Words as Carriers of Cultural Meaning

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CHAPTER 21

WORDS AS CARRIERS OF CULTURAL MEANING

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21.1 INTRODUCTION

21.1.1 Approaches and attitudes to cultural meaning

This chapter is about ways in which words, both as individual lexemes and in lexical subsystems or domains, can be 'carriers' of culture-related meaning. It must be said that this is not a topic that rates very highly on the agenda of most professional linguists. A commonly encountered attitude is: 'Yes, yes, everyone knows that there's cultural content in the lexicon, but it's not important for linguistics', i.e. it has little relevance to what is often seen as the core concern of linguistics, namely, understanding 'the grammar'. A related view is that to the extent that cultural aspects of meaning are significant, they are best left to the anthropological linguist or to the cultural historian. Both views presuppose that cultural aspects of meaning are easily visible without dedicated linguistic study—an assumption that derives, presumably, from thinking that cultural aspects of meaning are chiefly vested in content words for culturally distinctive kinds of food and drink, clothing, tools, weapons and other artefacts, social institutions, and the like. As we will see, cultural content in the lexicon may run much deeper than this and hold greater significance for our understanding of the lexicon.

Looking outside linguistics, one cannot help but be struck by a very stark contrast. The study of culture-laden words is of great and enduring interest to a raft of scholarly traditions in the humanities: not only cultural anthropology and cultural history, but also literary studies, hermeneutics, and translation studies. Works such as C. S. Lewis's (1960) *Studies in Words* and Raymond Williams' (1976) celebrated *Keywords* spring to mind, along with their descendants such as Bennett et al.'s (2005) *New Keywords* and Rosenthal's (2005) *Words and Values*. These studies tend to focus on English words that

loom large in public discourse, such as *democracy, equality, opinion, system, reason, community, relationship*, and *environment*. Among cultural historians and scholars detailing the history of ideas, there have been a string of insightful book-length studies of English cultural philology, including McMahon (2006) and Potkay (2007) on *happiness* and *joy*, respectively, and Thomas Dixon's (2003, 2008) studies on *passions* and *emotions*, and on *altruism*. To give the flavour of these works, consider Wierzbicka's (2014a) summary of Dixon (2003), which documented the remarkable career of the word *emotions* over the past 300 years:

> ... the shift from *passions* to *emotions* represented a cultural and conceptual, and not only lexical, change. The direction of that change can be gleaned from the lexical and conceptual networks to which the two words belonged. The network to which *passions* belonged also included words such as *soul, conscience, sin* and *grace*, whereas the one to which *emotions* belonged included words such as *psychology, evolution, organism, brain, nerves, expression, behaviour* and *viscera*.

This quotation gives a sense of how words can act as carriers of cultural meaning, not only in isolation but in concert with a suite of related, mutually reinforcing, words.

Within ethnography and cognitive anthropology, emotion vocabulary has proved a rich vein of study. One thinks of brilliant inquiries by Clifford Geertz (1973) into *lek* 'stage fright' and *rasa* 'feeling, meaning' in Balinese, Catherine Lutz's (1988) study of the meaning and function of *fago* 'compassion, love, sadness' and *song* 'justifiable anger' among the Ifaluk people of Micronesia, and Michelle Rosaldo's (1980) inquiry into *liget* 'anger, passion, energy' among the Philippine Ilongot. In a different tradition, developing out of the ethnography of communication, Donal Carbaugh and colleagues have shown how Finnish key cultural expressions, such as *olla omissa oloissaan* 'being undisturbed in one's thoughts' and *mietiskellä* 'contemplative and thoughtful', defy easy translation into English while providing a key to understanding Finnish 'quietude' (Carbaugh 2006; Carbaugh et al. 2006). In recent years, there have been a number of important lexical-cultural studies in crossover disciplines such as cultural psychology (e.g. Shi-xu and Feng-Bing 2013; Shweder 2001, 2008; Shweder et al. 2004).

Compared with this body of work from other disciplines, relatively few lexical-cultural studies have come from linguists (with notable exceptions, of course). The reasons are connected with the ascendancy of syntax, especially as studied by Chomskyan generative linguistics. Before this, the study of languages was integrally connected with the humanistic tradition (think, for example, of the line of scholarship that leads through Herder and Humboldt to Boas and Sapir), but under the influence of Chomsky and generativism, linguistics, especially in North America, largely disavowed its links with the humanities and sought to define itself as part of cognitive psychology and, more recently, as a branch of biology (biolinguistics). Interest in cultural aspects of the lexicon was never completely extinguished, of course. It was maintained in anthropological linguistics and in the newer field of ethnography of communication, and in the last third of the 20th century two new trends emerged in lexicology and lexical semantics

which promised to bring new rigour and systematicity to the study of the lexicon, as well as a revived interest in cultural semantics, namely: the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach originated by Anna Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka 1992, 1996, 1997, 2006a, 2010a, and other works; Goddard 2011a; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002, 2014a, 2014b) and the Meaning–Text Theory (MTT) associated with Russian linguists such as Jurij Apresjan (2000) and Igor Mel'čuk (2012).

The bulk of this chapter will be illustrated from studies by NSM researchers, not only because this school has produced a large and internally consistent body of work on descriptive cultural semantics, but also because the approach sets out to provide the finest level of resolution of semantic detail (even greater than that sought by the MTT approach.[1] The point is that when approaching cultural aspects of meaning (or indeed, any aspect of meaning) what one sees—how much detail, how much accuracy—depends on the method of description that is being brought to bear. Without a sufficiently precise, high-resolution method of semantic analysis, one may simply not 'see' the culture-specificity of many ordinary-seeming word meanings in a given language. Likewise, one may not be able to discern enough semantic detail to recognize culturally relevant semantic themes that link words in one domain to those in another. These contentions will be illustrated shortly with examples from a variety of languages.

