

The Language of Yoga between “the Great Chain of Being” and “Layers of the Cake”

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Abstract

Metaphorical language and metaphorical gestures used to convey information about the subjective experience of the body have been explored in Mueller and Ladevig (2013) who consider gesture(s) as embodied forms of thought and understanding. In particular, in teaching dance, metaphors (in speech, gesture, and body) appear to be extremely useful means to communicate embodied experiences. Further, another study by Łozińska (2021) shows that metaphor is an important didactic tool used by yoga teachers to instruct practitioners about complicated postures and that the images permeating verbal and verbo-gestural metaphors used for didactic purposes during a yoga class are a mixture of static, dynamic and image-schematic elements.

The present paper explores the interplay of iconicity and metaphor in the terminology of the 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 /encyclopedia 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?

Our metaphor analysis includes 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: iconicity, verbal metaphor, verbo-gestural metaphor, yoga, the Great Chain of Being

Introduction

The main goal of the present research is to examine metaphorical language in yoga teaching and identify the elements that may enhance a quick and deep, correct understanding of body postures and movements and the importance of awareness, kindness and mindfulness in the practice of yoga. In order to achieve it, it addresses the following research questions and their implication for understanding the role of metaphor in situational contexts:

RQ1: What image schemas underlie the metaphorical expressions used by yoga teachers?

RQ2: What influences the choice of metaphorical expressions in the yoga class?

RQ3: How is the visual information in the metaphor conveyed verbally?

The data for this study consist of 30 yoga contexts (classes and tutorials) drawn from the YouTube channel, “Yoga with Adriene”, created in 2012, where she began to share free at-home yoga workouts. Adriene Mishler is one of the most influential yoga teachers nowadays, an actress, and an entrepreneur who promotes the idea of incorporating yoga into daily life for overall wellness. Her videos have received more than one billion views, and she has 10.3 million subscribers. Each video is themed (e.g. *Yoga for Neck and Shoulders Relief*, *Yoga for Hips and Lower Back Release*, *Yoga for Comfort and Nourishment*). From the very beginning, her videos differed from most exercise-themed platforms. Her language is notable for her gentle, sometimes humorous style and the use of imagery and analogies that enhance understanding and can make the practice easier through verbal and visual metaphors. The themes of yoga contexts are mostly related to mental health, self-care, and mindfulness, to concepts like gratitude, compassion, and self-love, making her classes more than just physical workouts.

The methods for selecting the metaphorical language in yoga teaching involved several steps: transcripts of yoga classes and then exploration of visual aspects of the classes, including body language and demonstrations, to see how they complement the verbal instruction. These were followed by the identification of standard metaphors and of novel metaphors and the organisation of figurative expressions according to their corresponding image schemas. Last but not least, metaphorical expressions were grouped into nominal and verbal.

Previous studies on verbal and verbo-gestural means of communication

Metaphorical language and metaphorical gestures used to convey information about the subjective experience of the body have been explored in Mueller and Ladevig (2013) who consider gesture(s) as embodied forms of thought and understanding. In particular, in teaching dance, metaphors (in speech, gesture, and body) appear to be extremely useful means to communicate embodied experiences. In their work entitled *Metaphors for sensorimotor experiences. Gestures as embodied and dynamic conceptualisations of balance in dance lessons*, Muller and Ladevig analyse metaphors that are used to describe a

very ‘concrete’ and highly subjective bodily experience — the sensorimotor experience of a balanced body.

Their analysis addresses (1) the level of metaphoric expression and (2) the discourse level. When considering the former, they use the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and its extension, MIP-VU, the Metaphor Identification Procedure proposed by Steen’s metaphor group at the VU University of Amsterdam (2010). These Procedures require following a word-by-word analysis and a checking of potential metaphoricity for each word in each sentence. Regarding the latter (i.e. the discourse level), their approach relates to Cameron’s 2010 discourse dynamic approach that suggests that metaphors are not fixed entities but rather dynamic constructs that evolve through interaction and discourse.

