

CHAPTER SIX: THE RING FINGER

1. There is a lot of ring finger names in a large amount of languages which lay emphasis on the custom of putting rings on this finger. Engl. *ring finger* illustrates this much productive iconomastic pattern perfectly.²⁵²

Prs. *angošt-e halqe* (LAZARD 1990a) and *angošt-e angoštar* (ĀRYĀNPUR KĀŠĀNI 1979, s.v. *ring finger*) ‘ring finger’ contrast each other in that an Ar. loanword (*halqe*) alternates with an original Prs. word (*angoštar(i)*), but both literally mean ‘the finger of the ring’. Correspondently, Tajik has *angušt-i halqa* and *angušt-i angoštarī*. The same iconomastic pattern is found in Northern Kurdish, as is proved by KurmKrd. *tīliya gustilê / gustilkê / gustilkirinê / hingliskê* (*tilya gistilê; piçê gistilê / hingiliskê* AMÎRXAN 1992).

The Bal. labels *mundrīke lankuk* and *čallaī* ‘ring finger’, both recorded in Iranian Balochistan (respectively in Kasarkand and Irānšahr), explicitly mention the ring, *mundrī(k/g)* (also *mundīk* SAYAD HASHMI 2000) and *čalla* (also *čallaw*, *čallo*). The former is an IA lw. (< Si. *muṇḍrī* ‘ring’, GEIGER 1890–1891: 455) and is current in EBal. and SBal. (not only EHB, as stated in ELFENBEIN 1990-II). The latter is mainly used in WBal. and has cognates in Eastern Persian and EIr. languages; cf. AfyPrs. *čilla* ‘finger-ring without stone; ear-ring’, Her. *čalla* ‘ear-ring’, Sist. *čalla* ‘lock of hair; etc.’, Pšt. *čalá* ‘ear-ring’, Išk. *čil(l)a* (*čelik* IIFL II), Šyn. *čil(l)ā* ‘finger-ring’, etc. It has been considered as an IA lw. (cf. Hi. *čhallā*, Si. *chəlo*, *chəla*, also ROSSI 1979: I32 for Br. *čallaw* ‘ring’).

Most of the Bal. names for the ring finger emphasize the metal rings are commonly made of, i.e. gold (Bal. *zarr*). In all Bal. varieties the ring finger is named *zarrī*, possibly followed by the word for ‘finger’ (i.e., *zarrī lankuk* and *zarrī murdāna[g]*) or *zardānag* (Noške, i.e. ‘the one having gold’). And since wearing jewels among Baloch is traditionally a habit of women, especially of women of a high status, the finger which rings are used to be put on is equated to a fair, jewelled lady: this finger becomes nothing less than a *zarrānī bānok* (Noške, Xarān, Sarāwān, Karachi). Considering the derivation with the suffix *-ak*, one may attribute to Br. *zarak* ‘third finger’, an Ir. source other than Balochi (see ROSSI 1979: F172). The data at my disposal, however, do not allow the identification of this hypothetical source, since I

²⁵² For a few examples of the “ring-finger” and “gold-finger” patterns in languages other than Iranian, see VEENKER 1981: 370–371; BENNETT 1982: 13 ff.

have found no “gold-finger” in other Ir. languages; the source could also have been a Bal. variety not yet described.

To the habit of wearing a ring (more specifically, the engagement ring) on this finger also points Lār. *kelike nāmzadi* (KAMIOKA – YAMADA 1979), lit. ‘the finger of the engagement’; it is also possible, however, that this name evokes different practices symbolizing the engagement (not necessarily involving the ring finger), which are unknown to me.

2. In a very large, substantially contiguous geographic area, where languages from different linguistic families are spoken, such as Finno-Ugric and Balto-Slavonic, Southern Caucasian, Turkish, Mongolian, Uralic and Tibetan, the ring finger does not have any name, or, better to say, its same name depicts it is a ‘finger without a name’.²⁵³ Also in Sanskrit one finds *ánāmā-* and *ánāmikā-* ‘ring finger’, male nominals from *ánāman-* ‘nameless; infamous’; I am not aware of the existence of similar forms in any modern IA languages, though.²⁵⁴

Prs. *binām* ‘ring finger’ (lit. ‘(the one) without a name’) is recorded in traditional dictionaries (DEHX), but is completely unfamiliar to Prs. speakers of Iran, as I could notice in my fieldwork. “Nameless” ring fingers are Taj. *angušt-i benom*, KurmKrd. *tilya bênav* (RIZGAR 1993) and Oss. *ængwylʒ* (my own data).

