

# Tracking Down the Meaning of Words An Analysis of the 'Head' Domain

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**Abstract:** This paper is interested in why and how the meanings of words change. It argues that processes of semantic changes do not happen randomly, but are strongly influenced by the mental concepts through which speakers perceive the larger semantic domains to which the words belong. This argument is based on the analysis of the semantic domain 'head'. After introducing central technical terms ('concept of meaning', 'semantic domain') and the most important processes and causes of semantic change, we focus on the semantic history of four terms belonging to the concept 'head': *head*, *skull*, *brain* and *mind*. The meanings of all four terms change along the pathway of three general ways of perceiving and talking about the 'head': as the upper and superior part of the body, as the intellectual capacity superior to the physical body; and as a container. This observation suggests that semantic change within the 'head' domain reflects the mental concepts through which speakers of English have dealt with the 'head' domain throughout history. Thus, as the 'head' domain shows, meaning change is not a random process, but is to a large extent shaped by conventional concepts through which a speech community structures its perceptions of reality.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Language constantly undergoes changes – be it in its morphology, its pronunciation, its syntax, its vocabulary. But it is not only the outer form of words that changes, but also the content of words, the meaning or range of meanings are subject to profound changes. This process is – not like we would believe – a random one, but one that is very much structured by superordinate concepts, concepts which themselves are again influenced by current philosophy – both of which lead to recurring patterns in the change of meaning.

In this paper, we will explain how these mental concepts structure our vocabulary and deeply influence our view of the world as well as the processes and causes that lead to changes in meaning by showing changes in meaning in the *head* domain, i.e. words

that have a close relation to the ModE word *head*: *head*, *skull*, *brain* and *mind*. This is a particularly interesting field of words to be analysed, for as we will show, the different concepts of ‘head’ – ‘HEAD’ AS A PART OF THE ‘BODY’ DOMAIN, IN PARTICULAR AS A PART SUPERIOR TO THE REST OF THE BODY; ‘HEAD’ AS THE INTELLECTUAL CAPACITY SUPERIOR TO PHYSICAL BODY; ‘HEAD’ AS A CONTAINER – have strong influences also on completely different word fields. As a database, we used OED and the Online Etymology Dictionary, from which most of our examples are taken.

## 1.2. Explanation of Technical Terms

Meaning and meaning change is, however, not only a matter of single words and their respective meanings. To come to a deeper understanding of processes of semantic change, their cause and effect, the focus of research must reach beyond meaning change in isolated, single terms: for, in the same way as we organize our language use according to morphologic and syntactic rules, our ways of conveying and interpreting meaning is rigorously structured by cultural CONCEPTS OF MEANING. The conceptualizing of words makes our communication much more economical and efficient. ‘Concepts [...] fulfil the central function of economically representing, storing, structuring, and organizing information. Concepts allow human beings to retrieve, process, communicate, and apply their knowledge in an efficient way.’(Langlotz, 2003: p. 95)

The words and expressions related to such a concept of meaning form the corresponding COGNITIVE DOMAIN. ‘Cognitive domains thus function as the experiential contexts or backgrounds relative to which conceptual units are understood.’(Langlotz, 2003: Dissertation). The term domain can be defined as follows:

*A coherent area of conceptualization relative to which semantic units may be characterized. Three dimensional space, smell, color, touch sensation, etc. are basic domains. A concept or conceptual complex of any degree of complexity can function as an abstract domain (e.g. the human body, the rules of chess, a kinship network). (Langlotz, 2003)*

Therefore, one important cause in the change of meaning of words is the change of the ‘experiential context’ or the background. It is quite logical that both of these change over the course of time. We are therefore going to analyse what might have

lead to the change in context and therefore finally to changes in meaning in the head domain.

After having isolated recurring patterns in the change of meaning, we will argue that meaning and meaning change within the ‚head domain‘ have been considerably influenced by the following the three main concepts or frames of interpretation:

- a) ‚head‘ as a container
- b) ‚head‘ as part superior to the rest of the body
- c) ‚head‘ as the intellectual capacity superior to physical body

The fact that all four terms belonging to the ‚head‘ domain show similar patterns in semantic change reveals that change in word meaning is by no means a random process, but is fundamentally conditioned by culturally specific mental concepts. These cognitive concepts do not only influence our use of language, but the way in which a certain cultural community perceives reality at a certain time period.

