

Linguistic Theory

Gramley, WS 2008-09

Semantic Universals

Language and Meaning

Meaning has been excluded from modern approaches to linguistics (Bloomfield, Chomsky), incl. “formal semantics” (based on a logical calculus as with Montague) (Wierzbicka: 3-9).

Semantic Primitives (or Primes) (9-13).

Can the study of meaning be rigorous and scientific?

Yes, and the key to this lies in the notion of **semantic primitives**. It is not a question of rephrasing a concept in, for example, technical language. Rather: as with Aristotle, the search for the more basic, as that which is “**absolutely more intelligible**” (10).

What is a semantic primitive?

“The elements which can be used to define the meaning of words (or any other meanings) cannot be defined themselves; rather, they must be accepted as ‘indefinibilia’, that is, as semantic primes, in terms of which all complex meanings can be coherently represented.” (Wierzbicka: 10)

What is more basic?

“... I will maintain that Aristotle was right, and that, despite all the interpersonal variation in the acquisition of meaning, there is also an ‘absolute order of understanding’, based on inherent semantic relations among words.” (10)

What is necessary is choosing for primitives concepts which are “so clear that they cannot be understood better than by themselves and [to] explain everything else in terms of these.” (12)

Wierzbicka's Semantic Primitives (54 items)

Substantives: you, I; someone, people; something

Mental predicates: think, know, want, feel, see, hear

Speech: say

Actions, events, and movement: do, happen, move

Existence and life: be (there s/are), live

Determiners and quantifiers: this, the same, other; one, two, many / much, some, all

Augmentor: more

Evaluators: good, bad

Descriptors: big, small

Time: when, after, before, a long time, a short time, now

Space: where; far, near; under, above; side; inside; here

Interclausal linkers: because, if, if ... would

Clause Operators: not, maybe

Metapredicate: can

Intensifier: very

Taxonomy, partonomy: kind of, part of

Similarity: like

How can concepts like “promise” or “denounce” be understood?

They demand that we first understand simpler and universal concepts such as “say” (Wierzbicka: 10).

Wierzbicka proposes a list of “fundamental human concepts capable of generating all other concepts” (13)

Where can we get semantic primitives?

There are many possible sets: While any set is better than no set, “semantic descriptions are worth only as much as the set of primitives on which they are based.” (11)

But the set cannot be arbitrary; rather, the set used must have explanatory power (11). These semantic primitives are the lowest common denominators, the terms which “cannot be understood better than by themselves” (12).

These words are understood by everyone and require no definition.

But where do they come from?

Not from philosophy (as its 17th century proponents thought) but from empirical and theoretical linguistics, which can provide a complete list of “fundamental human concepts capable of generating all other concepts” (Wierzbicka: 13).

Lexical Universals

What methodology and theoretical assumptions lie behind this?

An in-depth analysis of any (and all) natural languages would give us a comparison which yield a match between all the languages investigated: “...the sets of primitives identified ... ‘match’, and ... in fact each such set is just one language-specific manifestation of a universal set of fundamental human concepts” (Wierzbicka: 13).

These concepts are expressible as lexemes or as bound morphemes and are “proof” of the universality of the fundamental human concepts ascertained in this way.

This is a position directed against linguistic relativity; it postulates that these concepts are innate (a part of the human genetic endowment). "This expectation was based on the assumption that fundamental human concepts are innate, in other words that they are part of the human genetic endowment ..." (Wierzbicka: 14)

The success of communication between speakers of different languages is support for this ("while cross-cultural communication is difficult, and has its limitations, it is not altogether impossible" (ibid.)

What languages have been investigated in this program?

A wide range of language from different families and different continents

What were the first concepts established?

I, you, someone, something, where, when, big, small, good, bad, do and happen (Wierzbicka: 14).

Are all languages then “the same”?

No, for the linguistic systems of each and every language are unique and culture-specific; and the presence of universals in all languages does not make for equivalent language use (Wierzbicka: 15).

“... every language has words which are intimately bound up with one particular culture and which have no equivalents in any other languages. ... At the same time, all languages also have words which ... do appear to have semantic counterparts in all other languages. ... [a set which] coincides with the set of this language’s indefinables.” (ibid.)

