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## SEMANTIC PRIMES AND CULTURAL SCRIPTS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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### 1. Introduction

This chapter explores how the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) developed by the authors and colleagues can be applied in practical situations in language teaching, intercultural education and training, and in international communication. We will proceed without any initial exposition of the NSM theory, introducing the required theoretical and empirical material along the way. This can be readily done if we take as our starting point the notions of core vocabulary and procedural vocabulary, as used in applied linguistics.

### 2. Semantic primes as “core vocabulary” in the L2 curriculum

The notion of core or basic vocabulary depends on the idea that some meanings are simpler than others; and that the simpler meanings are necessary and useful in order to explain and to grasp more complex meanings. In his book *Vocabulary*, Michael McCarthy (1990) introduces the concept as follows:

The idea that there might be a core or basic vocabulary of words at the heart of any language is quite an appealing one to language educators, for if we could isolate that vocabulary we could equip learners with a survival kit of core words that could be used in virtually any situation... (McCarthy 1990: 49).

The concept of procedural vocabulary (Widdowson 1983: 92-5) is similar, but with a different emphasis, namely, the role that certain relatively simple words and concepts play in the process of making sense of other, more complex, words and concepts. The minimal procedural vocabulary is “the simplest lexis of paraphrase and explanation” (McCarthy 1990); that is, a vocabulary of words for making sense, for negotiating the meanings, of other words.

Over the years there have been many attempts to clarify these concepts, and to identify core or procedural vocabulary for practical purposes, using a variety of assumptions and techniques. Carter and McCarthy (1988) review two such attempts: C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' work in the 1930s on Basic English, which was derived from conceptual analysis and practical experience, and Michael West's (1953) *General Service List*, one of the first attempts to use word frequency as a guide. By contemporary standards both projects were confused on certain basic points, e.g. not taking adequate account of the fact that many common words are polysemous, i.e. have multiple related meanings [Note 1]. Perhaps more importantly, neither Ogden and Richards, nor West, ever really resolved the conflict between rival criteria for "basicness" or "coreness": simplicity and versatility, on the one hand, versus raw frequency, on the other. Moreover, they also had recourse to other proposed criteria, such as "native speaker instinct", non-culture specificity, and the existence of antonyms and a wide range of polysemic senses (cf. Carter 1987).

More recent times have seen the advent of large-scale corpus linguistics, and the adoption of "controlled vocabulary" by leading major dictionaries, such as the Longman Dictionary and COBUILD. But there has still been no real agreement on the criteria for identifying core vocabulary, or even on the question of whether there is any ultimate core vocabulary in a principled sense.

This is where the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) research program has a special contribution to make. For over 30 years, Anna Wierzbicka and colleagues have been seeking to identify an ultimate core vocabulary – a vocabulary of simple basic concepts or "semantic primes" – using a single criterion: reductive paraphrase. They have been attempting to discover, by trial and error lexical-conceptual analysis, the smallest set of basic concepts in terms of which all other words and concepts can be explicated; literally, "the simplest lexis of paraphrase and explanation". The fruit of this research can be laid out in summary form in Table 1. On the present picture, it appears that the number of semantic primes (semantic elements, analogous in some respects to the chemical elements) is in the mid-sixties. Just as the vast proliferation of chemical compounds are the product of combinations of a smallish number of chemical elements, so the vast proliferation of possible lexical meanings in world's languages are the product of this set of shared semantic elements – meanings such as: I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, and PEOPLE; DO, HAPPEN, THINK, SAY, KNOW, and

WANT; GOOD and BAD, BIG and SMALL; THIS, WHEN, WHERE, BECAUSE, CAN, IF, NOT, and LIKE [Note 2].

Table 1: Table of semantic primes – English exponents  
(after Goddard and Wierzbicka Eds, 2002)

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Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE/PERSON, PEOPLE, SOMETHING/THING, BODY
Relational substantives:	KIND, PART
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH
Evaluators:	GOOD, BAD
Descriptors:	BIG, SMALL
Mental/experiential predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions and events:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence and possession:	THERE IS/EXIST, HAVE
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Time:	WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space:	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH (CONTACT)
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Intensifier, augmentor:	VERY, MORE
Similarity:	LIKE/WAY

Notes: • exponents of primes can have other polysemic meanings which differ from language to language • they can have combinatorial variants (allolexes) • they can have different morphosyntactic properties (including word-class) in different languages • they have well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties

