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Vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people.
Linguistics is of strategic importance for the methodology of social science.
Edward Sapir

1. Cultural analysis and linguistic semantics

In his introduction to *Vocabularies of Public Life* (1992) the well-known sociologist of culture Robert Wuthnow observes: “Perhaps more than at any other time in the present century, cultural analysis lies at the center of human sciences.” A significant feature of the work in this area, according to Wuthnow, is its interdisciplinary character: “Anthropology, literary criticism, political philosophy, religious studies, cultural history, and cognitive psychology are all rich fields from which new insights can be derived.” (2)

One discipline conspicuously absent from this list is linguistics. The omission is all the more striking in that Wuthnow links “the vitality and new thinking characteristic of the current sociological studies of culture [with] the depth of interest being given to questions of language” (2). This book seeks to demonstrate that cultural analysis can also gain important new insights from linguistics, in particular from linguistic semantics, and that the semantic perspective on culture is something that cultural analysis can ill afford to ignore. The relevance of semantics is not restricted to vocabulary, but perhaps in no other area is it so clearly obvious. It is therefore on vocabulary that this book concentrates.

More than sixty years on, Edward Sapir’s profound insights, several of which serve as epigraphs to this book, have lost none of their validity or importance: first, that “language [is] a symbolic guide to culture” (Sapir 1949:162); second, that “vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a people” (27); and, third, that “linguistics is of strategic importance for the methodology of social science” (166).

2. Words and cultures

There is a very close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it. This applies in equal measure to the outer and inner aspects of life. An obvious example from the material, visible domain is that of food. It is clearly not an accident that, for example, Polish has special words for cabbage stew (*bigos*), beetroot...
soup (barszc), and plum jam (povidla), which English does not; or that English has, for example, a special word for orange (or orange-like) jam (marmalade), and Japanese a word for a strong alcoholic drink made from rice (sake). Obviously, such words can tell us something about the eating or drinking habits of the peoples in question.

The existence of language-specific names for special kinds of “things” (visible and tangible, such as food) is something that even ordinary, monolingual people are usually aware of. The existence of different customs and social institutions which have specific names in one language but not in others is also widely known. Consider, for example, the German noun Bruderschaft, literally ‘brotherhood’, which Harrap’s German and English dictionary glosses laboriously as “(to drink) the pledge of ‘brotherhood’ with someone (subsequently addressing each other as ‘du’).” Clearly, the absence of a word for “Bruderschaft” in English has something to do with the fact that English no longer makes a distinction between an intimate/familiar “thou” and a more distant “you,” and that English-speaking societies do not have a common ritual of pledging friendship through drinking.

Similarly, it is no accident that English doesn’t have a word corresponding to the Russian verb хрисосовать (literally “to Christ one another”), glossed by the Oxford Russian-English dictionary as “to exchange a triple kiss (as Easter salutation),” or that it doesn’t have a word corresponding to the Japanese word mitai, referring to a formal occasion when the prospective bride and her family meet the prospective bridgroom and his family for the first time.

Most important, what applies to material culture and to social rituals and institutions applies also to people’s values, ideals, and attitudes and to their ways of thinking about the world and our life in it.

A good example is provided by the untranslatable Russian word пощёл (adjunctive) and its derivatives (nouns) пошлость, пошлак, and пошлостицы, to which the émigré Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov (1961) devoted many pages of detailed discussion. To quote some of Nabokov’s comments:

The Russian language is able to express by means of one pitiless word the idea of a certain widespread defect for which the other three European languages I happen to know possess no special term. (64)

English words expressing several, although by no means all, aspects of poshlost [sic] are for instance: “cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin’, in bad taste.” (64)

According to Nabokov, however, these English words are inadequate, for first, they do not aim at unmasking, exposing, or denouncing “cheapness” of all kinds the way пощёлость and its cognates do; and, second, they do not have the same “absolute” implications that пощёлость does:

All these however suggest merely certain false values for the detection of which no particular shrewdness is required. In fact, they tend, these words, to supply an obvious classification of values at a given period of human history; but what Russians call

poshlost is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence (in a book, in a soul, in an institution, in a thousand other places) often escapes detection. (64)

One could say, then, that the word пощёлость (and its cognates) both reflects and documents an acute awareness of the existence of false values and of the need to deride and deflate them; but to set out its implications systematically we would need to examine its meaning in a more analytical way than Nabokov chose to do.

The Oxford Russian-English dictionary assigns to пощёл two glosses: “1. vulgar, common; 2. commonplace, trivial, trite, banal,” but this is a far cry from glosses offered in Russian dictionaries, such as the following: “низкий в душевном, нравственном отношении, маленький, низкохвальный, заурядный,” that is, “spiritually and morally base, petty, worthless, mediocretie” (SRJ), or “заурядный, низкопробный в душевном, нравственном отношении, чудовищаньших интересов и запасов,” that is, “commonplace (mediocre), base (inferior, low-grade) spiritually and morally, devoid of higher interests and needs.”

The semantic range of пощёл hinted at by the English glosses quoted earlier is remarkably wide (extending from “banal” to “morally worthless”), but what is even more remarkable is the speaker’s disgust and condemnation included in the meaning of the word пощёл, and given additional weight in the derived noun пощёлак, which writes off a person with disgust, as a spiritual nonentity “without higher interests.” (The gloss offered by the Oxford Russian-English dictionary, “vulgar person, common person,” appears to imply social prejudice, whereas in fact the condemnation is made on moral, spiritual, and, so to speak, aesthetic grounds.)

From an “Anglo” person’s point of view, the whole concept may seem as exotic as those encoded in the words уха (“fish soup”) or борщ (“Russian beetroot soup”), and yet from a Russian point of view, it is a salient, habitual mode of evaluation. To quote Nabokov again: “Ever since Russia began to think, and up to the time that her mind went blank under the influence of the extraordinary regime she has been enduring for these last twenty-five years, educated, sensitive and free-minded Russians were acutely aware of the furtive and clamorous touch of poshlost” (64).1

In fact, the peculiarly Russian concept of пощёлство may well serve as an introduction to a whole system of attitudes, a glimpse of which we can obtain by contemplating some other untranslatable Russian words like istina (roughly ‘higher truth’), душа (‘soul,’ seen as a person’s spiritual, moral, and emotional core and as an internal theatre where a person’s moral and emotional life goes on); podlec (“base person who inspires contempt”), merzavec (“base person who inspires disgust”), negodnjak (“base person who inspires indignation”); for discussion, see Wierzbicka 1992b); or osuđat’ (roughly ‘condemn’), used conversationally in sentences such as:

Ja ego osuđat’.

‘I condemn him’.

Zenčin, kak pravilo, Murzsa osuđali. Možen, v osnovnem, sočuvstvovali ej.

‘Women, as a rule, condemned Murzsa. Men tended to be sorry for her.’ (Dovlatov 1986:91)
The tendency to osuđat ('condemn') other people in conversation, to make absolute moral judgments, and to link moral judgments with emotions, is reflected in a wide variety of Russian words and expressions, as is also the cultural emphasis on “absolutes” and “higher values” in general (cf. Wierzbicka 1992b).

