

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1. Fingers have a prominent position in everyday experience and in the perception people have of human body. They are natural instruments for ordinary actions. With fingers people point, touch, press, scratch, grasp, tighten, beat, tap, count, and so on. When people look at their own body, fingers and hands, being generally uncovered, are the first parts to be perceived; when people look at other people, they are generally the second, immediately after the face.

Fingers, like people, are individually animated, i.e., all fingers can move separately and autonomously and their movement is extremely eye-catching. People often accompany their talking with movements of their hands and fingers, regardless of the topic and in many cases unconsciously, though with different modalities according to the cultural system they belong to and their individual background.

A human hand has five fingers, and computation by means of fingers has proved to be a universal computational strategy.³ How counting as a cognitive ability has originated, which are the relationships between enumeration, cognition and cultures, how numerals have been conceptualized and verbalized, etc. are very complex questions, out of my present interests.⁴ I will spend here only a few words, which may prove useful to further steps in our investigation, without going into details.

It is certain that the human body in general, and hands and fingers in particular, have had a relevant function in the establishment of numerical systems. However, different ways of conceptualization may have parallelly existed and competed each other, generating linguistic stratifications in one and the same linguistic/cultural environment (GNERRE 1995).

The different computational strategies with basis '4', '5', '10' and '20', some of which may have coexisted at certain times, can all be explained resorting to the natural usage of hands (and in some cases feet) by human people. The bases '5', '10' and '20' are self-explanatory, being equivalent to the

³ Cf. POHL 1981: 284, LANDI 2000, EDELMAN 1999: 229.

⁴ The bibliography on the matter is so rich, that quoting it *in extenso* is not possible. A collection of papers on the subject, with the relevant bibliography, presented on the occasion of the International Conference on "Numeri e istanze di numerazione tra preistoria e protostoria linguistica del mondo antico" (Naples, 1–2 December 1995) is in *AIΩN* 17 (1995).

totality of the fingers of one hand, of two hands and of the digits in a human body, respectively. The basis ‘4’ could be considered as less transparent at first. To a quartal system resorted HENNING (1948) interpreting the Ir. word for ‘8’ as a dual form of Av. *ašti-* ‘(a measure of length) four finger’s breadth, palm’. Similarly, the Hittite word for ‘4’, *mieu-*, *miu-* (< IE **mei-* ‘to lessen; to be small’), has been interpreted as derived from the designation of the “little hand” (the hand with the exclusion of the thumb).⁵ The latter derivation was challenged by GNERRE (1995: 149), who prefers an explanation based on the lunar mansions. In fact, he considers the “little hand” hypothesis as possible, but unprovable («al momento non conosco dati etnografici che appoggino una tale ipotesi, ed una percezione (ed uso) della mano di questo tipo»).

Both Iranian and IA, however, bear witness to the fact that the four fingers from the index to the little finger may be perceived as an independent concept. Beside Av. *ašti-* quoted above, we have Yγn. *paxa*, explained as ‘the four finger of the hand (with the exclusion of the thumb)’⁶ in XROMOV 1972, Skt. *catur aṅgulá* ‘the four fingers of the hand (without the thumb); 4 finger broad, 4 inches’ and the several equivalent expressions in Ir. languages, pointing to a unitary concept. These are Sgl. *čārangešt*, Išk. *čor-angišt* ‘span, from thumb to fore-finger’, Šγn. *čōr-angušt/angišt*, Baġ. *čōringašt* ‘a measure of length, from the forefinger to the little finger’ (‘the distance between the thumb and the ring finger’ ZARUBIN 1960), Yzy. *čorangāšt* ‘the measure of length corresponding to four stretched fingers’, Rod. *čahār angošt* ‘the distance between the four fingers, the thumb excluded [*fāsele-ye beyn-e čahār angošt manhā-ye angošt-e šast*]’ (MO^cTAMEDI 2001: 171), AfγPrs. (Her.) *čār angošt* ‘a measure of length a little smaller than a span’, etc. In Colloquial Prs., *čahār angošt* is used to mean ‘very small’, ‘having a very small dimension’ (NAJAFI 1999).