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Research on a wide range of languages suggests that semantic primes have linguistic exponents, as words or word-like elements, in all languages (Goddard and Wierzbicka eds, 1994, 2002). Table 2 gives some examples. Furthermore, for each semantic prime, research has identified certain characteristic grammatical properties – patterns of combination, valency and complementation – and these properties also appear to be universal. To give a more concrete impression of what is involved, Table 3 below summarises the grammatical frames for some predicate primes. The prediction of NSM researchers, so far borne out by cross-linguistic investigation, is that in all languages it will be possible to express meanings equivalent to those with DO, HAPPEN, and SAY in the specific syntactic contexts set out in Table 3. Perhaps not surprisingly, semantically generic words like DO, HAPPEN, SAY, KNOW, THINK, etc. can be used to “carve out” whole areas of the lexicogrammar. For example, Lock’s (1996)

*Functional Grammar of English*, which takes a Hallidayan approach, uses headings such as (in part): ‘doing and happening’, ‘seeing, liking, thinking, wanting, and saying’, ‘being and having’. NSM researchers are developing a systematic approach to comparing and contrasting the grammatical organisation of languages on a semantic basis (Goddard and Wierzbicka Eds, 2002). This, however, is an aspect which cannot be pursued here.

Table 2: Exponents of a selection of semantic primes in five unrelated languages

	Malay	Spanish	Yankunytjatjara	Ewe	Japanese
DO	<i>buat</i>	<i>hacer</i>	<i>palyaṅi</i>	<i>wɔ</i>	<i>suru</i>
THINK	<i>fikir</i>	<i>pensar</i>	<i>kulini</i>	<i>súsú/bu</i>	<i>omou</i>
WANT	<i>mahu</i>	<i>querer</i>	<i>mukuringanyi</i>	<i>dí</i>	<i>hosii/-tai</i>
GOOD	<i>baik</i>	<i>bueno</i>	<i>palya</i>	<i>nyó</i>	<i>ii</i>
BECAUSE	<i>sebab</i>	<i>porque</i>	<i>-nguru</i>	<i>ta/ḡúti</i>	<i>kara</i>
IF	<i>kalau</i>	<i>si:</i>	<i>tjinguru</i>	<i>né</i>	<i>moshi + -ba</i>

Table 3: Syntactic frames for three semantic primes

DO:	X does something X does something to someone [patient] X does something to someone with something [patient + instrument]
HAPPEN:	something happens something happens to someone [undergoer] something happens somewhere [locus]
SAY:	X says something X says something to someone [addressee] X says something about something [locutionary topic] X says: “ — — — ” [direct speech]

The mini-vocabulary and the mini-grammar of the natural semantic metalanguage represent, in a very real sense, the intersection of the set of all languages. This means that the same “mini-language” can be used as kind of conceptual lingua franca for investigating and explaining meanings across languages and cultures, as well as within any single language and culture. We will expand on this in Section 2, but first we want to draw out some of the implications for language teaching and language learning.

Clearly, semantic primes have major implications for the lexical syllabus of early L2 teaching. By definition, they are the minimum procedural vocabulary – the set of

concepts which are maximally useful and versatile for understanding and explaining other words. Another consideration, perhaps less obvious, flows from the assumption that semantically prime meanings should all be pre-existing in the learner's L1 mental lexicon. Unlike L2-specific meanings, therefore, they should be easily recognisable and easy to learn. Additionally, along with the core vocabulary of primes there is a "core grammar" which could and should form part of the early syllabus.

Because exponents of semantic primes tend to be high-frequency items, one might think that they would "naturally" find their way into the early lexical syllabus, but this appears not to be the case. We sampled three introductory textbooks intended for English-speaking students: the German *Deutsch Heute* (Moeller et al. 2005), *The New Practical Chinese Reader* textbook (NOCFL 2004), and *Korean 1* (Language Education Institute, Seoul National University). In the first 500 vocabulary items, the number of semantic primes presented ranged from about 30 (in *Korean 1*) to about 40 (in *Deutsch Heute*). That is, even in the "best" text (from this point of view), fully one-third of the prime inventory was not introduced in the early lexical syllabus. Remarkably, to our way of thinking, none of the three texts included the primes LIKE, THE SAME, HAPPEN, THERE IS, PART or KIND among their first 500 words, even though one would have thought these to be extremely "high value" words for an early language learner. The Chinese and Korean texts, which each introduced less than half the prime inventory in the early syllabus, omitted items such as MAYBE, OTHER and BECAUSE, as well as providing very incomplete coverage of the temporal and spatial domains. These brief observations obviously raise many issues which would reward extended study, beyond the scope of this paper [Note 3]. Nonetheless, it seems sufficiently clear that language teachers and curriculum designers would be well advised to re-consider their early lexical syllabi with a view to including all or most semantic primes in the early stages.

