

Cross-Cultural Insights into Body Part Naming

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Abstract

Human bodies follow similar designs. Yet, languages differ in how they divide the body into parts to name them (Brown 1976; Enfield et al. 2006; Majid et al. 2015; Huisman et al. 2021). In this study, we investigate the similarities and differences in naming two separate body parts with the same word, i.e., colexifications. Using a computational approach, we analyze networks of body part vocabularies across 1,028 languages. The analyses focus on the influence of perceptual features that lead to variations in body part colexification networks and on a comparison of network structures in different semantic domains. Results reveal that adjacent body parts are frequently colexified, while variations in vocabularies are influenced by perceptual features like shape and function. Compared to semantic domains like emotion and color, body part colexification networks show less variation across language families. This research presents the first large-scale comparison of body part vocabularies and provides important insights into the variability of a universal human domain.