more, the usage of co-occurring terms by various theoretical schools highlights the idioms' heterogeneity and justifies their understanding as an open-ended category.

Nonetheless, all these terms are equivalent and refer to the same concept, broadly defined as "a stable word combination with a fully or partially figurative meaning" (Kunin, 1970 in Veisbergs, 2013: 111) even if sometimes linguists define them according to the needs of their particular study dwelling more on one distinct semantic feature or the other.

Given the richness of this class of idioms, in this paper we chose to focus only on somatic or "anthropomorphic" verbal idioms (Čermák, 1999: 110) that is, idioms containing a body-part name which combine a high frequency verb (a common transitive/ ditransitive verb) and one up to three of its arguments, namely, a complex verb group, a VP: V + 1 or 2 arguments. Simply put, we discuss only somatic verbal idioms, namely, idioms which come from the same semantic field and have the same syntactic structure (verb + argument).

BDD-A24542 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:43 UTC)

5. Idioms: main properties according to Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994)

Furthermover, even if, it is often claimed that idioms "elude precise definition" (Nunberg, Sag *et alii* 1994: 493), we believe that there exists a sets of characteristics which capture their fundamental aspects. Consequently, in line with the purpose of this paper we aim to present these main characteristics which in our opinion are necessary and sufficient to delineate an idiom from a non-idiom.

Therefore, to facilitate the understanding of idioms and thus, explain our choice of examples, we follow Nunberg, Sag and Wasow's (1994: 492-493) approach who list six basic idioms' properties, that is, (1) conventionality (non-compositional meaning), (2) inflexibility, (3) figuration, (4) proverbiality, (5) informality and (6) affect despite the fact that some of these features still represent a thorny issue.

The first property that Nunberg, Sag *et alii* (1994: 493) mention, conventionality refers to the fact that the idiom's meaning or use can't be entirely predicted on the basis of a knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another (*e.g.* to look down in the mouth). Inflexibility is defined as the property of idioms to appear only in a limited number of syntactic frames unlike freely composed expressions (*e.g.* to turn one's toes). Figuration refers to the fact that idioms typically involve metaphors (*e.g.* to give somebody the elbow), metonymies (*e.g.* to lend a hand), or even hyperboles (*e.g.* to cry your eyes out);

Another idioms' property under analysis in their study, proverbiality, highlights that idioms are typically used to describe a recurrent situation of particular social interest (becoming restless, talking informally, divulging a secret, or any other distinct situation) based on its resemblance or relation to a scenario involving homey, concrete things and relations – climbing walls, chewing fat, spilling beans (*e.g.* to have egg on your face, to have cold feet);

Informality refers to the fact that idioms are typically associated with relatively informal or colloquial registers and with popular speech and oral culture (*e.g.* have a foot in both camps, get your feet wet) whereas affect makes a reference to idioms as being typically used to imply a certain evaluation towards the things they denote.

As the above examples illustrate, not all idioms display the same features to the same extent and Nunberg, Sag *et alii* (1994) who use the adverb "typically" each time they describe the idioms' characteristics emphasize this very important aspect which explains their much discussed heterogeneity. In line with these arguments, Nenonen (2007: 309) dwells on the fact that some idioms are morpho-syntactically restricted while others are only lexically restricted, showing that in case of idioms some features cannot be applied uniformly and generally, even if they are included among their important characteristics.

6. The metaphoric value of corporeality reflected in English somatic verbal idioms

In addition to these highly debated characteristics, it is commonly accepted that idioms are language and culture-dependent multiword units because they draw on customs, experience-based traditional truths, community values and metaphoric features. However, we strongly believe that even if idioms are said to carry the authority of archetypal values, their meaning is sometimes partially motivated by the cross-cultural significance of the body part lexemes, their constituents.

BDD-A24542 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:43 UTC)

This is precisely why after we have clarified what idioms stand for illustrating their main characteristics with relevant examples, in this subsection we argue that there is a close inter-crossing between what the somatic verbal idiom conveys and what the body-part lexeme expresses in terms of its cross-cultural and figurative values.