21.1.2 Methodological issues in cross-cultural semantics

In the contentious field of lexical semantics (see Riemer, this volume), one of the main fault lines is that which separates conceptualist/intensionalist approaches from referentialist/extensionalist approaches. The former aim to describe the concept or sense behind word meanings, while the latter aim to anchor meaning in references to a presumed real or objective world. Extensionalist approaches are of limited help in dealing with cultural aspects of meaning, many of which concern intangibles (values, attitudes, psychological constructs, spiritual beliefs, and the like) that lack external referents. We will therefore proceed using a conceptualist approach, and this can be most straightforwardly done by means of verbal definitions. The main principle when using verbal definitions is the reductive principle: avoid using in the definition any words which are semantically more complex than the word being defined. The reasons are obvious: first, the goal of clarifying meaning cannot be served if every definition introduces more obscurities, and second, using complex terms in definitions frequently leads to definitional circularity.

Although lexicographers often pay lip service to the reductive principle, in practice they usually fail to adhere to it and other professional 'explainers' of words, including

[1] The MTT linguists are sometimes known as the Moscow School. There is also a second Moscow School, which is more focussed on 'cultural semantics' (cf. Zalizniak et al. 2005; Shmelev 2012a, 2012b) but whose works are as yet available only in Russian.

semanticists, seldom adhere to it either. The exception is the NSM research community. They have worked for decades to isolate what they call semantic primes, i.e. the minimal inventory of semantically simple word meanings (see Table 21.1), and to show how complex lexical meanings can be resolved into text-like configurations, termed explications, of semantic primes. The significance for present purposes, as explained below, is that semantic primes can be used as a 'safe', relatively culture-neutral defining vocabulary for investigating lexical meaning across languages. NSM semantics also makes use of a small set of non-primitive lexical meanings (termed 'semantic molecules') that can be shown to function as building blocks, alongside semantic primes, in explications for many concepts. This has important implications for the cultural loading of the vocabulary, because some semantic molecules appear to be language-specific (see section 21.3.3).

When dealing with meanings across a cultural gulf, the choice of defining vocabulary has a special significance on account of the danger of conceptual and terminological

Table 21.1 Semantic primes (English exponents) (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a)

I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	Substantives
KIND, PART	Relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	Determiners
ONE, TWO, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW, SOME, ALL	Quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	Evaluators
BIG, SMALL	Descriptors
THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	Actions, events, movement, contact
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING), (BE) MINE	Location, existence, specification, possession
LIVE, DIE	Life and death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	Time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE	Space
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	Logical concepts
VERY, MORE	Augmentor, intensifier
LIKE	Similarity

Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes). Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes. They can be formally, i.e. morphologically, complex. They can have combinatorial variants or allolexes (indicated with ~). Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

ethnocentrism, more specifically, Anglocentrism, i.e. the possibility that our meaning analyses of non-English languages may be distorted and inauthentic if couched in words whose meanings do not have precise equivalents in the language being described and which therefore impose an Anglo cultural bias. Fortunately, as it appears from the available evidence (Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002; Goddard 2008; cf. Goddard 2001a), semantic primes are lexical universals in the sense that they can be expressed through lexical means (words, bound morphemes, or phrases) in all languages. More precisely, the claim is that semantic primes exist as discrete word-meanings, or, equivalently, as the meanings of lexical units (Cruse 1986; Mel'cuk 1989) in all languages. This claim is not, of course, uncontroversial but even if it should turn out not to be 100 per cent correct, it is surely indisputable that semantic primes and basic semantic molecules, that is, words like 'people', 'do', 'know', 'say', 'good', 'bad', and 'because' (examples of semantic primes) and 'man', 'woman', 'child', 'mouth', 'be born', 'long', and 'sharp' (examples of basic semantic molecules) are *relatively* more cross-translatable and relatively less prone to cultural bias than words like 'relationship', 'experience', 'communication', and 'control' (examples of highly English-specific meanings).

Space precludes an overview of the semantic primes here, but in view of the theme of this Handbook, the proposal that WORD(S) is a semantic prime deserves some elaboration, as is the related claim that the concept of WORD(S) is universally lexicalized (Goddard 2011b; Wierzbicka 1996). Integral to the first claim is its resistance to non-circular definition. Consider, for example, sentences such as 'He/she said one word' (which contrasts with 'He/she said one thing') and 'He/she said the same thing in other words'. These sentences show that there is a conceptual contrast between, roughly speaking, the content of what is said and the form (WORDS) in which it is said. On the NSM view, it is literally impossible to paraphrase the meaning of 'word(s)', as used in sentences like these, in a reductive, non-circular fashion.[2] As suggested by the representation WORD(S), the proposed semantic prime is intended to be indeterminate between singular and plural, i.e. to be capable of referring to a single word (when combined with ONE) and equally to be capable of referring to something that is multiple in character.

The claim that the concept of WORD(S) is universally lexicalized has often been contradicted (e.g. Dixon and Aikhenvald 2002a: 2): 'It appears that only some languages actually have a lexeme with the meaning "word"'.[3] Examined carefully, however, this counter-claim turns out to be based on a failure to properly take account of polysemy.

[2] Typical ordinary language definitions of *(a) word*, such as 'ultimate minimal unit of speech' (*OED*) and 'single unit of language' (Collins Cobuild), fail both on account of their obscurity and because the words 'speech' and 'language' themselves depend conceptually on 'words', thus making the definitions implicitly circular.

[3] Despite Dixon and Aikhenvald's (2002a) claim to the contrary, WORD(S) is well attested as a lexical meaning in Australian languages such as Arrernte, Warlpiri, Kayardild, and Bundjalung (Goddard 2011b: 51). Likewise, there seems to be no particular difficulty in locating exponents of WORD(S) in polysynthetic languages, despite the tremendous difference in the kinds of words that can be found in them (Goddard 2001a).

