

# The metaphor of the “body politic” across languages and cultures. Andreas Musolff

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Published in: Frank Polzenhagen, Zoltán Kövecses, Stefanie Vogelbacher and Sonja Kleinke (eds.). *Cognitive Explorations into Metaphor and Metonymy*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 85-99.

## *Pre-publication version*

### 1. Introduction

- (1) Student A: ‘The *head* of the *body* represents the Queen of England, as she is in charge of the whole country and she is royalty. The features of the *head* (*eyes, nose, mouth and ears*) represent the different official people, such as politicians, the Prime Minister, the Government.’
- (2) Student B: ‘Beijing: *brain* (government); Shanghai: *hug/arm* (welcome to foreign people); Guangzhen: *feet* (keep China going); Hong Kong: *face* (familiar to everyone, representative); Taiwan: *hair* (we can live without hair but it is necessary for beauty).’

The examples above come from a research corpus<sup>1</sup> of answers given by MA students at the University of East Anglia (UEA) who completed the task of describing the *body politic* of their home country. As can be surmised from the geographical references, the first answer was given by a British student, the second one by a Chinese student. But the two answers do not just differ in terms of geography but reveal a difference in the conceptual structure of the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor.<sup>2</sup> The first response describes

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<sup>1</sup> The research corpus has been built up over the years 2011-13 and is still under construction (see Musolff 2014a *in press*).

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, it would be more accurate to analyse the data as evidence for the NATION-AS-PERSON metaphor, of which the NATION-AS-BODY mapping is a part or

aspects of the United Kingdom's official constitutional system in terms of a (human) body's head and its various prominent parts. The Chinese student's response, by contrast, is based on a selection of geographical entities in China which are linked to parts of the human anatomy through functional correspondences between the political institutions based in these localities and parts/functions of the human body (*brain, arm/hug, feet, face, hair/beauty*). This complex metaphor is superimposed on the well-known metonymy PLACE-FOR-INSTITUTION (as in *Beijing has decided*, meaning 'the government in Beijing has decided') but it transcends the metonymic-referential function by evoking interpretive characterizations (*arm - welcome to foreigners, feet - keeping the nation going, face - familiarity*) and even giving an ironical, ambivalent evaluation of Taiwan, which is *de facto* an independent state (but not acknowledged as such in the People's Republic of China), as being a less essential part of the body, necessary not for survival but 'only' for appearance. When read out in class, this part of the answer elicited a range of reactions, from laughter to political arguments about the China-Taiwan relationship.

Whilst there was a degree of variation in the ascription of body parts to geo-political metonymies across the sample, this interpretation pattern for the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor was similar across all Chinese students' responses and absent from most of the others, i.e. British, other European and other non-Chinese international students. Further responses from the Chinese students' sample included the following examples:

- (3) Like the eyes are the windows of the soul, Shanghai is the eyes of China. It is the window for foreigners to know about China, as it represents China in all aspects.

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presupposition (insofar as the prototype concept of a PERSON presupposes the existence of a (HUMAN) BODY). Many of the texts speaking about the NATION-AS-BODY ascribe personal intentions, feelings and actions to their subject. However, partly due to the historically motivated lexicalization of the concept in the phrase *body politic* in English, the NATION-AS-BODY characterization has become established in research literature and seems more convenient to use. However, its 'personal' aspects must always be taken into consideration.

- (4) Beijing: the heart of the country, dominates the whole country and symbolizes "life". Cheng Du city: right hand of China. City of Shanghai: left hand of China. Hainan island right foot. Taiwan island the left foot. The hands of China means they can create food and money for the body, that is to say, the two cities influence East and West China economically. The "feet of China": help China to stand up in the world.
- (5) Beijing is the heart of China. The police is the arm of China. The government is the head of China. The railway is the throat of China. Shanghai is the economic backbone of China. Shenzeng is the liver of China.

The sample is as yet far too small (11 British and 12 Chinese students' responses and 8 responses by students from other cultural backgrounds) to be considered representative or to undergo statistical validation but the apparent cross-cultural difference points towards an interesting aspect of the growing evidence of metaphor variation and its significance for cognitive metaphor theory (Kövecses 2005, 2009; Wang & Dowker 2010; Maalej & Yu 2011; Musolff 2003). Metaphors can vary across cultures, intra-cultural discourse traditions and speech situations, not only in terms of the "range" of source domain concepts they employ and of the "scope"<sup>3</sup> of target notions they are meant to signify, but also in the way they are 'put together' conceptually, i.e. in terms of the ordering and tiered construction of their underlying partial mapping elements. This finding opens a new perspective on fundamental issues of cognitive metaphor theory in general, such as the question of the 'universality' or (culture-specific) 'relativity' of metaphors. If a conceptual metaphor is interpreted differently across cultures, in which sense can it be called 'universal'? The following sections seek to elucidate this question by looking in detail at evidence of diachronic and synchronic variation of the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor.

