CHAPTER 2

Is “remember” a universal human concept?

“Memory” and culture*

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Speaking of “elementary notions, common to everyone in the human race, that can be expressed in all languages”, Umberto Eco (2000: 87–88) states: “Most certainly, every man has a notion of what it means to (…) to remember”. This paper argues that Eco is mistaken and that ‘remembering’ is not a universal human concept but a cultural construct, shared by some languages but not others. It also shows that culture-specific concepts like ‘remember’ and ‘memory’ can be explained and compared through genuinely elementary and universal notions such as know, think and before (that is, through ‘nsm’). To illustrate these general themes, the paper offers a detailed analysis of the Polish field of ‘memory’, linking Polish semantics with Polish history and culture.

1. “Memory” as a psychological construct

In his book Flesh in the Age of Reason historian Roy Porter gently mocks the eighteenth-century invention of something called a person’s [physical] ‘constitution’, which must be maintained (Porter 2003). Future historians will be able to similarly mock various twentieth-century inventions, such as, for example, “self”, “emotion”1 and the topic of this paper: “memory”.

This is not to say that either “constitution” or “memory” are simply fictions without any basis in reality. The eighteenth-century notion of “constitution” was grounded in the reality of the human body, and the twentieth-century notion of “memory” is grounded in the reality of human thinking and knowing (linked, of course, with the human brain). The point is that both “constitution” and “memory” are constructs – culturally

* I acknowledge with gratitude that this paper owes a great deal to many extensive discussions with Cliff Goddard.

1. “Today there is a thriving emotions industry’ to which philosophers, psychologists and neuroscientists are contributing. Yet until two centuries ago ‘the emotions’ did not exist” (Thomas Dixon 2003, Publisher’s introduction).
determined ways of looking at human beings, rather than scientifically determined ways of cutting nature at its joints. "Memory", which is our primary concern here, is not something that objectively exists — a "thing", or a distinct and clearly delimited aspect of human nature. It is a construct, linked with the current meaning of the English word *memory* — a construct that many psychologists and cognitive scientists tend to reify by treating it as something that "exists" independently of the English language.

In the current psychological literature, "memory" is often discussed in terms of two metaphors: that of "records in the brain" and that of "storage of information". For example, in *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* (Gregory 1987: 455) we read:

Memory. When we learn something there must be change in the brain, but no one knows what the change is. Until quite recently the concept of memory was used only in mentalistic contexts. Few dictionaries contain any reference to memory as a feature of a physical system, though we now have the language of computer scientists to help us in thinking about our own memories, as physical records in the brain.

The note of disdain in the sentence "until quite recently the concept of memory was used only in mentalistic contexts" is unmistakable. Really, it is implied, "memory [is] a feature of a physical system"; and luckily, "we now have the language of computer scientists to help us thinking of our own memories as physical records in the brain".

But is it really so helpful to think of "memory" in physical rather than "mentalistic" terms? In ordinary language "memory" is a "mentalistic" term; and if we want to understand the concept encoded in this term, the language of "mentalistic" concepts like THINK and KNOW will surely be more useful than that of "physical records in the brain".

The explanatory power of the metaphors drawn from the language of computer science is also far from clear. In a recent book entitled *The Search for Mind. A new foundation for cognitive science* (O’Nualláin 2002: 70) we read:

When viewing memory as a store, a computational metaphor is extremely useful. In computing, we make a distinction between storage media which are potentially removable from the machine like floppy disks, RAM (random access memory) which is the primary workspace of the computer and ROM (read only memory) which contains a few commands without which operation of the computer is impossible (COPY, DIR, etc.). Similarly we make a distinction in human memory between long-term memory, conceived of as back-up storage, and short-term memory, which is a workspace. In the meantime, certain ROM commands remain continually present (e.g. don’t fall off heights; nothing can be in two places at the same time).

Explanations of this kind can be confusing rather than illuminating. Since the concept encoded in the word *memory* is quite complex, to explain it we need to decompose it into terms which are much simpler and which in fact can be regarded as self-explanatory. Once we have done this we will have a much better idea of what exactly we are talking about. This semantic complication is not a luxury. In fact, at times it is a necessity. To my mind experiences", and c (p.71), this may a o than the reference. The same applies to memory, discuss to the Mind. Having and other biochemists authors write (p.46)

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exactly we are talking about when we discuss “memory”; and we will be in a better position to ask about the bodily (physical) correlates of the mental phenomena that this semantically complex English word stands for.

In fact, at times the discussion of “memory” in The Search for Mind moves closer to such a perspective, abandoning for a while the physicalist and computational language. To my mind, when the author speaks of “our past experience”, of “our lived experiences”, and of “how an experience is conditioned by our memory of past events” (p.71), this may actually be a more helpful, and a more illuminating starting point than the references to RAM and ROM.

The same applies to the studies of the biochemistry, anatomy and cell biology of memory, discussed, for example, in the entry on “memory” in The Oxford Companion to the Mind. Having discussed the recent studies of the “hippocampal potentialisation” and other biochemical mechanisms as in vitro analogues of memory processes, the authors write (p.460):

All this may seem a long way from Marcel Proust’s evocation of youthful memory, À la recherche du temps perdu, with its sense imagery. Are young chicks, sea slugs, or slices of brain tissue really going to reveal the molecular mechanisms of such a durable if elusive property of the human brain? It is an act of faith perhaps, to claim that they are. Complex phenomena are not merely the result of the additive properties of simpler ones, because as systems increase in complexity, their properties change qualitatively (...). Nevertheless, the general principles of organization that underlie these brain systems are similar.

But there is no reason why “memory” should be studied either introspectively, à la Marcel Proust, or objectively, from a biochemical point of view. Depending on what one wants to discover, both perspectives are obviously legitimate and appropriate. Arguably, however, conceptual analysis should come first. We cannot take for granted English words like memory, remember, recall, retrieve, forget, and so on; rather, we need to start an inquiry into “memory” and related phenomena by elucidating the meaning of such words. Without such a preliminary semantic inquiry scholarly articles on “memory” are often sorely lacking in clarity. The following passage from The Oxford Companion to the Mind (p.458) is a good case in point (the asterisks refer to separate entries):

... memory is a portmanteau expression which includes within itself two processes and, by hypothesis, a thing. The processes are the “learning of some new skill, behaviour pattern, or piece of information (sometimes called the acquisition of memory)” and, at some later time, the recall and re-expression of the skill or information (sometimes called retrieval). The thing that connects the two processes of learning and recall is a change in the properties of the brain system so as to store the new information which the learning represents, in such a form that it can subsequently, in response to appropriate cues, be searched for and retrieved. This change is known as the memory trace, or *engram. The relationship between
the language used to discuss these phenomena in the brain and that used in the description of the properties of computers and their memory stores is not accidental, for much of our present-day thinking about biological memory is directed – and constrained – by a framework of analogies from computer technology and information theory.

While this passage purports to define “memory” (“memory is a portmanteau expression which includes within itself two processes and a thing”) it is extremely difficult to see what this definition actually means. Two processes and a thing? What thing? Why isn’t the “change in the properties of the brain system” also a process? Or a state resulting from a process? On the face of it, it would seem that only the brain, not a change occurring in the brain, is a thing. It is also hard to see if there is any unitary generalisation behind the two “processes” in question; or what exactly is meant by “recall and re-expression”. The word recall is not obviously simpler and clearer than the word memory itself, and the word re-expression appears to refer to an earlier process or event of “expression”. But how is this earlier “expression” related to the “learning of some new skill”? Finally, it is not clear what is meant by “biological memory”. If what is meant is the biological basis of memory then why not say so? Since, however, it appears to be implied that everything that the term memory stands for can be reduced to some “phenomenon in the brain” there is hardly any room left for any “mentalist” memory which could have a biological basis. Thus, the passage as a whole obfuscates rather than clarifies the phenomenon which it is trying to explain.