Even by the following Prs. passage: *pesar čahār angošt-aš rā yek-i kard va [...] be surat-e doxtar zad* (“the boy joined his four fingers and [...] hit the girl’s face”), extrapolated from a tale published in BEHRANGI – DEHQANI 1969: 142, we may infer that *čahār angošt* is (or may be) perceived as a unitary concept in Persian.⁷

⁵ For bibliographical references see GNERRE 1995: 148–149 and fn. 30.

⁶ On Yγn. *pax*, *paxa* see below, pp. 70 ff.

⁷ Note the pronominal suffix *-aš* and the definite/specific object marker *rā*, which points to an already introduced or otherwise, as in this case, definite object.

There are several etymologies for the IE words for ‘five’.⁸ The one proposed by HOROWITZ (1992) and supported by SCHWARTZ (1992), points to IE **penk^w*- as the original IE word for ‘hand’; once this base had been incorporated into the numerical system for ‘five’, it was replaced in later phases of the IE languages by other words for ‘hand’. This fact could provide, according to HOROWITZ, a satisfactory explanation for the lacking of a common IE word for this very salient body part.⁹ The conceptual association underlying the alleged phenomenon would not differ from the more recent one which produced Tafr. *dost* ‘number ten’ (ADIB TUSI 1963–1964) by means of a semantic extension from ‘hand(s)’, and Yṛn. *paxxa* ‘ten, tenner’ (MIRZOZODA 2008, s.v. *paxxa*³) by means of a semantic extension from ‘finger(s)’.

To conclude this digression into the numerical domain, one may note that the number five has been regarded in several different cultures as THE PERFECT NUMBER, the number of completeness (see e.g. CREVATIN 1978: 7–11) and that the pentad has been perceived as a CANONICAL SET (SCHWARTZ 1992: 424).¹⁰ This finds an explanation in the fact that the fingers, which as a whole constitute a hand and represent a totality, are five in all. Examples from Persian classical poetry testify the symbolic value of FIVE. A clear instance is the case of ‘five days’ equated to TOTALITY OF LIFE (MOKRI 2005: 269–270).

2. The potential of hands and fingers is magnified by the symbolic power which human people universally attribute to them. With a simple movement of the hand or of a single finger one may give order, greet, bless, accuse, curse, insult; one may swear, nullify his own oath, pledge, attest one’s own identity, testify one’s own faith, contract alliances, reinforce social hierarchies, etc.; using a well established gestural code one may send every kind of messages. This makes the hand and the fingers highly powerful and dangerous performative organs. Since ancient times, both positive and negative

⁸ See a collection of them in BLAŽEK 2000.

⁹ For a different explanation, see § 2 below.

¹⁰ Cf. Prs. *dast* ‘hand’ used in the sense of ‘set’ (*yekdast lebās* ‘suit’; *yek dast bošqāb* ‘a set of plates’, etc.). I take the opportunity to signal here what could be an apparently odd usage of *dast* (‘hand’) in the AfyPrs. dialect of Herat, which contrasts with what one would normally expect. Besides being used as a numerative for clothes, Her. *dast* is also recorded with the meaning of ‘six of anything’; we can probably envisage here a reflex of what is the traditionally accepted concept of PERFECT NUMBER, which varies according to different objects.

powers have been attributed to them in culturally and geographically different areas.¹¹ As it happens to eyes, fingers are conceived as endowed with the magic power of casting a spell on someone in order to drive out evil. Well known in the Islamic world is the apotropaic function of the open hand showed to the enemy, symbolized by the famous hand-shaped amulet called *xams* (< ‘five’), also known as “the hand of Fatima”, a real “symbole d’accompagnement” in the Maghrebine tradition according to CHEBEL 1999: 86, widespread in all the Middle East and North Africa.¹² The very gesture of stretching one’s hand against someone’s face, or the simple word *xams* ‘five’ is understood as a very dangerous curse (SCHIMMEL – ENDRES 1994: 115–116). In Iranian, Xuns. *penja* and Bal. *panč* (from ‘five’, see below pp. 76 ff.), recorded as ‘curse made with the open hand, showing the palm towards someone’s face’, also attest the aggressive power of this gesture. The potential dangerousness of hands and fingers could have generated linguistic taboos; BONFANTE (1939) explains in these terms the lack of IE common words for ‘hand’,¹³ and even more for ‘finger’.

