

BERTUCCELLI M. (2013). A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF IDIOMATIC AND FIGURATIVE USES OF "HAND" IN ENGLISH AND "MANO" IN ITALIAN: EMBODIMENT AND CULTURAL FILTERS..  
RASSEGNA ITALIANA DI LINGUISTICA APPLICATA, P. 9-16,  
ISSN: 0033-9725

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### ***Abstract***

*Questo studio è una prima descrizione delle convergenze e divergenze tra Inglese e Italiano nelle espressioni idiomatiche e figurate con le parole "mano" e hand. Benché tradizionalmente considerate "monumenti mentali della storia" (Roberts 1944:304) e culturalmente motivate, le espressioni idiomatiche e figurate appaiono anche cognitivamente sorrette da corrispondenze sistematiche di natura concettuale, che nel caso specifico, sono riferibili al concetto di embodiment. I due punti di vista, come dimostrano studi recenti di linguistica cognitiva applicati al dominio delle parti del corpo, non sono in contraddizione (Maalej, Yu 2011) se, come sostiene Gibbs (2006), intendiamo il concetto di embodiment come principio sottostante che si manifesta in forme linguistiche variabili condizionate del contesto culturale nel quale il corpo opera.*

### ***1. Idioms, figurative language and embodiment***

A large number of approaches to idiomaticity together with various definitions of what an idiom is have been put forward in the literature (for an overview, see Kavka, Zybert 2004). If one narrows down the issue of its nature to the specific problem of defining what is an idiom and what is not an idiom, then it is possible to identify idiomaticity in terms of one or more structural properties, be they syntactic (e.g. lack of formal flexibility), semantic (e.g. non compositionality: the meaning or use of an idiom cannot be predicted (in full) on the basis of "knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another" (Nunberg, Sag, Wasow 1994:492); or, more generally, pragmatic (non-literal or figurative meaning; proverbiality; informality; affect, among others).

Indeed, most of the properties originally suggested by scholars in a purely structural vein have long turned out not to be inviolable criteria for idiomaticity. However, there seems to be agreement on a general definition of idiom as a multiword construction which has a non productive syntactic structure and whose meaning cannot be deduced entirely from the meanings of its constituents. On the basis of this definition, idioms would differ from metaphors and metonymies in that the meanings of the latter are more transparent, and their syntactic behaviour is more productive. Admittedly, however, the divide between some idioms and some metaphors is thin and most accounts of idiomatic phrases like "kick the bucket" or "spill the beans" assume that their figurative meanings arise from forgotten

historical reasons such that these phrases now exist as static, frozen dead metaphors in our mental lexicons (cf. Tendahl, Gibbs 2008). More particularly, cognitive linguistics has argued that the figurative meanings of many idioms are partly motivated by metaphorical knowledge. Therefore, if we broaden the analysis of the nature of idioms to an investigation of their cognitive and cultural motivation, the notions of embodiment on one hand and culture specificity on the other become relevant.

## ***2. The Cognitive Linguistics perspective***

In his discussion on the definition of idioms, Kövecses (2010:231) claims that the traditional view, according to which idioms are assumed to be a matter of language alone independent of any conceptual system, has less to offer to our understanding of their nature than the cognitive linguistic view, according to which idioms are regarded as the products of our conceptual system and not simply as a matter of language. According to Kövecses (2010), the meaning of an idiom springs from our more general knowledge of the world embodied in our conceptual system. Following Johnson's urge to put the body back into the mind (Johnson 1987), scholars in cognitive linguistics have stressed the general role of embodiment in shaping mind and language. The literature on the subject has grown impressively, and despite divergencies in the interpretation of the term itself (Wilson 2002; Ziemke 2003; Rohrer 2006; Goeschler 2005, Maalej 2008), the idea that language cannot be investigated in isolation from human embodiment has become entrenched: "our construal of reality is likely to be mediated in large measure by the nature of our bodies" (Evans, Green 2006:45); "the concepts we have access to and the nature of the 'reality' we think and talk about are a function of our embodiment: we can only talk about what we can perceive and conceive, and the things that we can perceive and conceive derive from embodied experience" (Evans, Green 2006:46).

The embodiment hypothesis is crucially associated with the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) introduced in Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and further elaborated in a rich bibliography including most notably Johnson (1987), Lakoff and Johnson (1999). Within the theory of Conceptual Metaphor, the central idea is that metaphors, far from being purely linguistic devices, are conceptual in nature and grounded in bodily experience. Being conceptual in nature means that they are constitutive of cognition and being grounded in bodily experience implies that the body is a potentially universal source domain for structuring abstract concepts.