We now move to other ways in which semantic primes can be useful in culturally informed language teaching (cf. Kramersch 1993; Liddicoat and Crozet 2000; Lo Bianco, Crozet and Liddicoat 1999) and in intercultural communication. This might seem paradoxical, for semantic primes (meanings like DO, HAPPEN, SAY, ONE, TWO, ALL, and so on) are in themselves supremely un-interesting from a cultural point of view. In fact, however, the "culture-neutrality" of semantic primes offers a solution to a serious but often unrecognised problem in culture studies, namely, the problem of

terminological ethnocentrism (Goddard 2004a). This occurs when complex, culture-specific words of one language/culture (e.g. English) are used as descriptive tools for analysing the meanings, values, assumptions of another language/culture – thereby imposing an inaccurate and inauthentic “outsider perspective”.

For example, if we simply gloss the Malay word *hormat* as ‘respect’, or the German word *Angst* as ‘fear’, or the Japanese word *omoiyari* as ‘empathy’, we are necessarily distorting the Malay, German, and Japanese concepts (cf. Goddard 1996; Wierzbicka 1999: 123-167; Travis 1998). The situation does not improve if, in place of a single gloss, we produce a list; e.g. *hormat* ‘respect, deference, proper politeness’. English-specific analytical tools are necessarily blunt tools for cross-cultural analysis. The heavily culture-laden vocabulary of other languages cannot be adequately explained by any simple procedure of glossing into their apparent English translation equivalents. What we have to do is to find ways of “unpackaging” the conceptual content in terms which are both precise and non-ethnocentric. This, of course, is where semantic primes come in. Because they are maximally simple and because they are shared between languages, they can be used to explicate complex language-specific and culture-specific meanings in maximum detail and clarity, and without terminological ethnocentrism.

A similar problem arises in descriptions of discourse and culture. For example, if discourse styles are described using English-specific descriptors such as ‘indirect’, ‘formal’, or ‘polite’, or if cultures are described using abstract sociological parameters such as ‘collectivist vs. individualist’, ‘high-context vs. low-context’, ‘high power distance vs. low power distance’, etc. (cf. especially Wierzbicka 2003[1991]). The ethnocentrism is inherent in choosing terms of description which do not have equivalents in the language being described. The cultural scripts approach, which can be regarded as the pragmatic “sister theory” to NSM semantics, provides an alternative non-ethnocentric approach.

### **3. Cultural scripts and intercultural communication**

The term cultural scripts refers to a technique for articulating cultural norms, values, and practices using the NSM metalanguage of semantic primes as the medium of description (Goddard and Wierzbicka eds, 2004). Because the simple words and

grammatical patterns of NSM have equivalents in all languages, cultural scripts are accessible to both cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike. The cultural scripts technique is one of the main modes of description of “ethnopragmatics” (cf. Goddard 2004a, ed. in press), i.e. the quest to understand speech practices from the perspective of cultural insiders. For this purpose, the techniques of cross-cultural semantics are equally essential, because to understand speech practices in terms which make sense to the people concerned, we must be able to understand the meanings of the relevant culturally important words – words for local values, social categories, speech-acts, and so on (Wierzbicka 2003[1991], 1997). Despite its tightly controlled vocabulary and syntax, the NSM metalanguage is surprisingly flexible and capable of capturing small nuances of cultural meaning.

In its general orientation and “stance”, the cultural scripts approach has a lot in common with the ethnography of communication and with aspects of cultural psychology (Hymes 1962; Gumperz and Hymes eds, 1986; Shweder 1993). Its primary distinguishing characteristic is its improved methodology of representation, based on empirically established semantic primes. A secondary distinguishing characteristic, more a matter of degree than an absolute difference, is the high importance placed on linguistic evidence. Aside from the semantics of cultural key words, other kinds of linguistic evidence which can be particularly revealing of cultural norms and values include: common sayings and proverbs, frequent collocations, conversational routines and varieties of formulaic or semi-formulaic speech, discourse particles and interjections, and terms of address and reference.