3. For their shape and their functioning as sexual surrogates, the fingers are frequently equated to the male sexual organ. SCERBO (1991: 47, 48) describes as follows the metaphorical mapping FINGER = MALE ORGAN in European languages: «Nei paesi di lingua francese, oltre a *doigt* [...] “dito”, considerato simbolo del pene, sono diffuse le seguenti metafore: *le doigt medium*, ovvero *le doigt de milieu*, “il dito di mezzo”, cioè quello posto fra le gambe dell’uomo; *le doigt que n’a pas d’ongle* [...] In alcune canzoni anonime troviamo la metafora *brigadier de l’amour* nel significato di “dito medio” per l’assistenza che tale dito offre nei giochi erotici [...] in Francia il dito medio della mano destra è chiamato anche *doigt de la cour* “dito cortigiano”. [...] Fra le popolazioni di lingua inglese si registrano con lo stesso significato le seguenti denominazioni: *little finger* [...], *forefinger* [...], *thumb of love* [...], *middle finger* [...]». Similarly, *angošt-e šekam*, lit. ‘the finger of

¹¹ References to an “evil finger” (*ubānu limuttim*) and a “good finger” (*ubānu damiqtim*) in the Akkadian world are in EBELING 1957. On the magic power attributed to hands and fingers see also BONFANTE 1939: 202–203 and BRACCHI 2009: 281–286.

¹² On the symbolism of the hand in the Islamic (mainly Arabic) world see CHEBEL 1995, s.vv. *Khoms*, *Main*, *Doigts*, *Phalange* (with relevant bibliography); CHEBEL 1999: 85–90. Prs. *xamse-ye mobāreke* ‘the fingers (the five prospering (blessed) ones)’ (STEINGASS 1963) also points to the special protective function of the hand. On the symbolism and the magic potential of the number five see SCHIMMEL – ENDRES 1994: 105–121.

¹³ For a different explanation see § 1 above.

the belly', *angošt-e bist-o-yekom*, lit. 'the twenty-first finger' (ŠĀMLU 2000: 1018) are (jesting) alternative expressions for the male organ in Persian.

The finger as a metaphor of the male genital organ is a recognized universal which finds an explanation not only in the finger's shape and its possible practical usages: in many cultures, fingers and hands are regarded as conceptually linked with the human procreative power, as underlined by ONIANS (1998: 231–232 fn. 9, 276 fn. 2, 356–359) as far as the Classical and Hebrew worlds are concerned. In this light, one should probably explain the Phl. expression *dast-hušk* 'dried hand(s)', occurring for example in *Dk.* V, 2.3, where we are told in which way the *devs*, who have tried to make Zardušt die, were punished (*kē margīh kē agārīh ud tā-z kē dast hušk* "Certains (d'entre eux) furent atteints par la mort et d'autres (rendus) impuissants, à telle enseigne que leurs mains se desséchèrent", AMOUZGAR – TAFAZZOLI 2000: 26–27).¹⁴

In order to establish a new etymology for Av. *zasta-* 'hand' (and its several cognates), GERSHEVITCH (1996) reconstructs a root **ghes-* 'to extend', to which he also refers Av. *āžu-*, Sgd. 'זָו 'penis (probably only in expanded size)'. In this way, he suggests an etymological link between *zasta-* 'hand' (*zas-ta-*) 'the extendible' and Gath. *āžu-* 'penis' (*ā-ž-(u)-*) 'the expansive'. I will straddle here the issue of the likelihood of GERSHEVITCH' proposal; I am sure, however, he would have rejoiced to know that witness to the equivalence HAND = MALE ORGAN is born at least by Nāi. *das* 'hand; male organ' (also Krmnš. *das-e xar* 'male genital organ (vulg.)').