Again and again, the current literature on “memory” emphasises the (perceived) need to move away from phenomenological and philosophical approaches to neurobiological and computational ones, and from “the mind” to the brain. For example:

For experimental science, the question is how far memory and its brain representation are amenable to experimental analysis rather than to logical and philosophical enquiry. Over recent decades, this has been one of the central problem areas for psychology and neurobiology. (The Oxford Companion to the Mind, p.458)

But how can “memory” be amenable to experimental analysis if we don’t explain first what we mean by the word memory? Seeking to understand what The Oxford Companion to the Mind (TOCM) is actually trying to say about “memory” in the passage quoted above, I would propose the following paraphrase of this passage:

*a scientific model of “memory” (TOCM)*

a. something happened to a person at some time
b. because of this, this person knew something (Z) about something (X)
c. because of this, something happened to a part of this person’s body [brain]
d. because of this, after this this part of the body was not like it was before this thing happened
e. because of this, if this person thinks about X now this person can know the same thing (Z) about X

This formula in "knowing" and "to some permutation:

a. some time
b. because of c.

In fact, however, to the Mind usually very notion that the cues be searched for "searching" and "the following ones (p. 316)

We do not use we how to recall it whether the conditions:

It seems clear that the word recall.

Thus, even in the Companion to the Mind, personal experience from this experience: While the folk concept memory as it is used this concept, too, knowledge and others, also, for some time.

So here is a pro that is, in sentence memory", that is, a person’s men

a. everyone
b. if a person this person

c. because I know it because I

d. at the same time

e. if a person some time
This formula may seem more complex than necessary in so far as it refers to both “knowing” and “thinking”. It might seem sufficient, and therefore preferable, to limit it to some permutations of “knowing”, along the following lines:

a. some time before now something happened to person X
b. because of this, X knew something about something (at that time)
c. because X knew it then, X knows it now

In fact, however, the literature on “memory” such as the article in The Oxford Companion to the Mind usually does refer, however indirectly, to thinking as well as knowing. The very notion that the relevant information “can subsequently, in response to appropriate cues, be searched for and retrieved” (p.456) involves thinking; for what else could that “searching” and “retrieving” be if not thinking? Consider also formulations like the following ones (p.464):

We do not perceive or remember in a vacuum. The context within which we experience an event will determine how that event is encoded and hence retained. What we have learned, we are not always able to call to mind, particularly if we try to recall it when our internal or external environment is dramatically different from the conditions during learning.

It seems clear that the expression call to mind refers to thinking, and that so does the word recall.

Thus, even in the scientific model presented, for example, in the article in The Oxford Companion to the Mind, the concept of ‘memory’ includes three main components: 1. personal experience (something happening to a person), 2. knowledge resulting from this experience, and 3. the ability to think about that knowledge some time later.

While the folk concept of ‘memory’, that is, the concept encoded in the English word memory as it is used in ordinary language, does not involve any references to the brain, this concept, too, involves the same three vital components of “personal experience”, knowledge and thinking; plus of course the temporal dimension: before and after, and also, for some time.

So here is a proposed explication of the word memory, used as a singulare tantum, that is, in sentences like “he has a good memory”, or “after the accident, he lost his memory”, that is, “memory” conceived of as a capacity:

1. a person’s memory (a folk model)
   a. everyone knows:
   b. if a person knows something at one time
      this person can know the same thing for some time afterwards because of this
   c. because of this, a person can think about many things like this:
      “I know it
      because I knew it before”
   d. at the same time everyone knows:
      if a person knows something at one time
      some time afterwards this person can not know this thing anymore
Memory in the sense of "capacity" has no plural and thus is very different grammatically from countable memories. The two are also very different semantically. For example, a "good memory" does not imply that one has "good memories". Roughly speaking, memories have to do with lived experience. A computer may have a "memory" (though not a "good" memory, only a "large" one), but it cannot have any "memories". Memory can be purely factual, memories are inherently experiential. To fully understand the differences between the two it will be helpful to explore first the meaning, or meanings, of the verb remember.

2. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage ("NSM")

The "natural semantic metalanguage" ("NSM"), in which the scientific model of memory was re-cast, is the outcome of empirical and conceptual investigations carried out over more than three decades within the framework of "NSM" semantic theory. This theory is based on two fundamental assumptions: that every language has an irreducible core in terms of which the speakers can understand all complex thoughts and utterances; and that the irreducible cores of all natural languages match one another, reflecting the irreducible core of human thought.

The research done within the NSM approach has tested the validity of these two assumptions, and their utility in describing and comparing languages and cultures. The justification for the approach lies, therefore, in the large body of work produced using this methodology (see the references listed in Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 1994 and 2002; see also the NSM homepage).

Cross-linguistic empirical research undertaken within the NSM framework suggests that there are sixty or so universal conceptual primes, each with its own set of universal syntactic frames. Using their English exponents, we can present them as follows (for equivalent tables in other languages, see Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 2002):

Table of universal conceptual primes (English version)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SubstantiveS</th>
<th>I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING (THING), PEOPLE, BODY</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determiners</td>
<td>THIS, THE SAME, OTHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantifiers</td>
<td>ONE, TWO, SOME, MANY/MUCH, ALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental predicates</td>
<td>THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>SAY, WORDS, TRUE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Actions, events, movement</td>
<td>DO, HAPPEN, MOVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location, existence,</td>
<td>BE (SOMEWHERE), BE/EXIST,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>possession specification</td>
<td>HAVE BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life and death</td>
<td>LIVE, DIE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logical concepts</td>
<td>NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF</td>
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(pp.393-4)

Hallpike also q
Gahuku-Gama:
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any conc.
of hearin;
understar
| Time | WHEN (TIME), NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT |
| Space | WHERE (PLACE), HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCHING (CONTACT) |
| Intensifier, augmentor | VERY, MORE |
| Taxonomy, partonomy | KIND OF, PART OF |
| Similarity | LIKE (HOW, AS) |

Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes. They can be formally, i.e. morphologically, complex. They can have different morphosyntactic properties (including word-class) in different languages. They can have combinatorial variants (allolexes). Each semantic prime has a well-specified set of grammatical (combinatorial) properties.

The great majority of words and grammatical constructions in any language are language-specific in their meaning, and cannot be matched exactly across languages. But evidence suggests that the sixty or so words listed as conceptual primes do match in meaning across languages, and can be used as a conceptual lingua franca which allows us to explain meanings and ideas “from a native’s point of view” while making them intelligible to cultural outsiders.

It would be impossible to investigate human psychology across languages and cultures if no psychological terms were shared by all languages. Fortunately (for any such projects) there are psychological concepts which all languages do share. As the table given above shows, these concepts include KNOW, THINK, WANT and FEEL.

In the past, it was sometimes claimed that there are “primitive” languages which do not have lexical (or lexico-grammatical) exponents for the concepts KNOW and THINK. For example, the anthropologist Hallpike, in his *Foundations of Primitive Thought* (1979) claimed that “primitive” peoples confuse thinking with speaking and hearing and that they have no concept of purely cognitive processes and states such as those linked in English with the words *think* and *know*.

This inability to analyse private experience, as opposed to social behaviour, the paradigm of the knowable, is well illustrated by ethnographic evidence from the Ommura, of the Eastern Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. Like many primitive peoples in New Guinea and elsewhere, the Ommura use the same verb (*ierom*) for ‘understanding’ or ‘comprehending’, and the ‘hearing’ of a sound etc. (pp.393–4)

Hallpike also quoted with approval Read’s (1955) statement about the Papuan people Gahuku-Gama:

The Gahuku-Gama do not ascribe any importance to the brain, nor have they any conception of its function. Cognitive processes are associated with the organ of hearing. To ‘know’ or to ‘think’ is to ‘hear’ (*gelenove*); ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I don’t understand’ is ‘I do not hear’ or ‘I have not heard’ (*gelenuwe*). (p.265 n.)
It has now been established, however, that claims of this kind are groundless, and that they are due to a failure to recognise the polysemy of certain words which can be established on language-internal grounds (Wierzbicka 1996, Chapter 6; Goddard 1998). The empirical work done within the NSM framework (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 2002) shows that all languages have identifiable exponents for the concepts know and think (as well as want and feel). This fact is crucial for any attempt to investigate, cross-linguistically, complex and culture-specific psychological phenomena such as that identified in English by the word memory: they provide us with basic analytical tools without which cross-linguistic comparisons in this area would not be possible at all (cf. Palmer, Goddard and Lee eds. 2003, and especially Goddard 2003).