But although generalizations about “absolutes,” “moral passions,” “extreme value judgments,” and the like are often valid, they are also vague and slippery. It is one of the major goals of this book to replace such vague and slippery generalizations with careful systematic analysis of words’ meanings and to replace (or flesh out) impressions with evidence based on sound methodology.

The starting point, however, is obvious to the naked eye. It lies in the old insight that the meanings of words from different languages don’t match (even if they are artificially matched, faute de mieux, by the dictionaries), that they reflect and pass on ways of living and ways of thinking characteristic of a given society (or speech community) and that they provide priceless clues to the understanding of culture. No one stated this old insight better than John Locke (1959[1690]):

A moderate skill in different languages will easily satisfy one of the truth of this, it being so obvious to observe great store of words in one language which have not any that answer them in another. Which plainly shows that those of one country, by their customs and manner of life, have found occasion to make several complex ideas, and given names to them, which others never collected into specific ideas. This could not have happened if these species were the steady workmanship of nature, and not collections made and abstracted by the mind, in order to naming [sic], and for the convenience of communication. The terms of our law, which are not empty sounds, will hardly find words that answer them in the Spanish or Italian, no scanty languages; much less, I think, could any one translate them into the Caribbee or Westoe tongues; and the versura of the Romans, or corban of the Jews, have no words in other languages to answer them; the reason whereof is plain, from what has been said. Nay, if we look a little more nearly into this matter, and exactly compare different languages, we shall find out, though they have words which in translations and dictionaries are supposed to answer one another, yet there is scarce one of ten amongst the names of complex ideas ... that stands for the same precise idea which the word does that in dictionaries it is rendered by ... These are too sensible proofs to be doubted; and we shall find this much more so in the names of more abstract and compounded ideas, such as are the greatest part of those which make up moral discourses; whose names, when men come curiously to compare with those they are translated into, in other languages, they will find very few of them exactly to correspond in the whole extent of their significations. (48–49)

And in this century, Edward Sapir (1949) makes a similar point.

Languages differ widely in the nature of their vocabularies. Distinctions which seem inevitable to us may be utterly ignored in languages which reflect an entirely different type of culture, while these in turn insist on distinctions which are all but unintelligible to us.

Such differences of vocabulary go far beyond the names of cultural objects such as arrow point, coat of armor, or gunboat. They apply just as well to the mental world.

3. Different words, different ways of thinking?

In a sense, it may seem obvious that words with special, culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society but also ways of thinking. For example, in Japan, people not only talk about "mii" (using the word mii), and practice the social ritual of mii, but also think about mii (using either the word mii or the concept associated with this word). For example, in Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel (1986), the hero, Masaji Ono, thinks a great deal—in advance and in retrospect—about the mii of his younger daughter Noriko; and clearly, he thinks about it from the point of view of the conceptual category linked with the word mii (so much so that he retains this word in his English prose).

Clearly, the word mii reflects not only the existence of a certain social ritual, but also a certain way of thinking about life’s important events.

Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to pošlost. Certainly, objects and phenomena meriting this label exist—the Anglo-Saxon world of popular authors contains a rich array of phenomena which merit the label pošlost, for example the entire genre of bodice-rippers—but to call these volumes pošlost would mean to view them through the prism of a conceptual category provided by the Russian language.

If a sophisticated witness like Nabokov tells us that Russians often think about such things in terms of the conceptual category pošlost, we have no reason not to believe him—given that the Russian language itself provides objective evidence for this claim in the form of the whole family of words, pošlj, pošlost, pošljak, pošlačka, and pošlatina.

It is often debated whether words encapsulating culture-specific conceptual categories such as pošlost “reflect” or “shape” ways of thinking, but the debate seems misconceived: clearly, they do both. Just as the word mii both reflects and encourages a certain perspective on human actions and events, so does pošlost. Culture-specific words are conceptual tools that reflect a society’s past experience of doing and thinking about things in certain ways; and they help to perpetuate these ways. As a society changes, these tools, too, may be gradually modified and discarded. In that sense, the outlook of a society is never wholly “determined” by its stock of conceptual tools, but it is clearly influenced by them.

Similarly, the outlook of an individual is never fully “determined” by the conceptual tools provided by his or her native language, partly because there are always alternative ways of expressing oneself. But a person’s conceptual perspective on life is clearly influenced by his or her native language. Obviously, it is not an accident that Nabokov views both life and art partly in terms of pošlost whereas Ishiguro does not; or that Ishiguro thinks about life in terms of concepts such as ‘on’ (cf. chapter 6, section 4), whereas Nabokov does not.

To people with an intimate knowledge of two (or more) different languages and cultures, it is usually self-evident that language and patterns of thought are interlinked (cf. Hunt & Benajji 1988). To question the validity of the link on the basis of an alleged lack of evidence is to misunderstand the nature of evidence which is relevant in this context. The fact that neither brain science nor computer science has anything to say about links between ways of speaking and ways of thinking and about differences in ways of thinking associated with different languages and cultures hardly proves that
such links and differences do not exist. Nonetheless, monolingual popular opinion, as well as the opinion of some cognitive scientists with little interest in languages and cultures, can be quite emphatic in their denial of the existence of such links and differences.

One particularly striking example of such a denial is provided by the recent linguistic best-seller by MIT psychologist Steven Pinker, whose book, *The Language Instinct* (1994), is hailed on the cover as “superb,” “dazzling,” and “brilliant,” and praised (on the cover) by Noam Chomsky as “an extremely valuable book, very informative, and very well written.” Pinker (1994:58) writes:

> As we shall see in this chapter, there is no scientific evidence that languages dramatically shape their speakers’ ways of thinking. The idea that language shapes thinking seemed plausible when scientists were in the dark about how thinking works or even how to study it. Now that cognitive scientists know how to think about thinking, there is less of a temptation to equate it with language just because words are more palatable than thoughts. (58)

Pinker’s book certainly offers no evidence of possible differences in thinking linked with different languages—but it is hard to see how it shows that “there is no such evidence.” To begin with he never looks at any languages other than English. In general, the book is conspicuous for its complete lack of interest in other languages and other cultures, highlighted by the fact that of 517 works cited in Pinker’s references, all are in English.

In his condemnation of the theory of “linguistic relativity,” Pinker doesn’t mince words: “It is wrong, all wrong,” he declares (57). He ridicules the proposition that “the foundational categories of reality are not in the world but are imposed by one’s culture (and hence can be challenged . . .)” (57), and doesn’t even consider the possibility that while some categories may be innate, others may indeed be imposed by culture. He also dismisses in its entirety the views put forward by Whorf (1956) in the famous passage that deserves to be quoted once again:

> We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organise it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.* (213)

Undoubtedly, there is a good deal of exaggeration in this passage (as I will discuss later). Yet no one with genuine cross-cultural experience could deny that it also contains a great deal of truth.

