

# Body Metaphors in Tamil Idioms

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## Introduction

Embodiment in general refers to the concept of representation of abstract ideas in terms of concrete elements. In cognitive science and, especially, cognitive linguistics, embodiment is considered a factor of cognition. This notion stems from the fact that not only the mind but also the body is involved in language and cognition. This is substantiated by two main premises of cognitive linguistics—first, language and cognition are not independent; second, the input for cognition is sensory perceptions and thus one cannot ignore the fact that body (ie, the source of sensory input) influences conceptualization. This view is different from the traditional notion in which only mind and language were taken into consideration for studies and less focus was given to the role of body in shaping cognition and language. Metaphors involve mapping of a source domain and a target domain based on an analogy that is shared between the two domains (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999). Kövecses (2010) identified that certain domains dominate the makeup of metaphors and that the source domain mostly comprise concrete entities, whereas the target domain mostly contains abstract concepts. This indicates that embodiment—speaking of abstract concepts in terms of concrete items—is one of the major characteristics of human language. In this study, among the various domains that constitute metaphors, the “human body” is chosen.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate how the body parts act as the source domain of metaphors in Tamil idioms and to discuss the underlying metaphoric concepts.

## Literature Review

The study by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) laid the foundation for metaphor studies (Gibbs 1994, 1999), which till then was not considered a topic of research in the arena of cognitive studies and was considered to be restricted to poetry and figurative language. These scholars identified a list of potential metaphors that is commonly found in almost all languages: for example, HAPPY IS

மலர்: 3

இதழ்: 2

தொகுதி: II

மாதம்: அக்டோபர்

வருடம்: 2018

ISSN: 2454-3993



UP, which makes us form sentences such as “I feel low,” “cheer up,” etc. Kövecses (2005, 2010) has done extensive work related to metaphors both from the cultural and cognitive point of view. After these studies, various investigations on metaphors of different languages have been published. In the case of Indian languages, there is a gap in the literature pertaining to metaphors. Singh (2017) has studied body metaphors, namely those of the heart, head, eye, hand, and mouth in Hindi. His work has integrated both cultural and cognitive foundations of the metaphors and their

### Methodology

Idioms that contain a body part as the main constituent in the source domain were collected from a secondary data source (Mozhi 1997) and from native speakers. The data sets were then qualitatively analyzed using the grounded theory method. Grounded theory is a qualitative, inductive method that focuses on exploring patterns in the data. The patterns were further analyzed and grouped, a process known as coding. This method encompasses three steps of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves coding the data sets by assigning them each a category. Then, axial coding follows; identifying similarities and overlaps between the data sets and grouping them into categories and subcategories. In selective coding, only codings that are related to those core categories are selected and unified to arrive at an integrated theoretical finding derived from the data. Thus, out of numerous idioms containing body parts in the source domain, those that involve metaphoric mapping were finally identified.

### Results and Discussion

Various idioms that contain a body part as a constituent of the source domain were studied. The literal meaning (source) of the idiom and the target meaning are described below along with the metaphoric attributes of each of the body parts. The literal meaning is enclosed within square brackets to enable comparison of literal meaning with the target domain.

#### Leg/foot

##### Leg is Base

The leg is conceptualized as the base.

- ka:lu:nRu [to base one’s foot]:  
to lay foundation
- contakka:lil nil [to stand by one’s own leg]:  
to be self-supporting.

##### Stepping is Involving

The act of stepping is conceived as involving in an abstract task.

- ka:l pati [to step on]:  
to involve in something first
- a:RRil oru ka:l ce:RRil ka:l [one leg in the mud and the other in the river]:  
to involve in two different things
- a:lam teriya:mal ka:lai viTu [to step in without knowing the depth]:  
to involve in something without knowing its potential risks.  
From this schema emerges the concept of “stepping back” conceptualizing “withdrawal”:
- ka:l pinne ilu [to pull back one’s leg]:  
to be reluctant
- ka:lai pinva:ku [to pull back one’s leg]:  
to withdraw.



### **Standing on One Leg is Stubbornness**

- oRRaikka:lil nil [to stand one leg]:  
to be so determined.

This metaphor seems to be derived from the imagery of a crane standing on one leg, awaiting its prey.

### **Pulling Someone's Leg is Cheating**

- ka:lai va:ri viTu [to pull someone's leg]:  
to fail someone

This metaphor is derived from the schema of FALLING IS DEFEAT. Thus, the idea of making someone fall by pulling their leg conceptualizes defeating.

### **Below the Foot is Subordination**

Legs are considered to have the least esteem in the Tamil culture, as is the case of most Asian cultures. For example, the act of touching someone's feet is an expression of submission or surrendering. This forms the basis of the following idioms:

- aTi varuTu [to fondle someone's leg]:  
to please someone for one's benefits
- ka:laTiyil [under one's leg]:  
to be under one's control
- kaalaTiyil viluntukkiTa [remain under someone's leg]:  
to be infatuated with someone.
- kaalaic cuRRi va: [to come around the legs]:  
to be infatuated with someone.

This idiom seems to stem from the imagery of a pet dog or cat that goes around a person's legs.

- ka:lilpo:TTu miti [to step on]:  
to treat with contempt.

### **Head**

The opposite extreme of the metaphor BELOW THE FOOT IS SUBORDINATION is the notion that the "head" being the highest member of the body. This can be realized in the following idioms:

- talaiyil tu:kkivaittu a:Tu [to dance keeping someone on one's head]:  
to treat someone with extremely high regards.
- talaime:l e:Ru [to climb on someone's head]:  
to dominate.

The notion of considering the head to have the highest rank and foot as the lowest is evident in the following idiom, ie, the lowest of a person approximated to the highest of another, indicating "submission":

- ka:la:liTTa ve:laiyait talaiya:l cey [to do a task given by one's leg using one's head]:  
to be too obedient/submissive to someone.

### **Head is Superiority**

The head is considered the highest and this is reflected in words such as talai-head/lead, talaivar-leader, etc. Hence, a notion of superiority is found to be assigned to the head. This is also reflected in some of the idioms, for example:

- talai irukka va:l a:Ta [tail taking over the head]:  
a subordinate member taking the lead (of a superior head)
- talaikku me:l [above one's head]:  
above one's level or capacity
- talaikku me:l veLLam [flood above one's head]:  
beyond one's control.

### **Facing Down is Humiliation**

- talaikuni [to face one's head down]:  
to feel humiliated

Similarly, the opposite of it is conceived as pride, ie:

- talai nimirntu [with the head straight up]:  
with pride/dignity

The above concept seems to evoke another idiom for vanity, a related concept. Excess of pride is conceptualized as having a heavy head.

- talaikkanam [heavy head]:  
vanity

Similarly, extreme 'anger or vanity' is conceived as though it rises to one's head:

- ...talaikku e:Ru [to rise to the head]:  
to feel extreme anger/vanity.

### **Head is Person**

This metonym evokes the following expressions:

- talaikku [per head]:  
per individual
- talaiyaik ka:TTa [to show one's head]:  
to visit.

### **Stomach**

In Tamil, certain emotions are conceptualized to be felt in the stomach.

#### **Fear**

- aTi vayiRRil neruppaikkaTTikkonTu [with fire in the lower abdomen]:  
with extreme awe
- vayiRRil puLiyaik karai [to dissolve tamarind in the stomach]:  
to hear some dreadful news
- vayiRRai kalakka [to feel like getting diarrhea]:  
to be extremely afraid.

#### **Happiness**

- vayiRRil pa:lai va:r [to pour water in the stomach]:  
to hear some soothing news.

#### **Jealousy**

- vayiRu paRRi eri [stomach burns]:  
to feel jealous/to feel rage against injustice.

#### **Sympathy**

- vayiRRaip picai [to squeeze the stomach]:  
to feel sympathy.