3. “Memory” as a cultural construct

Is “remembering” a human universal? And if so, then in what sense? Is it a universal human assumption that people remember things? Or is “remembering” a cultural construct, that is, a culture-specific interpretation imposed on human experience by some languages – notably, those which have words comparable to the English word remember. But don’t all languages have some words comparable to the English word remember?

Umberto Eco, for one, is convinced that “remembering” is indeed a human universal, and that all languages must have a word for it. Speaking of “elementary notions, common to everyone in the human race, that can be expressed in all languages” he writes (Eco 2000: 87–88): “Most certainly every man has a notion of what it means to perceive, to remember, to feel desire, fear, sadness or relief, pleasure or pain, and to emit sounds that express these sensations”.

Extensive cross-linguistic investigations conducted within the NSM framework have led to somewhat different conclusions. Thus, it is not “perceive” which is universal but see, hear and feel; not “feel desire” but feel and want; not “pleasure” and “pain” but feel good and feel bad.

The claim about the universality of “remember” is also not quite right. Whether or not remembering (in some sense) is a human universal, the concept of ‘remembering’ is most certainly neither elementary nor universal.

In Australia, one doesn’t have to look far to establish that many languages don’t have a word comparable to remember at all. It is enough to consult the most reliable dictionaries of Australian Aboriginal languages to see that in many of these languages, “remembering” as we know it is not distinguished lexically from mental activities such as “reflecting” or “thinking something over”. For example, in Cliff Goddard’s (1992) dictionary of Pitjantjatjar/Yankunytjatjara the word remember in the English word-finder leads us only to the expression pinangku kulin (lit. ‘think with [one’s] ears’), glossed as ‘reflect, think over, remember’. Similarly, in the Pintupi/Luritja Dictionary by K.C. and L.E. Hansen (1992), the word wurukulin is glossed as “v.worried; preoccupied; remembered the past; to be preoccupied about some possible happening”; and in

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R.M.W. Dixon's 1991 dictionary of Yidiny the word *binanga* is glossed as 'hear, listen to; think about, remember'. What these glosses (and the accompanying examples) suggest is that while the words in question can be used to translate the English word *remember*, they do not actually mean 'remember' but rather, something like 'think about something for some time' (without any obligatory reference to the past).

It might seem that denying the existence of a distinct concept of 'remember' in Australian languages is implying that they lack something essential and thus comes close to Hallpike's assertions about "primitive languages". In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. A language which would lack a concept of know or think would indeed be lacking something essential because these concepts could not be built out of any other, more elementary ones. On the other hand, 'remember' is a complex concept, which stands for a language-specific configuration of simpler concepts (including know and think). If a language has know and think, it has the conceptual and linguistic resources with which to build other, more complex, psychological concepts.

Australian languages, too, have complex psychological concepts for which English has no exact equivalents. The Pintupi concept of 'wurrkulinu' is a good case in point, as is also the Pintupi concept of *watilpa*, discussed in Myers (1979: 362). Nonetheless, these concepts, too, can be explained (explicated) in English on the basis of shared simple concepts, such as, above all, know and think. (See, e.g., the explications of *watilpa* in Wierzbicka (1992: 164).

To study the semantic field of "memory" across languages and cultures, we need workable analytical tools. Know and think are among such indispensable tools.

Turning now to my native Polish, and comparing it with English, I also find remarkable differences. It is true that the verb *remember* does seem to have an exact semantic equivalent in the Polish verb *pamiętać*, and memory, in the Polish noun *pamięć*. Nonetheless, many other words belonging to the same semantic and lexical field don't have exact equivalents in Polish, and indeed the whole model underlying this field appears to be significantly different.

Consider, for example, an English expression like *memories of childhood*. The closest Polish counterpart of this phrase would be *wspomnienia dzieciństwa*, but the two phrases, the English and the Polish one, do not mean the same. The English phrase implies that the memories in question "are there", as it were stored in a person's head. It thus implies something similar to the scientist's "engrams", that is, those "memory traces" (in the brain) that we have encountered in the passage from *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*. The Polish phrase (which is comparable to the French phrase *souvenirs d'enfance*) does not have such implications. Rather, it implies that certain images and experiences can be "brought back" by thinking — by something like a process of recollection. They are not retrieved from some mental archive where they have been stored but are as it were brought back from the past (by thinking).

This image of bringing something back from the past has its parallels in English sentences like *it's coming back to me* or indeed *it brings back memories (of childhood, etc).* But the fact remains that the meaning of a phrase like *memories of childhood* or *my earliest memory* cannot be rendered exactly in Polish. And conversely, a Polish phrase
like wspomnienia dzieciństwa or wspomnienia wojenne ("war memories") cannot be rendered exactly in English.

Similarly, one cannot accurately translate into Polish the English expressions I recall and as I recall, which imply a certain control over one's knowledge of the past, as one has experienced it. The closest functional counterpart of as I recall would be o ile pamiętam 'as far as I remember,' but that doesn't mean the same as I recall.

The most common Polish ways of speaking about something like "recalling" include przypominam sobie and przypомina mi się, which don't have exact equivalents in English. Anticipating further more detailed discussion of these expressions I will note that przypominam sobie, which appears to be similar in meaning to the French expression je me rapelle, implies that when I think about it, some knowledge (of something experienced in the past) "comes back to me". Przypomina mi się is an impersonal expression, comparable, from a syntactic point of view, to the English expression it occurs to me, but again, referring to something from a person's (experienced) past, something that is not under the person's "control". It refers to thoughts which as it were come back of their own accord; and not from some personal archive but "from the past".

The English expression memories to take away, too, conjures up the image of something stored in a person's head — in a kind of a mental archive to which this person has a key and over which they can exercise some control. The Polish word wspomnienia cannot be used in this way, because wspomnienia are the result of the process of wspominać (roughly, 'reminiscing'), that is, re-creating some aspects of the past by thinking about them rather than retrieving them from storage.

In the past, the words remembrance and recollection were used in English in ways closer to the Polish wspomnienia and wspominać. Indeed, as I will discuss more fully below, the verb remember could also be used in a more dynamic way in English, implying a mental process rather than storage. But the static image of storage, too, goes far back in the history of the English language. Some examples (from Stevenson 1958):

1. "Tis in my memory lock'd,
   And you yourself shall keep the key of it. (Shakespeare, Hamlet)
2. Yea, from the table of my memory
   I'll wipe away all trivial fond records. (Shakespeare, Hamlet)
3. Storehouse of the mind, garner of parts and fancies. (M.F. Tupper, "Of memory"; 19th century)
4. Long, long be my heart with such memories fill'd! (Thomas Moore, "Farewell"; 19th century)
5. And, when the stream
   Which overflowed the soul was passed away,
   A consciousness remained that it had left,
   Deposited upon the silent shore
   Of memory, images and precious thoughts
   That shall not die, and cannot be destroyed.
   (William Wordsworth, 18th-19th centuries).

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The key words in these examples are *locked, keep, records, storehouse, filled,* and *deposited:* they all suggest some things "kept" in a person's head, like mental possessions (often, "treasures"). They are "private" -- as if "owned" by the person who has experienced some events. The experiencer has privileged access to them -- other people don't. Of course other people can know (often better than I) what happened to me when I was a child; and they may remember it better than I can. Yet they don't have access to the perspective which I can have on those events, because these things are as it were part of my life: they are therefore not merely things that happened to me but things that I have experienced and which I can think of as part of my life.