What Mueller and Ladevig introduce in their research is the distinction between sleeping and waking metaphors, but their analysis of metaphors in body movements and speech concerns only waking metaphors, because they receive the speaker’s and the listener’s attention, while the sleeping ones do not. For example, if a verbal metaphoric expression is accompanied by a gesture that exhibits the Source Domain (SD) of the verbal metaphor, two modalities are being used at the same time. Instances of metaphors that structure the discourse about balance in dancing were identified in *think up and light* (ballet) vs *think down and heavy* (tango).

In ballet teaching, the combined use of metaphoric body gesture and verbal metaphor results in the formulation “Finding balance is feeling a silk thread pulling the navel towards the spine”. The metaphor that emerges for balance in the tango class is based on the idea of a feeling of a heavy leg, which behaves like an anchor chain hanging in the water. The heavy chain stabilises the dancer like a heavy anchor chain stabilises the ship. The metaphors the two teachers find to describe balance in two dance styles obviously have two differing source domains.

Another study that emphasizes the importance of metaphor as a didactic tool used by yoga teachers to instruct practitioners is Łozińska (2021)’s article *Imagery underlying metaphors: A cognitive study of a multimodal discourse of yoga classes* where she also shows that the images permeating verbal and verbo-gestural metaphors used for didactic purposes during a yoga class are a mixture of static, dynamic and image-schematic elements. The Polish linguist brings into discussion the image schemas (container, path, balance, force, orientation) that underlie the source and target domains of metaphors used to convey information while doing asanas.

Iyengar’s (1969) view of yoga asana names and the Great Chain of Being Metaphor

The founder of the style of yoga as exercise, B.K.S. Iyengar, assumes that while doing asanas, the yogis take the shape of different creatures, from the smallest 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. 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. This idea of asana names as being derived from plants, insects, fish, reptiles, birds and mammals can be related to the Great Chain of Being as pointed in the title of the present research.

Besides the appearance attribute of beings, which is central in understanding yoga poses, the behaviour attribute could also contribute, to some extent, to comprehending the metaphorical language used in some yoga classes. The source domain of animal

characteristics has been approached by Lakoff and Turner (1989: 172), who discuss the single generic-level metaphor, The Great Chain Metaphor, that 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.” (Lakoff and Turner, 1989: 172).

On the interplay of metaphor and iconicity

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 experiences. The image content of this trope, particularly of a source domain, is an iconic moment involved in metaphor (Hiraga 2005).

In spoken languages, iconicity is the direct imitative form-meaning relationship possible for acoustic properties and events (e.g. animal sounds or the sounds made by objects in motion or upon impact on other objects and phonesthemic forms (e.g. words ending in -ack (whack and crack) that denote forceful, punctuated contact.

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. 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. The pervasiveness of iconic expressions characterises not only sign languages but also the language used in yoga classes.

Analysis. The shape attribute in standard asana terms

The term “asana”, derived from Sanskrit and meaning “seat”, initially designated many of the oldest asanas as seated postures for meditation. Asanas may be standing, seated, arm-balances, twists, inversions, forward bends, backbends, or reclining, in prone or supine positions.

A closer look at about 80 basic asana terms that we found in online glossary sources brings even more evidence in support of Yiengar'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 includes the category of artefacts. Thus, the shape attribute can be visualised in standard asana terms related to the following:

Animals: cat, cow, dog, lizard, frog, tortoise, cobra, dolphin, shark, seal, fish, pigeon, peacock, spider, butterfly, caterpillar, locust.

Artefacts: chair, boat, bridge, saddle, plough, plank

Human beings: warrior, cobbler, child, baby

Plants: cactus, tree, lotus

Universe: crescent moon

Nature: mountain, volcano pose

These metaphorical names help practitioners visualise and connect with the essence of each pose, enhancing their practice.

Image Schemas that underlie metaphors in yoga teaching

Yoga language is usually produced and perceived in the visual-verbal modality (the co-speech gesture modality). The visual nature of this type of language comes from an abundance of iconic mappings.

Image schemas (Lakoff, 1980, 1987) are fundamental structures that influence thought, language, and meaning-making. They allow us to conceptualise complex ideas through more basic, embodied experiences and play a crucial role in how we interpret metaphors and construct meaning in communication.

