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## ICONICITY AND/OR METAPHOR IN THE YOGA JARGON?

### 1.Introduction

In this study we explore the interplay of iconicity and metaphor in the terminology of yoga practice by looking at the visual resemblance of asana names and the image content of the metaphoric source domain. According to Danesi (1995: 299), “the particular content of a metaphor can be said to constitute an interpretation of reality in terms of mental icons that literally allows us to see what is being talked about.” As our aim is to indicate the possible relevance of categories of cognitive linguistics in the āsana practice, our objective is twofold: (1) to identify iconicity and metaphor in yoga asana terminology, and (2) to see how world/encyclopedic knowledge contributes lexical knowledge. To this end, we will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the role of iconicity in language processing in general and in the context of asana practice in particular?
2. What is the relationship between metaphor and iconicity?
3. Does the metaphor-icon link support asana practice teaching and learning?

The cognitive approach to language is based on the observation that linguistic meaning is built upon *embodied experience*, that is, the most elementary experience of the body – its orientation in, and movement through space, its perceptive activity and interaction with the environment – provides the basis for language. Consequently, as all cognitive structures are derived from recurrent sensorimotor patterns, linguistic structures are likewise constructed and interpreted based on these patterns.

The human ability to make and understand metaphors seems to be an automatic cognitive process, one that probably evolved along with our ability to create and understand language. Because metaphors are processed automatically, they can be used for fast communication, as is the case of jargon, which promotes economy and precision of expression. According to Mc Arthur (1992: 545) jargon is “the specialized language of a trade,

profession or other group” and, for those who understand it, it is a kind of “verbal shorthand”, “an efficient and effective language”.

As the language of yoga uses Sanskrit, one of the oldest human languages, it was obvious that asanas needed to be labelled by updated, comprehensible, ordinary terms. For example, holding the tree pose is challenging enough, without trying to figure out what Vrksasana is at the same time! Being based on visually iconic description of information, asana terminology incorporates what cognitive linguists call *encyclopedic knowledge*, viz. information that is predictable from world knowledge. It is non-linguistic knowledge to which a linguistic unit such as a word potentially provides access.

## 2. On metaphor, iconicity and the metaphor - iconicity relation

A conceptual *metaphor* serves to establish correspondences or mappings between a source domain and a target domain by projecting representations from one conceptual domain onto corresponding representations in another conceptual domain.

Metaphors may be imagined from visual, auditory and other sensory experience. The image content of this trope, particularly of a source domain, is an iconic moment involved in metaphor. (Hiraga 2005).

A recurring theme in the inquiry into the nature of the linguistic sign (since Plato through Saussure and Peirce and the present day) is the opposite of arbitrariness (the motivated relationship between the form and the meaning of a sign, based on resemblance (a form signifies meaning), a characteristic of languages (both spoken and signed) that appears both in language processing and language acquisition.

The particular content of a metaphor can be said to constitute an interpretation of reality in terms of mental icons that literally allows us to see what is being talked about (Danesi 1995: 266)

In spoken languages, *iconicity* is the direct imitative form-meaning relationship possible for:

- (a) acoustic properties and events (animal sounds or the sounds made by objects in motion or upon impact on other objects (*whoosh, swish, whack, crack, crash, bang*);
- (b) phonesthemic forms: words ending in -ack (*whack and crack*) that denote forceful, punctuated contact;
- (c) words beginning with gl- (*gleam, glow, glint, glitter*) that denote a meaning related to light of low intensity ;

(d) words beginning with wr- (*writhe, wriggle, wrist, write*) that refer to twisting.

Properties of experiences especially of the visual, tactile, as well as mental and emotional type may systematically correspond to properties of vowels and consonants, and their patterns of combination, e.g. reduplication (Hamano, 1986).

According to Ohala(1983), there is a relationship between the impression of physical size and the vocal tract size. In spoken languages the function of mimetic words in narratives and story-telling is to bring to life events through vivid depiction and enactment.

Similar to the examples of onomatopoeic and sound-symbolic words from spoken languages, iconic form-meaning mappings in sign languages are created by the handshape which represents certain salient features of real-world objects or events. There can be several choices about how to iconically represent a referent. For example, the British Sign Language (BSL) sign for *lion* iconically represents a lion's pouncing paws, while the American Sign Language (ASL) sign for lion iconically represents the mane. Therefore, the visual-spatial modality affords a visually iconic depiction of information in the case of signed languages,

Given the universal experiences on which they are based, conceptual metaphors can potentially be universal. Humans use animal metaphors to frame their relationship with the environment and their place in an evolutionary continuum.