Exponents of semantic primes are often polysemous (a phenomenon which has been much studied by NSM linguists). Even in English, the word *word* has extended meanings that go beyond the semantically primitive meaning; for example, in fixed and semi-fixed expressions such as: *a word of warning, a kind word* (or *kind words), to have a word with someone, to have the last word, to put in a good word, to get/bring word of something, to give one's word*, not to mention biblical expressions such as *the word of God*. All these expressions refer to someone saying something (usually something brief) about something: they are not examples of WORD(S) in its semantically primitive sense. In cross-linguistic perspective, English is rather typical in this respect. In many languages the lexeme that can express the meaning WORD(S) can also express other, distinct, meanings such as 'talk', 'way of speaking', 'message', 'utterance', and 'what is said'.

To say that the concept of WORD(S) is apparently a pan-human concept is not to say that people everywhere have the same set of cultural beliefs and ideas about WORD(S). Obviously they do not; and to map out the patterns in word-related beliefs and practices across the world's cultures would be a fascinating project in linguistic anthropology. Three observations that can be made are: first, that WORD(S) are (presumably) universally implicated in religious/spiritual beliefs and practices, e.g. in rituals, prayers, chants, magical formulae, and the like; second, that variation in word use is (presumably) universally accorded social significance, e.g. taken to indicate identity, affiliation, status, and the like; and third, that the institution of writing inevitably introduces a complex of new, culturally variable ideas and ideologies about words (Ong 1982). The existence of variation in beliefs and practices involving WORD(S) is in no way inconsistent with the claim that WORD(S) is a universally lexicalized meaning. On the contrary, it is testimony to the importance of words to human beings, and to people's high level of awareness and attention to words.

Before proceeding, one additional analytical concept must be mentioned. This is what is variously referred to in the literature as cultural norms (norms of interaction, norms of interpretation), cultural rules, cultural assumptions, cultural scripts, etc. Despite the differences in terminology, all analysts agree that some constructs of this kind are important in cultural analysis. Such cultural norms or assumptions are different from word meanings: they are part of cultural pragmatics or ethnopragmatics, rather than semantics. At the same time, however, cultural assumptions are not unconnected with word meanings, just as pragmatics is not unconnected with semantics. As it happens, semantic primes can be used not only for descriptive semantics but also as a notation for writing cultural scripts (Goddard 2006; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004). This enables hypotheses about shared cultural assumptions to be formulated in terms that are recognizable to the people concerned and can represent cognitively realistic 'insider perspectives'. It also facilitates an easy integration between lexical semantics and pragmatics, i.e. roughly, between meaning that is encoded or encapsulated in words and meaning that is 'brought in', so to speak, by contextual assumptions. The focus of this chapter, however, is lexical meanings.

21.2 CULTURAL KEY WORDS

21.2.1 The 'key word' concept

The term 'cultural key words' refers to particularly culture-rich and translation-resistant words that occupy focal points in cultural ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and speaking. Wierzbicka (1997: 17) explains:

> A key word such as *duša* (roughly 'soul') or *sud'ba* (roughly 'fate') in Russian is like one loose end which we have managed to find in a tangled ball of wool: by pulling it, we may be able to unravel a whole tangled 'ball' of attitudes, values, and expectations, embodied not only in words, but also in common collocations, in set phrases, in grammatical constructions, in proverbs, and so on ...

The concept of a cultural key word is a qualitative one and somewhat inexact in the sense that it is not always possible to draw a strict line between cultural key words, other culturally important words, and less important but still culture-related words. Nevertheless, the key word concept has an undoubted heuristic value in helping to focus attention on culturally prominent concepts. Sometimes certain key words rise to the attention of a speech community (usually by way of contrast with outsiders) and attain an iconic, and therefore frequently contested status, in national identity discourses, e.g. Danish *hygge* 'pleasant togetherness cosy sociality', Dutch *gezellig* 'convivial, cosy, fun', Australian English *fair go*. Other key words stay below the horizon of consciousness of most speakers.

Cultural key words may be found in different departments of the lexicon, sometimes in unexpected places. The following is a non-exhaustive listing of areas which are known, on the basis of existing work, to be natural homes, so to speak, for cultural key words, along with a sample of quality work on a range of languages. The use of double inverted commas is intended to indicate that the English "translations" are approximate and inaccurate, to a greater extent than usual.

Cultural values and ideals, e.g. English *fair, reasonable* (Wierzbicka 2006a), German *Pflicht* "duty" (Wierzbicka 2014b), Chinese *xiào* "filial piety", *ren* "perseverance" (Goddard 2011a: 84–6; Ye 2006), Malay *sabar* "patient", *setia* "loyal" (Goddard 2001b), Danish *tryghet* "security", *hygge* "cosy sociality" (Levisen 2012), French *méfiance* "wariness, mistrust" (Peeters in press), Japanese *wa* "harmony, unity", *omoiyari* "empathy" (Wierzbicka 1997: 248–53, 275–8), Spanish *confianza* "trust", *calor humano* "human warmth" (Travis 2006).

"Sociality" concepts. This heading overlaps with the previous one, but it may be helpful in view of the new emphasis on sociality (Enfield and Levinson 2006). Examples include English *privacy* (Wierzbicka 2008), as well as the personal descriptors *rude* and *nice* (Waters 2012), French *s'engager* "being engaged, committed" (Peeters 2000), and *kastom* "traditional practices" in Melanesian Creoles (Levisen forthcoming).

Ethnophilosophical terms, including religious, metaphysical, epistemological, and cosmological terms: terms concerned with the nature of the world and people's position in it. Examples include: Russian *sud'ba* "fate, destiny" (Wierzbicka 1997), English *God, the devil* and their near-equivalents in Arabic and Hebrew (Habib 2011a, 2011b), English *evidence, commonsense* (Wierzbicka 2010a), Oceanic *mana* "spiritual power" (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014b; cf. Keesing 1986).