Phrases like *memories of childhood,* which are common in contemporary English, are consistent with such imagery and phraseology. They appear to imply a model of human life which can be spelled out along the following lines:

**Someone's memories (of childhood, etc.)**

a. everyone knows:

b. a person lives for some time

c. during this time many things happen to this person

d. after these things have happened, this person can think about these things like this:

   "I know what these things were like
   because they happened to me"

e. a long time after these things have happened

   this person can think about them in the same way

   if this person wants to

f. other people can't think about these things in the same way

As this explication shows, in the English folk model "memories" are a kind of personal knowledge which a person can access at will. This knowledge is based on past experience. It is not always thought about, but it is, in principle, *available* for thinking about; potentially at least, it is at the person's disposal.

The concept of 'memories' is closely related to the concept of 'remembering.' Roughly speaking, one might say that one's *memories of childhood* represent what one remembers of one's childhood. There are, however, some significant differences between the two words.

First of all, *remember* does not imply "private ownership" (privileged access), as the word *memories* does. As already mentioned, other people may "remember" things that happened to me better than I can. Further, not everything that can be remembered can count as "a memory": For example, one can say: "I remember my PIN number", but not "I have a memory of my PIN number." *Remember* implies knowledge which has its source in personal experience, but it doesn't have to be knowledge of something that "happened to me": what happened to me is the *source* of the knowledge, not its content. In the case of *memories,* however, it is both the source and the content.

Furthermore, the verb *remember,* as it is currently used, implies also a possibility of loss: the personal knowledge based on one's own experience could have gotten
lost but has not; it is still “in the person’s head”. At the same time, remember does
not seem to emphasise the permanent availability of a given piece of knowledge.
If I “remember” something now then I can “retrieve” a certain piece of knowledge
now—there is no implication that I will be able to retrieve it at a later time. The word
memories, on the other hand, seems to refer to some pieces of experiential knowledge
stored in my mind in a way which makes it possible for me to retrieve them at different
times at will.

Taking all these points into account we can explicate remember (in its experiential
uses) in the following way:

I remember that song
a. I can think about this song like this: “I know what it is like”
 b. I can think about it like this now because I could think about it like this before
c. I could think about it like this before
   because at some time before, something happened to me: I heard it
d. someone can think that I can’t think about it like this anymore
e. it is not like this
f. I can think about it in the same way now

It goes without saying that what applies to hearing applies also to seeing and feel-
ing. Sentences like “I remember that feeling” or “I remember those flowers” are no less
experiential than “I remember that song”, and can be explicated along the same lines.
For example:

I remember that feeling
a. I can think about that feeling like this: “I know what it is like”
b. I can think about it like this now because I could think about it like this before
c. I could think about it like this before
   because at some time before something happened to me: I felt it
d. someone can think that I can’t think about it like this anymore
e. it is not like this
f. I can think about it in the same way now

In addition to “experiential” uses, remember has also “factual” uses. Here, too, some
current knowledge is based on past knowledge. In this case, however, the source of that
past knowledge remains unspecified: there is no implication that that knowledge was
based on personal experience. For example:

I remember why she did it.
a. I can think about it like this: “I know why she did it”
b. I can think about it like this now
   because I could think about it like this before
c. someone can think that I can’t think about it like this anymore
d. it is not like this
e. I can think about it in the same way now

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4. “Voluntary m

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Can computers "remember" anything? Presumably not (in ordinary language). The noun memory has developed a technical meaning which makes it applicable to computers, but the verb remember has not.

4. "Voluntary memory" and "involuntary memory"

In his memoir Heading South, Looking North – A bilingual journey, the Latin American writer Ariel Dorfman (1999: 117) speaks of his own "Proustian struggle to recapture the past". The phrase to recapture the past highlights an aspect of "remembering" that often gets lost sight of in the scientific literature which relies largely on computational metaphors. Computers have a "memory" but they don't struggle to recapture the past. Polish words like wspominać and wspomnienia, or the corresponding Russian words vospominat' and vospominanija, suggest a perspective closer to the Proustian one, and so did, to some extent, the English word remember in its older, dynamic sense. Contemporary English, however, does not focus on "recapturing the past". One word which could be mentioned in this context is recollections, which does suggest some effort to "re-collect" (gather again) some bits of the past. But the word recollections does not suggest the idea of knowing (again) what something was like – it seems to imply factual rather than "experiential" knowledge of the past.

Another perspective on "memory" which seems to be discouraged by the computational metaphors is that of the past spontaneously "coming back" to a person's mind. Proust (1987) comments explicitly on the difference between the "memoire volontaire, memoire d'intelligence" ("voluntary memory, the memory of intelligence"), which "gives information about the past without conserving anything of that past" ("renseignements qu'elle-donne sur le passe ne conservent rien de lui"; p.57) and involuntary memory, capable of awakening the past which is hidden outside the domain of the intelligence and which can "come back to live with us". In the recent Penguin translation (Davis 2003) this passage reads as follows:

I find the Celtic belief very reasonable, that the souls of those we have lost are held captive in some inferior creature, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate thing, effectively lost to us until the day, which for many never comes, when we happen to pass close to the tree, come into possession of the object that is their prison. Then they quiver, they call out to us, and as soon as we have recognised them, the spell is broken. Delivered by us, they have overcome death and they return to live with us.

It is the same with our past. It is a waste of effort for us to try to summon it, all the exertions of our intelligence are useless. The past is hidden outside the realm of our intelligence and beyond its reach, in some material object (in the sensation that this material object would give us) which we do not suspect. It depends on chance whether we encounter this object before we die, or do not encounter it.
Proust speaks sometimes of such involuntary memories using the untranslatable phrase *il me souvient* (as it were, ‘it remembers itself to me’), as well as expressions like *le souvenir m’est venu* and *le souvenir m’est apparu* (usually rendered in the English translations of Proust as “the memory came to me” or “the memory appeared”). While such expressions are not common in colloquial present-day French, the basic French verbs *se souvenir* and *se rappeler* (both of them reflexive) are less active and “controlled” than the English verb *recall*. (Of the two, *se rappeler* is closer to *recall* in so far as it, too, implies a single act and is restricted to facts.)

Similarly, the reflexive German verb *sich erinnern* is less active and implies less control over the situation than the English *recall*. In fact, in situations in which in English one might say “I don’t recall” in both French and German one would usually say, colloquially, the literary equivalent of “I don’t know any more”: *je ne sais plus* and *ich weiß nicht mehr*.

The involuntary aspect of the mental processes in question is highlighted even more than in French or German in languages like Polish or Russian, which use for this purpose a combination of a reflexive verb with an impersonal construction and a dative subject. (See Section 6.)

But in contemporary English, it is difficult to speak of “memory”, colloquially, in this way. The verb to *recall* implies a degree of control and initiative, and so do words like *recollections* and *reminiscences*. All these words seem closer in their implications to Proust’s “voluntary memory, memory of the intelligence” than to the idea of the past “coming back” as it were of its own accord—and not just as “information” but as sensory experience.

In a letter written in exile, the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva has written: ‘mine vspomnilas’ Moskva — sady’, ‘there came back to me Moscow — its gardens’. The word *vspomnilas* is a reflexive, impersonal form of the verb *vspomnit*, roughly, ‘remember’, but the implication of an involuntary, spontaneous mental event cannot really be rendered by means of the word *remember* (as it is used in contemporary English). The closest translation might be “I was reminded of Moscow — of its gardens.” But *remind* is a transitive verb, with a syntactic slot for a specifiable causer or cause (“X reminded me of Y”), “I was reminded of Y by X”). As a result, even a passive form like *I was reminded* implies a trigger. By contrast, the phrase *mine vspomnilas* has no such slot, and neither does the Polish phrase *przypomniała mi się*.

Tsvetaeva’s sentence suggests nostalgia. The “involuntary spontaneous” expressions of Polish and Russian readily lend themselves to such a “nostalgic” reading. English words like *recall* suggest a different perspective, more compatible with the metaphors of storage, records, and retrieval, and with a focus on resources, capabilities, control, learning and problem-solving.