## **2. Processes and Causes Leading to Changes in Meaning**

### **1.1 Processes**

#### *1.1.1 Metaphor*

The term METAPHOR designates a process in which a word is used outside its normal context in a non-literal way. During this process, the qualities that the meaning of a word describes are attributed to another thing with similar qualities. It has to be noted that both objects can belong to totally different domains, but that they show some similarities in concept. We can for instance say: Joe is a Tiger – by this, we do not want to state that Joe (domain: human being) actually is an tiger (domain: animal) and has four legs, but we attribute the qualities of a tiger (force, ferocity, velocity etc.) to Joe.

Metaphors cannot only be single words that stand for something else, but often, metaphors are ‚the concepts that govern our thought‘. (Lakoff et al., 1980:3) This means that the metaphor, or intellectual concept of 'time = money' conditions the field of words used with *time*, i.e. *spend time*, *waste time*, *save time*, *run out of time* etc. (Lakoff et al., 1980: 8). Metaphors are some of the most dominant processes in semantic change.

### 1.1.2 Metonymy and Synecdoche

METONYMY refers to the use of an attribute to describe the object that is meant, as when we speak of *The White House* instead of *the US president*. But whereas in a metaphor, we use the similarity in the concept behind the word (words compared belong to different domains), metonymy makes use of the contiguity (spatial, conceptual etc.) of the terms that are compared. Here, for instance the spatial contiguity (that the US President resides in the White House), is used. Both words can be said to belong to the domain of the US government. SYNECDOCHE ‘refers to a given semantic notion by naming [only] its most prominent part’, e.g. *the nose* to a person with a really prominent nose. (Hock, 1986: 285f.)

### 1.1.3 Euphemisms

Another mechanism of change in meanings are EUPHEMISMS. These embellishments are often used in word fields that are taboo, like death, sex, body parts or excrements, e.g. for toilet, we use *lady’s/men’s room*, *restroom*, *lavatory*, *W.C.* etc. As these expressions become conventional over time, they are constantly replaced by new euphemisms. DISPHEMISMS usually do not occur in standard speech, but are often used in slang: I’m f\*\*ked for I am in a bad/uncomfortable situation. Disphemisms are used to shock on purpose or to consciously break a taboo.

### 1.1.4 Generalisation and Specialisation

The term GENERALISATION describes a process in which the meaning of a word is widened, as in the case of the French loanword *arrive*. Adopted from Old French *ad-ripare* it originally meant ‘to arrive at the bank of a river’. Its meaning then was extended to ‘reach a destination in general’ (Jucker, 2000:118). SPECIALISATION is the opposite of this process - the range of application of a word thus becomes less general. The OE word *steorfan* had the general meaning of “to die”. The meaning narrowed to “to starve” (Jucker, 2000:119).

### 1.1.5 Amelioration and Pejoration

AMELIORATION describes the elevation of meaning of a word. In the beginning, the word *pretty* meant ‘cunning, or crafty’. Today, it describes a beautiful person. PEJORATION, on the other hand, describes a process where a word’s meaning

becomes degraded. An example is the ME word *sely*. Like its German counterpart *selig*, it originally meant “blessed, blissful”, from where it changed to “innocent, helpless and defenceless” and eventually to its contemporary meaning “silly”(Hock,1986: 302f.).

## 1.2. Causes

### 1.2.1 New Needs and New Knowledges

With processes of technical innovation and research, new word fields came into being. A good example is the computer industry. It is often then that existing words are used in new domains – because of the vague physical resemblance of a computer mouse with the grey rodent, the ‘mouse’ got its name.

### 1.2.2 Irony and Unorthodox Use

The word *terrific* originally referred to a terrifying situation, but today means something really positive (Jucker, 2000:116). Also, it can happen that a speaker accidentally uses a word in an unorthodox way. This may turn out to be a useful addition and other speakers may adopt the meaning.

### 1.2.3 New Domains

Words can be used with different meanings in different socio-cultural domains, such as religious language, legal language, medical language etc. The word dinosaur was adopted into the every-day domain from biology and today refers to something old or out-dated, like *This video-player is kind of a dinosaur* (Jucker, 2000:117).