Emotions. As mentioned, emotions have been a rich vein for studies in culture-related meaning. Examples include: English *happiness* and German *Angst* "fear, anxiety" (Wierzbicka 1999: ch. 3; 2014a), Malay *malu* "shame" and related social emptions (Goddard 1996b), German *Wut* "rage, anger" (Durst 2001), Ilonglot *liget* "anger, passion, energy" (Rosaldo 1980), Ifaluk *fago* "compassion, love, sadness", *song* "justifiable anger" (Lutz 1988), Japanese *amae* "trusting dependency" (Wierzbicka 1997: 238–43).

Ethnopsychological constructs. This term refers to nominal expressions designating non-physical parts of a person, akin to English *mind, heart, soul,* and *spirit.* Significant studies exist on Russian *duša* "soul" (Wierzbicka 1992, 2005; cf. Pesmen 2000), English *heart* (Goddard 2008), French *âme* and German *Seele* (Wierzbicka 1992: 55–9), Malay *hati* (Goddard 2001c, 2008), Korean *maum* and *kasum* (Yoon 2006), Chinese *xin* (Yu 2009), Japanese *kokoro* (Hasada 2000: 115–16), Persian *del* and *chesm* (Sharifian 2011).

Cross-cutting a number of these categories are cultural studies of figurative (especially, metaphorical) language; e.g. Sharifian et al. (2008); Idström and Piirainen (2012).

21.2.2 Sketches of two cultural key words (English, Chinese)

Space permits only quick sketches of two examples of cultural key words, and these fall far short of expounding their full cultural relevance. There is nothing surprising about this. These are cultural key words, after all: by definition, each one could sustain and reward extensive study.

Anglo English *fair*. Wierzbicka (2006a) argues that *fairness* is one of the key values in modern Anglo culture, and points out that the expressions *That's not fair!* and *It's not fair!* are commonly heard in daily life from both children and adults, and across registers from informal to formal (e.g. in scholarly works, government publications, public administration, business, trade, and law).[4] This is all the more remarkable given their non-translatability into other European languages, let alone non-European languages. *Fair* (and *fairness*) form part of an ensemble of related Anglo concepts, such as *right* and *wrong, reasonable,* and even *rules*. Explication [A] below, for the expression *That's*

[4] Some legal scholars, notably Rawls (2001), have attempted to re-think the concept of *justice* in terms of *fairness*. This can be seen as a natural move, from the point of view of those anchored in Anglo ways of thinking. Less commonly, some legal scholars, such as Fletcher (1996: 81), have recognized that '[r]emarkably, our concept of fairness does not readily translate into other languages.'

not fair, is based on that proposed in Wierzbicka (2006a).[5] Notable aspects include the relational character of *fairness* (one is *fair* or *unfair* **to** someone) but that *fairness* does not necessarily involve doing something to someone. It rather turns on the negative effect of an action on someone else ('being bad for someone else'). Equally importantly, *fairness* presupposes doing something **with** someone else: it implies having 'dealings', so to speak, with the affected person. In these respects, *fairness* differs markedly from, for example, *justice*; in English, one can easily describe a teacher, for example, as *fair* or *unfair*, but hardly as *just* or *unjust*. Likewise, *rules* can be *fair* or *unfair* (and *rules* apply in situations in which people want to do things together). The link between *fairness* and *rules* highlights the fact that *fairness* implies a certain consensus about what can and can't be done within the 'rules of the game', so to speak.

[A] *That's not fair.*

a. I say: 'people can't do things like this,
   if someone does something like this, he/she does something bad'
b. if other people know about it, they can't not say the same
c. when people want to do things of some kinds with other people, it is like this:
d. they can do some things
e. at the same time they can't do some other things,
   because if they do things like this, it is very bad for these other people
f. everyone knows this

Notice that although *fairness* is often used in contexts that imply equality of treatment, in expressions like *fair share*, this is not always or necessarily the case. For example, in the collocation *fair prices* the focus is not on prices being the same for everyone, but rather on prices being such that they could be judged, by the general consensus, as justifiable (in terms of what is 'reasonable' for both sellers and buyers). Consider also expressions like *fair comment* and *fair criticism*. What is common across the full range of uses, Wierzbicka argues, is the assumption of consensus about what range of behaviours one can and cannot adopt, and, consequently, the assumed 'right' to say to someone who is being seen as acting *unfairly* that 'you can't do things like this'.

Attempting to summarize, informally, the unconscious cultural assumptions underlying the concept of *fairness*, Wierzbicka (2006a: 152) puts it as follows:

> Human interaction, which is based largely on what people as individuals want to do, needs to be regulated, in everyone's interest, by certain rules. These rules cannot be all stated in advance—presumably, because life is too complex and varied for that. ... The rules are seen as general, the same for everyone ('democratic') and voluntary. The approach is pragmatic and flexible (the rules are not necessarily all stated in advance). It allows for free pursuit of one's wants (it is 'liberal'), but within limits.

[5] Though its key semantic content is retained, this explication differs in form from its predecessor in Wierzbicka (2006a). The revised version presented in [A] was devised jointly by Wierzbicka and the present author.

In these respects, Wierzbicka (2006a: 152) argues: 'the everyday word *fair* has crystallized in its meaning political and philosophical ideas which were developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century by the thinkers of the British Enlightenment and which have become entrenched in modern Anglo consciousness'.

Chinese *xiào* 'filial piety'. The noun *xiào* represents an ancient and enduring Chinese virtue, and many people have located it at the very core of traditional Confucian values. As one traditional saying has it: *Bǎi shàn xiào wéi xiān* 'Of the hundred good deeds, *xiào* comes first'. *Xiào* is normally rendered into English by way of the curious expression 'filial piety', but this expression is a highly specialized one, and most ordinary speakers of English would have only a hazy idea of what it is supposed to convey. Djao (2003: 203) says that *xiào* implies 'love, respect, obedience, solicitude, devotion, care' and 'the utter sense of duty of the children towards the parents, with the implicit understanding that the children will look after the parents in their old age'. Confucius himself characterized *xiào* simply as: 'Give your father and mother no cause for anxiety other than illness.' At the core of *xiào* is the notion that a person owes a unique lifelong debt to his or her parents, though it can also be extended to grandparents and, especially for a woman, to parents-in-law. One's parents (*fùmǔ* 'father [and] mother') have given you life, raised you, educated you, and so on. *Fùmǔ eng bí shān gāo, bí hǎi shēn* 'What our parents give us is higher than a mountain, deeper than the ocean.'