Why should the ring finger be a “nameless finger”?²⁵⁵ Different answers have been given to this question. The most obvious explanation is that no importance has been attached to it; a sort of laziness in the creative human activity would have then encouraged the development of this label pattern, so largely spread. This is what ERDAL (1981: 123) thinks of the Turk. name of the ring finger. Another argument points to a linguistic interdiction: the ring finger could be culturally connoted in such a way that the usage of a specific name would be not recommended, since even the name alone could evoke its dangerousness. VEENKER (1981: 365) cites ERDEDI’s remarks on the matter: in Finno-Ugric, such a taboo would be justified by the fact that ancient sacrificial practices used to require blood flow from the ring finger. A similar hypothesis had been already suggested

²⁵³ Cf. also VEENKER 1981: 365.

²⁵⁴ POTTS 1847: 284 quotes a similar Hi. expression (from ADAM).

²⁵⁵ Note that one may consider in this light even the lacking of a name, as is the case with Garrusi, where, according to CHRISTENSEN – BARR 1939: 305, there are names for all the fingers except for the ringfinger («Der Ringfinger hat keine Name»).

by POTT (1847: 297–298) with regard to Skt. *ánāmā-*; see also BENNETT 1982: 17 for the ring finger names in New High German and Swedish. Be that as it may, “the nameless finger” in Tajik, Kurdish and Ossetic could also be explained as the result of a linguistic contact (perhaps even lexical calques); “the nameless finger” pattern could have got the status of an areal lexical feature.

3.1 As far as the ring finger names grounded on the finger’s position are concerned, I can only repeat what has already been said above. Different strategies for computation are attested in Iranian: if computation starts from the thumb, the ring finger actually happens to be the fourth finger, as proved by Prs. *angošt-e čahārom*; see DEHX, supported by some Prs. definitions in glossaries and dictionaries, as is the case with AFŠĀR 1989 s.v. Yzd. *angošt-e pas-kiliči* ‘ring finger [*angošt-e čahārom-e dast*]’. If computation starts from the forefinger, the ring finger becomes the third finger, as illustrated by Khot. *dāda hagašta* (BAILEY 1979: 50 s.v. *kanaiska*), EBal. (Mari) *semī mordayān*, Min. *kelenče sevvom* (G. BARBERA p.c.). If computation starts from the little finger, the ring finger will be perceived as the second finger and this counting direction accounts for Prs. (*angošt-e dovvom* (DEHX)); one finds Prs. *angošt-e dovvom* as the Prs. equivalent of Xur. *māye kleič* ‘ring finger’ in FARAHVAŠI 1976: 2 or Krd. *tilyâ bâbilîçk* ‘id.’ in SAFIZĀDE 2001.

3.2 The ring finger names that take into account the position of this finger mostly emphasize its closeness to another finger, which in most cases is the little finger. This iconomastic pattern is found in many languages, both ancient and modern: see Skt. *upa-madhyamā-* and *upa-kaniṣṭhikā-* ‘the finger next to the little finger, the last finger but one’, Lat. *proximus minimo digitus*, etc. (ANDRÉ 1991: 103–104; also VEENKER 1981: 371).

In Central Iran, we find Nāi. *engoli var keliču*, Zefr. *üngülī ver kasa* ‘the finger near [*var/ver*] to the little [*keliču/kas*] one’ and ZorYzd. *pas-kiličōg*, *angošt-e pas-kiliči* (AFŠĀR 1989) ‘(the finger) next to/following [*pas*] the little finger [*kiličōg/kiliči*]’.

EBal. *čīnča dumī murdānay* ‘ring finger’, lit. ‘the finger next to the little finger [*čīnča*]’ is the counterpart of *deba duhmī murdān* ‘forefinger’, lit. ‘the finger next to the thumb’ (see above p. 129), both provided to me by a Mari speaker, while in Šuyni, where *zalik* and *lakak* are labels for ‘little finger’,

pis-ʒalik angiḫt[aθ] and *pis-lakak angiḫt[aθ]* (ZARUBIN 1960) are ‘ring finger[s]’,²⁵⁶ cf. Šyn. *pis* ‘next, following’.