Pinker says that “the more you examine Whorf’s arguments, the less sense they make” (60). But what matters is not whether Whorf’s specific examples and analytical comments are convincing. (On this point there is now general agreement that they are not; in particular, Malinowski [1983] has shown that Whorf’s ideas about the Hopi language were misguided.) But Whorf’s main thesis is that “we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages,” and that “we cut nature up [in ways] codified in the patterns of our language,” contains a profound insight which will be recognized by anybody whose experiential horizon extends significantly beyond the boundaries of his or her native language.

Pinker dismisses not only the “strong version” of Whorf’s (and Sapir’s) theory, which claims that “people’s thoughts are determined by the categories made available by their language,” but also the “weak version,” which claims that “differences among languages cause differences in the thoughts of their speakers” (57).

When someone asserts that thought is independent of language, this usually means in practice that the words of his or her native language are absolutized and treated as adequate labels for supposed human “categories for thought” (cf. Lutz 1990). *The Language Instinct* is no exception in this respect. Pinker (1994) writes: “since mental life goes on independently of particular languages, concepts of freedom and equality will be thinkable even if they are nameless” (82). But as I will show in chapter 3, the concept of ‘freedom’ is not independent of particular languages (being different, for example, from the Roman concept of ‘libertas’ or the Russian concept of ‘svoboda’).

It is shaped by culture and history, and it is part of the shared heritage of the speakers of English. It is indeed an example of that ‘implicit agreement’ of the members of one particular speech community that Whorf was talking about in the passage so emphatically dismissed by Pinker.

Whorf certainly went too far when he said that the world is presented to us “in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions,” because evidence (in particular, linguistic evidence) suggests that the distinction between “who” and “what” (“someone” and “something”) is universal and does not depend on the way people in this or that culture “cut nature up” (see Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994).

But the expression “kaleidoscopic flux of impressions” was perhaps a picturesque overstatement. In fact, Whorf (1956) did not claim that all the “foundational categories of reality” are “imposed by one’s culture.” On the contrary, in some of his writings at least, he recognized the existence of a “common stock of conceptions” underlying all different languages of the world:

> The very existence of such a common stock of conceptions, possibly possessing a yet unstudied arrangement of its own, does not yet seem to be greatly appreciated; yet to me it seems to be a necessary concomitant of the communicability of ideas by language; it holds the principle of this communicability, and is in a sense the universal language to which the various specific languages give an entrance. (36)

Whorf may also have exaggerated the differences between languages and cultures and the conceptual universes associated with them, and the degree to which the terms of the agreement that holds throughout a speech community “are absolutely obligatory.” We can always find a way around the canonical “terms of agreement” by using paraphrases and circumlocutions of one kind or another. But this can only be done at
a cost (by using longer, more complex, more cumbersome expressions than those which we can use relying on the habitual ways of speaking offered to us by our native language). Moreover, we can only try to avoid those conventions of which we are conscious. More often than not, the grip of people’s native language on their thinking habits is so strong that they are no more aware of the conventions to which they are party than they are of the air they breathe; and when others try to draw their attention to these conventions they may even go on with a seemingly unshakable self-assurance to deny their existence. Once again the point is well illustrated by the experience of those who have had to adapt to life in a different culture and a different language, like the Polish-American writer Eva Hoffman (1989), whose “semiotic memoir” Lost in translation: A life in a new language should be required reading for all those professing an interest in this subject:

“If you’ve never eaten a real tomato, you’ll think that the plastic tomato is the real thing, and moreover, you’ll be perfectly satisfied with it,” I tell my friends. “It’s only when you’ve tasted them both that you know there’s a difference, even though it’s almost impossible to describe.” This turns out to be the most persuasive argument I have. My friends are moved by the parable of the plastic tomato. But when I try to apply it, by analogy, to the internal realm, they balk. Surely, inside our heads and souls things are more universal, the ocean of reality one and indivisible. No, I shout in every one of our arguments, no! There’s a world out there; there are worlds. There are shapes of sensibility incommensurate with each other, topographies of experience one cannot guess from within one’s own limited experience.

I think my friends often suspect me of a perverse refusal to play along, an unaccountable desire to provoke and disturb their comfortable consensus. I suspect that the consensus is trying to colonize me and rob me of my distinctive shape and flavor. Still, I have to come to terms with it somehow. Now that I’m no longer a visitor, I can no longer ignore the terms of reality prevailing here, or sit on the margins observing the curious habits of the natives. I have to learn how to live with them, find a common ground. It is my fear that I have to yield too much of my own ground that fills me with such a passionate energy of rage. (204)

The personal insights of bilingual and bicultural insiders such as Hoffman echo analytical insights of scholars with a broad in-depth knowledge of different languages and cultures such as Sapir (1949), who wrote that in every large community “a mode of thinking, a distinctive type of reaction, gets itself established, in the course of a complex historical development, as typical, as normal” (311), and that since such distinctive habitual modes of thinking become entrenched in language, “the philosopher needs to understand language if only to protect himself against his own language habits” (165).

“People can be forgiven for overrating language,” says Pinker (1994:67). They can also be forgiven for underrating it. But the conviction that one can understand human cognition, and human psychology in general, on the basis of English alone seems shortsighted, if not downright ethnocentric.

The field of emotions well illustrates the trap involved in the attempt to reach for human universals on the basis of one’s native language alone. A typical scenario (where “P” stands for “psychologist” and “L” for “linguist”) runs as follows:

P: Sadness and anger are universal human emotions.
L: Sadness and anger are English words, which don’t have equivalents in all other languages. Why should these English words—rather than some words from language X, for which English has no equivalents—capture correctly some emotional universals?
P: It doesn’t matter whether other languages have words for sadness and anger or not. Let’s not deify words! I am talking about emotions, not about words.
L: Yes, but in talking about these emotions you are using culture-specific English words, and thus you are introducing an Anglo perspective on emotions into your discussion.
P: I don’t think so. I am sure that people in those other cultures also experience sadness and anger, even if they don’t have words for them.
L: Maybe they do experience sadness and anger, but their categorization of emotions is different from that reflected in the English lexicon. Why should the English taxonomy of emotions be a better guide to emotional universals than that embodied in some other language?
P: Let’s not exaggerate the importance of language.

To show the reader that this dialogue is not fictitious, let me quote from a recent rejoinder by the distinguished psychologist Richard Lazarus (1995) directed, inter alia, at myself:

Wierzbitzka suggests that I underestimate the depth of cultural variation in emotion concepts as well as the problem of language. (255)

Words have power to influence, yet—as in the Whorfian hypotheses writ large—they cannot override the life conditions that make people sad or angry, which they can sense to some extent without words. . . .

I am suggesting, in effect, that all people experience anger, sadness, and so forth, regardless of what they call it. . . . Words are important, but we must not deify them. (259)

Unfortunately, by refusing to pay attention to words, and to semantic differences between words from different languages, scholars who take this position end up doing precisely what they wished to avoid, that is, “deifying” some words from their own native language and reifying the concepts encapsulated in them. Thus, unwittingly, they illustrate once again how powerful the grip of our native language on our thinking habits can be.

To assume that people in all cultures have the concept of ‘sadness’ even if they have no word for it is like assuming that people in all cultures have a concept of ‘marmalade’ and moreover, that this concept is somehow more relevant to them than the concept of ‘plum jam’, even if they happen to have a word for the latter but not the former.

