Semantic Universals

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Where does this come from?

- **Herder**
  - “thinking is essentially identical with speaking and therefore differs from language to language and culture to culture” (Wierzbicka 1992: 3).

- **Humboldt**
  - “different languages as bearers of different cognitive perspectives” (Wierzbicka 1992: 3).
  - “Each language... contains a characteristic worldview” (Humboldt in Wierzbicka 1992: 3).

- **Sapir**
  - “Language is a guide to ‘social reality’ ... it powerfully conditions our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings [...] are very much at the mercy of [their] particular language...” (qtd. In Wierzbicka 1992: 4).

- **Whorf**
  - “[Language] is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and the guide to the individual's mental activity [...] We dissect nature along the lines laid down by our native languages” (qtd. In Wierzbicka 1992: 4).

- **Chomsky**
  - “regards languages as differing from one another almost exclusively in form. [...] Language] is a set of labels to be attached to concepts which are language-independent and are not determined culturally, but biologically” (Wierzbicka 1992: 4).
Wierzbicka on Language

“Language is a tool for expressing meaning. We think, we feel, we perceive—and we want to express our thoughts, our feelings, our perceptions” (Wierzbicka 1992: 3).

“The real question [ is …] to what extent languages are shaped by ‘human nature’ and to what extent they are shaped by culture” (Wierzbicka 1992: 73).
Natural Semantic Metalanguage

“[…]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)” (Wierzbicka 1996: 22-3).

“The NSM theory hypothesizes, however, that there are also some kinds of sentences [canonical sentences] that can be translated—without the loss and/or addition of meaning—into any language whatsoever” (Wierzbicka 1996: 30).

- You did something bad.
- I know when it happened.
- I want to see this.
- These people didn’t say anything about this.
- If you do this, I will do the same.
- This person cannot move.

(ibid.)
The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)

“So the theory presented here combines, in a sense, radical universalism with thoroughgoing relativism. It accepts the uniqueness of all language-and-culture systems, but posits a set of shared concepts, in terms of which differences between these systems can be accessed and understood; and it allows us to interpret the most idiosyncratic semantic structures as culture-specific configurations of universal semantic primitives—that is, of innate human concepts” (Wierzbicka: 1996, 16).
List of Semantic Primitives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>substantives</th>
<th>I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>determiners</td>
<td>THIS, THE SAME, OTHER, SOME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quantifiers</td>
<td>ONE, TWO, MANY (MUCH), ALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mental predicates</td>
<td>THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-mental predicates</td>
<td>MOVE, THERE IS, (BE) ALIVE,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metapredicates</td>
<td>NOT, CAN, VERY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speech</td>
<td>SAY, TRUE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actions and events</td>
<td>DO, HAPPEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluators</td>
<td>GOOD, BAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>descriptors</td>
<td>BIG, SMALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td>WHEN, BEFORE, AFTER, NOW, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>space</td>
<td>WHERE, UNDER, ABOVE, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, HERE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partonomy and taxonomy</td>
<td>PART (OF), KIND (OF)</td>
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<tr>
<td>interclausal linkers</td>
<td>IF, BECAUSE, LIKE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>augmentor</td>
<td>MORE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imaginary possibility</td>
<td>IF...WOULD, MAYBE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words</td>
<td>WORD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Wikipedia NSM

- mental predicates
  - THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR, BE
- speech
  - SAY, WORD, TRUE
- actions, events and movement
  - DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, PUT, GO
- existence and possession
  - THERE IS, HAVE
- life and death
  - LIVE, DIE
- time
  - WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
- space
  - WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW; FAR, NEAR; SIDE, INSIDE; TOUCHING
- "logical" concepts
  - NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
- intensifier
  - VERY
- augmentor
  - MORE
- quantifiers
  - ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH
- evaluators
  - GOOD, BAD
- descriptors
  - BIG, SMALL, (LONG)
- taxonomy, partonomy
  - KIND OF, PART OF;
- similarity
  - LIKE
- determiners
  - THIS, THE SAME, OTHER

A Cross-Cultural Study of Color

- Are color perceptions and conceptualizations a result of neuro-physiological biological stimuli or cultural constructions?
Two Initially Opposing Opinions:

- “[The Kay McDaniel Theory] claims that colors are not objectively ‘out there in the world’ independent of any beings. Color concepts are embodied in that focal colors are partly determined by human biology” (Lakoff 29).