## 3. The ‘Head’ Domain

### 3.1. *Head*<sup>1</sup>

*Head* derives from OE *heafud* or *heafod*, meaning “top of the body”, and first appeared in 825. On the basis of the close consonant relation between *heafud* and Latin *caput*, the two can be considered cognates. By a reverse application of GRIM’S

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<sup>1</sup> If not stated otherwise, all examples are taken from the OED, entry "head".

SOUND SHIFT LAW and VERNER'S LAW<sup>2</sup> on *heafud* or the reverse process of MONOPHTONGISATION on *caput* respectively, we can reconstruct their Proto-Indo-European (PIE) ancestor *\*kauput*.

### 3.1.1 Original Use of Head in Old English

The first sources in which we find the word *head* use it to denote the anterior part of the body of a human being or animal. It is the part which contains the mouth and special sense organs as well as the brain and is separated from the rest of the body. The earliest attested use of head in the Vespasian Psalter in 825 refers to the to the head of a human being.

*upphebbende heafud min*  
*honda and heofod*

'I lifted my head' (825, author unknown)  
'hands and head' (975, author unknown)

As the following analysis of the different processes of semantic change will show, all new meanings and uses that arise can be traced back to the basic meaning of *head* as the most important part of the body. All changes show a close reference to at least one of the three mental concepts mentioned in the introduction.

### 3.1.2 Head as a Part of the 'Body' Domain, in Particular as a Part Superior to the Rest of the Body

The following uses of the term *head* are closely linked to the cognitive domain of the body, of which the head domain actually is a subsystem. In the following examples, *head* is used to refer to that part of the object which is most prominent or spatially outstanding.

#### a) *Head* as the Upper Part or End of an Object

A frequently found pattern of Generalisation is the use of *head* to denote a thing or part of a thing resembling a head in form or position. The word *head* in its original sense, as denoting the upper part of the body, is thus more generally applied to refer to the ultimate part of any object.

#### b) *Head* as the Upper Principal Extremity of Various Things, Especially When Rounded, Projecting, or Some Special Shape.

<sup>2</sup> Consonant shift from t > d in *\*kaupud* > *heafod*

*A spere with a sharpe hed..*

“A spear with a sharpe head” (1533, Berners)

- the top summit upper end (of an eminence or erection, as a pole, pile, mast, sail, staircase, ladder, etc.)

*I then accompanied her to the hed of the stairs.*

(1797, D’Arbley)

- the top of a page or writing (the title or a section: a heading)

*Per use but the head of every page, and there  
you shall finde what  
in the same page is contained*

”Read but the head of every  
page, and there you shall find  
what is contained in the same  
page...”(1586, Day)

### b) *Head* Standing for a Person as Such

In this example, *head* is part of the Metonymy in which the *head* denotes a person as such, because *head* is considered the most salient part of the body of a human being.

*A pleasant companion, a merrie head.*

”A pleasant companion, a merry head”  
(1573-80, Baret, John)

*Except by taking the votes not by heads, but  
by tribes, cities, or cantons.*

(1869, Freeman)

### 3.1.3 *Head as the Intellectual Capacity Superior to Physical Body*

In these examples, *head* is conceived as the seat of intellect and as the part of the body coordinating the functions of the body.

#### a) *Head* as the Seat of Mind

From 1374 onwards, there are many cases where *head* is used as a METAPHOR for the seat of mind, thought, intellect, memory, or imagination. In this use, it is often contrasted with the heart.

*There is now an other dout entred my head..*

“Another doubt has entered my head”  
(1559, Cunningham)

#### b) *Head* as a Part Essential to Life

Because of its coordinating functions, *head* is seen as a part essential to life or even the basic condition for the possibility of human life. There are many sentences where the meaning of *head* is actually equivalent to ‘life’, i.e. it is used in a metaphorical way. (Domain ‘head’ -> domain ‘life’)

*To risk one's HEAD.*

“To risk one's life”  
(contemporary proverb)

### c) *Head* as a Person to Whom Others are Subordinate

This example shows both reference to head as part of the body domain, as well as to the notion of head as the seat of intellect. The use is combination of metonymy (*head* standing for the person as such) and metaphor (*head* as the thinking part of a body).