Being associated to the male organ, fingers are also capable of evoking obscene concepts. Therefore, obscene senses are frequently associated to labels for fingers; cf. Engl. *finger*, as in the idiom *giving someone the finger*, referring to the obscene gesture (also known as *bird*) made by extending the middle finger while bending the other fingers into the palm, which is very common in several areas in the world, including the ones we are concerned with here. The practice to do obscene gestures with fingers to abuse someone by sending him messages with clear sexual contents is a universal.¹⁵ Which

¹⁴ See also *Dk.* VII 3.6 (MOLÉ 1993: 170), *WZ* 10.3 (GIGNOUX – TAFAZZOLI 1993: 66–67). On the other hand, one could interpret as originally meaning 'endowed with procreative powers' the Prs. idiom *tar-dast* 'dexterous' (lit. 'wet-handed'), already attested in Phl. (cf. SHAKED 2002: 132–133).

¹⁵ The relevant Ir. linguistic expressions which may be put forward in this connection are numberless. I will limit myself to quote here, as a sample of the different possibilities, Zar. *nāxū nāšū* 'dishonoured, infamous, disgraced', which may be said of a person to which a finger (*nāxū*) has been shown; Zarq. *angol dādan* 'to insult with a gesture made

finger(s) to use for this purpose, and in which way, depends on the different cultural traditions; the middle finger and the thumb generally compete for such a role. The ancient Romans, for example, used the middle finger;¹⁶ in Iran, showing the thumb while keeping the other fingers bent is not exactly a mark of friendship. A held up thumb is perceived as a deliberately aggressive gesture in the IA¹⁷ and Drav. areas¹⁸, as well. For the Baloch, the sticking up of the middle finger or its bending downwards while keeping the other fingers straight forwards transmit obscene messages; in some areas of Balochistan, however, it is the thumb that carries out this task. The erotic potential of the fingers increases the perception of their salutariness and/or dangerousness.

4. Most of the matters just hinted at so far about the position of the hand and the fingers in human imagery, their ordinary functions, their symbolic value, their role in sustaining devotional and ideological systems, their capacity to communicate, etc. lie at the intersection of a large number of scientific fields (semiotics, cognitive semantics, cognitive ethnography, anthropology, psychology, iconography, etc.). Two International Round Tables, organized respectively in Ivry and Sèvres in 1978 and 1980 by the French CNRS, had as their subject “La main et les doigts dans l’expression linguistique”. The collections of the papers presented at the two meetings (DE SIVERS 1979, 1981) clearly show the diversity of domains, methodologies and interests which «l’étude des rapports entre la pensée et la main» (DE SIVERS 1979: 1) may involve.

showing one of one’s own fingers (and in particular the forefinger) to someone else, with the nail in the direction of the insulted person (also to deceive, trick)”; Bal. *gaḏḏī kanag* ‘to stick one’s finger up (either physically poking someone from behind with the middle finger, or sticking this finger in the air as a sign of abuse. Very impolite)’ and by semantic extension, ‘to fiddle with, to mess with’ (RAZZAQ – BUKSH – FARRELL 2001); Damāv. *hāppās* ‘to insult someone, showing the thumb, sometimes after having insalivated it’. On THUMB = MALE ORGAN cf. also Prs. *šast* (‘thumb’) and its derivative *šastak* ‘dildo’, recorded by in traditional dictionaries (see DEHX). On the sexual value attached to the thumb in the ancient Roman world, see ONIANS 1998: 561 and fn. 4.

¹⁶ POTT (1847: 288–291) provides a rich documentation on a few Lat. names of the middle finger (such as *digitus infamis* (or *famosus*), *digitus impudicus* etc.) that find their motivation on the association with the male sexual organ.

¹⁷ Cf. CDIAL 5506, 5515.

¹⁸ Cf. DED² 4425.

The aim of the present work is to analyse in a motivational perspective¹⁹ all the words for ‘finger’ and the names of individual fingers in the Iranian languages, reconstructing in this way an iconomastic typology for the ‘finger’ lexical domain in Iranian. In the framework of modern onomasiology, which operates in the light of cognitive linguistics, I concentrated on the ‘pathways’ through which the concept FINGER in general and those for individual fingers have been verbalized, going back (when possible) to the respective source concepts. Many regularities in the recurrent schemas have been proved to exist, some of which are universal, being present not only in Iranian or areally connected languages, but also in languages not related at all. At the same time, through occasional sorties in conceptual domains other than FINGER, which have given the opportunity of several cross-linguistic semasiological digressions, I intended contributing a little to the general knowledge of Iranian lexicon, which, despite the outstanding work of great scholars in the past two centuries, still remains a neglected branch of Iranology.