The meaning of *xiào* can be explicated as shown in [B]. The first batch of components, in (a), establishes the focus on one's father and mother and on their special role in bringing an individual into the world and sustaining his or her life, and indicates that the individual has a special emotional attitude towards them. The components in (b) state that a person should always keep one's parents in mind and maintain a deep concern for the parents' satisfaction and peace of mind, such that one feels compelled to do certain things to make them feel good, and to refrain from doing certain other things which could make them feel bad. The components in (c) specify that it is considered very good if a person puts this attitude into practice in a substantial way, and very bad if they do not.

[B] *xiào* 'filial piety'

a. people can think about some other people like this:
   'one of these people is my father, one of these people is my mother
   I live because these people did many good things for me for a long time after I was born
   because of this, when I think about them, I feel something very good'
b. it is good if someone thinks about these people at all times
   it is good if someone thinks about these people like this:
   'I want these people to feel something very good at all times
   because of this, I want to do many good things for them
   I can't not do these things
   I don't want these people to feel something bad at any time
   because of this, I can't do some things
   I don't want to do these things'
c. it is very good if someone does many things because this someone thinks like this it is very bad if someone does not do many things because this someone thinks like this

Notice that the explication does not indicate which particular kinds of action are to be pursued or avoided. These could vary from situation to situation, though obviously looking after the parents' material wellbeing and peace of mind would be a minimum expectation. As for their mental satisfaction, given broader Chinese cultural concerns, this would often include things like achieving success in business or scholarship, bringing honour to the family name, and so on. The explication does not specify that anything like 'obedience' as such is required, taking it for granted that going against one's parents' wishes on a serious matter is ruled out because of the distress this would cause them.

Emphasizing that the *xiào* concept has no real equivalent in non-Confucian cultures, Ho (1996: 155) goes so far as to assert: 'filial piety surpasses all other ethics in historical continuity, the proportion of humanity under its governance, and the encompassing and imperative nature of its precepts.'

21.2.3 Additional comments

Although we have presented cultural key words as characteristic of languages, it is worth pointing out that there is not necessarily a one-to-one alignment between key words and languages, for two reasons. First, different varieties of a single language can have some different key words (while sharing others). For example, comparing American English with Australian English, it can be argued that the words *freedom* and *dream* (in the sense of 'ambition') have a better claim to key word status in American English, while in Australia the concept of *the fair go* (which is not equivalent to 'equality of opportunity': Wierzbicka 1997a) would have sound claim to key word status. In English English, the (folk) concept of *(social) class* undoubtedly has key word status (Goddard 2012), which it lacks in Australian or American English.

Second, it is possible to broaden the key word concept to make it applicable to 'areal semantics' (Matisoff 2004; Ameka 2009). Concepts such as 'money', 'God', and 'country' would presumably be entitled to the status of pan-European cultural key words. But although they occur with identical or near-identical meanings across the European culture zone and therefore hardly attract attention from Europeans, they are in fact culturally very distinctive when set against, for example, the traditional Aboriginal languages of the Australian continent. Similarly, the Australian Aboriginal concept often represented in English as 'Dreamtime' or 'Dreaming' (Green 2012) is widespread across Australian Aboriginal languages (cf. Arrernte *altyerre*, Warlpiri *Jukurrpa*, Yankunytjatjara *tjukurpa*) and can equally be seen as an areal cultural key word.

21.3 Other culturally important words

Many words are not sufficiently prominent and distinctive to qualify for the epithet of 'key word', but are nonetheless culture-laden to a significant extent. In the first part of this section (21.3.1), we survey a number of lexical domains, as speech-act verbs, social-category words, and terms of address, which are known to be particularly sensitive to cultural loading. Then in section 21.3.2 we shall see examples from several areas, such as cognitive/epistemic verbs, which may not be such obvious candidates. In section 21.3.3, we examine another way in which culture-specific meanings can manifest themselves across the vocabulary, namely, the role of culture-specific semantic molecules.

21.3.1 Social and interactional words

Probably every language has some areas of 'lexical elaboration' (Majid, this volume). Though not an exact term, this expression designates the situation of a language having an impressively large number of words in a particular semantic domain, thereby providing the terminological scaffolding for fine conceptual differences. Usually lexical elaboration can be seen to serve some cultural and/or functional purpose, though in some cases the reasons may not immediately apparent.

This can be illustrated with the example of English **speech-act verbs**, i.e. words such as *ask, suggest, apologize, thank, promise, complain*, and *congratulate*. Speech-act verbs provide a 'catalogue' of salient kinds of verbal interactions recognized in a particular culture. There is great cross-linguistic variation in the number of speech-act verbs in particular languages and in their character; see Ameka (2009) on Ewe, Goddard (2004) on Malay, Wierzbicka (2003, 2012a) on English, Polish, and Russian, and Peeters (2013) on French.

English is unusual in having literally hundreds of speech-act verbs, outdoing all or most of the other languages of Europe in this respect, let alone most languages from other parts of the world. In other words, the English speech-act lexicon is an area of great lexical elaboration, with many fine-grained meaning differences; consider, for example, *suggest* vs. *recommend, promise* vs. *guarantee, praise* vs. *compliment, insult* vs. *abuse, refuse* vs. *decline* (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a. But why? Wierzbicka (2003, 2006a, 2012) has argued that lexical elaboration in this arena supports cultural attention to the dynamics of interpersonal causation, which in turn arises from the modern Anglo cultural ideal of personal autonomy. Going further, she argues that one English speech-act verb—*suggest*—stands out as the prime example of contemporary Anglo interactional style. Not only is English unique among European languages in possessing a speech-act verb with the precise semantics of *suggest*, but the English language has also developed a whole brace of 'suggestive' strategies and formulas (Wierzbicka 2006b).