*The HEED of the vnyversall chirche is the pope.*      “The head of the universal church is the pope” (1521, Fisher)

#### 3.1.4 *Head as a Container*

The OED does not list any examples of *head* denoting container. Nevertheless, the association of *head* with some kind of container seems to have influenced the uses of the word *head*. This becomes obvious in fixed expressions like *take it into one's head that* or *put something into someone's head*. These examples show that we often speak of *head* as a container in which we keep thoughts and ideas.

Another interesting connection between *head* and ‘container’ is suggested by Hock in a chapter on semantic change in his book *Principles of Linguistics*. He mentions that in medieval soldiers' slang, there was an expression where *head* was replaced and metaphorically referred to as *cup* (Hock, 1986:299).

*Smashing cups into shards*                      „smashing heads“ (medieval soldiers' slang)

While, in English, this metaphor disappeared, in German it has nearly driven out the original word for “head”, *Haupt*, and has completely lost its metaphorical flavour. *Cup* is still present in the German word *Kopf*. This development from metaphor to a lexical item of its own right in German accounts for the force of concept ‘head’ as a container. This observation gives further weight to what we have stated in the beginning of this chapter: that the concept ‘head as a container’ is prevailing in the word *head* and a determinative factor in its semantic changes.

## 3.2. *Skull*<sup>3</sup>

The word *skull* first appears in texts of the 13-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Besides *skull* different forms of the word can be found : *scolle*, *scol(l)*, *scole*, *skoll(e)*, *sc(h)ulle*, *scul(l)*, *skulle* or *skul*. Its origin is not quite clear; the Online Etymology Dictionary traces it

<sup>3</sup> If not stated otherwise, all examples are taken from the OED, entry "skull".

back to Old Norse (ON) *skalli*, “bald head” or “skull”, which would be related to OE *scealu*, meaning “*husk*”. The OED instead, although recognizing the word as of foreign origin because of its initial *sc.-*, *sk.-*, doesn't agree on the connection to ON and therefore refers to the origin of the word as “obscure”.

### 3.2.1 Original Use of Skull in Old English

The first findings of the word refer to the bone enclosing the brain of man and animals. As in the first known example of the word in a text dated in the year 1290:

*Robert de brok..doruz de scolle smot is swerd.* (1290, author unknown)

Until today, this is the main meaning of the word, but there are three other meanings which became connected to it and can be traced back to the three basic concepts connected with the ‘head’ domain.

### 3.2.2 Skull as a Part of the Body Domain

The main use of the word skull is related to this concept. Besides the basic meaning, the bone enclosing the brain, various other examples show the frequency of the use of the word in this context.

#### a) *Skull* Denoting the Bare Scalp, the Top of the Head

*Loke that thou be armed sad, & hele thy bare scolle.* (1380, author unknown)  
*As piled as an Ape was his skulle.* (1386, Chaucer)

#### b) *Skull* Denoting the Back of the Neck

*He felle fro the littl seet .... and the scull is brokun,* “He fell from the little seat ... and  
*he is deed.* the skull is broken, he is dead.”  
(1382, Wyclef)

#### c) *Skull* Denoting a Cap or Close Fitting Head Piece

This use becomes quite common from the 16<sup>th</sup> century on.

*They saw the Emperour and his Son, each with a* (Jahr, author unknown)Skull of  
*Pearl on thir bare Heads.* (1674, Milton)

#### d) (*So Much*) *A Skull* Meaning per Person

Here, as with head in 1.2, *skull* is used metonymically, denoting a person as such. But this use doesn't occur before 20<sup>th</sup> century and still is a rare use of skull.

*They chop up the rope after and sell the bits for a few bob a skull.* (1922, Joyce)

### 3.2.3 *Skull as the Intellectual Capacity Superior to Physical Body*

Like *head*, though never as often, *skull* is used according to this concept.

#### a) *Skull* as the “Seat of Thought or Intelligence”

This metaphorical use commonly alludes to a small or dull intellect. *Skull* simply replaces brain.

*Better a dum mouthe than a brainless scull.* (1523, Skelton)

*We..have not an idea of our own in our skulls.* (1857, Reade)

#### b) *Skull* As an “Emblem or Reminder of Death and Immortality”

This use doesn't occur literally before the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

She was a perpetual memento mory ; a skull  
and *crossbones* would hardly have been more  
*efficacious.* (1826, Mitford)

### 3.2.4 *Skull as a Container*

Despite the possible relation of *skull* with OE *scealu*, meaning “husk”, the use of the word referring to a container is rare. Actually only two cases relating to this concept are mentioned in the OED.