## 2. Nations and their 'bodies'

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<sup>3</sup> This differentiation of metaphor *range* and *scope* is based on Kövecses (2002: 107-109, 183).

The NATION-AS-BODY metaphor is lexicalized in English in the phrase *body politic*, which belongs to a whole field of expressions that refer to political entities in terms of bodily organs and functions, such as *head of state*, *head of government*, *long arm of the law*, *organ (of a party)*, *sclerosis* or *tumor (of the body politic)* and others.<sup>4</sup> The phrase *body politic* appears to have originated in the early 16th century as a loan translation from *corpus politicum* and was used to describe the political role of the king (as opposed to his physical identity, the “body natural”) and by extension, the monarchical state in England.<sup>5</sup> It is still employed today in British and US public discourse, as can be observed in a research corpus (under construction) of more than 200 texts from British, US and international English-speaking press and internet media in the period 1991-2013 (Musolff 2010b, 2012, 2014a), which currently totals 112,500 words and includes more than 70 body-related concepts (see appendix). Smaller corpora have also been compiled for Dutch, French, German, Italian, Russian and Spanish (Musolff 2014a, 2014b).

All of these corpora show that the range of source domain concepts – i.e., salient body parts, state of health, well-known illnesses and injuries, agents of disease, therapies and aspects of body aesthetics – is roughly the same across European languages, and so is the scope of their application to political institutions, figures and governmental structures and functions. This is not surprising when we consider that most European languages have been in continuous exchange with each other for the past millenium and have inherited the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor as a concept *and* as a phrase as part of their common cultural legacy of Classical Antiquity, mediated by medieval Latin culture. Hence, all political cultures in Europe have developed *body*-metaphorical political terminologies since the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Charbonnel 2010; Guldin 2000; Koschorke et al. 2007; Nederman 2004; Peil 1983, 1985). The history of this metaphor in non-European Cultures seems to be largely unresearched; for

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<sup>4</sup> For dictionary entries on *body politic* and further political *body/organ imagery* see Deignan (1995: 2); Room (1999: 149, 713); Trumble & Stevenson (2002, vol. 1: 258).

<sup>5</sup> See Hale (1971: 43-50), Dhorn-van-Rossum & Böckenförde (1978: 548).

prominent metaphors in present-day Chinese political discourse see Liu 2002: 55-100).

Even among the *body politic* cognates in European languages, however, we can find distinct differences, both historically and synchronically. In German, for instance, there is no one main lexicalised phrase such as *body politic* in English but, instead, there are at least three terminological variants: “state body” (*Staatskörper*) is the most frequently used version but we also find ‘political body’ (*politischer Körper*), which seems to have more theoretical applications. Neither of these should be confused with the historically loaded lexeme ‘people’s body’ (*Volkskörper*), which still carries connotations of Nazi jargon. In French, on the other hand, *corps politique* and *corps social* are often treated as quasi-synonyms, which would be counter-intuitive from the perspective of contemporary English. The British corpus sample, for its part, seems to have as a further characteristic a relatively high quantity (10-20%) of word-plays and *double entendres* exploiting the ‘physical’ connotations of *body politic*, e.g. in criticizing or ridiculing individual politicians.<sup>6</sup>

From a historical perspective, this ‘person-focused’ application of the *body politic* metaphor seems to echo uses that date back to the Middle Ages, during which the ancient tradition of describing the state as a body-internal hierarchy from head to toe (Nederman 1992, 2004; Musolff 2009) was conflated with the theologically derived notion of the ‘King’s Two Bodies’, i.e. the distinction between a mortal body and the eternal, mystical ‘body’ of princes as spiritual-cum-worldly leaders (Kantorowicz 1997; Bertelli 2001; Horten 2009). This latter topic is by no means exclusive to the English History of Ideas, but it received its fixation as a terminological item of constitutional jurisprudence in the pair *body natural* – *body politic* in English (Kantorowicz 1997: 7).