Related to speech acts, words for **genres and speech events** (such as English *story, interview, lecture, joke)* represent a cultural inventory of recognized forms of extended verbal interaction. They are usually heavily culture embedded. Many studies in the ethnography of communication have focused attention on culturally revealing words of this kind (e.g. Katriel 1986 on Israeli *dugri* 'straight talk'; cf. Carbaugh 2005; Philipsen and Carbaugh 1986), but dedicated linguistic semantic studies are rare. Exceptions include Wierzbicka (1990) on Polish *kawal* 'conspirational joke' and *podanie* 'application, letter of request', Wierzbicka (2010b) on English *story* (which she regards as an

Anglo cultural key word), Goddard (1992) on the Yankunytjatjara indirect speech style *tjalpawangkanytja*.

Social categories, words for kinds of people. Examples include English *friend* (Wierzbicka 1997), Korean *noin* 'respected old people' (Yoon 2004), Russian *drug* 'close friend' and *rodnye* 'dear kin' (Wierzbicka 1997: 55–84; Gladkova 2013; Chinese *shúrén* 'old acquaintance' and *shēngrén* 'stranger', *zìjǐrén* 'insider, one of us', and *wàirén* 'outsider' (Ye 2004; 2013; Koromu (PNG) reciprocal terms *namuka* '(female) age-mate' and *waikohu* '(male) age-mate' (Priestley 2013); words for moieties in Australian Aboriginal societies (Wierzbicka 2013). An interesting dimension of such words in many languages are semantic components e.g. 'all these people are like one something, I am one of these people') that express someone's sense of belonging to a group, such as a family, moiety, clan, etc.

It is widely recognized that **terms of address** and address practices are indicative of local systems of social status, social distinction, and affiliation. Less often recognized is that address terms are not merely governed by pragmatic rules but have specifiable semantic content, which can be explicated to a high degree of accuracy. For a study of Australian English *mate*, see Wierzbicka (1997: 101–18). Wong (2006a, 2006b) deals with *auntie* and other kinship or quasi-kinship address terms in Singapore English.

Other culturally revealing areas include ethnomedical terminology, proverbs, and other traditional sayings (cf. Goddard 2009; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a), and conversational formulae and routines, including interjections (Ameka 1992, 1994, 2009; Bromhead 2009).

21.3.2 Cultural semantics in unexpected places

The domains treated in the previous section all plainly concern social interaction, and are therefore natural candidates for culture-related meaning. In this section, we look into several domains where culture-related meanings occur in unexpected places.

Cognitive verbs might seem an unlikely domain for social meaning, but when one considers that voicing one's thoughts and opinions often implies positioning them in relation to the thoughts and opinions of other people, the potential for socially oriented meaning to enter the picture becomes clearer. This can be illustrated with examples from English, Russian, and Danish. Compare the explications below for English *believe (that)* and Russian *sčitat'* 'firmly believe', respectively (Gladkova 2007: 75; Wierzbicka 2006a: 216–18). The *believe* explication applies to the meaning found in the grammatical frame with a *that*-complement, e.g. *I believe that they shouldn't have the vote*. Roughly speaking, it conveys a considered conviction, along with a certain gravitas, as shown by the fact that it can collocate with adverbs like *strongly*, e.g. *I strongly believe that* ... There is also acknowledgement of the possible existence of another point of view ('I know that someone else can think not like this'). Subsequent components express the speaker's apparent confidence that he or she can provide some kind of justification for thinking this way, almost as if the person is expecting to be asked to justify his or her belief. The

semantic content of *believe* resonates with Anglo cultural values of openness to others' opinions and a 'reasonable' attitude.

[C] *I believe that — —*:

a. when I think about it, I think like this '— —'
b. I know that someone else can think not like this
c. I can say why I think like this
d. I can say why it is good if someone thinks like this

Comparing with explication [D] for Russian *sčitat'* (Gladkova 2007), we can see some similarities (the first and final components of the two explications are similar), but there are many differences. The Russian word presents a seriously considered position about which there is no longer any room for doubt. It does not allow for or envisage other credible options and opinions. The final components portray the subject's determination to uphold and stick to the position expressed. These components explain why *sčitat'* cannot be used with any of the words that can intensify opinions in Russian—*gluboko* 'deeply', *sil'no* 'strongly', or *tverdo* 'firmly' (sentences like **Ja gluboko sčitaju, čto...*, **Ja sil'no sčitaju, čto...*, and the like, are ungrammatical). Gladkova (2007) links the 'absoluteness' of *sčitat'* to the value Russians place on forcefully speaking one's mind and on *govorit' pravdu* 'telling the truth' for its own sake.

[D] *Ja sčitaju, čto — —*:

a. when I think about it, I think this ' — —'
b. I thought about it for some time
c. I thought about things like this before
d. I want to think like this
e. I know why I want to think like this
f. I don't want to think about it in any other way
g. it is good to think about it like this

Levisen (2012) argues that several Danish verbs of cognition reflect characteristically Danish ways of thinking about thinking. *Synes*, for example, depicts an immediate and impressionistic response ('I think like this because I feel something now'). According to Levisen, willingness to share subjective impressions is valued in the Danish speech community, as is recognition that another person might think differently ('I know that someone else can think not like this'). The verb *mener* reflects another cognitive trend in the Danish speech community, anchored, as Levisen puts it, in 'co-cognition'. This is related to the value that is placed on being able to navigate one's way through a landscape of opinions: '*Mener* reflects a social reality which operates with "groupy" structures, and in which groups of like-minded people are thought to share opinions. At the same time, one's opinions are known to conflict with those of other groups' (Levisen 2012: 177). Levisen's explication includes the components: 'I know that some people can think the same, I know that some other people don't think the same.'