5. “Remember” — the change in meaning

As mentioned earlier, the meaning of the word *remember* has changed, from a more processual to a more static one. In the earlier usage, *remember* was close to “think again about something th
one’s past experience were re-living) some
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about something that happened a long time ago”; it implied going over, in one’s mind, one’s past experiences. In the later usage, the focus is not on thinking about (and as it were re-living) some past experiences, but rather, on the capacity to retrieve some bits of knowledge from storage.

For example, when Thomas Fuller (17th/18th century) wrote: “That which is bitter to endure may be sweet to remember” (Stevenson 1958), he clearly didn’t mean the capacity to retrieve some past event but the actual process of thinking about it again. Fuller’s saying derives from Seneca’s words “Quae fuit durum pati, meminisse dulce est” (“What was difficult to bear is sweet to “remember””). As this quote from Seneca shows, the Latin verb meminisse referred, or could refer, to a mental process rather than a mental capacity. The same processual character of meminisse is clear in the following quote from Ovid: “Namque est meminisse voluptas” (“for it is a pleasure, too, to “remember””). There are many similar examples preserved in older English, by no means only in translations or paraphrases. For example (also from Stevenson 1958): “Sorrow remembered sweetens present joy” (Robert Pollock, early 19th century) and John Masefield (early 20th century):

Only stay quiet while my mind remembers
the beauty of fire from the beauty of embers.

The English noun remembrance, now archaic, was clearly based on the processual meaning of the verb remember. Two examples from Shakespeare:

a. Praising what is lost makes the remembrance dear.

b. When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
   I summon up remembrance of things past,
   I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
   And with old woes new wail my dear time’s waste.

This older, processual meaning of remember implied actually doing something in one’s mind rather than being able to do something, as in the current meaning. In contrast to many other European languages, modern English doesn’t seem to have a word which would correspond, even roughly, to the Latin word meminisse. A sentence like “it is sweet (or it is a pleasure) to remember these things now” does not sound quite right in contemporary English, and the idea behind it is difficult to express in a fully idiomatic way. The expression “to go over in one’s mind” may seem to come close but it doesn’t suggest any considerable distance in time, and it could refer to something that happened earlier on the same day.

In addition to the more processual, dynamic character of remember in the older meaning, it appears that that older meaning did not include any reference to the possibility of forgetting. The modern emphasis on being able to do something in one’s mind seems to be related to the assumption that, at some time in the future, one may not be able to do so any more. When, however, remember referred to the actual process of “thinking back” rather than to the capacity to “think back”, the alternative “can I” or
"can’t I" did not seem to arise. There is no reason, therefore, to include the component "someone can think that I can’t think about it like this anymore" in the explication of the older meaning of *remember*. This leads us to the following explication of that older meaning:

1. I remember (e.g. the beauty of fire)
   a. I’m thinking about something (Z) now
   b. I can think about it like this: “I know what it is like; it is like this”
   c. I can think about it like this now
      because I could think about it like this some time before
   d. I could think about it like this some time before
      because some time before something was happening to me (e.g. I was seeing Z)
   e. When I think about it now I can think about it in the same way
   f. I want to think about it in this way now

As this explication shows, the older meaning of *remember* included two “active” components (a. and f.), which are not present in the more recent meaning: “I’m thinking about it now” and “I want to think about it now”, that is, two components of deliberative thinking about the past. It also included a vivid “re-play” of some past experience (component b.): not only “I know what it is like”, but also “it is like this”, where “this” refers to something “seen in one’s mind’s eye”. At the same time, this explication shows that the older meaning of *remember* did not include the expectation of loss: someone can think that I can’t think about it like this anymore” and the reaffirmation of one’s control over the past knowledge: “it is not like this”.

The active, processual character of the verb *remember* in its older meaning makes it comparable to the modern verb *reminisce*, but the two are by no means identical in meaning. First of all, *reminisce* is a speak act verb, whereas *remember* was a mental verb: when one reminisces, one says something (if only to oneself), whereas *remembering* (in the older sense of the word) implied thinking rather than speaking. The very fact that (as pointed out to me by Cliff Goddard, p.c.) one can “reminisce with” someone else but not “remember with” someone else demonstrates the more public (spoken) character of the former and the more private (mental) character of the latter. Second, one cannot “reminisce songs (flowers)”, as one can (and could) “remember songs (flowers)”, one can only “reminisce about songs (flowers)” – a syntactic fact which highlights a difference in meaning. *Reminiscing about* something implies talking about something, and does not imply that one necessarily sees or hears this something in one’s mind (although one is very likely to do so).

The shift from *remembering* as “going over some past (remote) events in one’s mind” to *remembering* “as being able to retrieve accumulated knowledge” suggests a shift in cultural emphasis and cultural values – a shift from a focus on re-living, and perhaps savouring, one’s past experience to using that experience instrumentally.

The modern English verb *recall* may be another manifestation of that shift. Unlike the modern *remember*, *recall* is active, but it doesn’t suggest re-living (in one’s mind) one’s past experiences, as one has on word comparable to “control” one’s knowledge.

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6. The meaning

As mentioned earlier, fully equivalent, to lent, to *remember*: and expressions which *wpomnienia* or *pamięć* one.

6.1 Wspomnienia

As noted earlier, it to the English *rem* example, phrases like *nía rodziny* (“fami reminiscences” because reliving it in one’s n
one's past experience. Rather, it suggests a certain control over one's knowledge of the past, as one has once experienced it. Many other languages, including Polish, have no word comparable to recall — no word implying that, to some extent at least, one can "control" one's knowledge based on past experience.

In the age of computers, the tendency to view human "memory" instrumentally, as comparable to the "memory" of a computer, is no doubt more pronounced than ever, but the shift from the "art of remembrance" to the "capacity of memory" clearly started much earlier. Computers don't practise "remembrance" and don't dwell on the past. They don't have lived memories based on personal experience. They have storage space which can be used as the programmer wants to use it. (As The Oxford Companion to the Mind puts it, "in computer language the memory is an instrument in which is placed a store of whatever information is to be used for calculation"); p.455.)

One is tempted to speculate that in modern Anglo culture, the practice of "dwelling on the past" and re-living in thought past experiences, images and emotions has gradually given way, in some measure, to a more procedural attitude to knowledge based on experience. At any rate, this is what the semantic change in the field under discussion appears to suggest.

The notion of "memory" as it is used in contemporary psychological literature is consistent with this new attitude. For example, laboratory studies of "bilingual memory" often treat the "bilingual memory" as a repository of words from two languages. They often discuss the issue of how these words are accessed or retrieved, but seldom question the validity of the underlying model as such.

6. The meaning of some Polish words related to "memory"

As mentioned earlier, Polish does have a noun semantically close in meaning, if not fully equivalent, to memory: pamięć, and a verb close in meaning, if not fully equivalent, to remember: pamiętać. In addition, however, it has some culturally salient words and expressions which have no counterparts in English. Apart from przypominać sobie and przypomina mi się, which were mentioned earlier, they include wspomnienia, wspominać, pamiętać, pamiątki, pamiętnik, and zapomnienie, which I will now discuss one by one.

6.1 Wspomnienia

As noted earlier, in some ways the Polish word wspomnienia can be compared to the English reminiscences; in other ways, however, it is closer to memories. For example, phrases like wspomnienia dzieciństwa ("childhood memories") or wspomnienia rodzinné ("family memories") could not be adequately translated into English as reminiscences because reminiscences imply talking about a past experience rather than reliving it in one's mind. Wspomnienia, like memories, implies something that one has
lived through, and it suggests feelings and images as much as thoughts. In contrast to memories, however, it doesn’t imply “storage” and “retrieval”.