“Within a particular language, every element belongs to a unique network of elements, and occupies a particular place in a unique network of relationships. When we compare two, or more, languages we cannot expect to find identical networks of relationships. We can, none the less, expect to find corresponding sets of indefinables.” (ibid.)

Why is these semantic primitives necessary?

“... it is only the postulated isomorphism of exponents of conceptual primitives which allows us to compare different semantic systems at all. For any comparison requires a *tertium comparationis*, a common measure. The hypothesized set of universal semantic primitives offers us such a common measure and thus makes it possible to study the extent of semantic differences between languages.” (Wierzbicka: 16)

The latter are “culture-specific configurations of universal semantic primitives.” (ibid.)

Innate Concepts and Language Acquisition

There is some evidence that we all have the same universal and innate basic notions as an experienced need which leads to a search for the term in the language used in our environment. These are compared to Sapir's “**absolutely essential concepts ... that must be expressed if language is to be a satisfactory means of communication**” (Sapir 1949: 93; qtd in Wierzbicka: 17). There is a kind of “**readiness for meaning,**” classes of meaning “**to which human beings are innately tuned and for which they actively search.**” (18)

“...the meanings of most words differ from language to language, that they are ‘cultural artefacts’, reflecting aspects of the cultures that have created them.”

(Wierzbicka: 18)

“In my view, what can be reasonably expected to be innate is not culture-specific concepts such as ‘bureaucrat’ or ‘*apparatchik*’, ..., but only those which show up in all languages, such as ‘person’ and ‘thing’, ‘do’ and ‘happen’, ‘where’ and ‘when’, or ‘good’ and ‘bad’. All the other concepts must be acquired via ‘the cultural tool of language’.”

Even Chomsky says: “Ordinary dictionary definitions do not come close to characterizing the meaning of words”

(1987:21, qtd. in Wierzbicka: 19)

The Universal Syntax of Meaning

In the words of Margaret Donaldson in *Children's Minds*. Norton, NY (1978) in a critique of Chomsky: "... a child first makes sense of situations and human intentions and *then* of what is said. This means that language is *not independent of the rest of cognition*" (245, qtd in Wierzbicka: 21).

Wierzbicka: Children apparently makes sense of language just like they do of non-verbal behavior such as crying, smiling, frowning, beckoning, (21)

She pleads for retention of the unity of semantics and syntax and against absolutizing the lexicon (22).

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

“If by investigating as many diverse languages as possible we can establish a hypothetical shared core of all natural languages, we can then treat this shared core as a language-independent metalanguage for the description and comparison of all languages and cultures” (Wierzbicka: 22).

“To put it differently, the shared core of all languages can be seen as a set of isomorphic mini-languages, which can be used as language-specific versions of the same, universal Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM).” (22f)

This is not the abstract “markerese” of Katz and Fodor, but it more language-like; it can be understood without recourse to some further metalanguage (23). There is a need to go beyond culture-specific perspective and reach for conceptual universals (24).

Semantic Invariants

“In any given speech community, meanings are shared. These shared meanings constitute the basis of communication, and the mainstay of culture; to a large extent they are also the vehicles by which culture is transmitted” (Wierzbicka: 24f).

The metalanguage allows us to go beyond the vicissitudes of any individual language (25).

Compositionality does not apply to the concepts of the NSM:

“As pointed out earlier, the meaning of a sentence like ‘I know this’ cannot be clarified by any further decomposition – not even by decomposition into some other meaningful sentences; and ‘features’, which have no syntax and which are not part of natural language, have no meaning at all: they have to be assigned meaning by sentences in natural languages, rather than the other way around” (Wierzbicka: 28).

Some primitives are polysemous (the same word, for example, for ONE and THE SAME), this does not mean they are identical or that the language in question cannot make the distinction. These concepts can be distinguished by their distinctive grammatical frames (29).

