

The embarrassment of riches: ‘Head’ words in the Indo-European family

The head is one of the principal anatomical components not only in humans but also in most other animals. The meaning ‘head’ is included in nearly all variants of the Swadesh list, since the identification of the head as a distinct and vitally important body part, labelled with a simplex word, seems to be a cross-cultural universal (Andersen 1978: 352–353). Thanks to their high frequency of use and their “basic concept” status, words meaning ‘head’ tend to be diachronically stable and therefore important for comparative reconstruction. Their expected retention rate – as estimated on the basis of data from several uncontroversial language families – is on a par with such words as ‘heart’ or ‘foot’ (Holman *et al.* 2008: 351). On the other hand, culture-specific factors may lead to the proliferation of secondary meanings, the rise of stylistically marked near-synonyms (e.g. Polish *leb* beside *głowa* ‘head’), and consequently to the locally accelerated evolution of the words in question. This seems to have happened repeatedly in the Indo-European family, in which not only the oldest reconstructible ‘head’ word, **reh* - (Nussbaum 1986), but also secondary, branch-specific terms have often been subject to lexical replacement (cf. German *Kopf* for Germanic **xa(u)βuðq* or the ousting of Lat. *caput* by reflexes of *testa* in most of Romance). The same is true of semantically similar concepts like ‘forehead’, which may readily become co-opted for figurative use and survive in the long run mainly as lexical fossils – derived adverbs or prepositions (e.g. loc.sg. **h énti* ‘at the fore’ > Lat. *ante*, Gk. *vṛí*, Ved. *ánti*, etc.) – while the original noun is replaced by a novel term. This variability of ‘head’ in Indo-European contrasts with the remarkable conservatism of some other body-part terms, such as ‘eye’, ‘ear’, ‘tooth’ and ‘heart’. In this paper, we shall attempt to identify recurrent patterns of semantic change in the emergence of new synonyms and the polysemic development of inherited ‘head’ words and their derivatives. Insights derived from recent studies of “embodiment” (Maalej and Yu 2011) will be used to explain the observed tendencies.

References

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