The verb wspominać (always imperfective) is glossed in Polish-English dictionaries as remember, recall, or reminisce, but it differs in meaning from all these words. It is an imperfective verb which refers to an on-going mental activity of thinking (for some time) about some events from the remote past, and re-living them in one’s mind. It is not a verb of ability (like remember, in its current meaning), it is not a verb of speech (like reminisce), and it is not a verb referring to a single mental act of “recall” (like recall). Above all, wspominać – like memories – refers to something that is seen as a part of one’s life. Loosely, it could even be glossed as “to engage in the activity of bringing some memories to the surface of one’s consciousness”. But there is no word for memories in Polish and the concept of ‘wspominać’ does not include the concept of ‘memories’ but rather reflects an alternative way of thinking about things that have happened earlier on in one’s life. It is a concept which implies that by thinking about one’s past life one can bring some things to light that were hidden before; and these things are not “memories” (stored in the mind) but as it were past events themselves. To put it another way, the activity of “wspominać” seems to be able to create new knowledge (new awareness), rather than merely activate knowledge previously stored in the mind. Above all, memories is something that one “has”, whereas wspomnienia is something that one “does” – the usual phrase is oddawać się wspomnieniom, literally, “to give oneself to wspomnienia”; that is, “to give oneself to the activity of wspominać”. Thus, wspominać implies a form of life (in Wittgenstein’s sense) which is not lexically recognised in English and which is evidently not as salient in contemporary Anglo culture as it is in Polish culture.

The salience of this “form of life” in Polish culture is also reflected in the noun wspomnienia (plural), which often features in the titles of literary works and which can translate the English word memoirs, as well as memories. Unlike memoirs, however, wspomnienia is a colloquial, homely word, often used in the collocation wspomnienia rodzinnego ‘family memories/memoirs’. Anybody who can write at all could write their “wspomnienia rodzinnego”, and those who can’t write could also snuć (“weave”, “spin”) wspomnienia – either orally or simply in their heads.

Both the verb wspominać and the noun wspomnienia imply an interest in dwelling in thought on the past that one has lived through. Often, this past is not a purely private past but has a historical dimension and refers to experiences which were once shared by many people and which can now be of interest to many people. Presumably for this reason, the noun wspomnienia can also translate the English word memoirs, which inherently implies a potential public interest (and a written form). At the same time, however, it also translates the English word memories, which is inherently private (and mental, rather than either oral or written).

The literary genre of “wspomnienia” is highly popular in Poland, as reflected in the high frequency of this word in the titles of various publications, and also, in the existence of the derived adjective wspomnieniowy(-a) and of the common collocation literatura wspomnieniowa; and one is tempted to speculate that both the popularity of this genre and the history of partition uprisings, exile, ma- vation of national r. Narodowej” (“the 1r both private and p among many, and After Such Knowledge as “the intense cult

Needless to say, equivalent in English. In fact, the Geri fairly close in mean different. For exam one meaning “or is seldom used to in literary genre as the wspominać, namely wspomnieniowy.

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d. after these
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e. a long time
f. this person

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h. X is doing
i. X wants to
j. when X th X thinks s
k. when X th X feels son

2. Langenscheidt’s (one meaning of Brin.
tionen bewahrt wurde word wspomnieniec co
this genre and the very meaning of the word reflect some aspects of Polish history—a
history of partitions, deprivation of national independence, threat to national identity,
uprisings, exile, mass deportations, forced emigration, and throughout all that, a cul-
tivation of national memory. The name of the present-day institution “Instytut Pamięci
Narodowej” (“the Institute of National Memory”), which collects and sieves through
both private and public documents of the past, is just one characteristic example,
among many, and a good illustration of what the writer Eva Hoffman, the author of
After Such Knowledge—Memory, history and the legacy of the Holocaust (2004: 41), describes
as “the intense cult of memory in that country [Poland]”.

Needless to say, the fact that the Polish word wspomnienia has no exact semantic
equivalent in English doesn’t establish that the concept encoded in it is unique to Pol-
ish. In fact, the German word Erinnerungen and the Russian word vospominanija come
fairly close in meaning to wspomnienia. Yet the semantic field as a whole is in each case
different. For example, German doesn’t have a verb equivalent to wspominać that is,
one meaning “to engage for some time in Erinnerungen”, and the noun Erinnerungen
is seldom used to refer to published recollections or memoirs: it is not an established
literary genre as the Polish wspomnienia is.2 Russian does have a verb comparable to
wspominać, namely vospominat’, but it does not have an adjective corresponding to
wspomnieniowy.

So here is a tentative explication of wspomnienia:

wspomnienia (cf. wspominać)
  a. everyone knows:
  b. a person lives for some time
  c. during this time many things happen to this person
  d. after these things happened this person can think about these things like this:
     “I know what these things were like
     because they happened to me”
  e. a long time after these things happened
     this person can think about some of these things in the same way
  f. other people can’t think about these things in the same way
  g. X is thinking about some things in this way now
  h. X is doing it because X wants to do it
  i. X wants to do it for some time
  j. when X thinks about these things
     X thinks about some of these things like this; “it was like this”
  k. when X thinks about these things in this way
     X feels something because of this

2. Langenscheidt’s (1993) standard German dictionary glosses both Gedächtnis ‘memory’ and
   one meaning of Erinnerung (in the singular) as “eine Art Speicher im Gehirn, in dem Infor-
   mationen bewahrt werden”, “a kind of storage in the brain, where information is kept”. The Polish
   word wspomnienie could never be used in a similar sense.
The last five components of this explication have been highlighted because they show most clearly the differences between wspomnienia and memories. Components (g), (h), and (i) show that wspomnienia is dynamic, voluntary, and refers to an activity; (j) shows that the experience is being re-lived in one's mind, and (k), that the thoughts and images are accompanied by some feelings.

6.2 Pamiątka (lit. 'little memory')

Another Polish word which deserves attention in the present context is pamiątka (formally, a diminutive of pamięć memory), glossed in the Kościuszko Polish-English Dictionary (1967) as "souvenir; token, Keepsake, memento", and in the phrase pamiątki przeszłości glossed as 'relics of the past'. None of these glosses do justice to the common Polish expression pamiątki rodzinné, which might be better approximated as 'family heirlooms'. Unlike heirlooms, however, pamiątki rodzinné are above all things of great sentimental value, and may have no material value whatsoever. They may consist of old letters, photos, notes, or drawings, as well as wedding rings or other items of jewellery.

The concept of pamiątki rodzinné, which has no equivalent in, for example, English, German, French or Russian, has a great salience in Polish culture. Again, the salience of this concept in Polish culture will be understandable to anyone familiar with Poland's history; and so will be the salience of the concept of pamiątka in general. For example, during World War II Warsaw was reduced to rubble by the Germans, with ninety percent of its buildings in ruins, and after the war it was rebuilt and its historic Old Town meticulously reconstructed. During the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, 200,000 inhabitants were killed, and those who were forced to leave the burning city left, in most cases, with little more than their family photos and other "pamiątki".

Arguably, the word pamiątka reflects historical experiences of this kind and implies an attitude of treasuring the past and wanting to keep it firmly in one's memory. It also seems to suggest that the continuity material links betw.

The most frequent pamiątki), pamiątki pamiątki)

As these observations the Anglo/English tourism, and the irre. Pamiątka has to do freedom of movement: life, loss, and destr. ment, whereas pan dimensions link pe, not speak of keepsakes przeszłości, 'pamiąt' neither keepsake no value, as pamiątka i

The importance, and wide ra. referring to official or tablica pamiątka the adjectives mem. referring to private pierscionesk (ring) - grandmother - is n. The basic syntax is, 'pamiątka after ([ which has remains it is someone’s pan
tion belongs has ha object reminds that the pamiątka, and s to it but because it of this key Polish w

pamiątka
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b. "I have th.  
c. I have had 
d. I want to l  
e. a long tim
The context is pamiątka as Polish-English: the phrase pamiątka stice to the common oximated as 'family of all things of great may consist of old items of jewellery. For example, English, again, the salience of miliar with Poland's general. For example, uns, with ninety pert historic Old Town 200 000 inhabitants t, in most cases, with his kind and implies me's memory. It also pared with the Polish a of North-Easterner Pap key concept. "Memori t departed loved ones." (Memel, memory) are absent, departed, or a as a light or small or remind the recipient could say, such objects mory." (p.125). ere are also differences. e Polish 'pamiątka,' on te generally, with what gs and other historical seems to suggest an appreciation that the framework of one's life can be destroyed, that the continuity of this framework cannot be taken for granted, and that since the material links between the present and the past are likely to be fragile and limited, they should be an object of special care and devotion (almost veneration, like relics). The most frequent collocations with 'pamiątka' include pamiątki rodzimne ('family pamiątki'), pamiątki przeszłości ('pamiątki of the past'), and pamiątki narodowe ('national pamiątki').