Similarly, metonymy is viewed in cognitive linguistics as one of the basic modalities of the working of cognition (Panther, Radden 1999): "Metonymy allows us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else; metonymic concepts structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Metonymic concepts are part of the ordinary, everyday way we think and act as well as talk" (Lakoff, Johnson 1980:37). The major difference with metaphor, it has been claimed by most cognitive linguists, is the fact that while metaphors involve mappings between two conceptual domains, metonymies operate within the same conceptual domain and are primarily characterized by a STAND FOR relation between a source and a target. The way they operate has been variously formulated: Langacker (1993) sees it as a process which consists in "mentally accessing one conceptual entity via another entity" (1993:30), Blank (1999) as "a linguistic device based on salient conceptual relations within a frame network" (Blank 1999:174), Radden and

Kövecses (1999) as “a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same Idealized Cognitive Model” (Radden, Kövecses 1999:21). Barcelona (2000) stresses the fact that, like metaphors, metonymies are at one time a fundamental type of experientially motivated cognitive models, and subject to cultural variation (“Metaphors and metonymies are to a large extent culture-specific”, 2000:6): so, for instance, English and Italian share the conventional metonymy EAR FOR ATTENTION: ‘She has a fine ear for music’ / *Ha un buon orecchio musicale*, or BODY PART FOR PERSON ‘She has five mouths to feed’ / *Ha cinque bocche da sfamare*, but differ in other areas, such as ‘She has a silver tongue’ / lit. *Ha una lingua d’argento*; It. *Ha una voce suadente*, to indicate a persuasive, eloquent person, and most significantly, as we shall see below, in more complex combinations.

Although a large amount of studies have spelled out their cognitive and cultural specificities, metaphors and metonymies often appear to be so tightly interwoven in natural languages that the term “metaphonymy” has been introduced by Goossens (1990) to describe the complex interactions that hold between the two. Indeed, many metaphors appear to be conceptually motivated by underlying metonymies (Barcelona 2000; 2011; Radden 2000; Taylor 2002; Panther, Thornburg, Barcelona 2009); moreover, the boundary between metaphor and metonymy is often fuzzy, so that it has been argued that they form a continuum (Barcelona 2000; 2011; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez 2000). Finally, metonymy has been claimed to underly much of our ordinary thinking, being more immediately grounded in experience (Panther, Thornburg 2003; 2007; Panther 2006), it has been suggested that metonymy provides the link between bodily experience and metaphor in the mapping concrete experience onto abstract concepts (Yu 2000) and it is now a widely shared view that it “plays a crucial part in the motivation of numerous conceptual metaphors, in prototype categorization, in certain types of symbolism and iconicity, in certain types of pragmatic inferencing” (Benczes, Barcelona, Ruiz de Mendoza 2011:2) In a long and articulated discussion of the problematic properties in the standard cognitive linguistics treatments of metonymies, Barcelona (2011) points to the essentially schematic nature of metonymies, claiming that the “stand for”, synecdotical, relation traditionally assumed to characterize metonymies should be dispensed with and replaced by “asymmetrical mapping”.

### ***3. The Relevance Theoretic perspective***

An alternative analysis of figurative language is offered by Relevance Theory (RT). Within the relevance theoretic framework, figurative language is a form of “loose talk”. As Sperber and Wilson (2008:84) put it, “we see metaphors as simply a range of cases at one end of a continuum that includes literal, loose and hyperbolic interpretations. In our view, metaphorical interpretations are arrived at in exactly the same way as these other interpretations. There is no mechanism specific to metaphor, no interesting generalisation that applies only to them”.

Hearers understanding metaphorical language use linguistic and contextual clues in order to create ad hoc concepts that are not identical to any of the concepts encoded in the metaphorical expressions but inherit from them some of their inferential properties. This view is rooted in a general approach to lexical pragmatics which is based on the following assumptions: lexical meanings are only clues to the speaker’s meaning; the lexical meaning of virtually every word we utter are adjusted to the context in order to satisfy expectations

of relevance; lexical meanings are typically different from the concepts communicated when we use a word: the latter may be broader or narrower; metaphors are just one of the many ways in which concepts are modified in contextual uses. Therefore, when we say “Bob is my right hand man” what we communicate is not the lexical meaning “right arm” but an *ad hoc* concept created by broadening the concept of “arm” to include information about its vital importance to human life. This process is not restricted to metaphor interpretation: it is also active in approximations like “France is hexagonal” or in hyperboles like “John is a giant” (Wilson, Carston 2006; Carston 2010; Carston, Wearing 2011).

Gibbs (2006) and Tendal and Gibbs (2008) have recently suggested that Relevance Theory and Cognitive Linguistics should be seen as complementary rather than contradictory perspectives, each contributing, albeit from different perspectives, to a general understanding of the mechanisms and processes underlying figurative language interpretation. Admittedly, both Relevance theorists and cognitive linguists have made valuable contributions to our understanding of how metaphors may cluster around central themes of the type that we are by now familiar with, such as LOVE IS A JOURNEY. Indeed, the repeated use of some linguistic metaphors may have created systematic conceptual correspondences: unlike CL, however, RT does not consider the latter essential to either the production or the interpretation of metaphors.

The present study is only a description aimed at a preliminary systematization of figurative expressions including body part terms (with a special focus on *mano* / “hand”): therefore, no specific claim will be made as to the cognitive processes underlying their production or interpretation. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that even within the limits of the perspective adopted, namely the identification of areas of convergence or divergence in the use of body part terms that express highly conventionalised meanings, our data seem indeed to support a view of figurative language as actually ranging along a continuum of more or less routinised expressions clustering around themes that while calling forth some notion of embodiment, still strongly demand inferential elaborations of the encyclopaedic information attached to the lexical items under consideration which may be referred to the working of the general principle of Relevance.

