

The Atoms of Meaning

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General

Most linguists do not regard semantics (the systematic study of meaning) as a central part of their discipline. This is both strange and sad, because meaning is the link between language and communication, between language and culture, and between language and cognition. Lately, however, meaning-based approaches have been making a comeback within the broad movements known as cognitive linguistics and functional linguistics. This article concentrates on the leading meaning-based theory of language, the natural semantic metalanguage or NSM theory originated by Anna Wierzbicka.

By Cliff Goddard

When we try to state the meaning of a word, there is a very real danger of getting 'tangled up' in other words. Most dictionaries fall into this trap because they do not observe a seemingly obvious principle: to explain the meaning of a word, one has to use other words that are simpler and easier to understand. Otherwise the definitions become circular, obscure, and inaccurate. We can see this in the Oxford Dictionary, when it defines *sad* as 'sorrowful, mournful, showing or causing sorrow', then *sorrow* as 'mental distress caused by the loss of good or occurrence of evil', and *distress* 'severe pressure of pain, sorrow, etc. anguish'.

Resorting to complex technical descriptors does not alleviate the problem, because in the end these too have to be understood in terms of ordinary language meanings. When we step across a language barrier another problem comes up, which is the potentially distorting effect of using words from one language/culture (typically English) to analyse the meanings of another language/culture.

Finding the atoms

According to Anna Wierzbicka and colleagues, the way out of these difficulties is to identify the simplest meanings expressed in languages, and then to use these to decode more complex meanings. Since simpler meanings are more likely to be shared across cultures, we may be able to reduce ethnocentrism in the process. For 30 years, Wierzbicka has been pursuing the ultimate vocabulary of simple indefinable concepts: semantic primes.

To get a sense of what semantic primes are like, compare *say* and *ask*. How could one paraphrase *say* in a context like 'Mary said something to me'? An expression like *verbally express* would be no good since the terms *verbally* and *express* are more complex and difficult to understand than *say* itself. We might consider something like 'Mary did something because she wanted me to know something', but this could fit many other actions apart from *saying*. Because it appears to resist paraphrase in simpler terms, *say* is a good candidate for the status of semantic prime.

It is a different story with *ask*, as in 'Mary asked me where Max was'. We can immediately make a start at a paraphrase: 'Mary said something to me because she wanted to know something, and because of this she wanted me to say something'. Though this rough paraphrase is not perfect, it is clear that the meaning of *ask* can be broken down into simpler terms, including *say*, *want*, and *know*.

I do not want to give the impression that identifying semantic primes is a simple matter. It is not. For every proposed prime – and there are about 60 of them – there is a long and sometimes complicated history of argumentation

and investigation. Well-established primes include nominal meanings like *I* and *you*, *someone*, and *something*, evaluative and descriptive meanings like *good* and *bad*, *big* and *small*, verbal meanings like *do* and *happen*, *know*, *think*, *want* and *say*, spatial and temporal meanings like *here* and *now*, *before* and *after*, *above* and *below*, and logical concepts like *because*, *if* and *not*.

Lexical universals

Research indicates that semantic primes exist as words or word-like elements (including affixes) in all languages. As one can see from the map, the languages that have been studied from this point of view come from many parts of the world, from many different cultural zones, and from many different language families.

Some tricky technical issues can arise in identifying primes across languages. There is no requirement that the exponent of a prime be simple in form. For example, in English the prime *a long time* is expressed by a fixed phrase (most languages have a single word for it). More importantly, there is the problem of polysemy: the phenomenon whereby a single word can have several related meanings. Like other common words, exponents of semantic primes are often polysemous, and they can be polysemous in different ways in different languages. For example, in Yankunyjtjajara the exponent of *say* is *wangkanyi*, which can also be used (in a different meaning) about birds singing and about the wind blowing. Careful language-internal analysis is necessary before claims about semantic primes can be established.

Semantic primes are not isolated concepts. They combine according to certain grammatical patterns that appear to be universal, in the sense that they 'work' in all the world's languages. This opens up the way for a new meaning-based theory of universal grammar (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002), though it is not possible to delve more deeply into it here.

Using semantic primes to crack the code

If only 60 concepts are simple and universal, then all other word meanings are complex and, potentially, language-specific. This includes ordinary words that seem basic from a monolingual perspective, like the English *go*, *hit*, *drink*, *break*, *hot*, *tree*, and *rock*. All these words lack exact equivalents in some other languages. Even more interesting are words for emotions, relationships, values, speech-acts, daily activities, and so on: concepts which people use to think about and make sense of their lives. For example, emotion terms that are often regarded (by English speakers) as basic, such as *angry*, *sad*, and *happy*, vary in meaning across languages.

One of the main theoretical and practical challenges for linguistic semantics is to explicate such subtle but important differences in the conceptual structures



Map: Sample of languages other than English studied in the NSM framework

of the world's languages. I will give a highly abbreviated example (cf. Goddard 2001) of the technique of explication of semantic primes, using one of the cultural key words of the Malay (Bahasa Melayu) language: *sabar*.

Sabar: a Malay cultural value

Sabar (verbal form *besabar*, abstract noun *kesabaran*) clearly means something both broader and more important than its conventional translation *patient*. Certainly one can *sabar menunggu* 'patiently wait', but the injunction to *sabar* can also be addressed to someone who is annoyed, agitated, grieving or distressed and in these contexts the English *patient* does not fit at all, e.g. *Janganlah marah! Sabar!* 'Don't be mad! Calm down!'; *Sabar, jangan menangis kuat sangat* 'Be calm, don't cry so loud'. *Kesabaran* is an important Islamic virtue (*sabar* itself is an Arabic loan word). On the Islamic view, misfortunes and suffering should be seen as tests from God; if we can sustain our *kesabaran*, this will show we are *beriman* 'faithful'. This helps explain why characteristic Malay advice in difficult situations is to *bersabar* 'endure it, forbear'. The old Malay tradition (*adat*)

also strongly favours staying calm in troubling situations, since it is only by staying calm that one can follow the traditional counsel to exercise caution in all matters, resist impulsive behaviour, and preserve harmonious social relations.

In my view, the meaning of *sabar* can be spelled out in semantic primes as follows:

X was *sabar* [at that time] =
at that time X felt something bad
because of this X could have thought:
I don't want this
I want to do something now
X did not think like this
because X didn't want to think
anything like this
it is good if a person can be like this

The wording of the component 'felt something bad' is intentionally vague, so as to be compatible with anything from mild irritation to great suffering. The key idea is that a *sabar* person could have formed an immediate impulsive intention: 'I don't want this, I want to do something now', but did not, because he or she 'did not want to think anything like this'. Being *sabar* is having a certain mental discipline. The

final component adds a strong moral endorsement: 'it is good if a person can be like this'.

Using the same technique of explication, the meaning of English *patient* can be unpacked and compared point by point with that of *sabar*. Both concepts, furthermore, can be culturally contextualized by a new approach to cultural description that employs semantic primes as a notation, namely, the theory of cultural scripts.

Just as a small number of chemical elements can generate an enormous number of complex substances, it seems that the enormous diversity of meanings encoded in the words and grammar of the world's languages are the product of a small number of semantic elements combined in manifold ways. Just as the discovery of the chemical elements and of their combinatorial properties opened new vistas for chemistry, the comprehensive description of the atoms of meaning can be expected to open new vistas for the study of language, thought, and culture. <

References

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