As these observations indicate, the Polish concept of 'pamiątka' is very different from the Anglo/English concept of 'souvenir,' with its connotations of travel, sight-seeing, tourism, and the implied wish to remember some distant places which one has visited. Pamiątka has to do, primarily, with history, souvenir with geography. Souvenir evokes freedom of movement and facility of travel, whereas pamiątka evokes transience of life, loss, and destructibility of the past. Souvenir brings to mind, primarily, enjoyment, whereas pamiątka suggests, above all, nostalgia and devotion. Some of these dimensions link pamiątka more closely with keepsake and memento, but one could not speak of keepsakes of the past or mementos of the past, as one speaks of pamiątki przeszłości, 'pamiątki of the past', or pamiątki narodowe, 'national pamiątki'. Above all, neither keepsake nor memento have the implications of something of great emotional value, as pamiątka inherently has.

The importance of the concept of 'pamiątka' in Polish culture is reflected in the existence, and wide range of use, of the derived adjective pamiątkowy. While collocations referring to official commemorative affairs such as księga pamiątkowa ('visitors' book') or tablica pamiątkowa ('memorial plaque') can sometimes be rendered in English with the adjectives memorial or commemorative, common collocations with pamiątkowy referring to private "relics" cannot be glossed in this way. For example, a pamiątkowy pierścionek (ring) - most likely, a ring which has once belonged to someone like one's grandmother - is not a "memorial ring" or a "commemorative ring".

The basic syntactic frame for the word (noun) pamiątka is pamiątka po (kims), that is, 'pamiątka after (someone)'. As this frame suggests, pamiątka is thought of as a thing which has remained after a person. At the same time, the word is inherently relational: it is someone's pamiątka after someone else. The person to whom the object in question belongs has had it for a long time and wants to have it for a long time, because this object reminds them of the other person. The other person is very dear to the owner of the pamiątka, and so is the pamiątka itself - not because of any material value attached to it but because it is "like a part" of the other person. So here is an NSM explication of this key Polish word:

- **pamiątka**
  - someone (X) thinks about this thing like this:
  - "I have this thing now"
  - I have had this thing for a long time before
  - I want to have this thing for a long time after
  - a long time ago this thing was like a part of another person
f. I thought about this person a long time before

g. I want to think about this person a long time after

h. this person is like a part of me

i. when I think about this person I feel something good

j. when I see this thing I can think about this person

k. because of this when I think about this thing I feel something good"

As this explication shows, a pamiętka is an object which links the present with the past, and which enables the past to live on in people’s thoughts and emotions. Normally, it is a link between people: a person and this person’s parents, grandparents, great grandparents, or other dead or lost relatives or friends whom this person cannot see now but who are still “like a part of this person”. The owner of the pamiętka cherishes it because it once was like a part of a person whom they cherish and identify with, and about whom they want to continue to think.

The word pamiętka can be extended to beloved places, and also to objects linking generations rather than individuals. In particular, the plural phrases pamiętki rodzinie ‘family pamiętki’ and pamiętki narodowe ‘national pamiętki’ imply such links between groups of people rather than individuals. Nonetheless, the prototype is, I think, the one spelled out in the proposed explication.

Pamiętka can also be used to refer to a new object, such as a special photo made to commemorate a child’s first communion, which would often bear the inscription “Pamiętka Pierwszej Komunii Świętej” the pamiętka of the first holy communion. In this case, the idea is that the object in question will become a “pamiętka” in the future. The phrase na pamiętke ‘to be a pamiętka of’ is often used in this way (for example, in dedications, to commemorate special events, in particular, times spent together. But a book or a photo given someone “na pamiętkę” (as a memento) is not necessarily thought of as a “pamiętka”. Pamiętka as a fully inflected noun has a specific meaning – the one spelled out in the proposed explication.

I will illustrate the significance of “pamiętki” in Polish culture with one example – a story concerning the Polish poet Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński and a little prayer book given to him in his childhood by his mother, “na pamiętke jego pierwszej komunii”, that is, in memory of his first communion. As reported recently by the poet’s daughter, it was a gift which Gałczyński (not a Christian)

... kept with him throughout his life, which traveled with him through all his successive abodes in so many different cities, which survived the war together with him from Anin, near Warsaw, via the Polish eastern border post at Hankiewicz, through Kozielsk [a Soviet camp where thousands of Polish officers were murdered by the NKVD – A.W.], through German Stalags, penal battalions, field hospitals, DP camps, post-war migrations of the displaced across Holland, Belgium, France, through countless places and situations, through parties and moments of solitude, despondency and timid, incipient hope. That small children’s prayer book accompanied him everywhere. Unlike

so many other books he has kept moving poem. Kira
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6.3 Pamiętnik

Another Polish word with many meanings. One of its meanings is "context of school life. Every day had a special

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The other meaning has another word (from dziecięce ‘day’) tends to include events recorded, ter

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Consider, for ex: Sienkiewicz’s ‘Z p: Poznań teacher’. As

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so many other objects which he also regarded as important, he never lost or forgot about it. That most treasured of all his possessions returned all the way with him to his beloved native-land.

The little book is for Galczyński a priceless "pamiątka"—and so is his mother’s hairpin, which he has kept all his life among this book’s pages, and to which he devoted a moving poem. Kira Galczyńska explicitly comments on the typicality of her father’s veneration of his "pamiątka"—relics—"po mamie" (literally ‘after mother’):

This is the first time I have related this story. Up till now I had lacked the courage to make it generally known. But of course I realise that for the current generation of Galczyński’s readers, for all those who see his poem as being about their mother, the story of the hairpin rescued from all the lesser and greater tempests, the cataclysms and migrations of displaced populations that the twentieth century brought in such abundance, ascends to the status of a national and not just a poetic symbol.

6.3 Pamiętnik

Another Polish word derived from pamięć ‘memory’ is pamiętnik. The word has two meanings. One of these meanings is particularly salient in (but not restricted to) the context of school life. As I recall from my own school days, in my school (a girls’ school) every girl had a special pamiętnik (decorative bound notebook) for her classmates to write or draw something in, “for memory” (see also Hoffman 1989:78). The most common introductory formulae in such inscriptions were ku pamięci, ‘for memory’ and na pamiątkę to be a pamiątka.

The other meaning of pamiętnik is usually rendered in English as diary. But Polish has another word for diary – dziennik, and it draws a distinction between dziennik (from dzień ‘day’) and a pamiętnik (from pamięć ‘memory’). A dziennik, like a diary, tends to include events and experiences which seem to be of interest at the time. A pamiętnik, on the other hand, which can also be written contemporaneously with the events recorded, tends to select events and experiences which one wants to remember later and which are seen, at the time of writing, as of more than passing interest. A pamiętnik, therefore, is more selective, and more reflexive, than a diary. A dziennik (‘diary’) aims at capturing the raw experience, whereas a pamiętnik sieves through the experience and aims at recording what can be seen as memorable. Consequently, a dziennik tends to be also more private than a pamiętnik: what is seen as memorable is also more likely to be of interest to other people.

Consider, for example, a short story from the canon of Polish literature: Henryk Sienkiewicz’s “Z pamiętnika poznanskiego nauczyciela”, ‘From the pamiętnik of a Poznań teacher’. As the title of this story suggests, the narrator’s notes are presented not as a record of purely private experiences but rather as a source of insight into the life of a Poznań teacher, and into the life of the Poznań region of Poland at the
time (in an epoch when this region was under German rule and subjected to heavy germanisation policies). Similarly, Miron Białoszewski’s (1970) “Pamiętnik z Powstania Warszawskiego,” a ‘Pamietnik of the Warsaw Uprising’, assumes that any authentic record of one’s experiences from that time will be of wide interest.