#### a) *Skull* Denoting a Shallow Basket

From 1508 on the word can be found denoting a special kind of basket with an oval or circular form and of considerable size, which is used in farm producing and fishing.

*To the Judas, whose skill...was knowen* (1634-46, Row)  
*to be far greater in making of skulle nor*  
*in either praying or preaching.*

#### b) *Skull* Denoting Drinking Bowls or Vessels

In the same century (first in 1513) the word gets an additional although rare meaning, denoting a drinking bowl or a vessel. Still today, in Scandinavian countries *skal*

means “prosit”, a fact which supports the thesis that there is a connection of *skull* with OE *scealu*.

### 3.3. *Brain*<sup>4</sup>

The term *brain* derives from the OE *bræg(e)n* meaning “skull, brain”. It was also written as *bragen*, *brein*, *brane*. OE also included the terms *bræg-panne*, “skull”, and *bræg-loca*, meaning “head”.

#### 3.3.1 *Original Use of Brain in Old English*

The term was first used about 1000 and referred to the convoluted mass of nervous substance contained in the skull of man and other vertebrates. Today the Latin words are used in the scientific language and the word brain has its usage in technical as well as in popular language.

#### 3.3.2. *Brain as Part of the Body*

The term was used for the first time in this around the year 1000. We have to distinguish between the general uses and the technical uses. The general uses were employed to express vertigo and dizziness. The following example is found in an early version of the *Medicina de quadrupelidibus*.

<i>Wid oferslæpe hara bragen.. wunderlice hyt beted.</i>	“With too much sleep, the hare brain wonderfully hides himself.” (1150, author unknown)
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Compared to the technical uses we see that the latter is used above all in medicine:

<i>The wit and reson ... Is in the celles of the brayn.</i>	“The wit and the reason ... is in the cells of the brain (1393, Gower)
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About 1200 the term brain received an additional meaning. Now it referred also to the substance of the brain and even to the marrow (GENERALISATION). In addition we can observe in the following example that the terms skull and brain were

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<sup>4</sup> If not stated otherwise, all examples are taken from the OED, entry "brain".

distinguished in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. So we can say that in this time the word went through a further change, the specialisation:

*And piked out hire fader brain, and  
of the skull had mad a Cuppe.*

“And picked out her father’s  
brain and of the skull she had  
made a cup.”(1393, Gower)

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the word *brain* undergoes a change, it becomes usual to employ the plural of the word instead of the singular, but only when mere cerebral substance, and not a definite organic structure, is meant or in familiar use and idiomatic phrases. We can find this usage of the plural still in our times in different phrases. We say "a dish of brains" but only "a disease of the brain".

### 3.3.3 *Brain as the Seat of the Mind*

The concept here refers to thought, fancy, memory, judgement, common sense, the centre of sensation, the organ of thought, memory, or imagination. In this connection it is also paired with ‘blood’ as the seat of the emotions. The first time it is used in this way is around 1300:

*Such ist he kinde of that sieknesse [i.e. love],  
noght for lacke of brain.*

“Such is the kind of sickness, And that is  
and that is not for (because of) the  
lack of brain.” (1393, Gower)

### 3.3.4 *Brain as a Container*

The word *brain* was itself not used as a container itself, it only appeared in combination with other words in the meaning of container: brain-box or brain-case.

## 3.4. *Mind*<sup>5</sup>

The term *mind* is derived from the OE *gemynd*, principally meaning memory, thinking or intention. The origins of *mind* can be traced back to P.Gmc *\*ga-menthijan* (thought) and the PIE base *\*men-* (“think, remember”). Comparisons can be drawn from the \*Proto-Germanic (PGmc) origin to Gothic *muns* (“thought”), Old Norse *minni* (“mind”) and Germanic *mine* (“memory, loving memory”). The \*PIE base can be compared with the Sanskrit *matih* (“thought”), the Greek word *memona* (“I

<sup>5</sup> If not stated otherwise, all examples are taken from the OED, entry "Brain"

yearn”), the Latin *mens* (“mind”) or *memini* (“I remember”) among others (Online Etymology Dictionary).

