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Semantic Primes

and Universal Grammar

Empirical evidence from the Romance languages

Edited by

Bert Peeters
University of Tasmania

Volume 81

Semantic Primes and Universal Grammar:
Empirical evidence from the Romance languages
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List of abbreviations

1	first person	LOC	locative
2	second person	MASC	masculine
3	third person	NEG	negative marker
ACC	accusative	NOML	nominalizer
ART	article	OBL	oblique pronominal
AUX	auxiliary	PART	partitive
CLIT	clitic	PAST	past
COMP	complementizer	PCOMP	passé composé
COND	conditional	PL	plural
DIM	diminutive	PPART	past participle
ERG	ergative	PEROS	passato prossimo
FEM	feminine	PREP	preposition
FUT	future	PRES	present
GER	gerund	PRET	preterite
GIV	given, presupposed or thematic information	REFL	reflexive
IMPF	imperfect	REL	relative pronoun
INF	infinitive	SPEC	specific
LG	ligature	SG	singular
		SIV	subjunctive

Preface

Anna Wierzbicka
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Twelve years after *Semantic and Lexical Universals* (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994), ten years after *Semantics: Primes and Universals* (Wierzbicka 1996), and four years after *Meaning and Universal Grammar* (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002), *Semantic Primes and Universal Grammar* (this volume) brings us another step closer to the realization of the aims of a research program which started more than thirty years ago, with the publication of *Semantic Primitives* (Wierzbicka 1972). Unlike its predecessors, though, it focuses on a group of typologically closely related languages, viz. the most important languages in the Romance group (French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian). This is a first in the history of what is now known as the Natural Semantic Metalinguage (NSM) approach, and more will be said about it later. To begin with, let us briefly recall the approach's main tenets and achievements, without getting lost in technicalities (these will be addressed in Chapter 1).

The NSM semantic theory developed over the last three and a half decades on the basis of a large number of cross-linguistic investigations has made it possible to make a distinction between genuine lexical and grammatical universals, on the one hand, and spurious ones, on the other hand, and also to establish, on an empirical basis, that some universals are indeed genuine. Results to date strongly support the original hypothesis that all languages share a universal core, both in their lexicon and in their grammar: a core which constitutes the bedrock of human understanding, communication, and translation. This shared core is like a mini-language, which can be used as a culturally neutral semantic metalinguage for the description of all languages, for the study of the cultural diversity as well as the psychological unity of humankind, and also for applied purposes, in education and cross-cultural communication. Let us look at each of these claims in turn.

Compilers of bilingual dictionaries know only too well that words from different languages usually do not match in meaning. For example, there are many English words which have no semantic equivalents in French, and vice versa. If this is the case for any *two* languages, the idea that, polysensy apart, some words could

be found which have exact semantic equivalents in *all* languages may seem completely fantastic. Yet, this is precisely what emerges from extensive empirical study, over more than three decades, of a number of diverse languages: viz., that words (or word-like elements) which have exact semantic equivalents in all languages (at least those that have now been studied from this point of view) do exist. A list of such words or word-like elements with exact semantic equivalents in all languages – so-called “semantic (or conceptual) primes” – has been drawn up, largely by trial and error, and continues to be tested against further languages. As pointed out before, the present volume is one more step in that direction.

In its current form, the list of primes includes some sixty-five elements, which can be organized in a table in some sense analogous to Mendeleev’s table of elements in chemistry (cf. D’Andrade 2001; Goddard in press). It is not claimed that this list – divided into broad thematic groups – is absolutely final but it is probably pretty close to final. While it has undergone many revisions in the past, these revisions were not random but rather can be seen as successive approximations to the goal – a goal which does not recede further and further as one seeks to approach it but rather comes more and more clearly into view. The elements in the list constitute the conceptual building blocks out of which all complex human ideas are constructed. Different cultures can produce different meaning systems, with different configurations of the same elementary building blocks; but the building blocks themselves are, in all cases, given to begin with. In the language of seventeenth-century philosophers like Descartes and Leibniz, these building blocks – or “simple ideas” – are “innate”, and in the language of modern science they are “hard-wired” and constitute part of the human genetic endowment. The “innateness” or “hard-wiredness” of the matching human concepts is of course only a hypothesis. But the universality of the elements themselves, emerging from empirical cross-linguistic investigations, gives this hypothesis a great deal of support.