On the Paz.? (pseudo) Av.? expression *arazān frārāzān* and its Phl. translation *pēš u pas angust* in the *Frahang-i Ōīm* has been discussed above, p. 130. There, it has been hinted at the possibility that Phl. *pēš angust* and *pas angust* could refer to the forefinger and the ring finger respectively, according to a iconomastic pattern that takes the middle finger as a point of reference. The Prs. expression *angošt-e pas* found in the *Kāmel at-Ta‘bīr*, with the meaning of ‘ring finger’ (MOKRI 2005: 264), as well as Yzd-JPrs. *passāyi* ‘ring finger’, i.e. the finger following the middle finger, could support this suggestion.

Both the ring finger and the forefinger are perceived as “lateral fingers”, if compared to the middle finger, to which they are next. This is proved by Yzγ. *kəranai γ^waḫt*, which means both ‘ring finger’ and ‘forefinger’ (see also above, p. 129).

3.3. On the middle finger’s central position, there is of course a general acknowledgement. However, if the thumb is kept aside, the remaining four fingers do not have a definite centre: the medial position is shared by the middle and the ring finger. Therefore, there are languages where the ring finger happens to be described as “the finger of the middle”. One of these is Latin: cf. *medii digiti* (pl.) ‘the middle fingers’, with reference to the middle and the ring finger; more precisely, the ring finger is named *medius digitus minor* (ANDRÉ 1991: 102).

In Iranian, one may quote Krd. (Mukri) *qāmīk ī nēwē* ‘Mittel- und Ringfinger’ (CHRISTENSEN – BARR 1939: 305). One could also explain in this light (Makrāni) Bal. *nyāmīen laḡkuk* ‘ring finger’ recorded by MORGENSTIERNE (1932a: 40), which otherwise should only be interpreted as a misunderstanding.²⁵⁷ Even the usage of the term *gaḏḏī* (‘middle finger’) to name the ring finger, maintained by one of my Balochi (Mari) informants,²⁵⁸ can be motivated by a sort of equation between middle and ring finger. But at this point, in order to avoid ambiguity, a specification is needed: the ring finger is the *kasānē gaḏḏī* (‘the little *gaḏḏī*’), while, by contrast, the middle finger is the *mazanē gaḏḏī* (‘the big *gaḏḏī*’). Similarly, the ring finger is described as a ‘little middle finger’ in Waxi and Rošani; cf. Wx. *mis.nam*

²⁵⁶ The items recorded in ZARUBIN 1960 are morphologically plural (pl. suffix *-aθ*).

²⁵⁷ Cf. FILIPPONE 2000–2003: 81 n. 70.

²⁵⁸ None of the others, however, confirmed a similar use for *gaḏḏī*.

tsiklai (LORIMER 1958) and Roš. *khal-lakak* (SKÖLD 1936: 186), as contrasted respectively to *mis.na angl* and *lakak iŋgaxt* ‘middle finger’. On Wx. *ʒəqlay* [*tsiklai*] and Roš. *khal* ‘small’ see below, pp. 152 f. and pp. 166 f.

4.1. If compared with the middle finger, the ring finger is certainly smaller. This comparison substantiates the existence of labels which depict this finger as a small(er) finger; cf. Wx. *zAq/zaq yAngəl* (LORIMER 1958) with *zAq* ‘little, small’, Yzγ. *cəldūri γ^waxt* with *cəldūr* ‘smaller; younger’, which is also a forefinger name (see above p. 130), and Pšt. *bačagúta, bačagwáta*, lit. the ‘child [*bačá*] – finger’.

4.2. The ring finger names accounting for the finger dimension, however, mostly take the little finger as the touchstone. Such a comparison leads one to say that this finger is a ‘bigger finger’, as is illustrated by Gz. *engulī beleter* (ŽUKOVSKIJ 1922: 110), or a ‘big little finger’, as is illustrated by Yγn. *kátta čīncīlaq* or *kátta čīlik* with *kátta* ‘big’ and *čīncīlaq, čīlik* ‘little finger’. Should we interpret also Par. *angušt-e bari* as a ‘big finger’, taking Par. *bari* (to my knowledge, otherwise unrecorded) as a lw. from IA (cf. CDIAL 11225 s.v. *vaḍra-* ‘big’)? However, this suggestion needs to be reinforced by further evidence.