In yoga discourse, they are utilised to convey concepts and experiences and help practitioners by facilitating a deeper understanding of yoga's physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. The types of image schemas identified in our research that underlie metaphors in yoga teaching are *container, path, balance, force, and orientation*.

Findings and discussion.

➤ ***The Container and the Path Schema***

The Container Schema, consisting of a boundary distinguishing an interior from an exterior, represents the body as a container. It lies at the basis of the following identified metaphoric expressions: *stay open to receiving the comfort, invite length in the spine, inviting a release, a surrender, turn out the inner smile, come into this little neck hammock, inhale lots of love in, lots of love out, step in our best and most beautiful selves in both body, mind and heart*.

This image schema links with other experiences of containment or containers, such as being in a room or building.

In yoga teaching language, the Path Schema is often used to describe the journey of personal growth or spiritual development. In the yoga contexts we have used, this schema reflects the idea of progression through poses and practices, suggesting movement toward a goal or state of being: *begin to windshield wiper the toes, sweep the arms forward, back and forth, swing the arms right and left, dial your hands, walk your fingertips forward*.

The metaphorical expression *in your own time travel there* in *So, in your own time travel there, listen to your body* suggests the conceptual metaphors THE SELF IS A LANDSCAPE and YOGA PRACTICE IS A JOURNEY.

➤ ***The Balance Schema, the Force Schema and the Orientation Schema***

In yoga practice, the Balance Schema is inherent in descriptions of physical postures (asanas) that require stability and equilibrium (e.g. *ground your tail to the earth, dig into your heels*) and sometimes symbolises the broader pursuit of balance in life.

The Force Schema represents the dynamic interplay of effort and ease in yoga practice, illustrating concepts like tension and relaxation within poses: *imagine that string pulling up your head, slowly cascading down, and sinking into your heels*.

The Orientation Schema is used to describe alignment and positioning in yoga. In the analysed data, this schema can symbolise clarity, focus, and mindfulness in both physical and mental practices: *sweep the arms up and overhead, the knees fly up, the fingertips rain down, spiral your heart towards the sky*.

➤ **Creative Metaphorical Use of Nominal Structures and Verbs**

Another instance of creative metaphorical language used by Adriene Mishler in her yoga sessions is represented by short, focused nominal phrases that provide clarity and help practitioners stay present and engaged in the moment by minimising distractions. Metaphorical nominal structures such as *spider fingers*, *noodle arms*, *cactus arms*, *aeroplane arms*, *thriller arms*, *windshield wiper legs*, *warrior legs*, *little neck hammock* allow conciseness and evoke imagery that resonates with yoga practitioners.

For example, in a yoga class focused on neck, shoulder and upper back relief, the instruction is:

draw a *little saucer-sized* circles with the nose, *baby circles* one way and then let it grow bigger ... a saucer to like a *salad plate*, and then it gets a little bigger, a *dinner plate* frisbee (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3-gKPNyrTA>)

As standard yoga poses, done in standard ways, can over time seem routine and stale, the use of verbal metaphors in teaching can also convey more meaning when economy of language is necessary. For instance, in order to suggest the process of extracting or drawing out energy, benefits, from a pose or practice, the verb “milk” is used: “On your next inhale ... crunch the back of your neck, I’m really milking it.” In addition, the metaphorical use of the verb “to melt” conveys a sense of relaxation, surrender, and letting go of tension:

Imagine your shoulder blades *melting down*.

Allow your heart *to melt*.

Melt the heart/hips/ribs down.

The practitioners are encouraged to “melt into” a stretch, suggesting that they should relax their muscles and breathe deeply, thereby creating space and ease in the body. This metaphor highlights the importance of mindfulness and acceptance in practice, promoting a state of flow and tranquillity. Overall, “to melt” emphasises the emotional and physical aspects of release in the yoga experience.

Two verb metaphors seemingly favoured by Adriene Mishler in her yoga classes imply both emotional and physical aspects. The verb “*to kiss*,” for which we found ten occurrences, suggests a mindful and delicate touch. It can imply a sense of affection or care in the practice, emphasising the importance of being gentle with oneself and cultivating a loving relationship with the body. This metaphor encourages practitioners to approach their movements and postures with a sense of warmth, awareness, and kindness:

Fingertips *kiss* up and overhead. (The verb “to kiss describes the lightness and softness of movement)

Palms *kiss* together. (The verb “to kiss” refers to a gentle or intimate connection between different parts of the body.)