#### **4. Cultural embodiment**

Figurative uses of body-part words in the languages of the world have long attracted the attention of linguists (cf. Brugman 1983; Lakoff, Kövecses 1987; MacLaury 1989; Allan 1995; Svorou 1994; Walsh 1994; Levinson 1994; Heine 1995; Matsumoto 1999; Yu 2000; Ahn, Kwon 2007; Frank et al 2008; Maalej, Yu 2011; to mention only a few).

Within the embodiment perspective, it is not uncommon to find statements that point out that, in everyday language, we often see a direct reflection of embodiment onto object names. Thus, in English, we speak of the “hands of a clock”, “the mouth of a river”, “the foot of a hill”, “the leg of a table” and “the nose of an airplane”. Especially, English uses plenty of body-related concepts in metaphors, e.g. “swallow one’s idea”; “sink one’s teeth into the theory”; “keep an eye on something”, and the same happens in many other languages. Investigation of idioms, metaphors and metonymies which include body part terms is therefore assumed to offer first hand data for validating the thesis that embodiment is the pivotal notion underlying the conceptualization of human experiences.

As analyses of cross-cultural data have increased, however, the necessity to think of embodiment not in the restricted sense of “humanly corporeal” but as cultural embodiment has come to the fore.

The need for a view that stresses the interaction between mind, body and culture as advocated by Gibbs (1999), and further stressed by Sinha and Jensen de López (2000), has been repeatedly underscored by Gibbs (2006:13): “bodies are not culture-free objects, because all aspects of embodied experience are shaped by cultural processes”. This means that, even if the physiology is the same, the way languages interpret and represent bodily experiences may be “shaped by cultural practices that resist simple biological explanation” (Gibbs 2006:39). The fact that Italian has *lancette dell’orologio* for “hands of the clock” and *foce del fiume* for “mouth of the river” may therefore be imputed to different cultural habits in anthropomorphisation patterns and should not call the theory into question. Different cultural models may interpret the same experiences differently, either by mapping different body parts onto the same abstract concept or by selecting the same body parts to map onto and structure different abstract concepts (Kövecses 2005, 2006). As Maalej and Yu (2011:9) point out, “The complex relation between body and culture in embodiment, cast as the interactions between metonymy and metaphor, often leave traces in language”. Below we shall look into some of these traces.

#### 4.1. Convergence, displacement and asymmetries

Indeed, as far as body part expressions are concerned, cross-cultural investigation highlights that idiomatic expressions, proverbs and sayings, metaphors and metonymies may have different cultural motivations in different languages. English and Italian, for instance, share several uses of body part terms in proverbs, idioms and sayings which express identical or equivalent meanings. I will call these cases of “convergence”. Here are some examples:

CONVERGENCE	
ENGLISH	ITALIAN
an <b>eye</b> for an <b>eye</b> , a <b>tooth</b> for a <b>tooth</b>	<i>occhio per occhio, dente per dente</i>
don't look a gift horse in the <b>mouth</b>	<i>a caval donato non si guarda in bocca</i>
to lead sb. by the <b>nose</b>	<i>menare qcn. per il naso</i>
to poke or stick one's <b>nose</b> into sth.	<i>ficcare il naso in qcs.</i>
to fight <b>tooth</b> and <b>nail</b>	<i>combattere con le unghie e con i denti</i>
the <b>eye</b> of the storm	<i>l'occhio del ciclone</i>
keep one's <b>fingers</b> crossed	<i>tenere le dita incrociate</i>

In many cases, however, the same or similar meaning is expressed in the two languages via different body part terms; I will call these cases of “displacement” within the same source – the body:

DISPLACEMENT	
ENGLISH	ITALIAN
to cost an <b>arm</b> and a <b>leg</b>	<i>costare un occhio della testa</i>
Break a <b>leg</b> !	<i>In bocca al lupo!</i>
to pay through the <b>nose</b>	<i>pagare un occhio della testa</i>

to be in it up to one's <b>eyes</b>	<i>esserci dentro fino al collo</i>
<b>nose to nose</b> / <b>neck and neck</b>	<i>testa a testa</i>
to win by a <b>nose</b>	<i>vincere per un pelo/per un capello</i>
to do sth. in the <b>teeth</b> of	<i>fare qcs. alla faccia di o in barba a</i>
to be wet behind the <b>ears</b>	<i>avere ancora il latte alla bocca</i>
to be out on one's ear	<i>essere licenziato su due piedi</i>
two <b>heads</b> are better than one	<i>quattro occhi vedono meglio di due</i>
brown <b>nose</b>	<i>leccaculo</i>
ITALIAN	ENGLISH
<i>stare seduto in braccio a qcn.</i>	to sit on sb.'s <b>lap</b>
<i>essere il braccio destro di qcn.</i>	to be sb.'s right <b>hand</b> man
<i>a naso</i>	off the top of one's <b>head</b>
<i>mettersi le gambe in spalla / darsela a gambe</i>	to take to one's <b>heels</b>
<i>tirare gli orecchi, dare una tirata d'orecchi a qcn.</i>	to slap sb. on the <b>wrist</b> / to tell sb. Off
<i>parlare fuori dai denti</i>	to speak one's <b>mind</b>