Past, Present, and Future of NSM Semantic Theory There are six main directions:

- "1. the proposed set of primitives has considerably increased;
- "2. the search for primitives came to be identified with a search for lexical universals;
- "3. the search for lexical primitives came to be combined with a search for universal syntactic patterns (that is, for universally available combinations of primitives);
- "4. the pursuit of, first, primitives and then their combinations grew into a broader programme of building a full-scale 'natural semantic metalanguage';
- "5. the theoretical underpinnings of the whole enterprise became gradually more and more clearly articulated (...); and
- "6. the range of domains, languages, and cultures to which NSM theory was applied, and against which it was tested expanded substantially." (Wierzbicka: 31)

“The semantic structure of an ordinary human sentence is about as simple and as ‘shallow’ as the structure of a galaxy or the structure of an atom. Looking into the meaning of a single word, let alone a single sentence, can give one the same feeling of dizziness that can come from thinking about the distances between galaxies or about the impenetrable empty spaces hidden in a single atom. The experience can be disconcerting, and perhaps it is not surprising that many theorists of language and cognition prefer to take the view that meanings can’t be analysed – as W. Lyons (1981: 73-4) put it, ‘for theoretically interesting reasons’.” (Wierzbicka: 233)

“But no reasons, not even ‘theoretically interesting’ ones, can absolve us from the effort of trying to explore the meanings of words to find out what unconscious principles determine the boundaries of their use. We have to try to pin down the elusive and culture-specific configurations of elements encapsulated in everyday concepts, and to face the formidable complexity of meanings which ordinary people appear to juggle effortlessly in everyday discourse.” (Wierzbicka: 233)

Complex Concepts as Configurations of Simple Ones

“The complexity of a concept can be viewed as the distance separating it from the level of indefinables. Some meaning encoded in natural languages can be regarded as ‘simple’ in the sense that they cannot be decomposed (without circularity) into any other meanings. ...

“... most concepts encoded in any human language are ‘complex’ in the sense that they *can* be decomposed in terms of simpler concepts.” (Wierzbicka: 212)

Abstract Concepts: Words for Emotions

“Generally speaking, abstract concepts appear to be less complex than concrete ones; but even so, they are usually much more complex than simple dictionary definitions or illustrative semantic formulae offered in scholarly literature would lead us to believe. But very simple definitions of this kind (e.g. *to lie* – ‘to say something untrue’) do not have any predictive power, and they cannot account for the differences in the range of use of related concepts. For example, as pointed out earlier (Chapter 4), a definition of ‘lie’ which says that ‘to lie’ is to say something untrue cannot account for the differences in use between *lie* and its closest Russian counterparts *vrat’* and *lgat’*, both of which also mean, roughly speaking, ‘to say something untrue.’ (Wierzbicka: 214)

An example: *happy* and *szczęśliwy* (Polish)

- (A) X feels happy. =
X feels something
sometimes a person thinks something like this:
something good happened to me
I wanted this
I don't want anything more now
because of this, this person feels something good
X feels like this

The following, marked in boldface, are semantic primitives:

- A) X **feels** happy. =
X **feels something**
sometimes a person thinks something like this:
something good happened to me
I wanted this
I don't want anything more now
because of this, this person feels something good
X feels like this

In other words the complete definition of *happy* can be accomplished with the semantic primitives established by Wierzbicka. Note that *sometimes* can very likely be subsumed under *WHEN*, which Wierzbicka glosses as *AT A TIME* (132).

Also: “The elements **BEFORE** and **AFTER** can perhaps be regarded as special modifiers (determiners) of time adjuncts, ... In past and future tenses, the elements **BEFORE** and **AFTER** are combined semantically with the element **NOW** (‘before now’, ‘after now’).” (132f)

The *X* of the initial and final formulas can be replaced by *A PERSON*. And I am also assuming that the *to* of *to me* is merely one case realization of *I*. In the case of the dative there is a putative reformulation: **I FELT SOMETHING GOOD** “something good happened to me.”

Semantic analysis cannot be solved by such formulations as

to kill means *to cause to die*

Some resign and say meaning is intrinsically fuzzy; hence, we cannot describe it.

Wierzbicka: meaning is central to linguistics and must be dealt with. (211f)

The question is one of depth of analysis.

Axiom: Some concepts cannot be defined by further decomposition into less complex concepts.

These are Wierzbicka's **semantic primitives**.

Semantic primitives cannot be further analyzed without circularity or obscurity.

Literature

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