The earliest explicit statement of the cultural scripts approach can be found in Wierzbicka (1994), though its roots go back to her *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics* (first published 1991, re-issued 2003). Since then a large number of individual studies have appeared, taking in languages and cultures as varied as English (in several varieties), Chinese, Ewe, French, German, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Yankunytjatjara. See, inter alia: Ameka (1994, 1999, in press), Goddard (1992, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2004b, in press), Hasada (1994, in press), Peeters (1997, 1999, 2000), Travis (2004, in press), Wierzbicka (1996*b*, 1996*c*, 1998, 1999: Ch 6, 2002*a*, 2002*b*, in press *a*, in press *b*), Wong (2004*a*, 2004*b*, in press), Ye (in press, 2004*a*, 2004*b*), Yoon (2004*a*). Over the years, various improvements have been worked through in the form and format of scripts, and this process is still ongoing [Note 4].



Cultural scripts exist at different levels of generality, and may relate to different aspects of thinking, speaking, and behaviour. We will illustrate with some relatively high-level scripts (sometimes termed “master scripts”) from Anglo, Russian, and Korean cultures. High-level scripts such as these are often closely associated with core cultural values. Although they are not directly about interaction as such, they articulate broad cultural themes which are typically played out in detail by way of whole families of related speech-practices, which themselves can be captured in detail by means of more specific scripts.

Script [A] is arguably a master script of Anglo culture, expressing a cultural preference for something like personal autonomy (Wierzbicka 2003[1991], in press *a*). It is associated with the Anglo cultural key word *freedom* (and *free*).

[A] *an Anglo cultural script connected with “personal autonomy”*

[people think like this:]

when a person does something, it is good if this person can think like this:

“I am doing this because I want to do it”

Many important Anglo speech practices flow from this script and others allied to it—above all, the avoidance of direct or “bare” imperative and the existence of a range of alternative strategies such as the prolific interrogative imperatives, so characteristic of English, and common “suggestive” formulas, such as *You might like to ...*, *Perhaps you could ...*, and *I would suggest ...*. Other related phenomena include relative avoidance of the performative use of *ask* (cf. *\*I ask you...*) and of pleading, begging, and other modes of “insistent asking”, and the existence of common disclaimer formulas, such as *It’s up to you*, *You don’t have to*, *Only if you want*, and so on. Having regard to the strongly negative impression that direct imperatives can create in Anglo culture, Wierzbicka (in press *a*) goes so far as to say:

The avoidance of the imperative in modern English and the development of an extended class of interrogative directives (so-called ‘wh-imperatives’, e.g. ‘could you/would you do X’) is a linguistic phenomenon whose cultural and linguistic significance can hardly be overestimated. It is a phenomenon which should be the subject of the first lesson in acculturation taught to every immigrant to an English-speaking country ... (Wierzbicka in press *a*).

Ethnopragmatic description of Anglo English is a pressingly urgent task, for in both scholarly and general circles there is a tendency to regard English, especially in its role as an international language, as culturally and pragmatically neutral. Nothing could be further from the truth: in its lexicon and grammar, and in its ethnopragmatic norms and values, English carries as much cultural baggage as any other language (Wierzbicka in press *b*). We will return to this issue in Section 3.

While not denying the continuities and consistencies in Anglo English, it is also important to acknowledge and to document local cultural variations in national and regional varieties of English, such as in Australian English, British English, and American English. There can be significant differences between these varieties, which can be, and often are, the cause of intercultural miscommunication and cross-talk. (The same applies, incidentally, to other “big” languages, such as Spanish, where there are significant differences between Standard (Castilian) Spanish and the Spanish(es) of Latin America.) Even more significant differences, of course, exist in “linguacultures” such as that of Singapore English, which employ varieties of English infused with values and practices altogether outside the Anglo tradition (Wong 2004a, 2004b, in press). Space does not permit us to pursue these matters here.

Script [B] is arguably a master script of Russian culture, expressing a cultural endorsement of, roughly speaking, an “expressive” stance in speech and action, and linked with the Russian key word *iskrennost'* (roughly, ‘sincerity’) (Wierzbicka 2002a).

[B]     *a Russian cultural script connected with “expressiveness”*

[people think like this:]

it is good if a person wants other people to know what this person thinks

it is good if a person wants other people to know what this person feels

Script [B] is one of a family of Russian cultural scripts which help explain and motivate the characteristically Russian preference for and appreciation of frankness of expression, uninhibited by concerns as to whether the thoughts and feelings expressed are confrontational, negative or socially unacceptable. Linguistic manifestations include various particles, interjections and response expressions (such as *Nepravda!* ‘Untruth!’, *Ty ne prav* ‘You are wrong’, *Da net* ‘emphatically no!’), and the high

frequency in Russian of words expressing extreme moral evaluation, such as *podlec*, *negodjaj*, *merzavec* ‘scoundrel, base person’ and *blagorodnyj* ‘noble, lofty’.