On the other hand, there are frequent cases of divergencies in the use of body part terms from one language to another. Below are some examples of such divergencies, which I will call "asymmetries", meaning that use of a body part term in a language is not paralleled by another body part term (in the expression of the same meaning) in the other language:

ASYMMETRY	
ITALIAN	ENGLISH
<i>acqua in bocca</i>	mum's the word
<i>parlare a braccia</i>	to speak off the cuff
<i>alzarsi col piede sbagliato</i>	get out of the wrong side of bed (also: start on the wrong <b>foot</b> )
<i>togliti o levati dai piedi!</i>	go take a running jump! / get out of my way!
<i>restare con un palmo di naso</i>	to be left dumbfounded or flabbergasted
<i>avere la puzza sotto il naso</i>	to be hoity-toity
<i>a occhi e croce</i>	more or less
<i>essere in gamba</i>	to be very capable
<i>fare il passo più lungo della gamba</i>	to bite off more than one can chew
<i>in gamba!</i>	take care!
<i>prendere qcs. sotto gamba</i>	to underestimate sth.
<i>mettere la pulce nell'orecchio a qcn.</i>	to set sb. thinking
<i>avere il dente avvelenato contro qcn.</i>	to bear a grudge against sb.
ENGLISH	ITALIAN
Shake a <b>leg</b> !	<i>Datti una mossa!</i>
not to have a <b>leg</b> to stand on	<i>non avere nessuna ragione che tenga</i>
to be on its last <b>legs</b>	<i>essere agli ultimi colpi/allo stremo</i>
to pull sb's <b>leg</b>	<i>prendere in giro</i>
to see <b>eye to eye</b> with sb.	<i>vedere le cose allo stesso modo di qcn.</i>
to be born with a silver spoon in one's <b>mouth</b>	<i>essere nato con la camicia</i>
to live <b>hand-to-mouth</b>	<i>vivere alla giornata</i>

to keep one's <b>nose</b> clean	<i>tenersi fuori (da guai)</i>
to be a bit long in the <b>tooth</b>	<i>non essere più tanto giovane</i>
to be fed up to the back <b>teeth</b>	<i>non poterne più / averne le scatole piene</i>
to get a thick <b>ear</b>	<i>prendersi uno schiaffone</i>
to laugh one's <b>head</b> off	<i>sbellicarsi dalle risate</i>
not to make <b>head</b> or tail of it	<i>non venirne a capo / non capirci niente</i>
to be a pain in the <b>neck</b>	<i>essere una rottura di scatole</i>
to put your <b>foot</b> in it	<i>farla grossa / farla bella</i>
to put your <b>foot</b> in your <b>mouth</b>	<i>fare una gaffe</i>
to get cold <b>feet</b>	<i>prendersi paura o avere un ripensamento</i>

#### 4.2. Historical and cultural motivations

With many of these expressions we have lost track of their origins. With others more than one possibility is offered by historical dictionaries, each pointing at culture-specificity as a necessary perspective from which analysis must proceed. “Break a leg!”, for instance, a well-known idiom used to wish an actor or a musician good luck before a performance, seems to be metaphorically based: in theatres, “legs” is the name of the thin vertical curtains that mask the wings, and probably the name is itself a metaphor that is based on their position with respect to the borders – a sort of skirt made of short draperies that hang from above, span the width of the stage and are used to mask lights or scenery that have been raised into the fly loft. Typically, a set of two legs and one border is used to form a complete masking frame around the stage. If an actor has great success and gets many curtain calls, he must enter from the wings so many times that he may “break a leg” (for the origin of the Italian equivalent *in bocca al lupo*, see Jamrozik 2006). Along with theatre, the navy seems to be a historically rooted cultural source of English idiomatic expressions such as “hand over fist”, meaning “quickly” (It. *a rotta di collo*) – the English expression began in the early seventeenth centuries: it reportedly comes from a sailing expression “hand over hand”, the way of quickly raising or lowering a sail – or “all hands on deck” (It. *Tutti al lavoro!*) and “one hand for oneself and one for the ship” referring to the necessity of everyone involved lending a hand. Horse racing is another important source of metaphors: “to win hands down” originally referred to the jockey dropping his hands, and so relaxing his hold on the reins, when victory appears certain. The specialised lexis related to horse riding also features “hands” as a metonymy for the skill in handling the reins, as a measure for the height of horses and for a kind of gallop (“hand gallop”). Finally, cricket is the sport from which “a safe pair of hands” is drawn, originally meaning the person who has the skill or reliability in catching a ball, or, of a goalkeeper, in making saves; a hand is also a member of a cricket eleven.