In the NSM framework, meaning and grammar are seen as inseparable. For the sake of brevity and convenience, the sixty-odd semantic primes can be described as lexical, but in fact their true nature is lexico-grammatical. In every language, each element has its own lexical (phonological) embodiment (and, in many cases, several such embodiments, i.e. lexical variants or “allolexes”); and at the same time, each element has its own set of grammatical (combinatorial) properties. The actual configurations lexically, phraseologically or grammatically encoded in different languages are language-specific, but the rules of combination are the same in all languages, and it is possible to enumerate, for each prime, all its combinatorial possibilities. Thus, each conceptual prime has its own conceptual grammar, and this grammar is as universal as the prime itself. For instance, in all languages the prime *I* can be combined with the prime *CAN*, the prime *CAN* with the prime *NOT*, and the prime *MOVE* with the prime *CAN* and with the prime *SOMETHING*,

to form sentences such as ‘I can’t move’ and ‘this thing is moving’. The combined grammatical properties of all the primes constitute a genuine universal grammar: the primes themselves, together with their combinatorial properties, form a system in which – in Saussure’s famous phrase (unless it was Meillet’s; cf. Peeters 1990) – “tout se tient” (everything hangs together). This system constitutes the indivisible conceptual core of all human languages. The proposed model of universal grammar, i.e. the inherent syntactic properties of all universal semantic primes, is described in detail in Goddard & Wierzbicka (2002). It is a return to the time-honored tradition of universal grammar, in which the fundamentals of grammar were seen as arising from fundamentals of human thought, shared by all people and by all languages; a view largely overshadowed in the Chomskyan era by the Chomskyan structure-based conception of universal grammar, in which meaning played no real part. There is however one important difference between traditional universal grammar and the universal grammar of the NSM approach, viz. detailed and rigorous analysis of natural languages. After more than thirty years of semantic research inaugurated in the early nineteen seventies with the publication of Wierzbicka (1972), revitalised by Cliff Goddard’s ideas in the nineteen eighties (cf. e.g. Goddard 1989), and in the last two decades vigorously pursued in numerous publications by a growing number of scholars, it has become possible to articulate a detailed and concrete account of exactly what the unity of all grammars consists in: that is, to delineate where the line runs between what is constant and what is variable, what is essential and what is “accidental”, what is universal and what is language-specific.

Having a set of universal primes, lexically embodied in every language, as well as a universal grammar governing the combination of these primes, is tantamount to having a universal mini-language, or rather a set of universal mini-languages which are matching and fully intertranslatable. Each of these languages constitutes a “natural semantic metalanguage” or an “NSM”, suitable for explaining all complex meanings within a particular language to speakers of that language, and also effective as a bridge to the meanings expressed by people in other languages and other cultures. These mini-languages can be called the English NSM, the French NSM, the Malay NSM, and so on, provided we bear in mind that they are isomorphic and constitute, in effect, different variants of one language-independent conceptual system – the universal human “lingua mentalis” (cf. Wierzbicka 1980). The English list of primes is a convenient medium for talking about genuine lexical universals and their universal combinatorial properties at international fora, but it is only a matter of convenience. The whole point is that equivalent lists can be drawn for all other languages, and that so-called canonical sentences (cf. Goddard & Peeters this volume) for testing their translational equivalence can be readily constructed in any language whatsoever.

This, then, is what is meant by empirical substantive universals – elements like *SOMEONE* and *SOMETHING*, *GOOD* and *BAD*, which can be transferred into any language whatsoever, and not just as isolated elements but within the context of particular sentences. If these sentences respect the combinatorial properties of the primes, then they can match exactly in meaning across all languages and be used in semantic explications constructed in any NSM. An explication formulated in English does not depend on the English lexicon or on English grammar, but can be readily transferred into any other language. Here is an example – a (simplified) explication of the German emotion term *Schadenfreude*, couched in universal human concepts and universal syntax, in an English, a French and a German version:

X felt *Schadenfreude* =

- (a) X thought like this about someone else:
- (b) « some good things happened to this person before
- (c) this person felt something good because of this
- (d) this person thought: this is good
- (e) now something bad happened to this person
- (f) this person feels something bad because of this
- (g) I think: this is good »
- (h) when X thought like this X felt something good because of this

X a ressenti de la *schadenfreude* =

- (a) X a pensé comme ça de quelqu'un d'autre :
- (b) « il y a des choses bien qui sont arrivées à cette personne avant
- (c) cette personne a senti quelque chose de bien à cause de cela
- (d) cette personne a pensé : cela est bien
- (e) maintenant, quelque chose de mal est arrivé à cette personne
- (f) cette personne sent quelque chose de mal à cause de cela
- (g) je pense : cela est bien »
- (h) quand X a pensé comme ça, X a senti quelque chose de bien à cause de cela

