

We report on a pragmatic-linguistic phenomenon specific to Aymara—an Amerindian language from the Andes’ highlands. In order to indicate the relative position of ordinary objects, Aymara people widely use absolute frames of reference, especially involving the east. Whereas absolute frames of reference are usually encoded in lexemes that refer directly to extrinsic entities (e.g., hills, valleys, or cardinal points), in Aymara they are encoded in lexemes that refer to the body: *nayra* (“eye,” “sight,” “front”) and *qhipa* (“back,” “behind”). An object A located to the east of an object B can thus be referred to as *nayra* (in “front”) relative to B, and B, as being *qhipa* relative to A. This peculiar use of front-back relationships deeply permeates various levels of Aymara everyday cultural practices, from language to gesture to urban planning. We document this phenomenon with various data sources: (1) linguistic expressions and speakers’ speech-gesture co-production, (2) linguistic patterns in the local créole Castellano Andino, and (3) the physical orientation of traditional houses. Through the analysis of macro-cultural factors involving the primacy of the sunrise, we show that these psycho-linguistic and urban manifestations are intertwined embodied instantiations of high-order social symbolic elements.

A prepublication draft of the paper is available at  
<http://www.cogsci.ucsd.edu/~nunez/FacingTheSunrise+.doc>