Related to cognitive verbs, but very different in terms of grammar, are epistemic adverbs, e.g. words such as English *probably, certainly, presumably*. Wierzbicka (2006a) argues that English exhibits lexical elaboration in this domain, motivated by the Anglo cultural value placed on epistemic caution and acknowledgement of other's opinions.

Ethnogeographical words. It is easy to assume that words like *mountain, river,* and *coast* simply designate places (or kinds of place) and thus lack cultural content, but in fact languages and cultures differ as to how they categorize the landscape (Bromhead 2011, 2013; Burenhult 2008; Mark and Turk 2003). This raises the possibility of culture-related aspects of meaning. For example, the meaning of English *desert* is largely constituted in terms of 'absences' and difficulties (Arthur 2003): lack of water, lack of people, the difficulty of living in hostile conditions. This construal reflects the perspective of outsiders, rather than the perspective of indigenous inhabitants, such as the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara (P/Y) Anangu of Central Australia. The same stretch of country that an English speaker could see as *desert* could be described using a P/Y 'eco zone' word such as *puṯi* 'bush country' or *taḷi* 'sandhill country'. Although this is not evident from the English glosses, Bromhead (2013) argues that these words incorporate a certain amount of ethnobiological and ethnozoological knowledge; for example, that kangaroos and small game can be found in *puṯi* and that many kinds of berries are found in the *taḷi*. If this is correct, the P/Y words can be seen as partly analogous to English words like *meadow, field,* and *paddock*, because in both cases the meanings include some idea of the kind of human use or activity. Human use is even more evident in P/Y geographical terms like *tjukula* 'rockhole' and *tjintjiṟa* 'claypan', whose semantic content is motivated by their usefulness as water resources in the arid Central Australian landscape. As Lowe and Pike (1990: 11; Bromhead 2013) remark: 'Because water was so precious in the lives of desert people, they [Aboriginal people] paid particular attention to places where it could be found at different times of the year, and had special names for the various kinds of holes or cavities in which water might collect.' Bromhead (2011) argues, in part, that the semantics of the Australian English word *creek* has adapted to the dryness of the continent in allowing for there being a variable amount of flowing water.

21.3.3 Culture-specific semantic molecules

As mentioned, semantic molecules are non-primitive word meanings which function as building blocks in the meanings of many other words. Some semantic molecules are believed to be universal or near-universal, e.g. various body-part words (e.g. 'hands', 'mouth', 'eyes', 'ears', 'legs', 'teeth', 'blood'), environmental terms (e.g. 'sky', 'ground', 'sun', 'fire', 'water'), physical properties (e.g. 'hard', 'long', 'sharp', 'heavy'), and some social categories and family-related words (such as 'men', 'women', 'children', 'mother', 'father', and 'be born'). Semantic molecules can also be highly language-specific, e.g. for English, 'God', 'colour', and 'number', and these can have great relevance to cultural content in the lexicon. Some of the ways in which semantic molecules can enter into the meanings of other words are more or less obvious to the untutored semantic intuition, but some only

come to light after careful semantic analysis. As an example of the former, presumably no-one would deny that the concept of 'God' is involved in the meanings of 'Christian' words such as *priest, church, sin, hymn, prayer, abbot, cloister, monastery*.

As for the concept of 'number', it may be well to remember that, as with 'colour', there are many languages and cultures that have no word for 'number' and lack elaborate systems of number words, and that in many cultures people do not engage in counting or similar practices, such as tallying (Goddard 2009). Arguably, the concept of 'number' enters into the meaning structure of a great many 'quantitative words' of one kind or another. For example, in English there are property-related abstract nouns, such *temperature, weight,* and *age* (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a), words for measuring devices and units of measurement (*clock, scales, speedometer; date, hour, minute, kilo, inch, kilometre*), words for types of numerical reckoning (*count, calculate, addition, subtraction*), and for numerical fields of study and practice (*maths, arithmetic*). It can be argued that the idea of precise and verifiable quantitative statements forms part of the concept of 'science' (cf. Wierzbicka 2011). More unexpected, perhaps, is the proposition that the concept of 'science' is implicated in the large register of English 'scientific' words, e.g. words like *hydrogen, electron, genome*, which can be regarded as part of everyday English but which still bear the semantic stamp, so to speak, of science.

21.4 Other culture-related words

As mentioned earlier, whether and to what extent we see the culture-connectedness of seemingly ordinary words depends to some extent on the method of semantic analysis. This applies even to words for items of material culture (artefacts, clothing, and the like). For example, anyone unfamiliar with Western Desert lifestyle will see at a glance that the words listed below (with definitions from the *Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara To English Dictionary*, Goddard 1996b) are linked to the lifestyle and culture of their speakers:

KIṞI: adhesive gum, made from the resin of spinifex or mulga. Used to plug holes or cracks in bowls, etc. and in making tools and weapons, such as spearthrower and hunting spears
PITI: large hemispherical wooden bowl, used to carry water
TJIRPIKA: a bed of leafy sprigs or small branches to put meat on, so it won't get covered in dirt

It may be much less obvious that a subtle and seemingly trivial difference, such as that between English *cup* and *mug*, could have any cultural relevance. On close analysis, however, it emerges that part of the meaning structure of *cup* is a 'use scenario' involving drinking a hot beverage, often while seated at a table (sometimes in association with a saucer) and typically picking it up and putting it down while drinking, while the scenario associated with *mug* involves holding the vessel in the hand for an extended

period (Goddard 2011a: 225–32). At this micro-level of analysis, even small differences in the semantics of artefact words may be seen to have some culture-related content.