Bibliographical references on items having as subject the names of the individual fingers are MOINFAR 1981: 230 (Persian; only “standard” names), FILIPPONE 2000–2003 (Balochi), MOKRI 2005: 262–264 (Persian). A very important collection of finger names in many languages of the world is in POTT 1847: 225–304 (‘Anhang über Fingernamen’), which still remains of great interest and contains a very rich documentation for Iranian.

5. The upper and lower human body limbs have five endings each, in a sense similar in shape, which are free and mobile. The whole of the five digits can be conceptualized as a unit, and can be verbalized with a specific word. This is what happens, for example, in languages like Persian, where the term *pan-je*, a derivative from *panj* ‘five’, denotes ‘the five digits as a whole’ and consequently the ‘hand’ (or the ‘foot’);²⁰ it lays emphasis upon the salience of the five digits at the ending of the body limbs.

¹⁹ Motivation is intended here as a fundamental component of the linguistic sign, autonomous with respect both to meaning and etymology, according to the lines outlined by ALINEI (1996). ALINEI has also been the first to introduce terms like *iconimo*, *iconimologia*, *iconomastica*, etc., which are used in the present book in their English form (iconym, iconomastic etc.). In 2005, *Quaderni di semantica*, Bologna, the journal edited by ALINEI, changed its original subtitle (*Rivista internazionale di semantica teorica e applicata / An International Journal of Theoretical and Applied Semantics*) into *Rivista internazionale di semantica e iconomastica / An International Journal of Semantics and Iconomastics*.

²⁰ For more details see below pp. 76 ff.

There are languages that differentiate lexically the endings of the hand from those of the foot. English, for example, has *finger* and *toe*, German has *Finger* and *Zehe*, French has *doigt* and *orteil*. There are languages in which FINGER and TOE have been verbalized as a unique concept (DIGIT). Among these, one may count the Ir. languages. If required by the context, the relevant term may be specified as ‘pertaining to the hand’, or ‘to the foot’; in Persian, for example, *angošt-e dast* ‘finger’ (lit. ‘the digit of the hand’) contrasts with *angošt-e pā* ‘toe’ (lit. ‘the digit of the foot’). In Iranian, exceptions to this general assumption are few, if any: all of them could be easily explained as the result either of partially wrong analyses by modern Western scholars, influenced by a categorization typical of their own languages (as is the case of Av. *angušta-* ‘toe’, see below, p. 56), or of a recategorization of original lexical hierarchies by native speakers living abroad (as could be the case with the discordant distinctions proposed in some Kurdish bilingual dictionaries published in Europe, see below, p. 85).

Given the salience of the fingers in everyday human experience, as compared to that of the toes, in what follows I will always refer to ‘finger’ (if not otherwise specified). Note that, though words for ‘finger’ may be used with reference to the toe, the automatic application of individual finger names to the corresponding toes is not (or not always) possible, as demonstrated for Balochi in FILIPPONE 2000–2003: 72–73. Since an adequate lexicographic documentation on the matter lacks, I will concentrate on the finger names, leaving off the toe names.

Finger names may consist of single words or may be lexicalized phrases, generally containing two lexical units, the second being ‘finger’, whose presence may be or not be indispensable. In some cases the motivations underlying them are no longer obvious; in other cases they are still transparent and the speaker is able to recognize the associative connections that have produced those specific names. As a consequence of the general trend towards standardization in the major Ir. languages, a wealth of terms for individual fingers with an interesting cultural motivation has been replaced by one more or less official name.²¹

²¹ This is a common phenomenon, involving all linguistic areas. It is in this light that one should reconsider the data offered by cross-language researches, like those presented in BROWN – WITKOWSKI 1981, concerning the presence of figurative names for certain body parts. In particular, with regard to figurative expressions for fingers and toes, it is stated that they are extremely rare in European languages, which «do not use figurative language in naming these body parts» (p. 601). This comment has been biased by the sources used for each language involved in their analysis (118 languages in all), characterized by dif-