The source domain of animal characteristics and appearance that will be used in our discussion of yoga asana terminology can be better understood if we first consider The Great Chain of Being Metaphor. Lakoff and Turner (1989: 172) point out that the Great Chain of Being Metaphor is

"[...] a tool of great power and scope because [...] it allows us to comprehend general human character traits in terms of well-understood nonhuman attributes; and, conversely, it allows us to comprehend less well-understood aspects of the nature of animals and objects in terms of better-understood human characteristics."

Therefore, the structure of the Great Chain of Being is characterized by its bi-directionality which involves upward and downward mapping of features/attributes.

Features can be transferred from a higher level of the Chain to a lower one, e.g. a *faithful, friendly dog*, or from a lower level to a higher one, e.g. *This man is a pig* (applied, usually contemptuously to a person).

### 3. Asana practice and names

The practice of Yoga has been around for about 5,000 years with its origin in India, and involves the combination of spiritual, physical and mental elements. *Hatha* yoga is the most modern branch of yoga that involves different body postures and movement while controlling the breathing patterns. In Sanskrit, “Ha” represents sun and “tha” represents moon, the opposites, and all the attributes that go with them: hot and cold, dark and light, physical and mental, male and female. These opposites need to be balanced in our experience of the world through yoga practice. Hatha is the basic style of yoga that constitutes the basis for most styles of yoga, often used to describe slower-paced classes. The body posture used in both medieval hatha yoga and modern yoga is called *an asana*.

The term *asana* is derived from the Sanskrit word for 'seat'. While many of the oldest mentioned asanas are seated postures for meditation, asanas may be standing, seated, arm-balances, twists, inversions, forward bends, backbends, or reclining, in prone or supine positions. Many yoga poses are named after heroes, saints and sages of India and Hindu myths. For example, as a way of connecting to, and revering deities, many yoga postures represent not just what the deity looks like, but also everything they stand for, so that when the posture is practiced the focus should be on the divine being's energy and essence.

Thus, Natarajasana, derived from the Sanskrit words *nata* 'dancer' and *raja* 'king', an asana shown in Figure 1, represents the cosmic dancing form of the Hindu God Shiva, and symbolizes the dance of the universe, the fluctuating, changing ups and downs of life. Shiva embodies the dynamism of life, the rhythm and cycles of nature. As in life, whilst the external posture may be full of movement and much wobbling when we practise, it requires a still, calm mind in order to stay balanced:

“Natarajasana is all about balance: You're simultaneously kicking and reaching. It's a balance of effort and ease that requires all of your attention. Some days I fall out of the pose, others I'm steady and strong. It's a good reminder that as it is in yoga, it is in life. Every day is a new chance to find balance.” (Tracy Middleton, Yoga Journal's brand director)



Figure 1. The Dancer Pose (Natarajasana)

The importance of the correct understanding of the meaning of asana is underlined by Judith Hanson Lasater, an American yoga teacher and writer:

“It is ironic that most people think of asana as the “movements” of yoga when actually asana represents the ability of the practitioner to stay still. And this staying still is a powerful practice. When one learns to hold the pose one learns to let the stillness of the body become a backdrop for the constant movement of the mind”. (<https://www.yogauonline.com/yoga-practice-tips-and-inspiration/judith-hanson-lasater-embodiment-spirit-understanding-meaning>)

The visual-spatial modality affords a visually iconic depiction of information in the case of asana poses. Thus, similar to iconically motivated handshapes in sign languages, the yogi’ body can take the form of various creatures “from the smallest to the tallest’ (Iyengar 1979), showing respect for life in all its diversity. Besides the Sanskrit names, the asanas have been given a variety of English names that relate to animals and nature, reminding of people’s observations in the world around them.

### 3.1. Iyengar’s (1979) view of yoga asana names

While doing asanas, the yogi can take the shape of different creatures, from the tiniest ones (the butterfly, the caterpillar, the locust, the snail, the dragonfly) to the biggest (the lion, the seal, the shark, the crocodile), because all creation is in harmony:

“Whilst performing asanas the yogi’s body assumes many forms resembling a variety of creatures. His mind is trained not to despise any creature, for he knows that throughout the whole gamut of creation, from the lowliest insect to the most perfect sage, there breathes the same Universal Spirit, which assumes

innumerable forms". (Iyengar B. K. S. 1979. *Light on Yoga: The Bible of Modern Yoga*: 42)

Each posture consists of the phase of entering into the pose, maintaining the pose and coming out of the pose, all according to a formalised pattern. Asana names are related to plants, insects, fishes, reptiles, birds and mammals:

"The names of the asanas are significant and illustrate the principle of evolution. Some are named after vegetation like the tree (vrksa) and the lotus (padma) ; some after insects like the locust (salabha) and the scorpion (vrschika) ; some after aquatic animals and amphibians like the fish (matsya), the tortoise (kiirma), the frog (bheka or manduka) or the crocodile (nakra). There are asanas called after birds like the cock (kukkuta), the heron (baka), the peacock (mayiira) and the swan (harilsa). They are also named after quadrupeds like the dog (svana), the horse (vatayana), the camel (ustra) and the lion (sirilha). Creatures that crawl like the serpent (bhujailga) are not forgotten, nor is the human embryonic state (garbha-pinda) overlooked." (Iyengar B. K. S. 1979. *Light on Yoga: The Bible of Modern Yoga*: 42)