X fühlte Schadenfreude =

- (a) X dachte so über jemand anders:
- (b) « vorher sind dieser Person manche gute Dinge passiert
- (c) diese Person fühlte deswegen etwas Gutes
- (d) diese Person dachte: das ist gut
- (e) jetzt ist dieser Person etwas Schlechtes passiert
- (f) diese Person fühlt deswegen etwas Schlechtes
- (g) ich denke: das ist gut »
- (h) als X so dachte fühlte X deswegen etwas Gutes

Thanks to the English and the French explications, we can actually explain the meaning of the word *Schadenfreude* to speakers of English and French. Moreover, since these explications can be transferred directly into any other NSM, we can similarly explain the meaning of this word to speakers of any other language. The German version can be seen as reflecting what speakers of German mean by the word *Schadenfreude*, and the proposed explication can be tested against native speakers' intuitions. Such matching explications, linking the speaker's meaning with the understanding of an outsider (coming from any language background whatsoever), are possible only because words like I, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, THINK, FEEL, GOOD and BAD (in the relevant meaning) have their counterparts in all other languages and because syntactic combinations like 'think something', 'feel something good / bad' or 'someone else' are universally available.

From this point of view, semantic formulae expressed in NSM radically differ from other systems of semantic representation. Usually, those other systems are "bilateral": they link linguistic expressions with some semantic representations and they do not refer to what these expressions can possibly mean to either the speaker or the hearer. By contrast, explications written in NSM are, as it were, not "bilateral" but "quadrilateral": they are meant not only to link linguistic expressions with their semantic representations, but also to explain what a *speaker* can mean by a given expression, and how a *hearer* can interpret it. In other words, they link four elements, not two: a hypothetical speaker, a linguistic expression, a semantic representation, and a potential hearer. This is what the word *natural* in the name of the metalanguage underscores: although the metalanguage is a formal system, not a natural language in the sense in which English, French or Malay is, it is a metalanguage carved out of a natural language (any natural language, e.g. English, French or Malay) and therefore intelligible through a natural language (any natural language, e.g. English, French or Malay).

Being sufficiently close to natural language to be inherently intelligible through real natural languages, like ordinary English or ordinary French, to speakers of those languages, NSM can be used for human communication, language teaching, dictionary-making, and a host of other applied purposes. It can be used for explaining to people what words, expressions, and indeed whole texts mean, and it can be used for explaining ideas, and whole systems of ideas, including aspects of law, religion, politics, and so on. NSM is useful, not only for academic purposes (in particular, for linguists talking to, and writing for, other linguists), but also for human communication outside academia. No other theoretical framework in semantics has similarly aimed at full translatability of research findings across languages: they all thrive on highly language-specific, mostly English terms and appear to see no problem with such a terminological and conceptual Anglo-centrism. This volume is predicated on the assumption that it is time for change.

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Scope and contents of this volume

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Recent times have seen determined and largely successful attempts at describing the isomorphic NSMs or natural semantic metalinguages (cf. Wierzbicka this volume; Goddard & Peeters this volume) of a number of typologically different languages spoken all over the world. The five chapters in Part I (i.e. Chapters 2 to 6) report on a similar effort focused on French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. Chapter 1, on the other hand, is a more detailed overview of the NSM approach than has been offered in the preface. In the present volume, and for the first time in the history of the NSM approach, four closely related versions of the metalinguage are presented side by side, and it is shown that, in spite of the similarities between them, there are at the same time some interesting differences. Where the four versions differ, French and Italian, more often than not, go one way and Spanish and Portuguese another one – a fact which is not surprising for anyone who is familiar with the historical circumstances in which each of the Romance languages developed out of a common ancestor (Latin). Nor is it surprising that at least some of the findings presented here invite us to have a fresh look at what has already been achieved, and to amend some of our working hypotheses accordingly.

Earlier descriptions for French (cf. Peeters 1994 and 1997) have been updated. Many of the existing proposals were in urgent need of revision, and nothing had been put forward for many of the most recently added primes, apart from a possible exponent. Justification and exemplification were required, a task greatly facilitated thanks to the input of Marie-Odile Junker. Similarly, work on Spanish (Travis 2002) was brought up to date. The Portuguese NSM was constructed by Patrick Farrell and Pedro Perini-Santos. Brigida Maher provided the Italian version, after doing the groundwork in her unpublished Honors thesis. In all cases, utmost attention was paid to the observance of the latest findings in NSM syntax. Various canonical contexts were used to describe the irreducible semantic core of each of the four main Romance languages, complete with its universal combinatorial properties. In the process of identifying and describing the local exponents