Societies are of course heterogeneous, and not every member of Anglo and Russian cultures would accept or endorse scripts [A] and [B], respectively. However, the claim is that even those who do not personally identify with the content of such scripts are nonetheless familiar with them, i.e. that they form part of the interpretative backdrop to discourse and social behaviour in their own particular cultural contexts.

Just as these two cultural scripts can be portrayed in English NSM, so they can equally well be portrayed in Russian NSM, as in [A1] and [A2] below. The scripts will therefore “work” equally well on both sides of the cultural fence: to help English speakers articulate their own Anglo cultural attitudes and to recognise how these differ from characteristic Russian attitudes; and equally, to help Russians articulate Russian cultural attitudes and to recognise how they differ from Anglo attitudes. This can be done in language which is culturally neutral.

[A1] *an Anglo cultural script connected with “personal autonomy”*

[ljudi dumajut tak:]

kogda čelovek čto-to delaet, xorošo, esli ètot čelovek možet dumat’ tak:

“ja delaju èto potomu, čto ja xoču èto delat”

[B2] *a Russian cultural script connected with “expressiveness”*

[ljudi dumajut tak:]

xorošo, esli čelovek xočet, čtoby drugie ljudi znali, čto ètot čelovek dumaet

xorošo, esli čelovek xočet, čtoby drugie ljudi znali, čto ètot čelovek čuvstvuet

To take an example from farther afield, script [C] can be regarded as one of the master scripts of Korean culture, capturing attitudes connected with *yeyuy* (roughly, ‘deference, decorum’). It applies in particular to interactions with *noin* (roughly, ‘respected old people’), and people from other highly regarded groups, such as teachers (Yoon 2004a).

[C] *a Korean cultural script connected with “deference”*

[people think like this:]

when I am with some people, I have to think like this:

“this person is not someone like me

this person is someone above me

because I am with this person now I cannot do some things, I cannot

say some things, I cannot say some words

if this person says to me: “I want you to do something”, I can’t say

to them: “I don’t want to do it”

if this person wants me to do something, it will be good if I do it

it will be very bad if this person feels something bad because of me”

Script [C] stipulates that certain people must be seen as unlike oneself and as “above” oneself [Note 5], that with such people one must be mindful of certain verbal and non-verbal constraints, that one cannot defy the expressed wishes of such a person (and even has a positive attitude towards complying with their wishes), and that one feels the need for caution to avoid causing such people any negative feelings. In linguistic terms, script [C] is manifested in a wide variety of Korean language practices – especially in the use of honorific words and speech-styles, but also in the use of titles and other respectful forms of address.

Needless to say, the Korean script in [C] represents a very different cultural stance to that of Russian culture. Nevertheless, the script can be rendered into Russian, as follows [Note 6].

[C1] *a Korean cultural script connected with “deference”*

[ljudi dumajut tak:]

kogda ja naxožus’ s nekotorymi ljud’mi, ja dolžen dumat’ tak:

“èti ljudi ne takie kak ja

èti ljudi vyše menja

potomu što ja naxožus’ s ètimi ljud’mi sejčas, ja ne mogu delat’ nekotorye

vešči, ja ne mogu govorit’ nekotorye vešči, ja ne mogu govorit’ nekotorye slova

esli èti ljudi skažut mne: “ja xoču što ty sdelal što-to”, ja ne mogu skazat’ im:

“ja ne xoču èto delat”

esli èti ljudi xotjat, što ty ja sdelal što-to, budet xorošo, esli ja èto sdelaju

budet očen’ ploxo, esli èti ljudi budut čuvstvovat’ što-to ploxo iz-za menja”

Conversely, the scripts from Anglo and Russian culture can be transposed into Korean.

[A2] *an Anglo cultural script connected with “personal autonomy”*

사람들은 이렇게 생각한다:

어떤 사람이 무슨 일을 할 때는, 이렇게 생각하는 것이 좋다:

“나는 이 일을 내가 하고 싶기 때문에 하고 있다”

[B2] *a Russian cultural script connected with “expressiveness”*

사람들은 이렇게 생각한다:

어떤 사람이 다른 사람들로 하여금 그 사람이 생각하는

것을 알기를 원한다면 그것은 좋은 일이다

어떤 사람이 다른 사람들로 하여금 그 사람이 느끼는

것을 알기를 원한다면 그것은 좋은 일이다

Reading these scripts from other cultures for the first time, speakers of Korean, English, and Russian often experience a sense of strangeness or unfamiliarity, because the ideas and attitudes being expressed are culturally strange. Nonetheless the scripts themselves are clearly intelligible and highly explicit. They articulate the culturally strange in terms of the linguistically familiar, i.e. in terms of simple common words whose meanings are shared between the languages concerned. This is in stark contrast to culture-specific words such as *freedom*, *iskrennost'*, and *yeyuy*, which are truly untranslatable. Needless to say, neither do cultural scripts have recourse to any value-laden language-specific terms of the sort which are commonly used in everyday talk about the impressions conveyed by foreign ways of speaking; for example, that Russians are often seen as *intense* (from an Anglo perspective), and that Anglos can be seen as *xolodnyj* (roughly) ‘cold’ and *bezdučnyj* (roughly) ‘soulless, heartless’ from a Russian perspective, or as lacking *ceng* (very roughly) ‘caring feelings, personal bonds’ from a Korean perspective.

Finally, it must be emphasised that scripts [A]–[C] are but isolated examples of high-level scripts from their respective cultures. A fuller description would include many more scripts for each culture – whole families of scripts interconnected in a variety of ways, and existing furthermore at different levels of detail and with

different degrees of situational specificity. For example, cultural scripts can deal with “rhetorical” speech practices such as active metaphor and sarcasm (Goddard 2004a, Wierzbicka 2002b), and even go down to matters of fine linguistic detail, such as the usage of terms of address, and interactional routines (cf. Wong in press; Ameka 2004; Ye 2004a, 2004b, among others).

The main point is that the NSM-based theory of cultural scripts provides a new and powerful medium for intercultural education training, which can readily adapted into any language and can be used relatively easily with speakers of any background.

#### **4. NSM English as an auxiliary international language (“nuclear English”)**

Despite the importance of having a medium of intercultural education which can be readily “indigenised” into the various languages of the world, it remains a truism that, however, that for international communication a single medium is needed and that English is increasingly fulfilling this role. The problem is that “English” is not a neutral value-free code, either at the level of its words and grammatical constructions or at the level of pragmatic norms. This applies even to so-called “international English” or “global English”. The existence of multiple “Englishes” around the world, and the fact that as a global lingua franca English is now used most extensively among “non-native” speakers complicates the picture further. Many scholars object to the imposition of “native speaker norms” (e.g. Seidlhofer 2001: 133), but it remains unclear how English can be an effective medium for international communication if it is not to be tied to some particular norms. Where would the (relative) stability, which is the prerequisite of intelligibility, come from if there were no shared code of communication?

Discussing this problem more than 25 years ago, Randolph Quirk (1981) proposed a solution in the form of an auxiliary language – “nuclear English”. This would be English stripped to the bone and freed from its historical and cultural baggage, “easier and faster to learn than any variety of natural, (full) English”, and at the same “communicatively adequate” (Quirk 1981: 155) [Note 7].

Culture-free as calculus, with no literary, aesthetic or emotional aspirations, it is correspondingly more free than the ‘national Englishes’ of any suspicion that it

smacks of linguistic imperialism or even (since native speakers of English would also have to be trained to use it) that it puts some countries at an advantage over others in international communication. Since it is not (but is merely related to) a natural language it would not be in competition for educational resources with foreign languages proper, but rather with that other fundamental interdisciplinary subject, mathematics.

Although in the intervening twenty five years Quirk himself did not seek to implement this programmatic idea, in a sense “Nuclear English” is now not only a real possibility, but a reality. NSM English, i.e. the English version of the natural semantic metalanguage, is nothing other than such a “nuclear English”. It is a subset of “full English”, easy to learn, and culture-free as calculus, with no literary, aesthetic or emotional aspirations, and in a very basic sense, communicatively adequate. At least, it meets the condition prescribed by Stein (1979: 68), in relation to Quirk’s concept of “nuclear English”, that: “its vocabulary is conceived of as self-contained: with the items included it will in principle be possible to express whatever one wants to express”. (This condition is met by the NSM in any of its versions: Russian, Korean, Chinese, Malay, Spanish, etc, as well as English.)

Could NSM English serve as a medium for international communication? Here the answer is of course: no. Certainly not in the sense envisaged by Quirk: “the emblematic consumers of Nuclear English should not be seen as Indonesian children in a village school room, but as Italian and Japanese company directors engaged in negotiating an agreement” (p. 156). One can hardly imagine Italian and Japanese company directors negotiating an agreement in NSM English (or any other version of the natural semantic metalanguage), that is, in a mini-language with just sixty-five or so words.