Likewise, it would be easy to assume that **words for natural kinds**, such as biological species, have little or no culture-related content, but this depends on the assumption that such words are simply labels for objective existing entities (or classes of entities) and nothing more. From a semantic point of view, it is more plausible that human perspectives of various kinds enter into the meanings of 'folk category' words; for example, that the meaning of English *tiger* includes the idea that they are fierce and dangerous, that the meaning of English *dog* and *cat* includes the idea that they are domestic animals (roughly, that they often live with people and can be useful); that the meanings of *cow* and *sheep* includes the idea that they are or can be 'farm animals' and that people get useful products, such as meat and wool, from them.

Attitudinal differences (or emotional stereotypes and associations) can also be part of the meanings of species words. The cultural associations of English *dog* and Malay *anjing* 'dog', for example, are significantly different because in the canonical Malay (Islamic) belief system *anjing* are unclean animals: one must ritually purify oneself after touching one, and the idea that they could live in one's house is quite repulsive. Similar observations apply to English *pig* vs. Malay *babi*; see also Levisen (2013) on Danish *svin* and *grise*. Examples like these could obviously be multiplied at length. In short, different cultural attitudes and different cultural utilizations may be embedded into word meanings.

Even the meanings of **physical-activity verbs** that may seem to correspond readily across languages may turn out, on closer examination, to differ in fine details in ways that make sense in cultural context. For example, Levinson (2007) argues that the peculiar semantics of 'cut/break' verbs in the Papuan language Yélî Dnye (e.g. *châpwo* 'sever across the grain' vs. *chaa* 'sever along the grain') reflect a traditional material culture based on splitting fibres with simple stone tools. In making canoes and houses '[c]utting across the grain was especially problematic, and wherever possible timber, vines and fibers were divided along the grain'. A contrastive semantic study is provided by Goddard and Wierzbicka (2009; Goddard 2011a: 285–95), who focus on 'chopping' verbs. English *chop*, Polish *rąbać*, and Japanese *kizamu* have very similar semantic structures and are normally listed as simple translation equivalents in bilingual dictionaries. They all involve a prototypical intention of transforming something into smaller pieces using an instrument with a sharp edge, by making repeated movements to raise the instrument and bring it down into contact with the object. Nonetheless, there are fine differences. Compared with *chop*, Polish *rąbać* depicts a larger and more forceful action, typically in relation to something very hard, such as wood and ice. The instrument is typically heavy, such as an axe or a heavy butcher's knife (not an ordinary kitchen knife, for example), and it is typically raised high above the object, before being brought down with force. Japanese *kizamu*, on the other hand, depicts small-scale and less forceful action than either *rąbać* or *chop*. The verb is prototypically used in relation to food preparation, where the desired outcome is very small pieces. Typically the instrument is smaller, lighter, and not raised high above the thing being affected. These differences can be linked with different cultural contexts and practices. In Poland there is a great need to chop wood in winter and to chop/cut openings (*przerębel*) in the ice of frozen lakes and ponds for fishing. The semantics of Japanese *kizamu* makes sense in terms of Japanese culinary traditions, which involve preparing small and delicate pieces of food which can be held daintily between finger and thumb or elegantly lifted to the mouth with chopsticks. (In the Japanese tradition, it was not common for wood to be chopped: firewood was typically gathered from fallen branches.)

21.5 Discussion

Emerging from the forest of detail, I would like to conclude with four broad points. First, almost any and every word can be seen as culture-bearing to some extent. From a practical point of view, this contention can readily be illustrated by the kind of examples reviewed in this chapter, but it also makes sense from a theoretical point of view. Though the number of genuine absolute semantic universals has not yet been established, it is almost certain that it cannot be more than 200 or so, given that there are 65 known semantic primes and only about 30–40 currently known or suspected universal semantic molecules (Goddard 2001a; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a, 2014b). This means that the vast bulk of the vocabulary of every language is subject to variability, and hence, potentially, to culture-related variation.

Second, the main contribution that linguistics can bring to the humanistic tradition of interest in cultural aspects of word meaning is the added discipline and rigour of linguistic analysis. To make good this promise, however, semantic analysis must be carried out reductively, i.e. from complex to simple, using minimal and standardized units of description which are as free as possible from ethnocentric bias. It remains a concern that many schools of linguistic analysis proceed without regard to these principles, producing analyses which are framed in an ever-proliferating maze of obscure and Anglocentric terms (Wierzbicka 2014).

Third, the culture-laden nature of most English words, including those invented or co-opted for the purposes of semantic analysis, has broader implications for linguistics as a discipline and community of practice in the 21st century. As an incipient global lingua franca, English is extending its functional reach and conceptual influence over other major national and international languages. Meanwhile, the world's minority languages are disappearing at an alarming rate. There is an urgent need for linguists to pay attention to the fact that English words too are carriers of cultural meaning, to help dispel the impression that the advance of global English is a purely functional, culture-neutral phenomenon, and to document ways in which even major national and international languages are changing under the semantic influence of English. This can happen via the adoption of loanwords (albeit often adapted in meaning as they enter the recipient language) or, more subtly, as Anglo cultural themes and values exert an influence on the semantics of indigenous vocabulary. Both phenomena can be illustrated by recent studies of Russian (Gladkova 2008; Zalizniak et al. 2005, 2012).

Fourth, there is the need for an improved standard of lexical-semantic documentation of endangered languages (Austin and Sallabank 2011; Evans 2010). Existing fieldwork manuals pay scant attention to the importance of locating and exploring culturally important words, or to the challenges involved in doing so (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014b). Lexical-semantic analysis and documentation should be a priority for linguistics in the field, with cultural aspects of meaning at the forefront of attention.

We cannot understand the true nature of language without understanding words, and words are much more heavily, and more subtly, culture-laden than is usually recognized by linguists. Linguists need to engage more seriously with high-resolution approaches to lexical semantics and to be more open about the role of words as carriers of cultural meaning.

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PART IV

WORDS IN TIME AND SPACE