### 3.2. Data analysis

A closer look at about 80 basic asana terms that we found in online glossary sources brings even more evidence in support of Iyengar's view of asana terminology. The classification we propose below orders classes of forms of being, taking into account the Great Chain of Being and also includes the category of artefacts:

- I. Mammals: *baby, child, reclined child, warrior, peaceful warrior, cobbler, camel, hare, (downward/upward facing) dog, puppy, cat, cat pulling its tail, cat-cow, cow, cow-face, horse face, seal, lion, monkey, half monkey, deer* (23)
- II. Birds: *pigeon, dove, eagle, eagle arms, feathered peacock, peacock tail heron, crow, swan, seated swan, sleeping swan, cockerel, rooster, stork*(13)
- III. Reptiles: *cobra, tortoise, crocodile* (3)
- IV. Marine animals: *fish, dolphin, seal, shark, side seal, crocodile* (6)
- V. Insects: *butterfly, half-butterfly, reclined butterfly locust, dragon fly, caterpillar* (5)
- VI. Non-vertebrates: *snail, scorpion* (2)
- VII. Plants: *lotus, tree, palm tree* (3)
- VIII. Artefacts: *table-top, bridge, plow/plough, wheel, plank, bow, boat, saddle, chair, bowtie, shoelace, reclined shoelace* (12)
- IX. Mythological creatures: *sphinx, dragon, winged dragon* (3)

By way of illustrating metaphor and iconicity in yogic postures let us consider some well known asanas:

The Cat pose or Marjariasana (derived from Sanskrit Marjari 'cat' and asana 'posture' or 'pose'), shown in Figure 2, imitates the periodical upward and downward stretching of a cat:



Figure 2. The Cat Pose (Marjariasana)

In the Cobra posture or Bhujangasana (derived from Sanskrit *bhujanga* meaning 'cobra' or 'snake' and *asana* meaning 'pose'), the final position emulates the action of a cobra raising itself just prior to striking at its prey:



Figure 3. The Cobra Posture (Bhujangasana)

One of the most common yoga postures, reminding of an inverted 'V' shape, is the Downward facing dog (AdhoMukhaSvanasana), as shown in Figure 4. The Sanskrit name comes from the words *adhas* meaning 'down', *mukha* meaning 'face', *svana* meaning 'dog' and *asana* meaning 'posture' or 'seat'.



Figure 4. The Downward facing dog pose (AdhoMukhaSvanasana)

This asana is named as such because in this yoga pose, the body looks like that of a dog relaxing and stretching while burrowing its face downwards towards the shoulders.

Actually, the asana that makes the transition to the Downward facing dog pose is a more basic one, called The Table Top Pose or Bharmanasana. As can be seen in Figure 5, in this pose the back of the person resembles a tabletop and the spine is like a stick. This asana is practiced to bring balance in the body while all the muscles in the body are equally stretched.



Figure 5. The Table Top Pose (Bharmanasana)

This posture also helps to progress to other poses, like the Plank Pose (Phalakasana), and the Thread The Needle Pose (UrdhvaMukhaPasasana). These three asanas, viz. The Table Top, the Plank and the Thread The Needle Pose, have been included in the class I have called 'Artefacts' in the classification of asanas proposed at the beginning of this section.

The next section, based on samples taken from yoga sites like *10 minutes morning yoga with Adriene* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klmBssEYkdU>) or *Sunrise yoga 15 minutes yoga practice* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7xsYgTeM2Q>)



will deal with the grammatical features that individualize the language used in yoga.

#### 4. Metaphoric verb structures used in yoga teaching

Interestingly enough, the language of instruction used in the yoga practice may diverge from its typical use in ordinary instruction texts. In example (1) the shift from the second person (*your next inhale*) to the first person (*I'm ...milking it, my sit bones*) proves that the relationship between the instructor and the student is not formal, distant, based on dominance.

- (1) On *your* next inhale, rather than shooting a look up, crunching the back of the neck, *I'm* really *milking it*, finding what feels good, sending some energy to my sit bones.

Moreover, there are instances of linguistic creativity mostly based on metaphor, as in the examples below:

- (2) a. *Shine* your collarbones/ *Put a smile on* your collarbones/Smile your collarbones wide.  
b. *Melt* your heart/ Melt from your heart.  
c. Make the back of your thigh *smile*.  
d. Tuck the chin slightly, *hug the low ribs* in, and up.  
e. Inhale, reach for the sky. *Palms kiss* overhead.