Therefore, following mainly Pârlog and Brînzeu's study (2009) we discuss the connection between the symbolic values of several body-parts, their powerful cultural side and the global idiomatic meaning of the verbal idioms in which these body-parts are used. We intend to examine the symbolic values of the body-parts and how they influence the meaning of the idioms in which they are employed because we have noticed that the archetypal values of the body-part terms have extended semantically and have determined the symbolic significance of somatic verbal idioms.

To begin with, we deem it necessary to highlight that it is not only "contemporary culture that loves body-gazing" (Atkinson, 2005: 2) (Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man is a relevant example which supports this argument), because if this were the case, the existence to this day of so many somatic verbal idioms could not be explained and they would not have gained an archetypal value. Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* (2009: 13) offer an insightful comment of what corporeality means, of its quality of "physical universal" (Enfield, Majid *et alii* 2006: 137), its cross-cultural implications and why "each culture gets the bodies it deserves" (Atkinson, 2005: 2), arguing that "corporeality is capable of transformation, of reinscription, of being experienced and represented in various terms, terms that may grant bodies great linguistic, fictional, and artistic potentialities, the ever earned for equilibrium between man and nature, corporeality and transcendentalism, body and spirit."

Therefore, anatomical lexemes are of significant importance in any culture because they are used to describe associated semantic and metaphoric relationships. This is so mainly because, simply put, "everyone has a body, and it is easy to refer to its parts, so the body is a very suitable source domain for expressing a variety of things. The body jumps out at us, so to say, as the ultimate common ground to resort to in solving our communicative coordination problems" (Dingemanse, 2006: 59).

In addition to this, given the fact that the human body is closely associated with archetypes and with the primordial images of the body in myths, legends, and most belief systems and that these particular images are recycled in various idioms and phraseological units, in line with Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* (2009: 70) we claim that "the archetypal body refers to the human body seen as a locus of the sacred and as a source of deep psychological insights".

With this view in mind, to prove that there are important points of convergence between the way body part terms are conceptualized and the idiomatic meaning of somatic verbal idioms we would like to offer several pertinent examples.

For instance, the numerous "hand" idioms, based on imaginative and cognitive metaphors, underline the semantic complexity of this part of the body. In Kroeber's terms "the hand is a semantic pattern, a certain model and attitude of thought, reflected in a terminology of its own" (Butiurcă, 2011: 516). This is due to the fact that "the hand is considered to be the most important part of the body in the history of man's evolution" (Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* 2009: 84) because several studies show that once erect, man no longer used his hands to help him walk, but, instead, he used his hands to organize his life better, to create hunting instruments, tools, art objects and clothes, to communicate efficiently and eventually, to learn to write and thus, to convey his needs to others.

BDD-A24542 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:43 UTC)

These expressive powers of "the hand" determined by its historic and cultural significance explain why, among other values, "the hand" is the symbol of power (*e.g.* "to have the upper hand over somebody"), lack of responsibility (*e.g.* "to wash one's hands"), help (*e.g.* "to bear somebody a hand", "to give a helping hand"), skillfulness (*e.g.* "to be an old hand", "to be good with your hands", "to bring somebody up by hand"), fearlessness (*e.g.* "to put one's life into somebody's hands"), authority (*e.g.* "to change hands", "to have a hand in something"), and even of violence (*e.g.* "to take somebody/ something off one's hands", "to bite the hand that feeds one").

Moreover, another body part with symbolic implications is "the heart" because it is used figuratively as the seat of feelings in general and of specific emotions, it is "the centre of the corporeal microcosm, the most important organ, whose activity ensures the life of the organism" (Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* 2009: 73).

For this reason, conceptually, "the heart" stands for love (*e.g.* "to win sb.'s heart", "to steal sb.'s heart", "to lose your heart to sb."), kindness (*e.g.* "to have a heart", "to have a heart of gold"), courage (*e.g.* "to take heart from sth."), cowardice, fear (*e.g.* "to have one's heart in one's mouth", "to lose heart"), endurance (*e.g.* "to harden your heart against sb./ sth.", "to eat your heart out for sb./ sth.").