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance uses of the *body politic* phrase in allusions to politicians’ physique (Blair, Brown, Putin, *The Independent*, 14 August 2007; *The Observer*, 1 November 2009) and state of health (*The Economist*, 7 January 2012 on the late Venezuelan President Chavez,) or in ironic self-denunciations, e.g. as a “toenail of the body politic” of Britain (B. Johnson on BBC *Newsnight*, 5 October 2009) or as a “happy parasite” (*The Independent*, 17 February 2012). The Italian sample also contains some examples of the former ridiculing use, mainly in references to the former Prime Minister Berlusconi (see e.g. “L’estetica di Berlusconi” in *Corriere della Sera*, 13 September 2011).

The intricacies of late medieval and Renaissance debates about how to separate the monarch's status and property from his or her 'personal' body (and property) are largely forgotten today, but an awareness of the double meaning of *body* in the political sphere seems to have survived in the public consciousness in Britain and still plays a role in present-day discourses. One likely transmitter of the *King's two bodies* concept in the United Kingdom are William Shakespeare's works, which continue to be an integral part of popular British culture through school, theatre and mass media.<sup>7</sup> Though *body natural* has largely disappeared from usage, the 'natural' connotations still seem to linger in present-day usage of *body politic*.

The *two-bodies* theory is not unknown in other European countries but figures only marginally in the public discourses of France and Germany, and where it occurs is referred to as a topic of scholarly research.<sup>8</sup> Explicit referencing and quotation of famous or infamous *body politic* concept-formulations in France typically do not evoke Shakespeare but Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Boisnard 2005); in Germany, the Nazi stigmatization of Jewish people as a disease-carrying *parasite race* that must be exterminated from the 'Aryan' *people's body* still strongly resonates in the public sphere, as an abhorrent example of how *not* to use body-based political imagery (Musolff 2010a). These distribution patterns for the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor in contemporary data may be motivated by discourse-traditions that have emerged in national political cultures as powerful leitmotifs for formulating collective identities.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bodily and medical symbolism and analogies of physiological and political entities pervade Shakespeare's dramas and tragedies (Diede 2008; Patterson 1991; Peltonen 2009; Spicci 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Désveaux (2012) and Haltern (2009).

<sup>9</sup> The assumption of 'national political cultures' is not meant to suggest that "nations", in the political sense of the word, each have a clearly defined, exclusive or dominant cultural identity – a concept that has been profoundly problematized and effectively discarded as an analytical category in modern theories of intercultural communication (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012: 2-7). The most relevant analytical level for discourse-oriented metaphor studies would appear to be "communities of practice" (Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999): 'political culture' in this sense could then be described as the ensemble of (politicians' and media) discourses that make up the "public sphere" of debates within what is usually a 'national' frame of reference (e.g. public debates about a nation's identity) but can also transcend

Are such motivations also available for the explanation of cross-cultural contrasts between ‘Western’ and, for instance, Chinese views of the *body politic*? One possible hypothesis to explain the Chinese interpretations of the NATION-AS-BODY-metaphor in our sample may be formulated with view to links between the geographical ‘wholeness’ of China’s publicly imagined “geobody” and popular constructions of its national identity. Callahan (2009) has shown that contemporary Chinese visualizations of the nation’s borders in historical and contemporary maps are characteristic of a “Cartography of National Humiliation” that has served to articulate fears of territorial dismemberment, e.g. in a map purporting to represent a Western “international conspiracy to divide up the PRC [= People’s Republic of China] into a clutch of independent states including Tibet, Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, East Turkestan, and Taiwan” (Callahan 2009: 143). If geographical contours and locations are of such salience in the public sphere of China, the grounding of conceptualizations of its ‘state organs’ and further ‘body parts’ in geo-institutional metonymies, which we observed in the Chinese students’ answers, appears to be as natural as the European versions. At the end of his article, Callahan concludes that the goal of geopolitical maps in China nowadays is “no longer primarily to recover lost territory; it is to cleanse the stains of lost honour and pride. The desire is not so much for material territory, as for symbolic recognition, acceptance and respect” (Callahan 2009: 171).

### 3. Methodological implications

The analysis of the Chinese students’ interpretations of the NATION-AS-BODY-metaphor which we proposed earlier and the hypothesis suggesting a characteristic “geobody” as their socio-cultural background imply a special focus on analysing in detail the inner conceptual structure of metaphors, which builds on methodological changes in cognitive analyses of metaphor

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national boundaries (e.g. international debates about ecology, security etc.) or concern a “sub-cultural” part of the national community (e.g. party-political discussions).

developed over the last three decades that transcend the classic Lakoff & Johnson (1980) model. They include, inter alia, the distinction between primary and complex metaphors (Grady, Taub & Morgan 1996, Grady and Johnson 2003), Conceptual Integration theory, which views metaphors as based on “blended” mental spaces (Fauconnier & Turner 2002), and fine-grained analyses of the metaphor-metonymy continuum (Barcelona 2000, Goossens 2003, Panther & Radden 1999).