The knees *kiss* the earth. (The verb “to kiss” refers to a gentle or intimate connection between the body and the ground.)

Head *kisses* your mat.

Besides a sense of stability and support, the verb “*to hug*” (13 occurrences) can imply creating a sense of warmth and connection, both physically and energetically. This

metaphor emphasises nurturing, support, and the importance of intentionality in one's movements and breath, fostering a deeper connection to the body and the practice.

Your low rib cage *hugs* in.

Create more space by *hugging* the front body to the back body.
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SedzswEwpPw>, min 5:32)

Hug both knees up!

Keep the elbows *hugging* into the side body!

➤ **Speaking to the senses: food-related metaphors in yoga language**

In yoga practice and language, “nourishing the body” goes beyond the idea of eating experience and emphasises the importance of providing the body with what is healthy, underlying the connection between physical, mental, and spiritual “nourishment”. In the yoga contexts we have analysed, the yogi uses interesting metaphors related to the idea of nutrition. The expression *It all lies in the pudding*, is a variation of the idiom “the proof is in the pudding”, meaning that the value of something (i.e. yoga practice) must be judged based on direct experience.

Along this line of thought, the 30-day yoga journey that Adriene Misher proposes at the beginning of 2024 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0et6I930LaU&list=PLui6Eyny-UzwwBB_riVPMdOF3cmheEPpy) provides more metaphoric language that is related to food and eating.

The identified metaphor YOGA UNDERSTANDING/PRACTICE IS EATING A CAKE SITTING ON A PLATE is evidenced by the expression *layers of the pudding/cake* that refer to the physical, energetic and mental dimensions of our being. The expressions suggest that personal growth and understanding occur in stages, much like the layers of a cake. It implies that practitioners can build upon their experiences and insights, revealing deeper layers of understanding over time.

The 3-layer cake metaphor is a complex one in that it refers both to the external world (the top layer) and the internal world, which has two major layers. **The top layer** of the cake represents the self from a physical, mental and emotional perspective that engages the people and objects of the external world. The icing on top represents our engagement with the other people and objects of the world. **The middle layer** of the cake represents the subtle realm of reality, along with our unconscious mental processing (pictures and sounds) and the dreaming state of sleep. **The bottom layer** is the causal level, out of which both the subtle and the overt realities emerge. It represents our individual characteristics in their latent or seed form, which is unmanifest. At this level, these characteristics (e.g. attractions, aversions, and fears) can more truly be attenuated or reduced, allowing us to experience our individuality as free or separate from the conditionings of the external world. Overall, practising yoga means travelling from here to there, and back again, usually “eating the top and middle layer” and occasionally, perhaps, “the bottom layer”.

An instance of metaphor variation is the phrase *layers of the onion* which suggests that, like an onion, personalities have “layers”. The outside layer is what the others see, and the core is one's private self. This metaphoric phrase can be associated with “peel up” which conveys a sense of gradual, mindful exploration, whether in physical postures or personal growth. In the second week of the 30-day yoga journey, Adriene Misher uses *the onion layer* metaphor to encourage yoga practitioners to

approach their practice with curiosity and to stress the power of self-inquiry. This process of self-inquiry can be deepened through mindfulness, the practice of paying careful attention to mental and physical processes.

The metaphoric structures that relate to the idea of mindfulness are *have on one's plate*, *empty your cup*, *fill your cup*, *clean your desk*, *get the juices flowing*. The importance of awareness regarding one's mental and emotional load is suggested by *having on one's plate*, which refers to the various responsibilities, challenges, or commitments that a person is managing in their life. In yoga language, this idiom suggests the need for balance and prioritisation, making space for self-care and personal practice.

The phrase *empty your cup* is also common in meditation and mindfulness practices. It means "to let go of attachments, preconceived notions, expectations, and judgments in order to create space for new knowledge and experiences, fostering deeper understanding.