Doubtfully, one may also associate here Pšt. *xamta gúta*, quoted by RAVERTY (1860 s.v. *gúta* ‘h’) as an Eastern Pšt. name of the ring finger: *xamta* could perhaps be interpreted as the fem. form (*xamáta*) of *xamát* ‘plump, chubby; fat, stout’.

5. In WIr., and in particular Southern and Central Kurdish, Gorāni and Central dialects, the ring finger and the little finger are depicted as related each other by a kinship degree. To the ring finger, which is bigger and very close to the little finger, the protective function of an elder versus a younger sibling is attributed. It may be perceived (1) as the little finger’s brother, as proved by SulKrd. *bira y tūte*, SouthKrd. (*qāmki*) *birâi tûta(la)* (*angusti birâtûta* SAFIZÂDE 2001), Krmnš. *berâ tuta*, Gor. (Gahw.) *kilik-i berâ tûtâ*, Gz. *engolî-birâ-biländ* (lit. ‘tall-brother-finger’), or (2) as the little finger’s mother, as proved by Xur. *māyekelēč* (*māye kleič* FARAHVAŠI 1976), NBšk. (Sardašt) *mom-kukalü*, SBšk. (Garu) *makukalu* (G. BARBERA p.c.). Ring finger names based on kinship relations are found in other languages as well; the ring finger as the mother of the little finger is found, for example, in Celtic (POTT 1847: 295) and in Modern Uigur (*çimçilaq anası* lit. ‘the mother of the little finger’ ERDAL 1981: 124).

To a degree of kinship among fingers could also point KurmKrd. *babeliçk* (RIZGAR 1993; *bobeliçk* FARISOV 1957, (*tilyâ*) *bâbilîçk* AWRANG 1969, *tilyâ bâbilîçk* SAFIZÂDE 2001), as well as KurmKrd. *mamelisk* (KURDOEV 1960), SouthKrd. *mâmelînck*, all meaning ‘ring finger’. All of them could be analysed as derivatives from the Krd. address terms for ‘father, daddy’ (*bab*, *bav*) and ‘paternal uncle’ (*mâma/mame*). Note however that *babeliçk* (*bâbliçk*) is recorded as ‘little finger’ in HAZĀR 1990 and SAFIZÂDE 2001, and as ‘middle finger’ in EBRĀHIMPUR 1994b (s.v. *angošt*).

6. A metaphorical association assuming the botanical world as the source domain has probably produced Pšt. *lākūlakāra* ‘ring finger’, which however has been recorded as ‘middle finger’ in Wanetsi (ELFENBEIN 1984).²⁵⁹ The image evoked by this name is that of a straight, pointed finger, which for its shape is equated to a *lakāra* (< IA, cf. CDIAL 10875), i.e. a stick, a reed. As for *lāk*^o, the initial part of the Pšt. idiom, should we think to a meaningless lexical element for an echo-copulative-compound?

7. Bohr. *eṅguš*, Voniš. *uṅguss*, Keš. *aṅguss* are general words for ‘finger’ used as names for the ring finger.

8. As far as Prs. *benser* ‘ring finger’ is concerned, one may only say that this is an Ar. loanword (cf. Ar. *biṅsir*, Syr. *beṣrâ* in MAŠKUR 1978) with a very limited usage, being restricted to the scientific lexicon (MOINFAR 1981: 230). It is labelled as “rare” in LAZARD 1990a.

9. The following ring finger names have proved difficult to analyze: Taj. *angušt-i zinhor* (recorded as ‘forefinger’ in Prs. dictionaries),²⁶⁰ Taj. (Kara-Tegin) *čablīki* (ROZENFEL’D 1982); Taj. *angušt-i (lelak-i) dastpūšak* (cf. dial. Taj. *dast-pūša* ‘glove’ ROZENFEL’D 1982 ?); KurmKrd. *belican* (RIZGAR 1993).

²⁵⁹ Cf. above, p. 141.

²⁶⁰ Cf. above, p. 124.