It is also the symbol of enthusiasm, willingness and sincerity in such idioms as: "to go heart and soul into something", "to bare one's heart/ soul to sb.", "to cross one's heart", "to wear one's heart upon one's sleeve", "to open your heart to sb.". Additionally, analyzing heart idioms we have noticed that on the one hand "the heart" may stand for our innermost part, that is, our conscience or soul (*e.g.* "to search one's heart", "to look into someone's heart/ soul", "to read sb.'s heart") and on the other, it may refer to our entire being, to our personality or character (*e.g.* "to have a heart of stone/ flint", "to have a heart of gold", "to have a light/ warm/ heavy heart", "to have the heart in the right place").

As for another important body part, "the head", following Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* (2009: 77) we claim that it symbolizes "reason, spirit, intelligence, power, and authority" because "it connects the human spirit to divinity and allows divine forces and supernatural energies to enter the body". This idea comes from Greek mythology which claims that Athena, the goddess of universal intelligence, was born out of Zeus's head and when offered Medusa's head, she chose to decorate her shield with it, because, even after Medusa's death, her head was believed to preserve tremendous destructive powers.

Thus, the lexeme "head" denotes the presence, the absence or the failure of mind or reason in an individual: "to have a good head on one's shoulders", "to have a long head", "to lay/ put heads together", "(not) make head or tail of sth.", "to need one's head examined", "to have one's head in the clouds".

It is also used metaphorically to express several attitudes such as: poise (*e.g.* "to keep a level/ cool head", "to keep one's head", "to lose one's head"), arrogance (*e.g.* "to go to one's head", "to have a swollen head", "to get the big/ swelled head"), impoliteness, anger (*e.g.* "to bite/ snap sb.'s head off", "to sit upon sb.'s head", "to be out of one's head"), determination (*e.g.* "to take it into one's head").

Similarly, another anatomical lexeme which is worth presenting is "the eye". Its archetypal values seem to derive both from Greek mythology in which "the all-seeing eyes of Argus [a giant with a hundred eyes] indicate enormous capacities of observing the exterior world and the Cyclopes that have only one eye in the centre of the forehead, are subhuman creatures, with a limited, blunt intellect" and from Buddhism in which "the small dot between the eyes of Buddha, the third eye, the Eye of

BDD-A24542 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:43 UTC)

Dharma, is a symbol of spiritual awakening, an organ of inner vision, of a superhuman state" (Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* 2009: 79).

Therefore, "the eye stands for seeing, observing, and understanding. It is the channel of revelation and of religious cognition" (Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* 2009: 79). Due to this fact, used metaphorically the lexeme "eye" denotes the ability to see (*e.g.* "to cast one's eyes/ an eye (over)", "to fix one's eyes", "to have an eagle's eye"), attention and interest (*e.g.* "to catch sb.'s eye", "to keep an eye on", "to be all eyes"), judgment and viewpoint (*e.g.* "to open sb.'s eyes", "to see with half an eye", "to draw/ pull the wool over sb.'s eyes").

Furthermore, what is interesting is that depending on the meaning of the lexemes with which the term "eye" enters into combination, the idioms thus, formed, may indicate a variety of attitudes or feelings: surprise (*e.g.* "not believe one's eyes"), meanness (*e.g.* "to give sb. the evil eye", "to throw dust in sb.'s eyes"), love (*e.g.* "to make eyes at sb.", "to cast sheep's eyes at sb."), admiration (*e.g.* "to please the eye"), happiness (*e.g.* "to have stars in your eyes").

Significantly, the last body part whose metaphoric meaning we deem important to discuss is "the mouth". On the one hand, Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* (2009: 81) point out that "seen as the organ which permits communication through speech, which tells stories and sings, the mouth turns into a powerful symbol of reason, supreme consciousness, spirituality, and art", but on the other hand, "because eating too much, telling lies, or hurling insults reveal a vicious nature, the mouth may also be associated with wild instincts, lust, and voracity". This last aspect is also emphasized by Bakhtin (1968: 104) which describes "the mouth" as "an orifice of the carnival body, which ingurgitates the world in joyful excess and for this particular reason, it should be associated with impurity and low social habits" (Pârlog, Brînzeu *et alii* 2009: 81).

Additionally, as telling the truth and keeping the secrecy of the rituals were the most important conditions imposed on neophytes when initiated into esoteric societies, the silence of the mouth represents the supreme condition of spiritual evolution (this is why, when joining a religious order, some monks take the vow of silence) and, thus, speaking too much is sometimes perceived as a sin or a violation of the religious vows.