6. Finger names have a marked status and are low in salience; consequently they have a very low frequency in both everyday speech and written texts. Nevertheless almost everybody learns the traditional finger names very early in life, often in association with nursery-rhymes, which folk repertoires generally abound with. There are finger rhymes telling no story but consisting of the finger names uttered one after the other; some instances in Balochi are provided below, p. 140. There are finger rhymes depicting the fingers as having active roles in actions (mainly escapades) and dialogues. In these cases, the fingers may or may not be referred to by means of their names; the mentioning of the fingers is usually accompanied by touching them in turn.²² Most people (children and adults) in Tehran and surroundings seem to know the rhyme entitled *lili howzak*; several variants of this popular Prs. rhyme exist elsewhere (a Her. version is quoted in ĀSEF FEKRAT 1997, s.v.). The initial event on which the matter turns is the falling of something (a goat) in a *howzak*, a small water basin (the hollow of the palm of one's own hand perfectly meets the case). In a different rhyme, the fingers are portrayed as planning a theft. The following are respectively (a) a Prs. version I recorded in Tehran and (b) a similar Semn. version, published in MORGENSTIERNE 1960: 77–78:

(a)		
little f.	<i>in mige berim bedozdim</i>	“this one says: let’s go thieving”
ring f.	<i>in mige či bedozdim</i>	“this one says: what should we thieve?”
middle f.	<i>in mige tašt-e talā bedozdim</i>	“this one says: let’s thieve a gold cup”
foref.	<i>in mige jāvāb-e xodā ro či bedim?</i>	“this one say: what answer shall we give to God?”
thumb	<i>in mige man-e man-e kalle gonde</i>	“this one says: I am, I am the bulky head”
(b)		
thumb	<i>āni bāt bašin duzdi</i>	“this one said: let’s go thieving”
foref.	<i>āni bāt kujā bašin</i>	“this one said: where shall we go?”
middle f.	<i>āni bāt šāhi kia</i>	“this one said: to the King’s house”
ring f.	<i>āni bāt a meniun</i>	“this one said : I am not coming”

ferent linguistic levels (highly standardized in the case of European languages, such as French, Italian, English, etc.).

²² An appendix with different types of finger rhymes in German languages is given in BENNETT 1982: 18–21; see also ERDAL 1981: 124–125. A couple of rhymes in Maghrebine Arabic are in CHEBEL 1999: 89. A few examples from Italian folklore are in ALINEI 2009: 271–272.

little f.	<i>āni bāt kulla, kulla šāmširka</i>	“this one said: I am a big, big little sword.
	<i>dārun.mukun, māšin, mukun, miun</i>	I strike and go, I strike and come”

A short Xuri finger rhyme, very close to a rhyme I used to patter when I was a child, sounds as follows (ŠĀYEGĀN 2006: 171):

little f.	<i>emmorγu sareow</i>	“this small bird is near the water”
ring f.	<i>em begeraftē</i>	“this one seized it”
middle f.	<i>em bekoštē</i>	“this one killed it”
foref.	<i>em bepedē</i>	“this one cooked it”
thumb	<i>em befārdē</i>	“this one ate it”

The mere fact that each finger is reckoned as different from the others and endowed with an individual personality is a current motif in many Ir. proverbs. In the following Prs. proverbs, the differences among fingers symbolize the differences among human people:

angošt-e kučak folān nemitavānad šod

“the little finger cannot become any Tom, Dick and Harry”;²³

pañj angošt barādar and, barābar nistand

“the five fingers are brothers, not equal”;

*pañj angošt yeki nistand*²⁴

“the five fingers are not one and the same”;

xodāpañj angošt rā yek andāze nayāfaride

“God did not create the five fingers of the same size”;

xodā dah angošt rā barābar xalq nakarde

“God did not create the ten fingers equal”.²⁵

These Prs. proverbs find parallels in both Iranian and not Iranian traditions; cf. Pšt. *pindzah wārah gute barābare nah di* “all five fingers are not alike (= all men are not alike)” (GILBERTSON 1932: s.v. *finger*); Ar. (variety

²³ One may resort to this proverb to stress that “there is no equal to a so-and-so in doing something” (DEHX).

²⁴ A Zarq. (Fārs) version (*pañš tā angošt mesle ham nis*) is in MALEKZĀDE 2004: 81; an analogous Sang. proverb (*pañj angošt kə mači nabunən* “the five fingers are not of the same size”) is in TA^cDĀDI SANGESARI 2002: 86.