#### 5. Idiomatic and figurative uses of English “hand” and Italian *mano*

While there is no denying that a great part of figurative meaning derives from our experiences with our own bodies, only a few extensive cognitive-based linguistic studies exist comparing one specific body part in two or more languages, as Nissen (2006:72) points out. The second part of this study is meant to be a contribution in this direction, concentrating on idiomatic and figurative uses of English “hand” and Italian *mano*.

## 5.1. Data

The data, which are not meant to be exhaustive, are essentially drawn from bilingual and monolingual dictionaries: the point of departure for the search was the word “hand” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Wordreference* online, and the word *mano* in the *Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana Treccani*, the *Vocabolario della Lingua Italiana Zingarelli* and the *Italian-English/ English-Italian Zanichelli*. The expressions were checked afterwards with native speakers. Reference is made only to standard British English and Standard Italian.

## 6. “Hand” and “mano” in metaphors and metonymies

### 6.1. Metonymies

Starting from dictionary entries for “hand” that basically consist of information about its position in the body, its form and its function, such as the one provided by the O.E.D.

HAND “ The terminal part of the arm beyond the wrist, consisting of the palm and five digits, forming the organ of prehension characteristic of man”,

metonymical uses of “hand” are often listed as clustering around such categories as the following:

- a) **Author or person:** we are short of hands; the hand of the painter / of the artist;
- b) **Skill:** to try one’s hand at, to turn or set one’s hand to sth, to keep one’s hand in, to have (no) hand at ;
- c) **Assistance:** to give somebody a helping hand; all hands on deck;
- d) **What can be held in a hand:** the cards held by the players (otherwise: a handful)
- e) **Possession, control and power:** to be in sb’s hands, to change hands; to fall/get into the wrong hands, to be in good or safe hands, to put one’s life in sb’s hands, to play into sb’s hands; to be/get out of hand, to take sth/sb. in hand; to gain the upper hand; to have a firm hand; to have sth on one’s hands, to have sth off one’s hands;
- f) **Spatiality:**
  - a) **proximity/availability:** to have sth to hand; to be on hand; to be close to hand or near at hand; to come to hand; to go hand in hand; not see one’s hand in front of one’s face;
  - b) **side:** on the one hand... on the other hand; on the other hand; on all hands; on every hand;
- g) **Time phases:** in hand (current, underway); first hand, second hand; from hand to hand  
**rapidity:** hand over fist; in the turn of a hand;
- h) **Behaviours:** to have your hands full; to act with a heavy hand (a heavy-handed gesture or action); high handed; ask for s.one’s hand (in marriage); a steel hand in a velvet glove; a good hand (a round of applause); clean hands (free from wrong-doing).

Most of these uses have parallels in Italian, where, following definitions along the same lines, “mano” features in expressions like:

- a) **Author:** *la mano di Michelangelo; di mano fiamminga;* (for persons, Italian uses “braccia”)
- b) **Skill and capacity:** *quel pianista/chirurgo ha una bella mano/una mano felice;*
- c) **Assistance:** *dare, tendere, offrire una mano;*
- d) **What is contained in a hand:** *una bella mano* (in plays with cards);
- e) **Possession, control and power:** *avere le mani legate/libere; avere in mano (in pugno) una situazione o una persona; mettere le mani su qualcosa o qualcuno; sfuggire di mano cadere nelle mani di qualcuno; essere in buone/in cattive mani; forzare la mano;*
- f) **Spatiality:**
  - i. **Availability:** *a portata di mano, fuori mano;*
  - ii. **Side or direction:** *tenere la mano destra/ la sinistra, andare contromano;*
- g) **Time Phases:** *dare la prima mano; di prima mano; metter mano a qualcosa; passare la mano, avere qualcosa per le mani, mano a mano; di mano in mano; mettere le mani avanti;*
- h) **Aggression and other behaviours:** *venire alle mani; alzare le mani su qualcuno; allungare le mani; pugno di ferro in quanto di velluto; avere la mano pesante/leggera; avere le mani pulite.*

Projected onto more theoretical frameworks, these categories are frequently subsumed under a prototypical metonymic relation “STAND FOR”. Thus, for example, THE HAND STANDS FOR PERSON (a), THE HAND STANDS FOR SKILL (b), THE HAND STANDS FOR GIVING (c), THE HAND STANDS FOR CONTROL/INFLUENCE (d), THE HAND STANDS FOR ACTIVITY (h), THE HAND STANDS FOR SIDE (f) (cf. Ahn and Kwon 2007).

Following this kind of generalization, the straightforward conclusion is often drawn that, since in most languages, as in English and Italian, the hands represent our behaviours, our actions, our capacities, our intentions, our affections, this is empirical evidence for embodied cognition. Now, I think there is nothing wrong with this conclusion as long as we interpret it as amounting to the observation that our body and (its parts) is the conceptual source for the verbal expression of abstract meanings. Within this perspective, we could add that embodiment is further visible through the fact that both our languages record the possibility for our hands to collocate and orient us like bodies in space. Their symmetry and their operating conjointly further surfaces in proverbs that have parallels in the two languages: “the right hand doesn’t know what the left is doing” / *la mano destra non sa cosa fa la mano sinistra*; “one hand washes the other and both wash the face” / *una mano lava l’altra ed entrambe lavano il viso*.

