

Complementarity between meronymy and frame of reference use in Diidxa Za: perspectives from an endangered language

Gabriela Pérez Báez
Smithsonian Institution
peresbaez@si.edu

Diidxa Za readily uses body part-derived meronyms to refer to object parts. This has been described for a number of Mesoamerican languages. The analysis of Ayoquesco Zapotec (MacLaury 1989) and Tseltal Maya (Levinson 1994) raise questions about the processes that enable the semantic extension of body part terms to name object parts, whether metaphor- or algorithm-based, their level of productivity and the requirements for source to target domain mapping.

This presentation will offer a detailed analysis of the meronymic system of Diidxa Za following a Structure Mapping Theory (Gentner 1983, Gentner & Markman 1997, Gentner et al. 2001, inter alia) to show that the different degrees of productivity of body part-derived meronyms correspond to the three types of comparisons proposed by the theory: literal similarity, analogy and abstraction. This approach suggests that the proposals in MacLaury (1989) and Levinson (1994) are not incompatible but rather correspond to different points in a continuum of comparison types. This explains a problematic mismatch between properties of the source and target domains raised in Levinson (1994) about the role of metaphor in meronym assignment.

Further, this approach elucidates the complementarity between meronymy and frames of reference (FoR) use. In describing the location of a Figure in relation to a Ground, Diidxa Za speakers strongly disprefer the relative FoR (Pérez Báez 2011). Yet, in cases of abstraction and greater productivity of body part-derived meronyms the relative FoR becomes critical: the assignment of meronyms to objects of simple geometry such as a ball or a cube depends upon the relative FoR.

This study is placed in the context of the relevance of linguistic diversity for the advancement of a scientific understanding of the human language faculty. Diidxa Za is spoken in 22 municipalities of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico but only in one are children speaking it. Reflections will be offered about the contributions made by Diidxa Za and a diversity of languages to the study of spatial language and cognition over the last four decades and the loss of opportunities that would result from understudied endangered languages going silent.

- Gentner, D. 1983. Structure-mapping: A theoretical framework for analogy. *Cognitive Science* 7, 155–170.
- Gentner, D. & A.B. Markman. 1997. Structure Mapping in Analogy and Similarity. *American Psychologist* 52-1, 45–56.
- Gentner, D., B. Bowdle, P. Wolff & C. Boronat. 2001. Metaphor is like analogy. In Gentner, D., K. J. Holyoak & B. N. Kokinov (eds.), *The analogical mind: Perspectives from cognitive science*, 199–253. MIT Press: Cambridge MA.
- Levinson, S.C. 1994. Vision, shape, and linguistic description: Tzeltal body-part terminology and object description. In S. C. Levinson & J. B. Haviland (eds.), *Space in Mayan languages*. Special Issue in Linguistics 32-4, 791–856.
- MacLaury, R. E. 1989. Zapotec body-part locatives: prototypes and metaphoric extensions. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 55-2, 119–154.
- Pérez Báez, Gabriela. 2011. Spatial frames of reference preferences in Juchitan Zapotec. *Language Sciences* 33: 943–960.