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The eating experience across cultures: a cognitive view

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This study presents a contrastive cognitive study of the uses of the verb 'eat' in Tunisian Arabic (for short) TA, English and French. This study investigates the metaphoric use of the lexical unit 'eat' in the above cited languages. The different metaphorical expressions of the verb 'eat' are taken from general language and specialized dictionaries in English and French. The TA expressions are, however, collected from speakers of this language through interviews. The analysis produces two clusters of meanings; one in which the meaning is built on the FULL-EMPTY schemas and the eating experience serves to conceptualize the disappearance of the eaten element and in the other cluster the human body, whether partially or totally, is either the eater or the food. In the three languages, the eater and the food play a crucial role in creation and understanding of metaphors, metonymies and related tropes.

In the first cluster of meaning the eating experience describes entities eating one another. This move from the state of being full to being empty is framed in terms of eating experiences.

tractors eat petrol.

Cette activité mange beaucoup de temps. (This activity eats a lot of time)

l-karaba t-akil essence. (The car eats petrol).

These examples are governed by the conceptual metaphor EATING IS CONSUMING. The feature of eating characterising living beings is transferred to objects. Accordingly, food in itself turns into a range of consumed entities.

The second cluster of meanings builds on the embodied experience of eating as it plays a crucial role in the creation and understanding of metaphors. The different expressions involved in this cluster capture many abstract experiences by conceptualizing the human being as the eater of other human beings and the food of other human beings at the same time. The human body is exploited partially by eating human organs or wholly through eating the self. The following table illustrates some of the metaphorical meanings of the eating experiences as it is used in the three languages.

Relevant senses associated with eating TA English French

- eat one another (dominance) + _ +



- eating with the eye (avidity) + _ +
- eating the heart (grief / sufferance) + + _
- eating the face (embarrassment) + _ _
- eating the head (death) + _ _
- eating the self (anger) + _ +

Table1: examples of some relevant senses associated with eating in TA, English and French.

These examples show that the embodied experience of eating serves to conceptualize different concepts. The understanding of these different terms is mediated by the culture. Throughout these examples we notice that the three cultures/languages agree in framing emotions metaphorically through the eating experience but each culture selects its own 'meal'. While eating the heart expresses a feeling of sufferance in TA and English, the French culture does not select this organ for eating. The interaction between the embodied action of eating and the cultural context accounts for this difference among the three languages.

The implication of the present study will be bringing about a further claim in support of the increasing role of socio-cultural context in shaping the creation and understanding of metaphors. The present study points to the importance of the context in determining the configurations of conceptual metaphors governing the understanding of eating in particular and food metaphors in general.