However, it seems to me that the broad notion of embodiment presupposed by this line of thinking, and the conclusion drawn on its basis, conceal a simplified view of a problem which, in my opinion, deserves finer investigation. As Cognitive Linguistics has always claimed, our conceptual system is mirrored in language patterns that to different extents and in different modalities reflect the interactions of our bodies with the physical environment: humans are embodied cognizers. Still, if we want to reach a deeper understanding of *how* the mind structures the concepts of the body and its parts in order to enable languages to communicate abstract meanings, and consequently of what kind of embodied cognizers humans are, the crucial question that needs to be answered, as Ziemke 2003 has pointed out, is: What kind of body is required for embodied cognition?

Let’s consider our object of investigation – the hand - more closely. Anatomically and neurophysiologically, the hand is a complex system, each component of which combines

with a variable number of other components in order to determine configurations, movements, and actions. The fine mechanisms of its functioning involve the coordination of muscles, bones, arteries, all controlled by several areas of the brain. Scientific lexis gives a name to each individual component of the limb (for instance, the 27 bones are divided into carpal bones (scaphoid, lunate, triquetrum, pisiform, trapezium, trapezoid, capitate, hamate, hook of hamate); metacarpal bones (I,II,III,IV,V) phalanges (proximal, middle, distal), and the same happens with muscles (flexor carpi ulnaris, flexor carpi radialis, palmaris longus, flexor digitorum superficialis and flexor digitorum profundus, to mention but a few), vessels, tendons etc.).

The great complexity of the hand-system is represented in the brain in the form of neural circuits and the whole organization of the hand-system is certainly represented in cognition. However, only a few synergies are responsible for a whole set of interactional movements, or movements addressed to an object.

Similarly, I would like to claim, only a few conceptual synergies are responsible for hand related lexis and idiomatic expressions with the words *hand/mano* and these are essentially based on a few, not very delicate, parameters among which :

- a) Form and size: roughly rectangular if not spread, medium size, plus thumb
- b) Quantity: two
- c) Constitution: skins, bones, muscles, blood vessels, nerves
- d) Structure: palm, back, wrist, fingers, nails, balls, knuckles
- e) Position: end of wrist, bilateral, middle of the body
- f) In-built movements: bend, rotate, open, close, spread, raise, form fist.

Approximate as they are, these parameters represent most of the phenomenological information that is necessary for language to organize concepts concerning what we can do with our hands and name them: *hold, grasp, slap, pat, tap, clap, stroke, grab, wipe, join, scratch, pick, feel* etc.

Needless to say, these lexical items are themselves approximations: different parts of the hand (and of the body) are conceptually recruited in each of them (e.g. nails and fingers in scratching, balls and fingers in tapping, palms and fingers in clapping, hand, wrist and arm in raising) and different patterns of configurations are presupposed for different actions (think of grasping vs stroking, wiping vs. picking, for example).

The conceptual representations underlying different uses of the words *hand/mano* and implicit in several actions performed by the hand are only portions of the conceptual representations of the hand-system as a limb.

If we assume our knowledge of the hand as a limb to be represented by a flexible, dynamic frame consisting of slots and values, then it appears clearly that not all slots and not all values are relevant to the comprehension of the idiomatic and metaphorical expressions with the words *hand/mano*.

If looked at from this perspective, the apparent similarity of the a-h STAND-FOR metonymic readings listed in dictionaries turn out to conceal deep differences, homogeneity being the emergent result of different processes that, while hinging on the physical and functional properties of the hand mentioned above, select and act upon variable combinations of its components extending the concept beyond its physical domain into several directions. Thus, for instance, if the structural configuration of the fingers and the possible movements of the hand are foregrounded, the concept may be dynamically construed to represent the image of a “container” and consequently enter some specific networks which are responsible for its further metonymic and metaphorical projections; if

its roughly central position with respect to the human body is focalised, together with its possibility to indicate via a pointing finger, then analogies may be found with the stylus of a clock; if only the position on the right and on the left of the human body is selected, then the possibility to indicate spatial collocations emerges; if the actions that can be performed with the hands are selected, then other circuits can be triggered that lead to agentivity as the emergent reading with its multiple interpretations.

Metonymic readings that appear equivalent on the surface of the two languages may therefore be the outcome of different cognitive processes (analogy, projection, foregrounding, focalization, selection, image creation) acting upon different parts of the overall conceptual representation. In the next section, I will describe metaphorical expressions with the words “hand”/mano in English and Italian.

## 6.2. Metaphors

Through tangible images, often metonymically rooted, metaphors with the words *hand/mano* allow for expressions of abstract values, moods, attitudes of mind: again, there are parallels and asymmetries between English and Italian.