The verbal structures in the sentences above suggest that there is no need to work at the pose really hard, it should be done with kindness and gentleness, thus responding (iconically) to a significant human need and the basic hatha yoga principle.

#### 5. Focus on prepositions and use of the definite article before body part names

Another characteristic that shows up in the language of yoga instructors is the very frequent use of prepositions as in (3) and (4):

- (3) And slowly allow the knees to descend. They kiss the earth. We walk them *out* as wide as the yoga mat . ...If you want to ease *into* the day a little more, take the palms together *up* and *behind* the head bending *at* the elbows. Soften *through* your jaw. You rock the forehead gently massaging it *on* the mat. ... Walk the knees *underneath* the hips, curl the toes *under* ... stack the right hip *over* the left... lower *back down* all the way *to* the knees ... keep that low rib cage hugging *in*.

- (4) Cross one ankle *over* the other as you come *through to* a seat. The palms come *to* the knees. Circle back to the word that you chose and take it on to the rest of your day."

It is common knowledge that in ordinary English it is natural to use possessives while referring to someone's body parts (e.g. turn *your* head, lift *your* arm).

During asana practice, however, expressions such as "don't lose the outer wrist", "lift the knees up", "don't harden the eyebrows" are commonplace. Through this operation, body parts become abstracted, generalised and thus separated from their owner. This seems to be related to their subsequent animisation and personalisation, crucial for the interpretation of certain religious-philosophical notions.

### **Conclusions**

The need to relate something that is already familiar to new information, for its quick understanding and application, is also evident in the terminology used for yoga asanas. The conciseness and commonality of asana terms can equally be accounted for by the temporal dimension of the yoga practice which includes production, processing and execution.

The names used for the shapes taken by the yogi's body are explanatory metaphors (less time consuming and easier to process) which correspond to most forms of being included in the structure of the Great Chain. The language used for yoga practice is obviously embodied as it is based on interaction with the environment and perceptive activity.

The sensory experience shows up in metaphor, which includes an iconic moment provided by a source domain. The source domains identified in this study include 23 mammals, 13 birds, 12 artefacts, 6 marine animals, 5 insects, 3 reptiles, 3 plants and 2 non-vertebrates.

The metaphoric verbal structures accompanying the execution of some asanas also help to understand abstract concepts; they are creative, novel metaphors that convey the idea of kindness and gentleness.

The linguistic tendency towards animisation and personalization shows up in the use of the definite article before body part names.

On the whole, the yoga jargon is intended to trigger emotions, draw attention and motivate action toward some state of well-being to oneself and to the others.

#### DATA SOURCES:

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## ICONICITÉ ET /OU MÉTAPHORE DANS LE JARGON DU YOGA ?

**Résumé :** Dans cet article, nous menons une étude des métaphores dans un corpus de 80 termes de yoga et expressions verbales accompagnant l'exécution des postures de yoga. La motivation du choix de ce sujet est de comprendre comment la métaphore et l'iconicité peuvent aider la communication dans le contexte de la pratique du yoga. Le cadre général adopté à cette fin est la linguistique cognitive car la métaphore est un instrument clé dans la présentation et la compréhension des postures de yoga. Nous avons identifié et classé les métaphores dans le corpus en fonction de la ressemblance visuelle des noms d'asanas qui évoquent le mécanisme de la Grande Chaîne de l'Être, « une échelle de formes d'être – humain, animal, végétal, objets inanimés » (Lakoff et Turner 1989 : 167). Nous avons également pris en compte des fragments de cours de yoga où les structures verbales métaphoriques indiquent la créativité linguistique de l'enseignant. En outre, l'utilisation fréquente de prépositions et l'utilisation de l'article défini au lieu de l'adjectif possessif avant les noms des parties du corps complètent les caractéristiques du jargon dans le contexte de la pratique des asanas.

**Mots-clés :** *jargon du yoga, asana, métaphore, Grande Chaîne de l'Être, iconicité.*

**Abstract:** In this paper, we carry out a study of metaphors in a corpus of 80 yoga terms and verbal expressions accompanying the execution of yoga postures. The motivation for the choice of this topic is to understand how metaphor and iconicity can help communication in the context of yoga practice. The general framework adopted for this purpose is cognitive linguistics because metaphor is a key instrument in the presentation and understanding of yoga poses. We have identified and classified metaphors in the corpus according to the visual resemblance of asana names that evoke the mechanism of the Great Chain of Being, "a scale of forms of being – human, animal, plant, inanimate objects" (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 167). We have also considered fragments from yoga lessons where metaphorical verbal structures point to the teacher's linguistic creativity. Besides, the frequent use of prepositions and the use of the definite article instead of the possessive adjective before body part names round up the jargon characteristics in the context of asana practice.

**Keywords:** *yoga jargon, asana, metaphor, Great Chain of Being, iconicity.*