The key question about any “nuclear English” however—and about any language of international communication—is the question of vocabulary. Quirk (1981: 156) reluctantly avoided “issues in the lexicon”, but if lexical issues are ignored, the whole project of creating a nuclear English for international communication can be no more than a promisory note, utopian and lacking in substance. A “culture-free calculus” must be based on *universal* human concepts (otherwise, it will be culture-bound, not

culture-free), and as decades of empirical investigations carried out with the NSM framework have shown, there are only sixty-five or so such universal concepts.

One writer who has considered such issues was Gabriele Stein (1979), in her article “Nuclear English: reflections on the structure of its vocabulary”. But sensible as Stein’s reflections were, the soundness of the argument cannot make up for the absence of an empirical basis. For example, she proposed as “culture-free” lexical items for the hypothetical “nuclear English” words like *female*, *brother*, and *sister*, that is, words which are in fact exceedingly culture-specific: most languages of the world do not have a word corresponding to *female* (covering women and girls as well as bitches, cows, mares, hens, etc.); and numerous languages do not have words covering both ‘elder brothers’ and ‘younger brothers’, or ‘elder sisters’ and ‘younger sisters’, the distinction between older and younger brothers and sisters being often culturally very important. As these examples illustrate, a “nuclear English” based on the speculations of native speakers rather than an extensive cross-linguistic investigations is bound to reflect ethnocentric preconceptions.

A genuinely “culture-free” nuclear vocabulary cannot exceed the set of word meanings which constitute the intersection of the vocabularies of all languages. Although such a minimal (but truly universal) vocabulary is sufficient for the elucidation of culture-specific concepts encoded in “full” natural languages, as shown by the extensive corpus of NSM semantic studies, it is not sufficient for tasks like negotiating international agreements, conducting business negotiations, safeguarding human rights or coordinating anti-terrorism or disaster-relief operations on a global scale. For such purposes speed is as important as accuracy.

Clearly then, a truly nuclear, culture-free subset of English cannot fulfil such a role: only a much richer, larger subset of English can do that, and such a larger subset cannot be “culture-free”. In particular, culture-specific concepts like ‘negotiations’, ‘compromise’, ‘deal’, ‘agreement’, ‘efficiency’, ‘evidence’, ‘commitment’, ‘deadline’, ‘probability’, ‘performance’, ‘competition’, ‘opportunity’, ‘feasible’, ‘reasonable’ and ‘fair’ are unlikely to disappear from English-based international communication. [Note 8] On the other hand, NSM English, being culture-free, can play a useful role in the contemporary world as a universal cultural notation for elucidating meanings, ideas, assumptions, and so on, i.e. as an auxiliary language.



Three quarters of a century ago in his paper on ‘The function of an international auxiliary language’, Edward Sapir (1931: 113) wrote:

What is needed above all is a language that is as simple, as regular, as logical, as rich, and as creative as possible; a language which starts with a minimum of demands on the learning capacity of the normal individual and can do the maximum amount of work; which is to serve as a sort of logical touchstone to all national languages... . It must, ideally, be as superior to any accepted language as the mathematical method of expressing quantities and relations between quantities is to the more lumbering methods of expressing these quantities and relations in verbal form. This is undoubtedly an ideal which can never be reached, but ideals are not meant to be reached: they merely indicate the direction of movement.

Obviously, NSM English does not look exactly like what Sapir had in mind, because with its sixty-five or so lexical items, it is lexically poor rather than rich. In many other respects, however, it fits Sapir’s requirements for an ideal auxiliary language amazingly well. It is simple and can do the maximum amount of work with a minimum of demands on people’s learning capacities, and it can indeed be regarded as a logical (or cognitive) touchstone to all natural languages. It is also culturally neutral and can serve as a cultural notation for cross-cultural comparisons and explanations. While it cannot serve as a full-fledged language of intercultural communication, it can serve as an auxiliary language of intercultural training: as a “neutral” cultural notation for comparing languages and cultures.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

The original impetus behind the natural semantic metalanguage program was not motivated by the prospects of practical application. Yet as the theory has been developed and refined, its applicability and practical importance has become increasingly obvious. To learn how to use semantic primes and cultural scripts in practical settings, one does not need to be a specialist in semantics or semantic typology, or to be concerned to any great extent about the technical details or

theoretical underpinnings of the metalanguage. One does not need to be a linguist at all. The metalanguage is there “on the shelf”, as it were, ready to be used for various purposes. Of course, a certain amount of familiarisation and training is necessary, just as with learning to use any kind of equipment; and there are certain potential problems which users should be aware of and prepared for. There is an urgent need for materials and programs which can “train the trainers”, so as to promote and facilitate the application of NSM in different fields of applied cultural linguistics as surveyed in this chapter.