In Italian, *avere le mani bucate* (lit. “to have hands with hole”) is to be a squanderer (“to burn a hole in one’s pocket”); *avere le mani d’oro* (lit. “to have hands of gold”) is to be capable of doing things of very high quality (“to be clever with one’s hands”); *mangiarsi le mani* (lit. “to eat one’s hands”) means to regret bitterly (“to kick oneself”); *avere le mani pulite* (lit. “to have clean hands”) is to be honest; *avere le mani in pasta* (lit. “to have hands in dough”) means to be involved in some affair (“to have a hand in s.th”; “to have a finger in the pie”); *avere il cuore in mano* (lit. “to have one’s heart in one’s hand”) means to be frank (“to wear one’s heart on one’s sleeve”); *mettere la mano sul fuoco* (lit. “to put one’s hand on the fire”) means to be absolutely certain; *portare qualcuno in palma di mano* (lit. “to carry someone in the palm of one’s hand”) means to appreciate, praise; and *fare la mano morta* (lit. “to do the dead hand”) means to act without intention; *mettersi le mani nei capelli* (lit. “put one’s hands in one’s hair”) translates “to tear one’s hair out” meaning not to know which way to turn; *toccare con mano* is to see something for oneself, and *allungare le mani* (lit. “to stretch one’s hands”) is to have sticky fingers (or to hit someone).

In English, on the other hand, the simile “to know something like the back of one’s hand” (lit. *conoscere qualcosa come il dorso della mano*) means to know something very well (It. *come le proprie tasche*); “to live from hand to mouth” (lit. *vivere dalla mano alla bocca*) means to be very poor (It. *vivere di stenti, vivere alla giornata*); “to wash your hands of something” (lit. *lavarsi le mani di qualcosa*) is to absolve yourself of responsibility; “to be underhanded” (lit. *agire sottomano*) means to be deceitful; “to be a dab hand/an old hand” (lit. *essere una vecchia mano*) means to be an expert (It. *essere esperto, pratico di q.cosa*); “to take the law into your own hands” (lit. *prendere la legge nelle proprie mani*) is to seek to avenge a wrong yourself rather than appeal to law enforcement for assistance (It. *farsi giustizia da soli*); “to catch someone red-handed/ with one’s hand in the cookie jar” (lit. *cogliere qualcuno con le mani arrossate*) is to catch someone in the act of doing something wrong (It. *cogliere qualcuno con le mani nel sacco*); “to put one’s hand to the plow” (lit. *mettere mano all’aratro*) is to begin an important task (It. *mettersi all’opera*); “to sit on one’s hands” (lit. *sedersi sulle proprie mani*) means refuse to do anything (It. *starsene con le mani in mano*); “to overplay your hand” (lit. *esagerare con la mano*) is to try too hard to achieve a goal, resulting in failure or complication” (It. *fare il passo più lungo della*

*gamba*); “to play into someone’s hands” (lit. *recitare nelle mani di q.uno*) is to be manipulated by an opponent into doing something advantageous for that person and detrimental for yourself (It. *fare il gioco di q.uno*); “to show one’s hand” (lit. *mostrare la propria mano*) is to reveal one’s plans or intentions (It. *scoprire le proprie carte*); “to win hands down” (lit. *vincere con le mani giù*), or “with both hands tied behind one’s back” (lit. *con le mani legate dietro la schiena*) is to win easily and conclusively (It. *a occhi chiusi*).

Further, “to give a golden handshake” (lit. *dare una stretta di mano dorata*) as a way of dismissing someone with a big sum of money has no body part equivalent expression in Italian (It. *dare una bella buonuscita*); “to give a glad hand” in the sense of giving a warm greeting to someone is *fare un’accoglienza calorosa*, and being “putty in someone’s hands” is synthetically expressed by the Italian *essere malleabile*. A “hand-to hand fight” is *un combattimento corpo a corpo* in Italian.

### 6.3. Sayings, proverbs, and comparisons

Proverbs and comparisons show similar patterns of (a)symmetries: “to bite the hand that feeds you” (to be hostile to someone who has been kind to you) is *sputare nel piatto in cui si mangia* in Italian; “time hangs heavy on one’s hands” (time seems to go slowly when one has nothing to do) can only be paraphrased non-idiomatically *il tempo scorre lento quando non si ha niente da fare*; “the devil makes work for idle hands” (lazy people are susceptible to the temptation to do wrong) is equivalent to the Italian *l’ozio è il padre dei vizi*; “many hands make light work” (a lot of people working make a job seem easy) has no correspondent expression with *mani* in Italian; “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” (lit. *un uccello in mano è meglio di due nel cespuglio*) translates the Italian *meglio un uovo oggi che una gallina domani*; “cold hands, warm heart”, on the contrary, is equivalent to the Italian *mani fredde, cuore caldo*; “one hand for oneself and one for the ship” (lit. *una mano per sé e una per la nave*) meaning that one should always put some effort in safeguarding oneself as well has no equivalent expression with a body part in Italian; “to be waited on hand and foot” (lit. *essere serviti mani e piedi*) is expressed in Italian by *esser serviti e riveriti*. “As bare/flat as a hand” has no literal equivalent in Italian, whereas “hand and glove” is rendered by the Italian low register phrase *culo e camicia*.

