Kinesthetic Pattern Grammar in the Yama-Bhavacakra: Markedness, Blending and Midline Mimesis

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Across a wide range of approaches to cognitive linguistics, practitioners and theorists pursue cross-linguistic applications and non-western cultural models in order to better test, refine and develop the field (see e.g., Heine 1997, Slingerland 2005, Rice 2017). Theories of embodied cognition should be no exception. To inquire further into the experiential foundations of cognitive grammar in bodily dynamics of upright posture (developing ideas from Ellen 1977; Heine 1997; Van Lier 2010; Pelkey 2013, 2017a, 2017b, 2018), I pursue a cognitive semiotic analysis of the Tibetan Bhavacakra diagram. Since the tradition emerges out of a decidedly non-western context, it provides critical supporting evidence for a set of general organizational patterns or mimetic schemas (Zlatev 2016, 2018) in human cognition. I define the larger set of schemas as "kinesthetic pattern grammar", arguing that that such phenomena are best accounted for as patterned bundles of kinesthetic relations introduced via the reorganization of the anatomical planes intrinsic to the evolution of upright posture. This, in turn, provides further critical grounding for multiple theory-internal concepts and constructs such as grammatical markedness (pace Haspelmath 2006), and conceptual blending (pro Fauconnier & Turner 2002).

Notably, the Tibetan Bhavacakra, or 'wheel of life', features depictions of the six realms of samsara or 'rebirth' (including heaven, hell, human, animal, titan and hungry ghost realms). These realms are depicted between the spokes of a wheel, and that wheel is supported by Yama, the monster of impermanence. Yama's hands support the upper frame of the wheel while its feet support the lower frame. Drawing on discussions of textual and visual records in Teiser (2007), plus a working database of 30 visual exemplars, the paper presents statistical, structural and critical evidence to demonstrate that the relative placement of each of the six realms to each other, and to the viewer-inverse image of Yama as interlocutor, are theoretically non-trivial and phenomenologically non-arbitrary. Distinctive patterns of vertical/transverse and lateral/horizontal oppositions emerge that could only make sense with experiential reference to human kinesthetic midlines. Visual and textual content analyses suggest important correlations between the Tibetan wheel model and structuralist adaptations of the logical square of oppositions. As such, the analysis not only adds plausibility to the origins of cognitive grammar but also identifies much needed continuity between theoretical constructs in cognitive linguistics and structuralist semiotics.

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