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## Notes

Note 1: In any case, as often pointed out, the notion of ‘word’ and ‘word frequency’ are not as simple as they may seem. Really the appropriate unit of analysis is not the word (or word-form), but rather the lexical unit, i.e. a pairing of a form and a meaning (cf. Bogaards 1996: 369-371). One cannot determine the frequency of particular lexical units by simple inspection or statistics on corpora.

Note 2: The research bibliography of NSM semantics is extensive, including literally hundreds of studies and taking in languages of Australia, Africa, the Pacific, East Asia and Southeast Asia, as well as English and other European languages. This work spans the domains of lexical semantics, grammatical semantics, and cultural pragmatics. A detailed bibliography can be found at the following website:

– <http://www.une.edu.au/arts/LCL/disciplines/linguistics/nsmpage.htm>

Note 3: The nature of early lexical syllabus is related to some extent to the pedagogical approach; for example, how “communicative” the course aims to be in the early stages. It should also be noted that particular primes may require more instructional attention in some languages than in others. For example, to introduce KNOW in German requires attention to the *wissen/kennen* distinction, to introduce YOU in Korean requires attention to multiple second-person forms and respectful address practices. Also, it is not always clear when one should count a particular prime as having made its first appearance, especially in cases where a prime has several lexical realisations (allolexes); for example, in English indefinite *someone* and interrogative *who* are separate words (both exponents of a single prime SOMEONE), but in Chinese both functions are served by a single word. In the text counts reported in this paper, we adopted a “generous” approach, i.e. in cases in which a prime has several

exponents, we counted it as having been introduced at the first appearance of the first exponent.

Note 4: Many scripts are hinged around evaluative components: ‘it is good if —’. Evaluative components can also take the form ‘it is not good if —’, ‘it is bad if —’, ‘it is not bad if —’, etc.; or other variants such as ‘it can be good if —’ and ‘it can be bad if —’. Another kind of framing component, useful for other scripts and in other contexts, concerns people’s perceptions of what they can and can’t do: ‘I can say (think, do, etc.) —’ and ‘I can’t say (think, do, etc.) —’. Lower-level, more specific, scripts are often introduced by ‘when’-components and ‘if’-components, representing relevant aspects of social context.

Note 5: Yoon (2004a) cites the following set of Korean fixed expressions, which all refer to the cultural imperative to show “respect” for certain people. The terms ‘above’ and ‘below’ are ubiquitous: *wuy ala an kali-ko* [regardless of above and below], *wuy alay pwunpyel epsi* [without thinking of above and below], *nen wuy alay-to eps-e?* [don’t you have above or below], *wuy alay-lul molu-ta* [not knowing above or below].

Note 6: For a more natural style of expression *vyše menja* ‘higher than me’ is used as a substitute for *nado mnoj* ‘above me’. Out of context, *vyše menja* could also mean ‘taller than me’, i.e. it is a polysemous expression, but in the context of the script the intended meaning is clear.

Note 7: It is ironic that such words often crop up in the very passages in which their authors denounce the “unfair” position of Anglo English in the world today. For example, Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas’ (1999) condemn as *unreasonable* the “Englishisation” of the world: “it is unreasonable to expect that Danes, Catalans or other users of English as a second language to use English supremely well” (1999: 33, quoted in Seidlhofer 2001:137). The words *reasonable* and *unreasonable* are among the most quintessentially Anglo, and untranslatable, words in the English language (Wierzbicka in press b).

Note 8: Kirkpatrick (2004) rejects Quirk's proposed "nuclear English" in favour of the opposite approach: a "Lingua Franca English" in which speakers with different mother tongues all speak according to their own native norms, yet understand each other by virtue of good will and mutual tolerance without any "standard monolithic norms" (p. 7). He sees no problem with the use of various local cultural norms: "I think it is inevitable and desirable that speakers will transfer some of the pragmatic norms of their L1 to lingua franca English" (p. 6). This seems to us unduly sanguine. What will happen when the pragmatic norms of different speakers are in conflict? For example, when one interlocutor's cultural background encourages him or her to express requests by way of bare imperatives ("do this!", "go there!", "bring me that!"), whereas another regards bare imperatives as an intolerable assault on their personal autonomy (cf. Wierzbicka in press: ch 2; Clyne 1994)?

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