Expressions with parts of the hand follow the same paths: in some cases the part of the hand mentioned in the English expression coincides with the part of the hand mentioned in the Italian equivalent, in other cases a different body part is used and in others no body part is involved: thus, to mention only a few examples, “to twiddle one’s thumbs” (to be idle) is paralleled by the Italian *girarsi i pollici*, but “to be all thumbs”, meaning being awkward and clumsy in working with one’s hands (lit. *esser tutto pollici*), translates into Italian as *essere legati, impacciati*; “to burn one’s fingers” (to suffer from a bad experience) is equivalent to the Italian *rimaner scottati*, where the burned part is not mentioned; “to be closefisted with money” (to be stingy) can be expressed by the regional *avere il braccino corto*, and “to have one’s finger in too many pies” (to be involved in too many things) can be rendered with *avere i piedi in troppe staffe*.

### 6.4. Further remarks

The analysis carried out so far shows that, even though the centrality of the hands is uncontroversial in the structuring of idiomatic and figurative uses of the terms in the two languages, differences can be identified both as a result of the socio-cultural filters that shape the profile of one and the same conceptualization process and as a different way of conceptualizing the same experience. The comparison between English and Italian expressions with “hand”/*mano* makes it sufficiently clear, I believe, that it would be impossible to generalize in such terms as to gain insights into cognition and conceptual systems without positing culture and history as mediating frames. On the other hand, if it is true that it is not always safe to infer how people think from the way they talk (Gibbs 2007), it is also true that languages express their sociocultural specificities, or preferences in terms of body parts in other areas than figurative uses. Morphological derivation and compounding are cases in point.

### 6.5. Derivation and compounding

Italian has few denominal verbs for things we can do with our hands: *manomettere*, *maneggiare*, *manipolare*, *manovrare*, but both derivation and compounding provide evidence for the sociocultural role of our hands in the naming of objects, qualities and activities that are connected with the word *mano* via various kinds of conceptual relations and inferences. Some of them have parallels in English words with “hand”, or with the Latin equivalent *manu* or the French *main*; others are definitely language and culture-specific. They belong to the areas of:

- a) jobs and works: *manodopera* (labour, workforce, manpower); *manovalanza-manovale* (labourer, unskilled labourer, jack); *manifattura* (factory, manufacture); *manufatto* (handmade [adj], artefact, manufactured article);
- b) handwritten texts, such as *manoscritto* (manuscript), or books that can be held in the hands, such as *manuale* (handbook, textbook);
- c) activities that can (or could, originally) be performed by the hands: *manomettere* (tamper, falsify); *manovra* (manoeuvre, tactics, operation, trick); *manutenzione* (maintenance, upkeep); *manipolazione-manipolare* (handle, manipulate, tamper); *maneggiare* (handle), and related *maneggevole* (handy, manageable, easy to handle); *mantenere* (maintain, keep up); *manrovescio* (backhander); *manata* (slap); *pallamano* (handball); *baciamano* (hand kissing);
- d) objects that commonly rely on hands for their use: *manette* (handcuffs); *manopola* (knob, grip, mitten); *manovella* (crank, handle); *manubrio* (handlebars, dumbbell); *maniglia* (handle); *corrimano* (handrail, rail, railing); *asciugamano* (towel, handtowel); *battimano* (handclap, applause); *lavamano* (handbasin);
- e) quantities that can be held in a hand: *manciata* (handful, fistful); *manipolo* (handful);
- f) manual skills: *manualità* (manual skill, manual ability); *manesco* (aggressive/free with one’s hands).

English derivation and compounding tell a similar story. Beyond the expressions mentioned above, the following show the notion of “hand” as constitutive of English words that have no immediate equivalent with *mano* in Italian, denoting:

- a) jobs that rely heavily on the use of hands, such as cowhand (*buttero*); deckhand (*mozzo, marinaio*); farmhand (*bracciante agricolo*); handmaid (*cameriera, ancella*); stagehand (*dipendente di un teatro*);
- b) activities that are performed by hand, such as: handwriting (*scrittura, grafia*); shorthand (*stenografia*);
- c) objects that are carried by or used by/for hands, such as: handbag (*borsetta*); handbasin (*lavamano*); handgrip (*impugnatura*); handset (*cornetta, telefono portatile*); handout (*foglietto, volantino*); handcuffs (*manette*); handgun (*pistola automatica*);
- d) activities that involve the use of hands, such as: handpick (*selezionare*); handover (*trasferimento, passaggio, cessione*).

## 7. Conclusions

The study was meant to show the crucial role of our hands in structuring our thought and our lexicons. The description provided shows that English and Italian relate themselves with the body part “hand”/*mano* in very similar ways, with a few exceptions that can be referred to social and cultural differences. It is remarkable for instance that cricket, the navy and horse racing provide figurative uses of the English “hand” that do not have equivalent in Italian, whereas Italian has uses of the term *mano* in areas that point to the expressions of feelings and emotions. Far from being exhaustive, this is only a preliminary investigation into the complexities of body parts language, and further investigation would be required in order to spell out the kind of mental operations and cultural filters at work in the profiling of the meaning of each individual lexical expression starting from encyclopaedic knowledge attached in the two languages to the words “hand”/*mano*.

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Pisa, marzo 2013

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