In fact, the concept of ‘anger’ is no more universal than the Italian concept of ‘rabbia’ or the Russian concept of ‘gnev’. (For detailed discussion of rabbia, see Wierzbitzka 1995; for gnev, see Wierzbitzka in press b.) To say this is not to argue against the existence of human universals but to call for a cross-linguistic perspective in trying to identify and map them.
4. Cultural elaboration and the lexicon

Since before Boas first mentioned four Eskimo words for “snow," anthropologists have taken elaboration of vocabulary as an indication of the interests of particular cultures and of differences among them. (Hymes 1964:167)

Since Hymes wrote this, the familiar example of Eskimo words for snow has since been called into question (Pullum 1991), but the validity of the general principle of “cultural elaboration” would seem to be unassailable. Some illustrations of the principle have not stood the test of time, but one doesn’t have to be persuaded, for example, by all of Herder’s (1966[1772]) illustrations to be able to accept and admire his basic insight:

Each [language] in its own way is both lavish and lacking, but, to be sure, each in its own way. If the Arabs have so many words for stone, camel, sword, snake (things amongst which they live), the language of Ceylon, in accordance with the inclination of its people, is rich in flatteries, titles, and verbal décor. For the term “woman” it has, according to rank and class, twelve different names, while we discourteous Germans, for example, are forced in this to borrow from our neighbors. According to class, rank, and number, “you” is rendered in sixteen different ways, and this as well in the language of the journeyman as in that of the courtier. Profusion is the style of the language. In Siam there are eight different ways of saying “I” and “we,” depending on whether the master speaks to the servant or the servant to the master. . . . Each one of these synonyms is linked to custom, character, and origin of the people; and everywhere the inventive human spirit reveals itself. (154-155)

Yet not only some of the illustrations but even the principle of cultural elaboration itself has recently come under attack, although at times the attackers seem unable to make up their minds as to whether it is false or, rather, a boring truism.

For example, Pinker (1994) writes, with reference to Pullum (1991): “Speaking of anthropological canards, no discussion of language and thought would be complete without the Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax. Contrary to popular belief, the Eskimos do not have more words for snow than do speakers of English” (64). Yet Pullum himself ridicules the references to the reported multiplicity of Eskimo words for snow in rather different terms: “Utterly boring, even if true. Only the link to those legendary, promiscuous, blubber-gnawing hunters of the ice-packs could permit something this trite to be presented to us for contemplation” (quoted in Pinker 1994:65).

What Pullum seems to overlook is that once the principle of cultural elaboration has been established as valid on the basis of “boring” examples, it can then be applied to areas whose patterning is less obvious to the naked eye. This is the reason (or at least one of the reasons) why language can be, as Sapir put it, a guide to “social reality,” or a guide to culture in the broad sense of the word (including ways of living, thinking, and feeling).

If someone finds it boring that, for example, the Hanunóo language of the Philippines has ninety different words for rice (Conklin 1957), that is their problem. To those who do not find the comparison of cultures boring, the principle of cultural elaboration is of fundamental importance. Since it is highly relevant to this book (in particular, to the chapter on “friendship”), I will illustrate the principle here with some examples from Dixon’s book, The languages of Australia (1980).

As would be expected, Australian languages have a rich vocabulary for describing culturally important objects. . . . Australians typically have terms referring to different kinds of sand, but perhaps no unspecified lexeme corresponding to the English word sand. There are often many terms for referring to parts of emus and eels, among other animals; and there may be specific terms for each of the four or five stages of chrysalis that are recognized to intervene between grub and beetle. (103-104)

There are verbs which distinguish culturally important actions—for instance, one verb will refer to ‘spearing’ in cases where the spear is aimed into its trajectory by means of a wheemna, another when it is held in the hand and the actor can see what he is aiming at, another when the speaker makes fairly random jabs in, say, thick grass in which he has seen a movement (none of these verb roots will be related in any way to the noun ‘spear’, unlike the situation in English). (106)

One lexical area in which Australian languages excel concerns names for types of noise. For instance, I was able easily to record around three dozen lexemes in Yidiny referring to kinds of noise, including dalma ‘sound of cutting’, mida ‘the noise of a person clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, or the noise of an eel hitting the water’, mara ‘the noise of hands being clapped together’, nyarruga ‘the noise of talking heard a long way off when the words cannot quite be made out’, yuyu ‘the noise of a snake sliding through the grass’, gagg ‘the noise of some person approaching, e.g. the sound of his feet on leaves or through the grass, or even the sound of a walking stick being dragged along the ground’. (105)

Above all, Dixon emphasizes (with reference to Kenneth Hale’s comments), the great elaboration of kinship terminology in Australian languages, and its cultural significance.

Hale also notes that it is natural to find cultural elaboration reflected in lexical structures. Among the Warlpiri, for instance, where the algebra of kinship plays an intellectual role similar to that which mathematics plays in other parts of the world, one finds a flourishing, even vibrant, elaboration of kinship nomenclature which succeeds in enabling knowledgeable Warlpiris to articulate a truly impressive array of principles which inhere in the system as a whole—this elaboration, incidentally, goes far beyond the strictly practical needs of Warlpiri society, thereby revealing its true status as an intellectual field capable of providing considerable satisfaction to those individuals who, as they go through life, become increasingly expert in it. . . . Similar remarks apply to many other Australian tribes. (108)

It is hard to believe that anyone could indeed find these examples of cultural elaboration boringly obvious or uninteresting, but if someone does, there is really little point in arguing with them about it.

5. Word frequencies and cultures

Although elaboration of vocabulary is undoubtedly a key indicator of the specific features of cultures, it is of course not the only one. A related one that is often
The generalization which emerges from these figures (concerning a whole family of words) is loud and clear, and it is entirely consistent with generalizations made independently, on the basis of nonquantitative data: that Russian culture encourages "direct," sharp, undiluted value judgments, whereas Anglo culture does not. It is also consistent with other statistical data, such as, for example, those concerning the use of the hyperbolic adverbs absoljuto 'absolutely' and soveršeno 'utterly/perfectly' and their English counterparts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English (K &amp; F/C et al.)</th>
<th>Russian</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wholly</td>
<td>vse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>absolutely</td>
<td>absoljuto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utterly</td>
<td>soveršeno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perfectly</td>
<td>absolutely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One further example: the use of the words **terribly** and **awfully** in English and the words **strašno** and **užasno** in Russian:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English (K &amp; F/C et al.)</th>
<th>Russian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>terribly</td>
<td>užasno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awfully</td>
<td>strašno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horribly</td>
<td>2/1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If one adds to this the fact that Russian also has the hyperbolic noun *užas* 'terribly' (literally 'terror/horrors'), with a high frequency of 80, and with no counterpart in English at all, the difference between the two cultures in their attitudes to "overstatement" becomes even more striking.

Similarly, if we notice that one English dictionary (K & F) records 132 occurrences of *truth*, whereas another (C et al.) records only 37, we may at first be dismayed by the difference. When we discover, however, that the figure for the closest Russian counterpart of *truth*, namely, *pravda*, is 579, we will probably be less inclined to dismiss the differences as "accidental."

Anybody who is familiar with both Anglo culture (in any of its varieties) and Russian culture knows intuitively that *rodina* is (or at least has been until recently) a common Russian word and that the concept encoded in it is culturally salient—much more so than the English word *homeland* and the concept encoded in it. It is hardly surprising that frequency data, however untrustworthy they may be in general, confirm this. Similarly, the fact that Russians tend to talk about "pravda" more commonly than speakers of English talk about "truth" can hardly come as a surprise to people familiar with both cultures. The lexical fact that Russian also has another word for something like "truth", namely, *istina*, even though the frequency of *istina* (79), unlike that of *pravda*, is not spectacularly high, provides additional evidence for the salience of this general theme in Russian culture. Without wishing to undertake a proper semantic analysis of either *pravda* or *istina* here, I might say that *istina* refers not just to "truth" but rather to something like "the ultimate truth," "the hidden truth" (cf. Mondry & Taylor 1992, Smolev 1996), and that it occurs, characteristically, in combination with the word *iskat* 'seek', as in the first of the following two examples:

Zolota mne ne možno, ja išču odnoj istiny. (Alexander Pushkin, *Sceny iz rycarskich vremen*).

'I don’t need gold, I only seek the truth [*istina*].'

Ja po-prežnemu verju v dobro, v istinu. (Ivan Turgenev, *Dvorjanskoe gnezdo*).

'As before, I believe in the good, in truth [*istina*].'

*Istina* xoroša, da i *pravda* ne xoda. (Dal', 1882)

'Concept is good, but *pravda* is not bad either.'
Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words

But if the characteristically Russian concept of ‘istina’ (“absolute truth”) plays a significant role in Russian culture, the concept of ‘pravda’ is even more central to it, as the numerous proverbs and sayings (many of them rhymed) illustrate (the first example is from SRJ and the others from Dal’ (1955[1882]):

Pravda glaza kolet.
‘Truth burns (pierces) the eyes.’

Bez pravdy žit’ legče, da pomirat’ tjaželo.
‘Without truth, it is easier to live, but hard to die.’

Vse minetsja, odna pravda ostanetsja.
‘Everything will pass, only truth remains.’

Varvara mne tetka, a pravda sestra.
‘Barbara is my aunt, but truth is my sister.’

Bez pravdy ne žit’e, a vyt’e.
‘Without truth, life is one long howl.’

Pravda so dina morja vynosit.
‘Truth will uplift you from the bottom of the sea.’

Pravda iz vody, iz ognja spasaet.
‘Truth will rescue you from flood and fire.’

Za pravdu ne sudis’: skin’ šapku da poklonis’.
‘Don’t take anyone to court for truth but take off your hat and bow.’

Zavali pravdu zolotom, zatopči ee v grjaz’ - vse naružu vyjde.
‘You can bury truth in gold or trample it in the mud, but it will still out.’

Xleb-sol’ kušaj, a pravdu slušaj!
‘Eat bread-and-salt, but heed the truth!’

This is just a small selection. The Dal’ (1955[1882]) dictionary of proverbs has dozens more concerning pravda—and dozens of others concerning its opposites, vrat’ and lgoat’ (some of them excusing and justifying lying as a necessary concession to life, despite the supreme splendor of the truth).

Xoroša svjataja pravda—da v ljudi ne goditsja.
‘The holy truth is good—but it is not for people.

Nc vsjaku pravdu žene skazyvaj.
‘Don’t tell every kind of truth to your wife’.

Similarly revealing are common collocations such as, above all, pravda-matka ‘truth-mother’ and pravda-matuxša (matesku being a tender, peasant-style diminutive for ‘mother’), which are often used in combination with the verbs govorit’ ‘speak’ or rezat’ ‘cut’ (i.e. ‘speak’ (see Dal’ 1955[1882] and 1977[1862]); or in the phrase rezat’ pravdu v glaza ‘to throw the cutting truth into a person’s face’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{pravdu-matku} & \quad \text{(matuxša)} & \quad \text{govorit’} & \quad \text{(rezat’)} \\
\text{truth-ACC-mother-ACC} & \quad \text{mother-DIM-ACC} & \quad \text{speak} & \quad \text{(cut)} \\
\text{to speak (to cut) the mother-truth’} & \\
\text{rezat’ pravdu v glaza} & \quad \text{to cut truth-ACC into eyes-ACC} & \quad \text{to speak the full (painful) truth to someone’s face, without any attempt to soften or hedge it}
\end{align*}
\]

The idea of vigorously throwing the whole “cutting truth into another person’s face” (“to their eyes”), combined with the view that the “full truth” must be loved, cherished, and respected like a mother, is at variance with Anglo cultural norms, which value “tact,” “white lies,” “minding one’s own business,” and so on. But as the linguistic evidence mentioned here indicates, it is part and parcel of Russian culture. The sentence:

Ljublu pravdu-matšku.
‘I love the truth-the-(dear-little)-mother’

cited in SSRJ is equally revealing of the traditional Russian preoccupation with and attitude toward truth.

I am not saying that a society’s cultural preoccupations and values will always be reflected in common words, and in particular in abstract nouns such as pravda ‘truth’ and sud’ba ‘fate’. Sometimes they will be reflected, rather, in particles, interjections, set phrases, or speech formulae (cf. e.g. Pawley & Syder 1983). Some words may be culturally revealing without being very common.

Frequency is not everything, but it is important and revealing. Frequency dictionaries are only broadly indicative of cultural salience, and they can only be used as one among many sources of information about a society’s cultural preoccupations. But it would be foolish to ignore them altogether. They tell part of the story. For their message to be fully understood and correctly interpreted, however, figures have to be considered in the context of an in-depth analysis of meanings.

6. Key words and core cultural values

Next to “cultural elaboration” and “frequency,” another important principle linking vocabulary and culture is the principle of “key words” (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1968[1940], Williams 1976, Parkin 1982, Moeran 1989). In fact, the three principles are interrelated.

“Key words” are words which are particularly important and revealing in a given
culture. For example, in my Semantics, culture and cognition (Wierzbicka 1992b) I tried to show that the Russian words sudba (roughly ‘fate’), duša (roughly ‘soul’), and toska (roughly, ‘melancholy-cum-yearning’) play a particularly important role in Russian culture and offer invaluable insight into this culture.

There is no finite set of such words in a language, and there is no “objective discovery procedure” for identifying them. To show that a particular word is of special importance in a given culture, one has to make a case for it. Evidence is necessary for each such claim, of course, but evidence is one thing and a “discovery procedure” is another. For example, it would be ridiculous to criticize Ruth Benedict for the special attention she paid to the Japanese words giri and on, or Michelle Rosaldo, for her special attention to the Ilongot word liget, on the grounds that neither of them explained what led her to the conclusion that these words were worth focusing on, or justified her choice in terms of some general discovery procedures. What matters is whether or not Benedict’s and Rosaldo’s choices led them to significant insights recognized by others familiar with the cultures in question.

How can one justify the claim that a particular word is one of a culture’s “key words”? To begin with, one may want to establish (with or without the help of a frequency dictionary) that the word in question is a common word, not a marginal word. One may also want to establish that the word in question (whatever its overall frequency) is very frequently used in one particular semantic domain, for example, in the domain of emotions, or in the domain of moral judgments. Furthermore, one may want to show that this word is at the center of a whole phraseological cluster, such as the following one in the case of the Russian word duša (cf. Wierzbicka 1992b): na duše (‘on the soul’), v duše (‘in the soul’), po duši (‘after the soul’), duša v dušu (‘soul to soul’), izlii dušu (‘to pour out one’s soul’), otvesti dušu (‘to relieve one’s soul’), obrat’ dušu (‘to open one’s soul’), duša naraspast (‘a wide-open soul’, that is, ‘a communicative, sincere, frank person’), razgovor i po dušam (‘to talk from soul to soul, that is, very intimately’), and so on. One may also be able to show that the proposed “key word” occurs frequently in proverbs, in sayings, in popular songs, in book titles, and so on.

But the question is not how to “prove” whether or not a particular word is one of the culture’s key words, but rather to be able to say something significant and revealing about that culture by undertaking an in-depth study of some of them. If our choice of words to focus on is not “inspired” we will simply not be able to demonstrate anything of interest.

Using “key words” as an approach to the study of culture may be criticized as an “atomistic” pursuit, inferior to “holistic” approaches targeting more general cultural patterns rather than “a random selection of individual words.” An objection of this kind could be valid with respect to some “studies in words” if these studies are indeed just a “random selection of individual words,” viewed as isolated lexical items.

As this book hopes to show, however, a study of a culture’s “key words” need not be undertaken in an old-fashioned atomistic spirit. On the contrary, some words can be studied as focal points around which entire cultural domains are organized. By exploring these focal points in depth we may be able to show the general organizing principles which lend structure and coherence to a cultural domain as a whole, and which often have an explanatory power extending across a number of domains.

A key word such as duša (roughly ‘soul’) or sudba (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. For example, sudba leads us to other “fate-related” words such as súdenno, smirenne, učast’, řebří, and rok, to collocations such as udary sudby (roughly ‘blows of fate’) and to set phrases such as níčego ne podelela (‘you can’t do anything’), to grammatical constructions such as the whole plethora of impersonal dative-cum-infinitive constructions, highly characteristic of Russian syntax, to numerous proverbs, and so on (for detailed discussion, see Wierzbicka 1992b).

Similarly, a key word such as enryo (roughly ‘interpersonal restraint’), on (roughly ‘debt of gratitude’) and omoi (roughly ‘beneficent empathy’) in Japanese can lead us to the center of a whole complex of cultural values and attitudes, expressed, inter alia, in common conversational routines and revealing a whole network of culture-specific “cultural scripts” (cf. Wierzbicka in press a).

7. “Culture”—a perilous idea?

The idea that cultures can be interpreted in part through their key words may be attacked by questioning the notion of “key words” or the notion of “culture.” To dwell for a moment on the second of these.

In the current debate on “culture,” many voices have challenged the notion of “culture” itself, presenting it as a “perilous idea.” One influential writer, Eric Wolf (1994), refers in this context to Franz Boas as someone who appreciated, ahead of his time, “the heterogeneity and the historically changing interconnectedness of cultures” and was therefore able to see cultures as a “problem and not a given”:

Just as Boas had disaggregated racial typologies and scrupulously severed considerations of race from considerations of culture, so he argued against the common presupposition that each culture constituted a distinctive and separate moral sui generis. Since all cultures could be shown to be interconnected and continually exchanging materials, no culture was due to “the genius of a single people” (Boas, quoted in Stocking 1968:213). Since cultures were also forever breaking up and differentiating, it was not very useful to speak of culture in general; cultures needed to be studied in all their plurality and particular historicity, including their interconnectedness. (5)

Wolf charges that subsequently, anthropologists failed to fully appreciate the importance, and the full implications, of these points:

Anthropologists have . . . taken seriously Boas’s point about oppositions and contradictions in culture but have done little thinking about how these heterogeneous and contradictory perspectives and discourses can intersect, how divergent interests and orientations can be made to converge, how the organization of diversity is accom-
“immutable essences with fixed contours”? Aren’t they, too, cross-cutting, overlapping, and ever evolving?

Indeed they are. Yet to declare, for this reason, that the concept of “one language” (for example, French or Russian or Japanese) is a total fiction, misguided and probably reactionary, too, would be carrying theoretical extremism to the point of absurdity.

For those who do not acquire two languages by “immersion” but have to learn them by their own effort, the news that there is no such thing as “another language” might bring some relief (no need to study any further) but hardly much benefit. If people didn’t believe in the existence of “other languages,” then—a part from those bilingual by birth or circumstances—we would all be monolingual.

In fact, as Wallerstein (1994) himself pointed out, for different ethnic communities in a multicultural society (such as the United States), the news that the notion of “another language” is a total fiction would hardly be good news either (no more funding, perhaps, for Spanish language schools, there being no such thing as “the Spanish language”).

Groupism is also the expression of democratic liberation, of the demand of the underdogs (those geographically defined as lesser breeds) for equal rights in the polis. This expresses itself, for example, in the call for “multiculturalism” in the United States and its equivalents elsewhere. The “universalist” response to multiculturalism—the call for “integration” of all “citizens” into a single “nation”—is of course a deeply conservative reaction, seeking to suppress the democratic demand in the name of liberalism.

No language can be a better example of heterogeneity and lack of “fixed contours” than English. But does this mean that there is really no such thing as “English” and that there are only “the world’s Englishes”?

There are undeniable differences between Australian English, American English, Indian English, and various other “Varieties of English Around the World” (to use the title of an important linguistic book series), but if these different “Englishes” were not perceived as different “varieties of English,” then on what basis would they be grouped together as “Englishes”? Even if their presumed common core was not fully identifiable in terms of a finite list of features, “with fixed contours,” would this mean that the notion of “English” has no content at all? To take a familiar example, the phenomenon of “baldness,” too, has no fixed contours (for people with 30,000 hairs on their head are not bald, and neither are people with 29,999, or 29,998, and so on). This doesn’t mean, however, that there are no bald people in the world, for “baldness” depends on the number of hairs but on the overall impression that a person’s scalp makes on other people.

Languages may be heterogeneous (to a varying degree) and may lack fixed contours, but this doesn’t mean that they are total fictions; and it is in a clash with another language that the distinctness of a language (as a separate identity) reveals itself.

To quote another sophisticated bilingual, the semiotician Tzvetan Todorov (a Bulgarian living in Paris):

Depuis que les sociétés humaines existent, elles entretiennent des relations mutuelles. Pas plus qu’on ne peut imaginer les hommes vivant d’abord isolément et ensuite
Introduction

...tions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (89).

There is no need to invoke “a little cultural homunculus built into everyone through the process of socialization” (Wolf 1994) to recognize the validity of “a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms... by means of which people communicate and develop... their attitudes toward life.”

For example, the Russian word sudba expresses a historically transmitted conception of life by means of which Russian people communicate about people’s lives and develop their attitudes toward life. The word sudba (with its high frequency in Russian speech) provides both evidence of this inherited conception and a key to its understanding.

Language—and in particular, vocabulary—is the best evidence of the reality of “culture,” in the sense of a historically transmitted system of “conceptions” and “attitudes.” Of course, culture is, in principle, heterogeneous and changeable, but so is language.

In the second chapter of this book I will study different conceptions of interpersonal relations historically transmitted in a few different cultures (“Anglo,” Russian, Polish, and Australian) and reflected in key words. The inclusion of both “Anglo” and “Australian” cultures brings us face to face with the issue of unity and heterogeneity: Australian culture is associated with the English language, as is also “Anglo” culture in Britain, America, and elsewhere. Both the unity and diversity of “Anglo” culture are reflected in the lexicon: the unity in the pan-English word friend, and the diversity in the Australian-English word mate (with its own semantic profile and high cultural salience).

Furthermore, the changeability of culture is also reflected in the lexicon: although the word friend itself has remained stable in Anglo culture for several centuries, I show in chapter 2 that its meaning has changed (as reflected in its range of use, its collocations, and indeed its syntax)—in accord with independently established changes in the prevailing conceptions concerning interpersonal relations. (I am referring here not to the emergence of the new words boyfriend and girlfriend, revealing as they are of the changed patterns of living and of changed expectations and attitudes, but to the far less obvious changes in the meaning of the word friend as such.)

To say that “culture has no describable content” is to imply that culture cannot be taught. Languages CAN be taught, despite their lack of fixed contours, because they do have a describable core (in the form of basic vocabulary and basic rules of grammar). To say that cultures have no content and to imply thereby that they cannot be taught may seem a very liberal and enlightened position, but in fact the advocacy of this position hampers the possibility of cross-cultural understanding.

Progress in cross-cultural communication will not be born out of slogans emphasizing only heterogeneity and changeability of cultures and denying the reality of different cultural norms and patterns (in the name of “deconstruction,” misguided universalism, or whatever). Progress in cross-cultural understanding requires a basis in well-founded studies of different cultural norms and historically transmitted patterns of meaning.
The reality of both linguistic and cultural norms becomes evident when they are violated, as often happens in cross-cultural encounters. To deny the reality of such rules is to indulge in academic scholasticism at the expense of persons and social groups (including, in particular, the ethnic underdogs) for whom successful cross-cultural communication is a matter of existential necessity (cf. e.g. Kataoka 1991; Darder 1995; Harkins 1994; cf. also Wierzbicka 1991a, chapter 2 and in press a).

The evidence for the reality of cultural norms and shared concepts is provided by language and, in particular, by the meanings of words. Linguistic semantics provides a rigorous methodology for decoding such meanings and, consequently, for elucidating for cultural outsiders the tacit assumptions which are linked with them.

8. Linguistic and conceptual universals

To compare the meanings of words from different languages (such as, for example, pravda and truth, or duša and soul), we need a tertium comparationis, that is, a common measure. If the meanings of ALL words were culture-specific, then cultural differences could not be explored at all. The “hypothesis of linguistic relativity” makes sense only if it is combined with a well thought out “hypothesis of linguistic universality”: only well-established linguistic universals can provide a valid basis for comparing conceptual systems entrenched in different languages and for elucidating the meanings which are encoded in some languages (or language) but not in others.

The idea of conceptual universals as a possible “common measure” for comparing semantic systems is inherent, at least in embryonic form, in Leibniz’s (1961[1903]) conception of “an alphabet of human thoughts”:

Although the number of ideas which can be conceived is infinite, it is possible that the number of those which can be conceived by themselves is very small; because an infinite number of anything can be expressed by combining very few elements. . . . The alphabet of human thoughts is the catalogue of those concepts which can be understood by themselves, and by whose combination all our other ideas are formed. (430)

Being a firm believer in the “psychic unity of humankind” (founded on the universal “alphabet of human thoughts”), Leibniz recommended comparative study of different languages of the world as a way to discover the “inner essence of man” and, in particular, the universal basis of human cognition (Leibniz 1981[1709]:326).

Just as Sapir and Whorf have often been chastized for emphasizing profound differences between languages and the conceptual systems associated with them, Leibniz has been chastized for emphasizing their underlying unity. For example, the distinguished British anthropologist Rodney Needham (1972) commented on Leibniz’s proposal:

This bold suggestion . . . was based on the tacit premise that the human mind was everywhere the same. . . . Methodologically, Leibniz was thus proposing a comparative analysis of the kind that Lévy-Bruhl was to put into effect almost exactly two centuries later, and even in terms that find ready agreement today; but it is not premises, not the type of research that he recommended, that have since been called into renewed question. Underlying his proposal was the conviction that human nature was uniform and fixed, and it is precisely this idea that more recent conceptual analyses have made difficult to accept. (220)

Thus, scholars of Pinker’s orientation dismiss the study of differences between languages as a possible source of insight into social cognition, for they identify such an endeavor with “the idea that thought is the same thing as language” (which they reject as an “absurdity” (Pinker 1994:57)). On the other hand, scholars of Needham’s orientation dismiss the search for linguistic universals as a possible guide to conceptual universals because in their view there can’t be any conceptual universals: to admit that such universals could exist would mean to accept the possibility that some aspects of “human nature” and human cognition may be constant.

What neither side seems prepared to consider is the possibility that languages, and the ways of thinking reflected in them, exhibit both profound differences and profound similarities; that the study of diversity can lead to the discovery of universals; that some hypotheses about universals are indispensable for the study of the diversity; and that hypotheses about conceptual universals have to be checked and revised in response to empirical findings emerging from systematic cross-linguistic investigations.

In fact, there is no conflict between an interest in linguistic and conceptual universals on the one hand and an interest in the diversity of language-and-culture systems on the other. On the contrary, to achieve their purpose, these two interests must go hand in hand.

Consider, for example, the following question: How do patterns of friendship differ across cultures? One standard approach to this question is to use broad sociological surveys based on questionnaires, in which respondents are asked, for example, How many friends do you have? How many of them are male and how many female? How often, on average, do you see your friends? And so on.

The procedure seems straightforward—except for one small point: if the question is asked in Russian, or in Japanese, what word will be used for “friend”? The assumption behind such questionnaires, or behind comparative studies based on them, is that, for example, Russian, Japanese, and English words for “friend” can be matched. This assumption is linguistically naive, and the results based on it are bound to present a distorted picture of reality (cf. Watanabe 1977). It is even more naive to assume that from a cognitive point of view such lack of correspondence doesn’t matter, for “thought is [not] the same thing as language” (Pinker 1994:57). We can only reach thoughts through words (no one has yet invented another way). This is why in trying to say something about “human thoughts” we need to weigh our words carefully and try to anchor them in linguistic and conceptual universals.