²⁵ See ŠĀMLU 2000: 1007–1008.

spoken in the Persian Gulf area) *šuwwabi*° *yaddak muub waḥda* “your fingers are not the same” (QAFISHEH 1997: s.v. *šubi*°).²⁶

There is a plenty of references to fingers in general, and specific fingers in particular, in the idiomatic phraseology of any Ir. languages. From them, one may infer the place these body parts have in the human imagery. I will not dwell upon them; I would only mention the Prs. expression *šast-e kasi xabardār šodan* (lit. ‘to become aware, said of someone’s thumb’), which means ‘to find out suddenly; to perceive, understand by instinct’ (NAJAFI 1999),²⁷ and presupposes the identification of the thumb, a perceptive antenna, with the whole person. The “alert thumb” strongly reminds the Shakespearean “pricking thumbs” (“By the pricking of my thumbs – something wicked this way comes”, *Macbeth* Act 4, Scene 1, 44–45), which has also inspired the title (*By the pricking of my thumbs*) of a famous novel by Agatha Christie.

The attitude of people towards their fingers has encouraged in many languages denomination processes based on the conceptual equation FINGER = HUMAN BEING.²⁸ Old Turkish *ärnäk* ‘little man’ (ERDAL 1981: 124), used as the general term for ‘finger’, is explained in the light of an anthropomorphic perspective. Being equated to human beings, fingers may also be linked each other by kindred relationships, as human beings are; this conceptual association explains many finger names, with a worldwide, albeit discontinuous, distribution.

7. The lexical domain of the finger names shows astonishing analogies in the conceptual grounds from which it has developed in the different languages, analogies which may be explained resorting to the common experi-

²⁶ Something similar should exist in Gypsy folklore as well. As reported by an Italian journalist interviewing a young Romani woman after several acts of aggression against Rom camps in a few Italian cities, planned in reprisal of criminal acts allegedly committed by Romani people, the woman stated that the collective punishment was to be considered as unjust, since Romanies are different one from the other, and she accompanied her wording with the moving of the fingers of one of her hands.

²⁷ Similarly, cf. Sang. *ma šast xabar dār bəbo* (Ta^ĀDĀDI SANGESARI 2002: 143) and Neh. *šasseš āmu xabar*, with which one remarks the fact that a piece of news has been spread earlier than one could image (SOTUDE 1989: 75).

²⁸ Among the different parts composing the human body, however, not only the fingers can be perceptually conceived as human beings. On the anthropomorphic and, in general, animistic patterns in the development of the body part terminology see also BONFANTE 1958.

ence of mankind and to the perceptive and cognitive abilities shared by human beings.

The finger names derive from cognitive processes in which the fingers are described in terms of some peculiar features or are equated with something different on the basis of associative principles. We can distinguish three main tendencies: the emphasis may be laid (1) on the physical appearance of the fingers; (2) on their relative position; (3) on one of the possible (real or symbolic) functions or activities people commonly assign to them.

Fingers' appearance and position represent anatomic universals based on a common perceptual reality. This does not mean however that all the people all over the world would describe their fingers in the same way. Starting from one and the same reality, different aspects may be selected and intervene in the denomination processes.

The thumb may be perceived as a big or as a short finger, depending on the touchstone. Its dimension and shape may favour mental processes based on associative principles which equate the finger to another element belonging to a different domain. The equation may be dependent on socio-cultural constraints. It is a matter of fact that, from an anatomical point of view, all people the world over have any of their fingers at the same position with respect to the others. But one may decide, for example, to describe the position of the ring finger with respect to the middle finger or with respect to the little finger. Fingers may also be examined in their sequential order. But when people use their fingers in counting, the finger from which computation starts may differ according to different cultural practices: there are people starting from their thumb, others from their little finger, and there are those who, by cutting off the thumb, start the sequence from their forefinger. In the Middle East, computation generally starts with the little finger.²⁹ This current practice has originated a few Ar. expressions, with which one may emphasise the importance attributed to the person one is talking about. When equating a person to a bent little finger, the first to be counted, the speaker acknowledges him/her as 'the first', the top in his/her category (see LANE 1968: s.v. *xinšir* and *thanna*). The finger names which take into account the finger sequential position clearly show the culturally imposed order. In English, for example, the forefinger, *alias* the first finger, is obviously considered to be the first. This order is proved to be very common in