Ning Yu’s investigations (1998, 2008a, 2008b, 2009) of differences in the composition of English and Chinese versions of the BODY PARTS-FOR EMOTIONS metonymy and of the SOCIAL FACE metaphors that have been derived from them can serve as an example of how these new insights can be applied in cross-cultural metaphor analysis. According to Yu, “Chinese is richer than English with conventional expressions involving the body part of the face” and he deems the concept of SOCIAL FACE to be “central to the Chinese construal of their social life” (Yu 2008b: 257).<sup>10</sup> Yu’s conclusions are supported by a large number of cross-cultural pragmatic and ethnographic studies that have highlighted and criticized the ethnocentric bias in approaches that assume “universality” for a SOCIAL FACE-model based mainly or exclusively on Anglo-American politeness-concepts.<sup>11</sup> One important difference is, for instance, an emphasis on mutuality and on conflict-avoidance-orientation of face-saving strategies in the Chinese context, as opposed to an (allegedly) more utilitarian, strategic model of face-maintenance and face-threatening in English (Jia 1997; Pan 2000; Pan & Kadar 2012). Of course, we have to be careful not to jump to stereotyping conclusions by confusing theoretical definitions within national cultures with actual discourse usage. As a theoretical construct of social science research, the notion of SOCIAL FACE has been defined, challenged and redefined many times in many cultural contexts but such

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<sup>10</sup> As we saw in the initial example from the Chinese student’s response, the SOCIAL FACE concept can also be applied as part of the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor, i.e. as a means to distinguish the part of the *national body* that is “familiar to everyone, representative” from non-public identity aspects.

<sup>11</sup> See Jia (1997), Ting-Toomey (1994); for a critical discussion see Scollon, Scollon & Jones (2012: 59-60). For the cultural relativity of Anglo-American FACE and POLITENESS concepts even within the larger Western cultural context see Ehlich (2005: 71-82).



theory-loaded interpretations are not necessarily congruent with usage in everyday discourse. Still, Yu has pointed to the “theories of *yin-yang* and five elements of Chinese philosophy and medicine”, which favour states of balance and equilibrium, as typical of “the way Chinese culture sees the world” (Yu 2008b: 401). He thus proposes a long-term socio-historical perspective as the relevant context in which the Chinese mutuality-focused SOCIAL FACE concept gained prominence. Callahan’s (2009) analysis of historical changes in the publicly imagined “geobody” of China might, if corroborated and deepened in terms of a long-term-historical perspective, provide a comparable contextualisation of Chinese students’ *body politic* interpretations.

#### 4. Conclusions

The brief analyses presented here cannot provide a comprehensive cross-cultural comparison of the NATION-AS-BODY metaphor; they only present hypotheses about differences in usage patterns and interpretations that are suggested by the data collected so far. The first hypothesis is that the synchronic usage of metaphors as evidenced in corpus data is characterized (i.e. not just marginally affected) by *variation*, specifically in the selection and distribution of its source concepts. Although this variation is semantic, i.e. not of the type investigated in ‘classic’ sociolinguistic studies of sound, lexical or grammar change, it seems to follow the general principle that synchronic variation is indicative of diachronic divergence in usage patterns (Labov 1972; Edwards 2013: 24). It may therefore be possible to link present-day metaphor variation to socio-historical trends in specific discourse communities, e.g. regarding the typical versions of the *body politic* metaphor in the national political cultures of Britain, France, Germany and China.<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, regarding the ‘universality-vs.-relativity’ question, the data discussed above suggest a ‘pragmatic’ solution, i.e. to assume universality only for very general, and therefore, semantically broad, *metaphor themes*. Such themes include conceptual metaphors such as A NATION IS A PERSON, A NATION IS

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<sup>12</sup> For a qualification of the category ‘national political culture’ see footnote 9 above.

