

## Understanding souls: A commentary on Anna Wierzbicka's natural semantic metalanguage

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There is a legend about the famous Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget delivering a distinguished lecture at Clark University in the late 1960s. During the question and answer period he was observed furiously jotting down notes. When the event concluded his host complimented Piaget for being so engaged. He responded: 'I was writing my next book!'

Anna Wierzbicka too is one of those anomalous and seemingly superhuman researchers with analytic powers and a writing capacity far beyond those of mortal academics. Her scholarly productivity is so off the charts that one imagines she must never sleep, or that she composes books while riding in the elevator. Piaget had his structural developmental stage theory, which he tirelessly applied to various domains of human thought (space, number, causality, morality, logical reasoning, even dream understandings). Anna Wierzbicka has her Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) theory which she believes makes it possible to do comparative research without ethnocentrism and can be used to more objectively define, translate or derive the meaning of almost anything. And over the past decades she and her colleagues (Cliff Goddard for example) have been extraordinarily diligent in applying that theory to almost everything (from the meaning of the concept expressed by the English word 'emotion' to the explication in NSM terms of key concepts in a variety of languages and cultural traditions—such as the Australian idea of a 'mate', the German idea of 'verboten' or the Malay idea of 'malu' (which is often translated in non-NSM terms as 'shame' or 'propriety')—to the meanings conveyed by Jesus Christ in his Sermon on the Mount.

Here she examines some of the conceptual challenges one faces doing comparative analysis of the meaning of kinship terms. She challenges (among other things) the deployment of the concept of kinship obligations in anthropological theories. In general Anna Wierzbicka's work has been deeply skeptical of the applicability of most theoretical or 'etic' concepts (such as 'emotions' or 'kinship' or 'morality') widely used by social scientists to understand the understandings of others. That skepticism is displayed in this essay (to pick but one example) by her suspicion that 'loyalty' is an ethnocentric concept. It does not stop there. Most researchers in comparative ethics (including myself) assume that the idea of a moral obligation is a universal human concept, which can be conveyed by one of the meanings associated with the English

words 'ought' and 'right', as in 'You ought to do X' or 'X is the morally right thing to do under the circumstances.' If you look closely at Table 1 (in the target essay titled 'The NSM table of universal human concepts') you will notice that lexical items expressing a sense of moral obligation per se are nowhere to be found. And I can guess that the next step in the argument will be the suggestion that the anthropological search for cross-cultural differences in local judgments about ones moral obligations is misguided because the concept of a moral obligation has not been universally acknowledged linguistically or codified in a lexical unit of the 'ought v ought not', 'right v wrong' type. I will return to the implications of that sort of claim in a moment.

Given the format for this commentary, which calls for brevity, there are several things I will not be able to do. I will have nothing to say about Anna Wierzbicka's contribution to our understanding of Australian Aborigine understandings of what many anthropologists might (but if she is right, misleadingly) categorize as 'kinship obligations' or of the true meaning of the Dalabon word 'Wekemarnûmolkkûndokan'. Unfortunately I will also have little to say about the vast corpus of her writings, which I greatly admire, in which she portrays distinctive cultural mentalities and the particular things members of different cultural communities (here I employ only NSM concepts) want, think, feel, know and think of as good or bad. I will always look forward to her skeptical critiques of the rush in the social sciences to postulate universals; and she has had many eye-opening things to say over the years about the overgeneralization and misapplication of Anglocentric emotion concepts (for example, happiness), emotion concepts which she argues (on the basis of NSM analysis of linguistic expressions in other languages) are far from universal. Instead in the space that remains I wish to communicate skeptic to skeptic and put on the table a few concerns I have about the limits of the NSM approach.