## **Stomach is One's Living**

The stomach is also one's basic living. This can be seen in the following idioms:

- *vayiRRil aTi* [to hit in the stomach]:  
to deprive someone's livelihood
- *vayiRRil maNNai po:Tu* [to throw sand on someone's stomach]:  
to ruin one's livelihood
- *vayiRRuk kavalai* [worry of the stomach]:  
problem of breadwinning
- *vayiRRuppilaippu* [livelihood of the stomach]:  
one's subsistence
- *vayiRRaik kaluvu* [to wash the stomach]:  
to manage to earn for one's food
- *vayiru vaLar* [to grow one's stomach]:  
to survive adopting undignified means.

## **Intestine**

Idioms that involve intestines are related to being terrified:

- *kulai naTuka* [intestines shivering]:  
to be terrified
- *kuTal terikka* [intestines splashing]:  
being terrified.

## **Hand**

The hand being the organ that is used to do work evokes various idioms related to doings:

### **Hand is Status**

- *kai iRaku* [one's hand lowering]:  
to decline in status
- *kai oku* [one's hand rising]:  
to prosper
- *oru kai po:Tu* [to put a hand]:  
to help/involve.

### **Hand is Help**

- *kai koTu* [to lend a hand]:  
to help
- *oru kaiya:y iru* [be one hand]:  
to be helpful
- *kai oTinta:R po:l* [as the hand is broken]:  
feel helpless
- *kai ma:Ru* [exchange of hands]:  
help.

### **Hand is Control**

- *kaiyil illai* [not in hand]:  
not in one's control
- *kaiyil po:Tu* [to put in one's hand]:  
to control/dominate someone
- *kai naluvu* [escape one's hand]:  
to miss the target

- kai mi:Ru [disobeying one's hand]:  
out of control
- kai viTu [leave one's hand]:  
to give up.

### ***Palm***

#### **Palm is Protection**

- uLLakayyil vaittu ta:ku [to hold someone in the palm]:  
to be very protective of someone.

### ***Face***

The face is used in certain idioms related to anger, sadness, and happiness.

- mukam malar [face blossoming]:  
face turning happy
- mugam civa [face turning red]:  
to become furious
- cuTu mu:ñci [hot face]:  
short-tempered person
- mukattil eLLum koLLum veTi [hot to pop grains]:  
to be furious
- mukam ca: [face dying]:  
to feel humiliated
- mukattait toka po:Tu [face down]:  
to be dull
- mukattai ka:TTu [to show one's face]:  
to shout at someone in anger.

### ***Eye***

#### **Eye is Dearness**

The eyes are considered very dear and important and this is evident from the fact that in Tamil, eye and pupil are used as endearment terms: eg, kaN (eye), kaNNe: (eye {vocative}), kaNmaNi (pupil), kaNNamma: (dear {femenine}), kaNNa (dear {masculine}). This conceptualization can also be observed in different idioms:

- kaNNukkuLLe: iru [to in one's eyes]:  
to miss someone
- irukaNkaL [two eyes]:  
two dear things/persons
- onRe: onRu kaNNe: kaNnu [only one eye]:  
one dear thing/person
- kaNNukku kaNNa:ka [eye for eye]:  
too dear
- kaNNukkuL vaittu [to keep in one's eye]:  
to treat someone very dear and special
- kaNNaik keTuttukkoL [to hurt the eyes]:  
to harm oneself.

#### **To Open Eyes is to Show Mercy**

The heart is conceptualized to have an eye which evokes a metaphor of opening the eye to indicate “one beginning to show mercy.”

- kaN tiRa [to open eyes]:  
to show mercy
- kaTavuLukku kaN illai [God has no eyes]:  
God is merciless.

### Eye is Watchfulness

- oru kaN vai [to keep an eye]:  
to keep an eye on someone
- kaNNa:ka iru [to be an eye]:  
to be focused on something.

### Eye is Consciousness

- kaNNai mu:TikkoNTu [closing one's eyes]:  
carelessly
- kaNNai maRai [to hide one's eye]:  
giving too much importance to someone/something that it blurs one's decision making
- kaN terinte: [despite being able to see]:  
despite being aware of the consequences.

