Overcoming Terminological Ethnocentrism

Terminological ethnocentrism is an insidious, and often unrecognized, problem in cultural description. It occurs when words of one language/culture, typically English, are uncritically used to describe deeply cultural meanings of another language/culture, with an inevitable distortion of meaning. Scholars often view the so-called “problem of translation” as intractable, but new research in linguistics suggests a way forward.

By Cliff Goddard

A solution is offered by the programme of semantic research led by the distinguished linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1996, 1997). The key idea is that there is a small set of simple, basic meanings (semantic primes) which can be expressed clearly and precisely in all languages; for example:

- I, you, someone, something, people, do, happen, say, think, know, want, good, bad, this, other, the same, when/time, where/place, because, if, can, not, like.

Semantic primes offer a way around terminological ethnocentrism while at the same time allowing culture-specific concepts to be explicated with great detail and clarity.

Three Cultural Key Words of Malay

As concrete examples from my own work (Goddard 1996, 1997, 2000, 2001), consider the following explications, phrased solely in semantic primes, for three “untranslatable” cultural key words of Malay (Bahasa Melayu). Of course, explications like these are unfamiliar and may seem peculiar, but unlike most semantic descriptions they are very clear and they can be transposed virtually word-for-word into Malay.

To begin with, malu has a broad meaning, usually glossed in Malay-English dictionaries as “ashamed”, “shy”, “embarrassed”. One anthropological classic describes it, with a dash of ethnocentrism, as “hypersensitivity to what other people are thinking about one”. It is one of the prime forces for conformity in the Malay kawung (village). Explication [A] presents malu as an unplanned and unwanted feeling due to the thought that other people could be thinking and saying bad things about one. Notice the lack of negative connotations, in contrast to English “ashamed”.

[A] person X feels [“feels”] malu =

X thinks something like this:

people can know something about me
people can think something bad about me because of this
I don’t want this
because of this X feels something bad because of this
because of all this, X feels something bad

Secondly, maruah is it variously glossed as “self-esteem”, “dignity”, or “pride”. Explication [B] presents it as a two-sided concept with the self to maintain a positive view of oneself, and to maintain a positive profile in the eyes of others. In particular, to avoid being “looked down on” by others. Concern for maruah motivates one to do some things and to avoid others. (Like many culturally important Malay words, maruah originates from Arabic, but its meaning has since shifted somewhat.)

[B] person X,ada (“has”) maruah =

X wants to think good things about him/herself
X wants other people to think good things about him/her
X doesn’t want people to think about him/her:
this person is someone below me
because of this, X wants to do something, X doesn’t want to do some other things
people think: it is good if a person is like this

Finally, menghormati (the verbal form of hormati) is usually glossed as “to show respect”. One sociologist has described it as “deference that is owed to a social position”. According to [C] the idea is to show someone that you recognize his/her standing and that you want to avoid his/her disapproval, and that to do this you behave in a deliberately selective way in terms of what you do, what you say, and how you say it. (Malay culture emphasises linguistic etiquette to a much greater extent than in European cultures, e.g. avoidance of the pronouns aku “I”, and kau and awk “you”, use of various honorific words, and using a refined (hala) speech style.)

[C] person X menghormati person Y =

X thinks things like this about Y:

Y is someone above me
I don’t want Y to think anything bad about me
X wants to know this
because of this, when X is with Y
X does some things, X doesn’t do some other things
X says some things, X doesn’t say some other things
X says some words, X doesn’t say some other words

Three Malay Cultural Scripts

Semantic primes can also be used to formulate so-called cultural scripts, in place of conventional complex, English-specific descriptors such as “indirect”, “polite” or “collectivist”. The general layout of a cultural script is illustrated in [D]. This is intended to capture characteristic Malay concern for caution and prudent action; cf. everyday phrases such fikir dulu “think first”, fi’ir panjang “think long”, fi’ir dua kali “think twice”, etc. and the proverbial saying: “jikau nasi, ikut hati maruah follow feelings suffer, follow heart die”. Note that cultural scripts are not intended as a model of how people actually behave, but as a model of what “people think”, i.e. about a kind of interpretative backdrop for social action.

[D] people think:

D1: I don’t want something bad to happen because I do something
because of this, it is good if I think about it before I do anything

The next two scripts show the close links between the culturally preferred communicative style and Malay key words sketched above. They can be compared with the following quotation, which is typical of conventional ethnographic descriptions: “The social value system is predicated on the dignity of the individual and ideally all social behaviour is regulated in such a way as to preserve one’s own amour propre and to avoid disturbing the same feelings of dignity and self-esteem in others” (Vreeland et al 1977: 177). Script [E] spells out the cultural priority placed on verbal caution and premeditation, particularly in relation to hurtful speech.

(E) people think:

it is not good if I say something to someone, this
person feels something bad because of this, when I want to say something to someone, it is good to think about it for some time before I say it

(E) people think:

it is not good to say something about someone, if other people might think something bad about that person because of it

In a short article like this it is impossible to justify these semantic analyses adequately in proper detail or to describe the research process, so I have concentrated on the methodological angle. I hope it is clear that despite its small size the vocabulary of semantic primes offers a promising new medium for linguistic and cultural description, a medium which can improve precision and clarity while at the same time reducing the invisible ethnocentrism which comes from basing the language of description on English alone.

References

- Goddard, Cliff. ‘Communicative style and cultural values - Cultural scripts of Malay (Bahasa Melayu), Anthropological Linguistics 42(1), (2000), pp. 81-116

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For more information on the approach described in this article, readers can consult the "NSM Homepage" at:
http://www.une.edu.au/arts/LCL/disciplines/linguistics/nsmpage.htm

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