Natural Semantic Metalanguage theory, as articulated by Wierzbicka, is a scheme of 'prime concepts' designed to make it possible to specify and translate the meaning of anything, with one noteworthy exception. Namely the sixty or so 'prime concepts' (concepts such as 'I' and 'you', 'good' and 'bad', 'do' and 'happen') which she argues are universally and readily grasped by human beings. Not only are those concepts said to be empirical universals induced from comparative linguistic investigations of the symbolic vehicles (lexical units) used to convey them; they are also said to be concepts that are so basic, ultimate, simple or straightforward that they themselves are beyond definition or analysis. With respect to those sixty or so prime concepts there is nothing that can be said to specify or define *their* meaning; in other words there is no way by means of language to impart or convey the meaning of a prime concept (the meaning of 'I' for example) to someone who did not already intuitively or directly grasp it.

Put to use as a translation device Wierzbicka argues that the NSM has the virtue of being non-ethnocentric, precisely because the NSM scheme of prime concepts has been induced from lexical units that have been shown to be linguistic vehicles for those sixty or so concepts in every local or 'emic' semantic system. Thus she suggests the NSM can be employed as a non-ethnocentric system for the translation of less

transparent parochial or culture-specific meanings into a universal language of thought that anyone, regardless of language or culture, should be able to grasp. Here one is tempted to ask: why is the human ideational world populated at all with culture-specific meanings that require NSM definitions to be understood by outsiders? I imagine the NSM theorist might answer as follows: precisely because those parochial concepts are not basic, ultimate, simple or straightforward but rather have been imaginatively invented (over the collective history of thought of this or that cultural group) with conceptual resources supplied by the table of prime concepts. In other words, culture-specific concepts ('mate', 'verboden', 'malu') are culture-specific (and thus transparent only to native speakers who have mastered them) because they are discretionary derivative complexes; although, according to NSM theory, they can be rendered intelligible to any outsider by a process of decomposition and reduction back to the basic set of universal elements, the prime concepts out of which they were historically constructed. One of the central interpretive principles of the NSM program might well be dubbed 'hermeneutical priming': from the point of view of an outside interpreter all culture-specific concepts are somewhat opaque ideational complexes that are decomposable without loss of meaning into prime concepts, at which point they become *universally* intelligible. I confess that I find it hard to fully embrace this reductive picture of the source of meaning. A good deal of meaning gets lost in translation when culture-specific concepts are rewritten as prime concepts, or at least that seems so to me in cases where I am the native speaker. The results often seem stilted, or to supply only minimal meanings. I am left wondering whether a competent native speaker could reliably back-translate from an NSM rendering of their own native meaning and actually recognize in the pure prime concept rewrite the original culturally salient parochial idea (with all its implications and connotations).

Solving the problem (or is it an unsolvable mystery?) of how human beings are able to grasp concepts at all (including concepts that don't play an acknowledged part in one's own way of life) is not a standard to which I would hold any approach to semantic analysis. I accept that there are many things human beings know non-derivatively. We know them either by means of what some philosophers call intuitive reason or because they are so simple or obvious they resist further analysis and can be readily grasped. We know such things without the need for reflective deliberation or derivation from other things we already know—for example, that a part of a whole can't be greater than the whole, or that it is wrong to treat like cases differently, or that something is round. Perhaps most of the concepts in the NSM are of that sort, although it is not immediately obvious or self-evident to me why concepts such as 'live' and 'die' should be classified as ultimate, non-derivative or beyond definition. I suspect 'live' and 'die' are part of the NSM mainly because they have been matters of reflective concern for human beings everywhere and because those concerns have been expressed via lexical units everywhere one looks, and not because they are pure conceptual primes. Nevertheless a rather large question lingers here: precisely how *does* one establish semantic equivalence across languages for lexical units that are the symbolic vehicles for prime concepts (which by definition are not derivable from any other

concepts and thus can't be defined?). If there is an inductive linguistic procedure for breaking into the circle of meanings expressed in each of two languages and establishing that two lexical units (one from each language) convey equivalent meanings at the level of prime concepts it is not transparent.