### Mouth

The mouth is used in idioms related to speech, gossip, and other verbal activities as in the following examples:

- veRum va:yai mel [to chew an empty mouth]:  
to gossip habitually
- o:TTai va:i [mouth with a hole]:  
to be a bad keeper of secrets
- va:y vaLar [to grow mouth]:  
to become insolent in speech
- va:yaik kiLaRu [to stir someone's the mouth]:  
to pull words
- va:yai oTTu [to stick one's mouth]:  
to talk irresponsibly
- va:yuLLa piLLai [baby with mouth]:  
one who talks cleverly
- va:yilla: ji:van [mouthless creature]:  
a poor animal (that cannot speak)
- va:yilla: ji:van [mouthless insect]:  
a meek person (who does not raise his/her voice)
- va:y viTTu [from the mouth]:  
frankly
- va:y ni:L [mouth that extends]:  
to talk too much
- va:y cuttam [clean mouth]:  
truthful person/keeping one's words.

### Tongue

The tongue is involved in expressions related to speech and eating, for example,

- iraTTai na:kku [double tongue]:  
double-tongued

- na:kku ca: [tongue dying]:  
bored by tasteless/the same food.

### **Ear**

Idioms involving the ear are mostly related to hearing and listening, for example,

- ka:til e:Ru [to rise into someone's ears]:  
to listen
- pa:mpukka:tu [snake's ears]:  
sharp ears.

### **Nose**

#### **Nose is Intrusion**

The nose is correlated with interference for its protrusion, and this notion gives rise to the idiom of being intruding, comparable to English, “nosy”.

- mu:kkai nulai [to insert one's nose]:  
be nosy.  
Extreme anger is also indicated to occur in the nose:
- mu:kkukku me:la ko:vam [anger on one's nose]:  
extreme anger.  
Another expression involving the nose is related to humiliation or insult
- mu:kkaRu [nose being cut]:  
feel humiliated.

### **Brain**

The brain is used idioms related to thinking.

- mu:Laiyai kacakku [to squeeze the brain]:  
to think hard
- uTampella:m mu:Lai [brain in the whole body]:  
to be intelligent.

The idiom “brainwash” (mu:Laiccalavai) is also present in Tamil with the same target meaning.

### **Blood**

#### **Blood is Innateness**

The blood is considered to be related to one's intrinsic nature and some idioms reflect this notion:

- uTampil nalla rattam o:Tu [to have good blood]:  
to be a good person
- ...rattatile u:riyatu [to have...in one's blood]:  
to have something innately/by nature
- rattam koti [blood boiling]:  
to be angry (against injustice).

The idiom “to freeze one's blood” is also present in Tamil (irattam urai) with the same target meaning.

### **Metaphors of toil**

Certain organs are considered to suffer during hard work and hence used in expression of toil:

- aTivayiRRaip piTittukkoNTu [holding one's stomach]:  
with strenuous efforts



- nakku taLLu [tongue falling out]:  
too hard to do
- kaNnu pituku [eyes squeezing out]:  
too hard to do
- va:yil nurai taLLu [mouth foaming]:  
too hard to do
- iTuppu uTai [breaks the hip]:  
to toil.

### **Numerals**

It is interesting to note that in Tamil, the word “arai” means hip as well as half and similarly “ka:l” means quarter as well as leg. This indicates that the body is considered a unit and the numerals half and quarter are metaphorically equated with the half and quarter of the human body. Similarly, the root word for tooth and many are “pal.” Thus, not only idioms, but also various lexical items contain metaphors and these are examples of body metaphors.

### **Conclusion**

The study provides a list of metaphors and metonyms, a subgroup of metaphors, that underlie various idioms in Tamil language that make use of body parts in their source domain. From the findings, it is evident that the body plays a major role in conceptualization. Further comparative studies on such metaphors will reveal how conceptualization differs from each language and how conceptual metaphors are similar in this regard across languages.

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