### 3.4.1 *Original use of Mind in Old English*

*Mind* was originally used as a term denoting four different fields of meaning. The first upcoming of the word in written form was around 971, where it stands for a thought, purpose or intention. Furthermore, it was used as a term for memory; a quantity, number or amount of something, or for the mental or psychical being or faculty. In the following, we will examine how the notion of the mind fits in with the three mental concepts that were outlined in the introduction.

### 3.4.2 *Mind as a Part of the ‘Body’*

As the *mind* is a rather abstract concept, we did not find expressions belonging to this domain.

### 3.4.2 *Mind as the Intellectual Capacity Superior to Physical Body*

#### a) *Mind* Standing for “Mental or Psychical Being”(Generalization)

The expression *mind over matter*, for example, sets the *mind* in opposition to *matter*, meaning that the mind (of a human being) is superior to matter. Man has intellectual control over matter.

#### b) *Mind* As “The Mental Faculties”(Metaphor)

The mind standing for the healthy and normal condition of the mental faculties, the loss or impairment of which constitutes insanity was first pinned by Chaucer in 1369.

*For he had ... loste his mynde.*

“For he had ... lost his mind.”  
(1369, Chaucer)

#### c) *Mind* Standing for a Person’s Attention / Interest / Intellect (Metonymy)

*... when the candidates could give their whole (1861, Stanley)  
minds to the subject.*

Here *mind* can be seen as referring to different aspects of a person that are being devoted to a certain task, or as it is put in the OED *to addict oneself to (a study or practice)*.

d) *Mind* Meaning One's Purpose, Opinion, Way of Thinking (Metonymy)

In this context, the fixed expression *to change one's mind* is often used, meaning the want to alter one's purpose, opinion, way of thinking or to persuade someone.

e) *Mind* Standing for Cognitive or Intellectual Powers (Specialization)

This can only be applied restrictedly, and often stands in contrast with *heart*:

*Possessor of a soul refined,* (1784, Cowper)  
*An upright heart and Cultivated mind*

#### 3.4.4 *Mind as a Container*

Quite similarly to the word *head*, the mind is seen as the container of thoughts and ideas, as in: *To spring to one's mind. A mind like a sink* (colloquial): an imagination that tends to put an indecent construction on events, or which is filled with lewd ideas and images.

## 4. Summary and Conclusion

As stated in the introductory paragraphs, semantic change happens according to semantic concepts, which build bases of human thinking. By applying the three main concepts on the expressions *head*, *mind*, *skull* and *brain*, the paper proves that semantic change within the "head domain" takes place according to three main semantic concepts or frames of interpretation: a) 'head' as container, b) 'head' as part superior to the rest of the body and c) 'head' as the intellectual capacity superior to physical body. According to those three semantic concepts, it can be observed that semantic change within the head domain often happens through metaphorical, metonymical, generalized or specialized use of the word's original meaning.

*Head* as the most prominent part of the head domain undergoes changes according to all three concepts. In general, *head* follows the pattern of designating a part, which is superior to others, either to other parts of the body or to other people. Also its notion of an intellectual capacity superior to the body is a sign of *head* standing for the first or ultimate part of something.

In terms of its original meanings, the meaning of *mind* has mainly been generalized according to the concept of mind as the intellectual capacity superior to the body. Mind as the container of ideas and thoughts is mostly used in collocations, whereas

*mind* is not used as part of the body, in particular as a part superior to the rest of the body at all.

Semantic change of skull mainly takes place according to the concept of skull as a part of the body, since it denotes the bony substance, which surrounds and protects the brain. Due to its usage in medicine, *brain* is mainly used to denote a part of the body and marginally used as seat of the intellect or mind.

The analysis of all four expressions has shown, that the concept of head as a part of the body domain is very dominant; despite semantic change, the link to a body persists in all meanings of all four expressions. '*Head*', '*mind*', '*skull*' and '*brain*' all seem to cover distinct parts of the head domain. Semantic change shows, that those so-called distinct parts nevertheless interfere with each other. The expressions, which distinguish the separate parts develop a tight and interwoven network of shared meanings and give meaning to every detail within the large range of the head domain.

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