But let's assume it can (and has) been done. Even so the NSM test of universal lexical expression seems far too stringent a criterion for crediting human beings with the ability to grasp a concept. Why shouldn't we entertain other possibilities, for example, (i) that there are many universally intelligible and readily graspable concepts (take 'roundness' for example) that are not primes and/or (ii) that there are many prime concepts (the moral sense of 'ought', for example) that might help us understand other people's souls even if that prime concept has not been codified by means of lexical units in the native language of the person whose soul we are trying to grasp. Understanding the soul of others does not require or presuppose that they themselves must have already engaged in self-examination or already developed particular kinds of linguistic resources for doing so.

Consider, for example, the idea of 'roundness' and the following remark by the nineteenth-century British ethicist Henry Sidgwick in his classic volume *The Methods of Ethics* (1884: 354): '...the uninstructed majority of mankind could not define a circle as a figure bounded by a line of which every point is equidistant from the center: but nevertheless, when the definition is explained to them, they will accept it as expressing the perfect type of that notion of roundness which they have long had in their minds.' The fact that the concept of 'roundness' can be defined by reference to other concepts means that it is not a prime concept. The fact that most of those other concepts by reference to which roundness can be defined are not prime concepts either invites a series of questions. That questioning process (consisting of probes about the meaning of 'line' and 'point') is bound to either itself go in circles or else come to some resting place, where there is nothing more that can be said—you either get it or you don't. My question here is this one: even if one never goes through that process of trying to linguistically spell out the meaning of 'roundness' and thus does not even try to get the 'uninstructed majority' of humankind to comprehend and accept one's definition, does one really doubt Sidgwick's point that 'roundness' (a non-prime complex derivative concept) is universally grasped by human beings?

Sidgwick (1884, pp. 27–35) is essential reading for anyone interested in the concept of a moral obligation. He views it as a prime concept (ultimate, unanalyzable, 'too elementary to admit of any formal definition') linguistically conveyed in English by means of lexical items such as 'ought' and 'right', but also as a concept that can be clarified by 'determining its connections with other notions with which it is connected in ordinary thought, especially those to which it is liable to be confounded.' Wierzbicka does not find lexical items semantically equivalent to 'ought' and 'right' in all languages and hence leaves them off her list of universal human concepts. I accept the linguistic findings. I don't accept the implication that the core concept of a moral obligation is ethnocentric (although of course that prime concept may take on a special character in a parochial context, which needs to be identified as such). Raymond

Firth wrote of the Tikopia: ‘The spirits, just as men, respond to a norm of conduct of an external character. The moral law exists in the absolute, independent of the Gods’ (see Shweder 2012, p. 89). Sidgwick has the following to say about the prime concept expressed by the English lexical items ‘ought’ and ‘right’ (understood in the sense of moral obligation): namely that the approved conduct is objectively ‘right’ which implies that it ‘...cannot, without error, be disapproved of by any other mind.’ The core concept seems recognizable in both England and Tikopia and we need not rely exclusively on the study of lexical representation to grasp the moral sense of the English word ‘ought.’

When I think of Anna Wierzbicka I sometimes think of the French anthropologist Louis Dumont, who once wrote (1970, p. 249): ‘The oneness of the human species, however, does not demand the arbitrary reduction of diversity to unity—it only demands that it should be possible to pass from one particularity to another, and that no effort should be spared in order to elaborate a common language in which each particularity can be adequately described. The first step to that end consists in recognizing differences.’

Very few anthropologists have systematically taken up that challenge, which requires one to be a universalist without reducing diversity to uniformity. Anna Wierzbicka’s NSM is a monumental and heroic attempt to take up the challenge. It deserves to be seriously engaged by all cultural anthropologists. I have learned much from her bountiful writings, even if I have treated this occasion as an opportunity to raise questions and express some of my doubts.

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## Comment on Wierzbicka

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Wierzbicka trenchantly poses the question of how to describe the categories by which people live in a manner that is true to their own cultural and linguistic systems, rather than a projection of the analyst’s own. This is an enduringly urgent problem for