Given the previous arguments, conceptually, most verbal idioms reveal that "the mouth" is associated with reason, supreme consciousness (*e.g.* "to put one's money where one's mouth is"), spirituality (*e.g.* "to look as if butter wouldn't melt in sb.'s mouth"), wild instincts (*e.g.* "to be all mouth"), lust (*e.g.* "to melt in your mouth'), impurity (*e.g.* "to leave a bad/ nasty taste in the/ your mouth") and low social habits (*e.g.* "to blow off one's mouth", "to run off at the mouth").

As all the above-mentioned examples illustrate, most idioms are related to the metaphoric definition of the lexemes employed as body parts, then as an integral part and a result of the inter-lingual parallel between cultures and their metaphoric values which, sometimes, motivate the idioms' meaning. All in all, as already stated we argue that there is a close inter-crossing between what the body-part lexeme expresses in terms of its cultural and figurative values and what the somatic verbal idiom conveys, proving, once more, that idioms are culture and language dependent units.

7. Concluding remarks

To conclude, taking everything into account, "an idiom is a sequence of words which operates as a single semantic unit, and like many multi-word units the meaning of the whole cannot be deduced from an understanding of the parts" (Gairns, Redman,

BDD-A24542 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:43 UTC)

2005: 35); this multi-word unit has distinct properties as the ones discussed by Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994: 492-493) and which have been briefly presented above.

This paper argues using pertinent examples that there is a close inter-crossing between what the body-part lexeme expresses in terms of its cultural and figurative values and what the somatic verbal idiom conveys. Consequently, the body-part lexemes are an integral part and a result of the inter-lingual parallel between cultures and their metaphoric values motivates the idioms' meaning based on the fact that idioms are culture and language dependent units. What is more, this paper tries to prove that the meanings of somatic verbal idioms have a close connection with national geographic environment, historical background and economic life, customs, and religious beliefs due to the symbolic values of the archetypal body seen as a carrier of deep psychological insights and sacred meanings.

References

Atkinson, T., *The Body*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2005

Butiurcă D., "The Metaphor of *Hand* in Idiomatic Expressions" in *The Proceedings of the European Integration: between tradition and modernity Congress*, Editura Universităţii "Petru Maior", vol. 4, pp. 516-534, 2011. Available at: *http://www.upm.ro/facultati_departamente/stiinte_litere/conferinte/situl_integrare_europeana/engllist4.html*

Čermák, F., "Somatic Idioms Revisited", *Europhras 95 Europäische Phraseologie im Vergleich: Gemeinsames Erbe und kulturelle Vielfalt, Hrsg. W. Eismann*. Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer, Bochum. (Studien zur Phraseologie und Parömiologie 15), p. 109-119, 1999. Available at: *https://ucnk.ff.cuni.cz/doc/somatic-idioms.rtf*

Dingemanse, M. *The Body in Yorùbá. A Linguistic Study*, MA Thesis, Leiden University, 2006. Available at: *http://www.vormdicht.nl/linguistics/the-body-in-yoruba.pdf*

Enfield, Majid *et alii*, "Cross-linguistic categorisation of the body: introduction", *Language Sciences*, no. 28, pp. 137-147, 2006. Available at: *http://www.researchgate.net/publication/223270648_Cross-linguistic_categorisation_of_the_body_Introduction*

Gairns, R., Redman, S., *Working with Words – A Guide to Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*, Cambridge University Press, London, 2005

Nenonen, M., "Prototypical Idioms: Evidence from Finnish", *SKY Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 20, pp. 309-330, 2007

Nunberg, G., Sag, I. A., Wasow, T., "Idioms", *Language*, *Linguistic Society of America*, vol. 70, no. 3, pp. 491-538, 1994

Parkinson, D., Francis, B., *Oxford Idioms – Dictionary for learners of English*, 4th edition, Oxford University Press, London, 2010

Pârlog, H., Brînzeu, P., Pârlog, A. C., *Translating the body*, Institutul European, Iaşi, 2009

Veisbergs, A., "Phraseological Units and Idioms, East and West and Where do we stand", *Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 3, pp. 109-121, 2013

BDD-A24542 © 2015 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-18 20:53:43 UTC)