This potential for public interest, linked with any pamiętnik, becomes explicit in the case of pamiętniki (the plural form), a word usually translated as memoirs but in fact much closer in meaning to pamiętnik. The word pamiętniki implies that one has lived, in one’s own estimation, in interesting times or circumstances, and that one is trying to record some events which one has witnessed and which can be of more general interest. Memoirs are written post hoc, from memory, and so are pamiętniki (in contrast to pamiętnik in the singular). In addition, the word memoirs implies that the author is a public figure, whose recollections are likely to be of public interest. The word pamiętniki does not seem to require that: anyone who has lived a reasonably long and eventful life could write their pamiętniki, though probably not their memoirs. In Polish literature, the most popular pamiętniki were written by soldiers-adventurers (from the gentry), and the great century of pamiętnikarze (writers of pamiętniki) and pamiętnikarstwo (pamiętniki-writing) was the seventeenth century, a century replete with all kinds of ventures and adventures. More recently, as noted by Miłosz (1969:427), Polish sociologists have gathered “Pamiętniki emigrantów” (memoirs of Polish workers in France and Latin America) and “Pamiętniki chłopów” (memoirs of peasants).

In more recent times, however, there has arisen another genre no less (and perhaps even more) popular than pamiętniki: wspomnienia. As mentioned earlier, when it is used as a title, the word wspomnienia is also translated into English as memoirs. But the word wspomnienia implies an emphasis on personal experience and on re-living the past, rather than on any narration of “interesting” events (that one has witnessed) as the word pamiętniki does.

6.4 Zapomnienie

Another important Polish word is zapomnienie – roughly, ‘oblivion’, but unlike oblivion, a fully colloquial word with a wide range of use. According to the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1991), oblivion means ‘the state of having been forgotten or of no longer being considered important’. By contrast, zapomnienie has nothing to do with having once been considered important. It can refer to anything and anyone that has been forgotten and, in the speaker’s view, should not have been forgotten. A typical example is “Żył w nędzy i zapomnieniu” (SJP): ‘he lived in great poverty and ‘forgetfulness’. One couldn’t say in English: ‘he lived in oblivion’.

In a famous poem by Galczyński the poet enumerates all the things about his wife and his life with her that he would like to “rescue from forgottenness” (ocalić od zapomnienia). These things include her hands, the snow in her hair, and the “glow of our lamp” – not the kind of thing worthy of the English word oblivion.

Apart from ocalić ‘to live forgotten’, there is another past participle zapomniany as it was reproached to the poet in question that speaking, sadness at being, sadly and worse.

The opposite of interest, as its range Kira Galczyńska (2002) uses the word我没忘 “moja niezapomniana” (which can be used) people (to unforgotten). It is interesting to look at words zapomnienie: some specific aspect of the meanings of spe-

6.5 Polish “mem

Needless to say, I do speak English, but rather, of English “memory” culturally significant different perspective. The presence of the meaning of an interest in the word pamiętka (an inexpressible, inexplicable relationship) implies that it can be used as a noun that can refer to past events together, all these things of memory, cult of” in this context takes.
Apart from ocalić od zapomnienia 'to rescue from oblivion', and żyć w zapomnieniu 'to live forgotten', the rich phraseology of zapomnienie includes pójść w zapomnienie 'to go into forgetfulness', and wydobyć z zapomnienia 'to bring out of forgottenness'. The past participle zapomniany 'forgotten' is also a common Polish word, whose meaning is not rendered accurately by the English forgotten. Zapomniany implies sadness and as it were reproach. For example, zapomniany poeta 'a forgotten poet' implies that the poet in question should not have been forgotten. The same component of, roughly speaking, sadness and reproach is present in the noun zapomnienie 'the state of having been, sadly and wrongly, forgotten'.

The opposite of zapomniany, niezapomniany (where nie- means 'not'), is also of interest, as its range of use is wider than that of the English unforgettable. For example, Kira Gąskowska (2003: 123), in her memoir quoted earlier, writes about her mother as "moja niezapomniana matka", 'my impossible-to-forget mother'. In English, unforgettable can be used about events and experiences, but normally not about beloved people ('my unforgettable mother').

It is interesting to note that Russian has no (colloquial) counterparts of the Polish words zapomnienie and zapomniany. This is another indication that these words reflect some specific aspects of Polish culture (and history) — the same which is reflected in the meanings of specifically Polish words like paniątka and pamiętnik and expressions like literatura wspomnieniowa.

6.5 Polish “memory words” — an overview

Needless to say, I do not claim that Polish has more words in the area of memory than English, but rather, that most Polish words in this area do not match the meanings of English “memory words”. I have also suggested that the differences in question are culturally significant, as they appear to reflect different attitudes to the past, and also, different perspectives on one's own mental life.

The presence of the impersonal expression przypomina mi się ('it comes back to me') and the absence of an active verb like recall, appear to imply a view of “memory” as less subject to one's control and more open to spontaneous, involuntary, inexplicable processes and events than that reflected in contemporary English. The presence of the imperfective verb wspominać and the noun wspomnienie implies an interest in dwelling on the past and re-living the past. The presence of the word paniątka (plural paniątki) implies an attitude of treasuring the past (the link with which is always under threat and can be lost). The presence of the word pamiętnik implies an interest in preserving a record of the present time for the future, so that it can be remembered later; and the presence of the colloquial word zapomnienie reflects the value placed on remembering and cherishing the past. Taken together, all these facts corroborate Eva Hoffman's observation about "the intense memory, cult of" in Poland and throw light on some of the most salient forms that this cult takes.
7. Conclusion

When one reads statements like Umberto Eco's: "Most certainly every man has a notion of what it means (...) to remember" one is inclined, on intuitive grounds, to agree. When one considers, however, how complex the concept of 'remembering' really is (that is, the concept encoded in the English word *remember*), the natural inclination to agree with Eco must weaken. On the basis of empirical research, we can say that most certainly, every man (and every woman) has a notion of what it means to think and to know – but we don't have any grounds for affirming that they all have a notion of what it means to remember. On the contrary, linguistic evidence indicates that while 'think' and 'know' are indeed universal human concepts, 'remember' is not. Further, when one looks at the closest counterparts of the English word *remember* (and its close relatives) in other languages, one realises that the semantic fields to which these words belong can be structured very differently. When one considers further that the meaning of the word *remember* has changed over the last century or two, one will be even more careful not to absolutise the concept encoded in its current meaning as an indispensable human universal.

This is not to say that there are no human universals in the area which can be linked with the English words *remember* and *memory*. Rather, our preliminary conclusion must be that if there are some human universals in this area they remain to be identified. To try to identify them in terms of language-specific English words like *remember*, *remind*, *memory*, or *mind* would defeat the purpose. One cannot capture any human universals in terms of culture-specific English concepts, but only in terms of universal, that is, shared, concepts like *someone*, *know*, *think*, *happen*, *before*, *after*, etc.

Of course it makes sense to say that (apart from illness etc.) all people remember, as all people think, feel, want and know. We cannot say, however, that they all have a notion of what it means to remember. People think about life, other people, and themselves in many different ways; and no ways of thinking encoded in contemporary English should be assumed, without investigation, to represent ways which must be familiar to all people (see Wierzbicka 2006). What applies to the ways of thinking encoded in key English words like *mind*, *emotion*, or *self* applies also to the English words *memory* and *remember*. The fact that the word *memory* has become an important technical word in modern science and technology should not mislead us in this respect. In the end, we need to bear in mind that the concept of 'science' itself is a cultural artefact of the English language. We must remember that – and at the same time, continue to search for genuine human universals.

References

Chapter 2. Is "remember" a universal human concept?