²⁹ ŠĀYEGĀN (2006: 171) remarks the fact that Xuri children always begin counting with their little finger.

different areas of the world.³⁰ However, even in English one may note pattern stratifications: if *first finger* may only refer to the forefinger (never the thumb!), and consequently *second finger* is used with reference to the middle finger, *third finger* to the ring finger and *fourth finger* to the little finger, it sometimes happens to find the expressions *third finger* and *fourth finger* in connection with the middle finger and the little finger, respectively.³¹

Names for fingers motivated by activities performed by, or attributed to fingers are generally culturally bounded. However, functional universals also exist. This is proved by several iconomastic types for finger names pointing to specific activities, which are shared by people from different cultural backgrounds and speaking different languages, as is the case with “the pointing finger” and “the plate licking finger” for the forefinger or “the lice squatting finger” for the thumb.

8. Not all the languages have specific names for all the fingers. In some languages, only the thumb and the little finger have their own denominations, with the other ones having no name or being referred to with a general term for ‘finger’ (taxonomic subordination change). Different factors may favour this situation. Even alleged magic powers could suggest not giving a name, as could be the case with the ring finger.

However, when a specific finger is simply recorded with the general term for ‘finger’, one has to be cautious. Much may depend on how the data has been recorded. Specific elicitation techniques, for instance, may guide the informant towards a particular kind of answer, with the danger of distortions. Suppose an informant, inquired after the name of a single finger, is not in the position to answer the question, since he fails a specific name, being missing in his dialectal repertoire (what is likely) or in his personal, active repertoire (what is more likely). On this specific occasion, he may follow different strategies. He may say, for example, that he does not know it; he may say that that finger does not have any name at all, or he may get out of the tight corner resorting to the general (categorically superordinate) term for ‘finger’. In a section dedicated to ‘Sentences relating to parts of the body’ in a Balochi handbook first published in the 1960s (°ABDULQAYYŪM BALOČ 1997: 198), we read that «*mardume dastā panč lankuk int. awli zandê māsī ā diga-*

³⁰ For Dravidian, for example, cf. Parji *muna vanda* DED² 5020 ‘the finger which is ahead’.

³¹ See for instance the definition of Engl. *finger* in COD: «One of the five terminal members of hand (*thumb, & index, middle, ring, & little*, ff.), or four excluding thumb (usu. now membered thus, but cf. *fourth f.*, i.e. *ring f.*, in marriage service)».

rān lankuk gušant» (“In the hand of a man there are five fingers [*lankuk*]. The first, stout one is called *māsī*, the other ones are called *lankuk* [‘finger’]”). It is in this light that we should probably interpret the data provided by ŽUKOVSKIJ (1888: 63) for Kešei, where *aṅguš* should be ‘finger’ but also ‘forefinger’, ‘middle finger’, and ‘ring finger’, or for Vonišuni (ibid.), where *uṅguss* stands for ‘finger’, ‘forefinger’, ‘middle finger’, ‘ring finger’ and ‘little finger’.

The following anecdote is clear and to the point. Pressed by Grace Goodell, a young American researcher working in a village of Xuzestān on the bird lore and trying to straighten out some of the village bird names and descriptions, the sage Old Nur, a 87-year-old man living in Rahmat-Ābād, spoke in this way: «“Sometimes Long Tail wants to sing this way, sometimes another tune ! [...] Call all the little ones sparrows, Khanom Grace; write down that the big ones are named hawks.” He held up his hand, opened out. “One finger is long, one is short, one is fat,” he said; “they’re all different. Some of us are Lurs, some Arabs, Bakhtiaris, some mahalli, one American. Hosein is dark, Fatemeh is blond, Abol has green eyes. [...] Everything’s different, individual, each has its own job, that’s all. This finger points, these two pick up bread, this one wears a ring, this one is too small to do anything. Call these all fingers, call all the birds sparrows. What does it matter? Call all the big ones hawks, all the little ones sparrows. Who can begin to name every little bone and muscle of God’s hand?”» (GOODELL 1979: 152).