A BODY or similarly broad mappings discussed in the literature (Kövecses 2002, 2005; Lakoff & Turner 1989), e.g. THE UNIVERSE IS A CHAIN (OF BEING), CHANGES ARE MOVEMENTS, LIFE IS A JOURNEY etc. These broad metaphor themes are so general that their “ubiquity” (Paprotté & Dirven 1985) is almost trivial – were it not for the fact that they have been overlooked in traditional semantics. As background imagery they are available and accessible in every culture and this sense, universal. On the other hand, preferential uses and interpretations of specific source aspects differ significantly, not just in regard to particular source domain elements but also in terms of their underlying metaphor-metonymy complexions. In this regard, the cross-cultural contrasts observed here go beyond mere surface variation. They reflect differences at the level of their cognitive structures and (if the attempted sociocultural contextualization is plausible) in the metaphor’s cognitive import among diverse communities of users.

## Appendix

Lexical items from scenarios of the metaphor A STATE IS A (HUMAN) BODY in UK media and international English-speaking media 1991-2013

CATEGORIES	SUB-CATEGORIES	LEXICAL ITEMS
BODY	BODY ORGANISM IMMUNE SYSTEM	<i>body, body politic organism (auto) immune system, immunity</i>
LIFE-DEATH	BIRTH LIFE VITALITY DEATH	<i>birth, born revive, survive vital dead, death, deceased, bury, last rites, turning off the life- support machine, six feet under, body politic snatchers monster, tentacles</i>
MONSTER	MONSTER	
ANATOMY	ARTERIES BLOOD BRAIN DNA FACE GALL-BLADDER HAND HEAD HEART LIMB LIVER LUNG MUSCLES NERVE ORGAN SKIN SOLAR PLEXUS TOENAIL TORSO	<i>arteries bleeding brain DNA, genes face gall-bladders hand head heart limb, part livers lung muscles nerve organ skin solar plexus toenail torso</i>
STATE OF HEALTH		
GOOD STATE OF HEALTH	HEALTHY	<i>on the mend, off the sick list, recover</i>
BAD STATE OF HEALTH	ALLERGY CANCER CANKER CIRRHOSIS	<i>Allergy, allergic cancer, cancerous, metastasize canker cirrhosis</i>

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	COLLAPSE	<i>breakdown, collapse</i>
	COMA	<i>coma</i>
	CYST	<i>cyst</i>
	DISEASE	<i>ailments, disease, diseased, illness, malaise, sick, sick man</i>
	FEVER	<i>febrile</i>
	INFLUENZA	<i>flu</i>
	INFECTION	<i>infection, infected</i>
	NEURALGY	<i>neuralgic</i>
	PAIN	<i>ache, pain, painful</i>
	PANDEMIC	<i>pandemic</i>
	PARALYSIS	<i>paralysis, cripple(d)</i>
	PATHOLOGY	<i>pathologies</i>
	PLAGUE	<i>plague</i>
	ROT, DISINTEGRATION	<i>rotten heart of Europe</i>
	SCLEROSIS	<i>euro sclerosis, eurosclerosis</i>
	SYMPTOM	<i>symptom</i>
	SYNDROME	<i>syndrome</i>
	THROMBOSIS	<i>blood clot</i>
	TUMOUR	<i>tumour</i>
INJURY	DISEMBOWEL	<i>disembowel</i>
	DISMEMBER	<i>dismember</i>
	WOUND	<i>wound</i>
AGENT OF DISEASE	CONTAGION	<i>contagion</i>
	GERM	<i>germ warfare</i>
	LEECH	<i>leech</i>
	PARASITE	<i>parasite</i>
	POISON	<i>poison, toxic, cyanide, toxin</i>
	VIRUS	<i>(flu) virus, superbug, MRSA</i>
	ZIT	<i>zit</i>
THERAPY	CURE	<i>cure, course of treatment</i>
	DIET	<i>diet</i>
	DISINFECT	<i>disinfect</i>
	DOCTOR	<i>doctor</i>
	LIFE-SUPPORT MACHINE	<i>life-support machine</i>
	MEDICATION	<i>antidote, drugs, medication, medicine, remedy,</i>
	OPERATION	<i>ops, bypass</i>
	RELIEF	<i>relief</i>
	ROOT CANAL TREATMENT	<i>lifted from the root canals</i>
	SIDE-EFFECT	<i>side-effect</i>
	TRANSPLANT	<i>transplant</i>
BODY AESTHETIC	PIMPLE	<i>pimple</i>
	PUSTULE	<i>pustule</i>
	WART	<i>wart</i>
	BODY APPEARANCE	<i>hard-bodied, "mobs" (man boobs). podge, portly, "ripples-and-</i>

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*nipples" look*

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