- “Our colour sensations occur in our brains, not in the world outside, and their nature is no doubt constrained by our human biology (which links us, in some measure, with other primates); but to be able to communicate about these sensations, we project them on to something in our shared environment” (Wierzbicka 1996: 331)
Berlin and Kay (1969)

- Significant regularities cannot be drawn via questioning (linguistically), but are surprisingly similar across all cultures when individuals are asked to point out the best example of a ‘focal color’ (cf. Lakoff 26).
- Cultures are inconsistent when it comes to the boundaries defining the edges of a color.

Images from: http://amor.rz.hu-berlin.de/~h0998dgh/Einfu/einfu.html
Berlin and Kay (1969)

- Basic color terms name basic color *categories*, whose central members are the same universally. For example, there is always a psychologically real category RED, with focal red as the best, or ‘purest’ example.

- The color categories that basic color *terms* can attach to are the equivalents of the English color categories named by the terms *black, white, red, yellow, green, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange*, and *gray*.

- Although people can *conceptually* differentiate all these color categories, it is not the case that all languages make all of those differentiations. Many languages have fewer basic categories; for example, BLUE + GREEN, RED + ORANGE + YELLOW, etc. When there are fewer than eleven basic color terms in a language, one basic term, or more, names such a union.

- Languages form a hierarchy based on the number of basic color terms they have and the color categories these terms refer to.

  (Lakoff 25).
Berlin and Kay, modified

This has been expanded to seven levels. A culture can fall into one of the following stages:

- Stage I: Dark-cool and light-warm (this covers a larger set of colors than English "black" and "white").
- Stage II: Red
- Stage III: Either green or yellow
- Stage IV: Both green and yellow
- Stage V: Blue
- Stage VI: Brown
- Stage VII: Purple, pink, orange and/or grey
Kay and McDaniel (1978)

- Kay and McDaniel went on to determine that specific receptor cells in the retina would fire at distinct wavelengths of light.
- They concluded, therefore, that the human perception and then conception of color were biologically determined. (cf. Lakoff 27).
“Despite their indirect links with human neurophysiology, the meanings of colour terms are cultural artifacts” (Wierzbicka 1996: 333).

“There can’t be any colour universals, if colour itself is not a human universal. But ‘seeing’ is indeed a universal human concept” (Wierzbicka 1996: 288).

- i.e. No ‘black’ and ‘white’ binary, but able to clearly see or not able to clearly see distinction
- Warm colors: result from associations with the sun or fire
- Cool colors: from a negative definition (lack of sun or fire)
Shared Environmental Factors

“Another universal or near-universal has to do with the importance of the environment as a fundamental frame of reference for any human description of ‘seeing’ [...] backgrounds are no doubt more stable and predictable than ‘figures’ [moving against the background]: the sky (often blue), the ground (often brown), the grass (typically green), the sun (often yellow and brilliant), the sea (often dark blue), the broad expanse of snow (normally white)” (Wierzbicka 1996: 289).
Summary

- Certain elements of human experience may be universally or near-universally shared across cultures and result from biological traits or shared heritage.
  - Spatial perceptions and metaphors may result from embodiment (Lakoff)
  - Salient visual perceptions may be the same for most humans (Kay and McDaniel)
  - World cultures may share fundamental environmental experiences: sun, fire, naked-earth, dark, sky, etc. (Wierzbicka)
- However, interpretations of these shared phenomena, or conceptions, tend to be highly cultural specific.
  - associations, taxonomy, emotions(?)
- Both influences are highly important for language learning and meaning formation
References: