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Presentation · December 2020

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Invited lecture for the International Summit
on Languages and Migration in a Globalized World
RUDN University, Moscow, Russia
16 December 2020

1. Leibniz's dream: the birth, the death, the revival

In this talk, I want to take up a question which I have been grappling with for fifty years. It is a big question, and I have not been grappling with it alone. The question is: Are there any concepts that all human beings share? Three centuries ago, Leibniz was convinced that indeed there are such concepts, and he called this hypothetical set of universal concepts "the alphabet of human thoughts".

But gradually, the idea faded from philosophical discourse and eventually it was largely forgotten. It was revived in 1963 by Polish linguist Andrzej Bogusławski. A few years later, it was taken up in my own work, and in 1972, in my book *Semantic Primitives*, a first hypothetical set of universal human concepts – "semantic primitives", or "semantic primes" – was actually proposed. It included 14 elements.

From the start, I thought, as did Bogusławski, that in principle, it should be possible to find the truth about the ultimate elements of human thinking through in-depth exploration of a single language – any language. At the same time, it seemed clear that in practice, a focussed semantic study of many different languages would be a necessity too.

From this point of view, emigrating from Poland to Australia and joining the Australian National University in 1973 was a great blessing, as it led to many diverse languages being studied from the "semantic primitives" point of view and, after a decade or so, brought about a radical expansion of the inventory of primes – especially thanks to the input from my Australian colleague Cliff Goddard.

Thus, from the early 1980s, more and more linguists, experts in many different languages and language families joined in the testing of the expanding set of semantic primes held as universal against an increasing range of languages and domains. As a result, for three decades or so, the set steadily grew. The expansion stopped in 2014, when the number of 65 primes was reached.

In this talk, I will quickly review the developments which have taken place since then. I will re-affirm our belief that we have identified, in full, the shared "alphabet of human thoughts" and that it includes 65 semantic primes. I will also discuss the recurring claims that one of these primes, which we now call HAVE PARTS, is not universal.

2. What is at stake

Many scholars who debate the plausibility of the existence of a shared "alphabet of human thoughts" treat the question as purely theoretical: one of countless "academic questions" discussed in universities, without any great significance "in the real world".

They are mistaken. A shared set of human concepts makes it possible to establish a shared human lingua franca, a "Basic Human" in which messages of global significance can be formulated and exchanged, across all parts of planet earth. In particular, if a charter of global ethics is ever to be agreed on – or even meaningfully discussed – by representatives of different traditions, it needs to be formulated in cross-translatable words.

There is a vital connection between shared human concepts and cross-translatable words. Those who believe in shared human concepts but not in shared human words often miss the point that if there were any shared human concepts not embodied in actual words, they could not be used for a global exchange of messages and ideas.

For example, a charter of global ethics requires not only the universality of the concepts GOOD and BAD, but also the availability, in all languages, of some words embodying these concepts. Representatives of different traditions cannot sit around a table and discuss what is good and what is bad if they don't have some *words* for the concepts GOOD and BAD.

And if they are going to accept English as their working language, they need to rely in their discussions on those English words which are cross-translatable into other languages of the world. Otherwise, the dialogue will degenerate into an exercise in what Carsten Levisen calls "conceptual colonialism".

Thus, the question is not only: "Do all people on earth have shared concepts?", but also, "Do all people on earth have cross-translatable words in which those shared concepts can be expressed?" To put it differently, the question is not only: "Does humankind have a shared conceptual mother tongue?", but also, "Can people *speak* to each other in that shared mother tongue?"

For example, if there is to be an international round-table discussion about the issue of the sale of human body parts, the participants need to have a shared concept of "parts of the body" *and* some cross-translatable words or phrases to express that concept. What is at stake, then, is not only the question of human unity in some theoretical sense, but also, of human solidarity and human communication in a very practical sense.

One of the most memorable sentences in the King James Bible comes from a line in the Acts of the Apostles, from St Paul's speech to the Greeks in Athens (Acts 17:26): "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth."

If we accept that we are all related by blood, as members of the same human family, then we are, as Pope Francis puts it in the title of his new encyclical (of 3 October 2020), "Fratelli Tutti" (the title of the official English translation is "Brothers and Sisters All"). But as many modern thinkers have pointed out, a deep awareness of human unity requires something else as well. In the words of the German philosopher Karl-Otto Apel, it requires that we see all people on earth as a "universal community of communication" (1972).

But there are six or seven thousand different languages in the world. Can a universal community of communication be established in a world divided by thousands of different languages?

As I see it, the answer to this question depends, above all, on the availability of shared concepts which can be expressed in cross-translatable words and phrases. More generally, it depends on the availability of a common language, however small, in which people of different backgrounds can communicate and understand each other. Colleagues and I believe that such a common language is available in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, or NSM, which has as many versions as there are languages in the world and which represents the shared core of them all.

3. An example: talking about the trade in human body parts

Consider again the issue of the trade in human body parts, which is an important topic in international discourse. For example, in his encyclical "Fratelli Tutti" Pope Francis speaks against "…an abomination that goes to the length of kidnapping persons for the sake of selling their organs". Can this issue be discussed in all languages, or only in some? Assuming for the moment that the discussants have a word meaning "to sell" at their disposal, can one say something like this in any language:

"It is bad if people want to sell parts of people's bodies"?

Some linguists have claimed that in the languages of their expertise there is no word for PART; for example David Nash and David Wilkins (2021) make this claim about the Australian Aboriginal language Warlpiri. Could the speakers of such languages discuss the trade in human body parts?

My own expectation is that they could. Before I show how I think they could do it, I will present three other tenets of a hypothetical "charter of global ethics" formulated in NSM:

1. It is bad if people want to do bad things to other people.

2. It is bad if people want to do bad things to other people's bodies.

3. It is bad if people want other people to feel something very bad in their bodies.

Suppose that we want to add to these three a tenet condemning the trade in human body parts; and that we want to formulate this tenet in a way that would make it cross-translatable – even into languages without a special word corresponding to the English word "part" as used in the phrase "part of the body". How could we do it? To put it differently, how could the speakers of such a language condemn such trade?

Here is my hypothesis, based on a trail of evidence going back to 1994: in many languages they could say the equivalent of the following sentences:

> Human bodies [or: our bodies] have many "things",
> some of these "things" are inside the body
> (heart is one of them, liver is another, there are others).
> It is very bad if someone wants to sell these "things".

(There are also some other possibilities which I can't discuss here for reasons of time.)

It seems uncontroversial that in this context the word glossed as "things" expresses the same meaning as the English word "parts". So, in some languages it may not be possible to talk about the trade in human body parts as succinctly as in English. But this doesn't mean that a word like "things" doesn't do the job in a specific lexico-grammatical frame, when it is combined with the word "have".

In this connection, it is interesting to note that the outstanding Warlpiri lexicographer Paddy Patrick Jangala opens many of his definitions of Warlpiri body part terms with the phrase "that which we all have"; and that he emphasises that a given body part term applies to human bodies generally.

In our article "Talking about bodies and their parts in Warlpiri" (2018), Cliff Goddard and I proposed two main lexical exponents for the prime which we now prefer to call HAVE PARTS, and we emphasised the important role of the verb *mardarni* 'to have' as used in sentences in which the subject is not a person but a thing, or a body. Schematically, we proposed that in sentences like "the body has (*mardarni*) many things, head, arms, legs, and others" the verb *mardarni* does not indicate "ownership" but "having parts".

This is in fact consistent with what the Warlpiri Dictionary (Laughren et al. 2006) says. In their critique of our treatment, however, Nash and Wilkins reject our interpretation and affirm: "It is not that *mardarni* 'have' is the Warlpiri reflex of PART; possession is clearly the relevant notion." (2021, footnote 12).

But objects and bodies cannot "possess" or "own" anything, in the ordinary sense of these words. To my mind, a sentence like "our bodies have [*mardarni*] many things, head, arms, legs, and others" clearly refers to the part-whole relationship, and not to "ownership" or "possession". Bodies do not "own" or "possess" their parts.

4. The set of universal semantic primes in 2020

Seven years after the set of 65 universal semantic primes was first presented as the answer to Leibniz's question about the "alphabet of human thoughts", I am happy to repeat what I said in *Imprisoned in English*: "Extensive semantic investigations conducted over many years, by many scholars, in the NSM framework, have led to the conclusion that there are sixty five primes, the same in all languages." (p.34)

Does this mean that the table of 65 primes is exactly the same in 2020 as it was in 2014?

No, not exactly; but it is very close now to what it was then. There are still 65 primes, and only one of them shows a new face: it is the prime MINE, as in the sentence "it is mine", with which we replaced the prime that we earlier designated, for many years, with the word "have".

But apart from MINE, there are no new primes in the current table of primes, and MINE itself is not an entirely new prime but an older prime re-conceptualised. Thus, from the point of view of NSM researchers, the table with 65 elements has now been stable for many years, and as more and more domains were addressed in NSM-based work it has proved sufficient as a toolkit for dealing with them all.

How have these ideas been received by those outside the NSM research community? Have linguists sceptical about the NSM theory, or downright hostile to it, been able to throw serious doubt on any of the 65?

A good deal of scepticism has indeed been expressed, at different times, by different authors. We have sought to consider all such critiques as carefully as possible.

The most serious empirically-based attack on the viability of one of the primes which NSM researchers are facing at the moment concerns the prime PARTS (HAVE PARTS). This is why the bulk of the paper on which this talk is based is devoted to this particular prime (Wierzbicka 2021).

In closing, I would like to formulate two conclusions, one about the psychological unity of humankind, and another, about the need for linguistic education that would integrate, in some measure, the two key aspects of human thought and speech: the diversity and the unity.

5. Conclusions

First, the unity.

More than a century ago the great American anthropologist Franz Boas affirmed what he called the "psychic unity of mankind". Afterwards, for a long time, this tenet was widely accepted in anthropology.

The last thirty years, however, saw a swing of the pendulum. Among the most influential proponents of this swing, I would single out the leading anthropologist, and founder of the new discipline of cultural psychology, Richard Shweder, who contraposed "cultural pluralism" to the "principle of psychic unity", and called the belief in the principle of "psychic" (psychological) unity "pious" (Shweder & Sullivan 1990: 400). To his credit, however, Shweder remained open-minded and later accepted the NSM claim that KNOW,

THINK, WANT and FEEL, and also GOOD and BAD, are universal human concepts (Shweder 2004: 82).

After fifty years of investigations, both empirical and analytical, I submit that the same applies to eleven out of the fourteen "semantic primitives" which I posited half a century ago, and to the full set of sixty five, which Cliff Goddard and I posited seven years ago (2014), including PARTS (HAVE PARTS).

Yes, we need to be always conscious of the danger of taking categories of our own language for universal and attributing them to speakers of other languages. In particular, in the present era of the global domination of English there is an ever-present danger of taking concepts lexicalised in English for universal. No one has sought to highlight this danger over the years more strongly and more consistently than NSM researchers, to mention only my own books *English: Meaning and Culture* (2006) and *Imprisoned in English* (2014), and Carsten Levisen's "Biases we live by" (2019). More than that, we have consistently exposed the "pervasive Anglocentrism entrenched in the language of contemporary science" (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014: 155).

But this is precisely why we have always insisted on finding, roughly speaking, "universal words" (or "lexico-semantic universals", cf. Goddard 2001), and not only theorising, in English, about conceptual primes lexically embodied in *some* languages but not in others. Thus, for PARTS – as for any other hypothetical prime – it is critical to establish whether or not it is lexically embodied in all the languages sampled.

For clarity's sake, I will now contrast three different positions on the universality of conceptual and lexical primes.

1. According to some linguists, such as Ken Hale (1994), there is a universal set of conceptual primes that all humans share, but there is no set of "universal words or expressions" diverse in form but identical in meaning in all languages. In effect, then, Hale seemed to accept that there is a shared conceptual "alphabet of human thoughts" for all people on earth to *think* with but not to *speak* ('write') with.

2. According to some other linguists, there is no universal set of conceptual primes shared in its entirety by all languages: every language has its own set of "semantic primes"; such sets may overlap, but there is no complete "alphabet" of lexically embodied primes common to all languages. This is, as I understand, Nicholas Evans' position.

3. According to NSM linguists, on the other hand, there is a universal "alphabet" of conceptual primes lexically embodied in all languages, an "alphabet" that people can both think and speak ('write') with. Three consequences follow from this.

First, every language can be, in principle, its own metalanguage.

Second, every language can, in principle, be a metalanguage for every other language.

Third, speakers of all languages can discuss some topics of common interest using words different in form but identical in meaning. For example, there can be an international discussion about a charter of global ethics, free of Anglocentrism and based on words and expressions which correspond to shared human concepts.

Evidence suggests that, despite all our diversity, linguistic and cultural, we people all think about the world with sixty five shared "semantic primitives". In particular, we all know that we have BODIES, bodies with many PARTS (or many "things"). Consequently, we all have linguistic resources necessary for condemning not only genocide, torture, infanticide, and rape, but also trade in human body parts.

To have a global discussion on matters of global importance we need more than a set of shared conceptual primitives; we also need a shared semantic metalanguage in which those primes – shared human concepts – can serve as tools for human communication, potentially including all people on earth.

According to Pope Francis' encyclical "Fratelli Tutti", "In today's world the sense of belonging to a single family is fading". From this point of view, it seems particularly important to recognise that the principle of psychological unity of all people on earth is not just a pious slogan, or a well-meaning declaration not based on evidence, but a truth

supported by empirical findings; and that these findings can enhance our sense of belonging to a single family and a universal community of communication.

As cross-linguistic investigations of the last fifty years show, despite the phenomenal diversity of human languages and cultures, a shared "alphabet of human thoughts" was not just a figment of Leibniz' imagination. In fact, we can now affirm with confidence that there is not only a shared "alphabet of human thoughts" but a common language, Basic Human, with a specifiable vocabulary and grammar, which can be seen as humanity's "shared mother tongue".

I believe that this common language, Basic Human, represents the deep truth about the "genetic code of the human mind" and that for this very reason, it can provide a secure basis for a non-Anglocentric global discourse about questions that concern us all, such as global ethics, the earth and its future, and the health and well-being of all people on earth.

And now, my second concluding point.

A recent joint statement issued by five of the world's leading Learned Academies including the Australian Academy of Humanities emphasises the importance of languages in global context. The document states that "Clear and precise communication is [now] more crucial than ever before"; and rightly stresses that "the people of the world must be able to speak to each other and be understood". It doesn't address, however, the question of how these objectives can be achieved.

The Academies call for a renewed commitment to multilingualism, while at the same time emphasising that "we must increase our capacity to speak with each other as part of a global community". The document doesn't recognise, however, that *by itself*, multilingualism will not increase our capacity to speak with each other as part of a global community.

To achieve genuine global understanding we must be able to express, *at times*, the same global messages through many diverse languages of the world. To this end, I believe,

Academies and other national and international bodies should be promoting, among other things, education in minimal languages.

Minimal languages different in form but matching in meaning can achieve and integrate both goals at the same time: to overcome the world's single-minded reliance on English as a global lingua franca while enabling people everywhere on earth to share the same global messages through their own native languages.

The goals of linguistic diversity and linguistic unity can be upheld together. Unity without diversity leads to uniformity and conceptual poverty, diversity without unity leads to divisions and a lack of global understanding. By promoting education in minimal languages in as many countries as possible we can help protect linguistic diversity and at the same time advance genuine global understanding.

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