Fill your cup yoga is a 20-minute home yoga with Adriene Mishler posted on September 1st, 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H4dVbaLqg84&pp=0gcJCdgAo7VqN5tD>) meant to encourage practitioners to invest in their own well-being, enabling them to share their energy and positivity with others. Structures such as *a moment to reconnect and fill your cup* and *fill our cup with these daily moves* point to the idea of nurturing and replenishing oneself—physically, mentally, and spiritually. They emphasise the importance of self-care and personal well-being, suggesting that one should engage in practices that restore energy and balance.

The fourth mindfulness-related metaphoric expression, *clean your desk* is creatively used to point to the idea of clearing mental clutter and creating space for clarity and focus. It suggests the importance of organising one's thoughts, emotions, and priorities to enhance mindfulness and presence in practice and daily life. It also encourages practitioners to let go of distractions, negative thoughts, or unresolved issues, much like tidying up a physical space.

Get the juices flowing is used in a morning yoga session with Adriene Mishler (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOilkvadChg>), who encourages practitioners to release stagnation and embrace a state of flow, to connect with their bodies and minds, fostering a more dynamic and present experience in their yoga practice and daily life. The metaphoric phrase refers to stimulating energy, creativity, and vitality within the body and mind.

➤ **Speaking to the senses: Creative visual, auditory and other sensory metaphors**

As we have mentioned in the section devoted to the interplay of metaphor and iconicity, metaphors may be imagined from visual, auditory and other sensory experiences.

The analysed yoga contexts disclose how visual information in the metaphor can be conveyed verbally, reinforcing certain elements in a posture, as in:

I love the image of the umbrella here.

As you exhale, thread the needle here.

I like the idea of the spine as a superhighway of our energetic body (THE SPINE IS A HIGHWAY)

Do some figure eights.

The shape attribute, which surfaces in standard asana terms and in the examples above, can be accompanied by the size attribute:

Inhale, breathe into your hands, nice big balloon breath here. Big balloon inflates here. Coming to a little ski position.

The auditory content in the source domain is an iconic element in the following examples:

Exhale the SH sound if you like, shh as you come up to a forearm plank. Let's do the dang thing!

The touch element in metaphorical vehicle expressions, often used by Adriene Mishler in her yoga classes, relates to positive feelings of love and kindness meant to help in the management of emotions:

*Hug your right knee in!
The soles of the feet kiss together!*

Conclusions

The image schemas that appear most often to underlie the metaphorically used lexis are CONTAINER, PATH, FORCE, and ORIENTATION. (RQ1)

The chosen metaphorical Vehicle expressions that occur in Adriene Mishler's videos relate to themes/topics that refer not only to physical dimensions (stability, equilibrium, relaxation), but also to emotional and spiritual dimensions of the body, such as affection, mindfulness and connection (RQ2)

The visual information in the metaphor content includes (RQ3)

- the SHAPE attribute
- sometimes the SIZE attribute: *big beach ballon, baby cobra*
- RELATIONAL meanings: *hug, kiss*.

The discourse use of metaphor unveils the following conceptual metaphors:

THE SELF IS A LANDSCAPE

THE SELF IS A LAYERED CAKE

YOGA UNDERSTANDING/ YOGA PRACTICE IS A JOURNEY

YOGA PRACTICE IS EATING A CAKE SITTING ON A PLATE

The complex role of metaphor in yoga classes in general and in yoga with Adriene Mishler in particular can be more clearly understood if we contrast simple sentences with metaphoric sentences (e.g. Relax your shoulders vs Melt your shoulders or Breathe in deeply vs Big inhale, fill your balloon, etc.). While simple sentences only convey clear instructions, metaphoric sentences invite imagination and emotional engagement and create a deeper connection to the practice by prompting practitioners to reflect on their own experiences and sensations in a more nuanced way.

We believe that the yogi's background obviously influences the verbal style adopted during the classes. Given Adriene's reading and artistic experiences (dancing ballet and tap jazz, gymnastics, piano lessons and theatre), her yoga sessions can turn into "poetry for the body". Thus, this practice can enrich the practitioners' experience beyond physical aspects; it can be linked to broader life themes such as resilience, balance and growth.

Additionally, metaphoric yoga language can create a sense of unity among teacher and practitioners and can offer opportunities to mediate attitudes and values.

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