

The right-left conceptual mapping in a comparative and diachronic perspective

This paper investigates the right-left conceptualization of space in ancient Indo-European languages. In a crosslinguistic perspective, RIGHT and LEFT terms can be recruited to designate cardinal directions (Hertz 1909: 567; Lloyd 1962: 59; Brown 1983: 136). These terms turn out to be associated respectively to *east* and *west* in languages such as Vedic Sanskrit, Hittite, and Homeric Greek. However, the interpretation of such metaphorical mapping from the source domain to the target domain is still an open question. This is also due to some unresolved inconsistencies between etymology and semantic developments emerged in the reconstruction of the Indo-European roots of these terms since the earlier studies of Grimm. The German linguist ascribed the origin of the spatial uses of RIGHT and LEFT to the orientation of the observer's body (1848: 981). The question is further complicated by the unclear origin of linguistic metaphors for positive and negative valence, through an associative mapping from the concrete right-left space to the abstract emotional concepts of 'goodness' and 'badness'. The mental spatial schema is indeed activated to represent such concepts by means of the well-known Good is Right and Left is Bad conceptual mapping (cf. Casasanto 2009; 2014). From a strictly linguistic perspective, a strong asymmetry has been observed between RIGHT and LEFT terms. More specifically, while the RIGHT terms of most Indo-European languages derive from one and the same root **deks-* (Walde 1930: 784; Pokorny 1959: 190), the LEFT terms cannot be traced back to one common ancestor (cf. Buck 1949: 865). Traditionally, such an asymmetry has been ascribed to cultural conventions (cf. Van Leeuwen-Turnovcová 1990), which, however, would ultimately reflect the original embodied asymmetry within the hand domain (cf. Meillet 1906 [1982]: 290; Cuillandre 1947; Heesterman 1959: 256; Giannakis 2019: 256-257). Yet, from an etymological perspective, it has been shown how the words for RIGHT and LEFT derive from lexical roots that are not primarily related to the sides of the body (cf. Foolen 2019: 145), thus challenging an embodied origin of these mental metaphors. Now, recent studies on Indo-European spatial Frames of Reference (FoRs) have revealed that RIGHT and LEFT terms could be used within an absolute or geocentric FoR (Bartolotta 2022). Such results might shed light on the transfer pattern from the concrete domain of spatial regions to the abstract domain of right-left dimensions. Indeed, although it is widely assumed that the human body is the main source domain for the linguistic conceptualization of the entire domain of spatial relations, and that, accordingly, hands are the conceptual source for RIGHT and LEFT polarity (Heine 1997: 49; cf. Bickel 1994: 32), the analysis of the data from a comparative and diachronic perspective seems to suggest a different path of this conceptual metaphor. More specifically, the textual analysis of the RigVeda and the Homeric poems, aside from supporting pieces of evidence derived from Hittite oracle and ritual texts (cf. Ünal 1978; Puhvel 1983; Sakuma 2009) and the Umbrian Tabulae Iguvinae (Prosdocimi 1979; 2015; Untermann 2000: 475), suggests that the extension to hands is the result of a conceptual metaphor which goes from cosmogony (involving the concrete movements of the sun) to the body (cf. Kuiper 1970: 128; Gonda 1972: 8; Abrams & Primack 2001: 1769), thus proving that the metaphoric mapping between body-parts and other domains is not unidirectional (cf. Sinha & Jensen de López 2000: 24; Yu 2008: 408).

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