9. “Natural semantic metalanguage”: Exit from Babel

The idea that “there is no exit from language” (cf. e.g. Appignanesi and Garratt 1995:76) is not a twentieth-century invention, but it is certainly one which has been put forward with ever greater insistence in the last few decades (and also, with an ever greater range of interpretations). In a sense, this statement is true, in so far as everything we say we say in some language, so that even if we “translate” our thoughts from one language into another, we remain within the confines of a language.
In another sense, however, this idea is not true, for the existence of conceptual and linguistic universals does offer us an exit of sorts. This statement requires an explanation.

If we assume (at least as a working hypothesis) that, first, all languages have a common core (both in their lexicons and in their grammar), that, second, this common core is innate, being shaped by a prelinguistic “readiness for meaning” (cf. Bruner 1990:22), and that, third, this common core can be used as a kind of mini-language for saying whatever we want to say, then we can see that a door leading “outside language” has already opened. For although this common core can only be identified, and understood, via language, it is, in an important sense, language-independent: it is determined by an innate conceptual system, and is independent of everything idiosyncratic in the structure of all individual languages.

To put it differently, by identifying a common core of all languages, we can carve within any language (for example, English or Japanese) a mini-language (a kind of “basic English” or “basic Japanese”), which we can then use as a metalanguage for talking about languages and cultures as if from outside them all. Since our “basic English” will be isomorphic with our “basic Japanese” (or basic anything else), from a theoretical (though of course not from a practical) point of view it will not matter which “basic language” we choose for our descriptive and explanatory formulae: each such “basic language” will be isomorphic to all the other ones, and each of them will be based directly on the prelinguistic conceptual system, presumed to be innate and universal.

If there is no “exit from language” in an absolute sense, there is, in some sense, an exit from the Babel of languages (via universal human concepts). Babel, that is, in the sense of the multiplicity of languages and the resulting confusion. But, as Derrida has discussed (1982:132–139; 1991), “confusion of tongues” is only the second meaning of the word Babel. In the original sense of the word, “Babel” was the tower of strength, the tower of a universal linguistic system. In this original sense of the word, natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) offers the possibility of a partial return to Babel (via universal human concepts). It presents a partial solution to what Derrida calls the “double bind” of the necessity of translation and the impossibility of translation and offers us some hope for achieving, or at least approaching (via universal human concepts), what Derrida calls “forbidden transparency, impossible univocity” (1991:253).

This, then, is the fundamental assumption (or working hypothesis) on which the description and comparison of meanings in this book is based. In contrast to other approaches to meaning, the one adopted here relies neither on ad hoc formulations of meaning, given in ordinary language, nor on formulae of technical metalanguages requiring further explanation, but on paraphrases formulated in a self-explanatory “natural semantic metalanguage” carved out of natural languages and assumed to be independent of them all. Since this natural semantic metalanguage is based directly on natural language, the paraphrases formulated in it can be regarded as, essentially, self-explanatory (certainly more so than formulae of logical calculi); since, however, they do not utilize the full resources of natural languages but only their minimal shared core, they can be standardized, comparable across languages, and free of the inherent circularity which plagues semantic descriptions using the full-blown ordinary language as its own metalanguage.

For a full explanation of the methodology of semantic description in the NSM approach and for its theoretical underpinnings, the reader must be referred to some other works in the NSM literature (cf. in particular Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, and Wierzbicka 1996). Here, I will only highlight a few basic points: semantic primitives, lexical universals, categories and “parts of speech,” the universal syntax of meaning, polysemy, “allolexy,” “valency options,” and the trial-and-error approach.

9.1 Semantic primitives

As colleagues and I have tried to demonstrate for almost a third of a century, the key to a rigorous yet insightful talk about meaning lies in the notion of semantic primitives (or semantic primes). One cannot define ALL words because the very idea of “defining” implies that there is not only something to be defined (a definiendum) but also something to define it with (a definiens, or rather, a set of “definieneses”). The elements which can be used to define the meaning of words (or any other meanings) cannot be defined themselves; rather, they must be accepted as “indefinibilia,” that is, as semantic primes, in terms of which all complex meanings can be coherently represented.

This is, then, one of the main assumptions of the semantic theory, and semantic practice, presented in this book: meaning cannot be described without a set of semantic primitives; one can purport to describe meaning by translating unknown into unknowns (as in Blaise Pascal’s mock definition, “Light is the luminary movement of luminous bodies” [1667/1954:580]), but nothing is really achieved thereby. Semantics can have an explanatory value only if (and to the extent which) it manages to “define” or explicate complex and obscure meanings in terms of simple and self-explanatory ones. If we can understand any utterances at all (someone else’s or our own), it is only because these utterances are built, so to speak, out of simple elements which can be understood by themselves.

This basic point, which modern linguistics has lost sight of, was made repeatedly in the writings on language by the great thinkers of the seventeenth century, such as Descartes, Pascal, Antoine Arnould, and Leibniz. For example, Descartes (1931[1701]) wrote:

Further I declare that there are certain things which we render more obscure by trying to define them, because, since they are very simple and clear, we cannot know and perceive them better than by themselves. Nay, we must place in the number of those chief errors that can be committed in the sciences, the mistakes committed by those who would try to define what ought only to be conceived, and who cannot distinguish the clear from the obscure, nor discriminate between what, in order to be known, requires and deserves to be defined, from what can be best known by itself. (324).

9.2 Lexical universals

In the theory on which this book is based, it has been hypothesized, from the start, that conceptual primitives can be found through in-depth analysis of any natural language, but also that the sets of primitives identified in this way would “match,” and that in
fact each such set is just one language-specific manifestation of a universal set of fundamental human concepts.

This expectation was based on the assumption that fundamental human concepts are innate, and that, if they are innate, then there is no reason to expect that they should differ from one human group to another.

Until recently, this assumption was based largely on theoretical considerations rather than on empirical studies of different languages of the world. This situation has changed, however, with the publication of *Semantic and lexical universals* (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, henceforth SLU), a collective volume in which conceptual primitives posited initially on the basis of a mere handful of languages were subjected to a systematic study across a wide range of languages from different families and different continents. The languages investigated in this volume included Ewe of the Niger-Congo family in West Africa (Felix Ameka), Mandarin Chinese (Hilary Chappell), Thai (Anthony Diller), Japanese (Masayuki Onishi), the Australian languages Yankunytjájarra (Cliff Goddard), Arrernte (Aranda) (Jean Harkins and David Wilkins), and Kayardild (Nicholas Evans), three Misoralpan languages of Nicaragua (Kenneth Hale), the Austronesian languages Acehnese of Indonesia (Mark Durie and colleagues), Longgul of Solomon Islands (Deborah Hill), Samoan (Ulrike Mosel), and Mangap-Mbula of Papua New Guinea (Robert Bugenhagen), the Papuan language Kaa (Andrew Pawley), and—the only European language besides English—French (Bert Peeters).

9.3 Categories and “parts of speech”

The work of the last thirty years undertaken by myself and colleagues has identified nearly sixty candidates for the status of universal semantic primitives, as outlined in the table below.

| Substantives: | I, YOU, SOMEONE/PERSON, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, BODY |
| Determiners: | THIS, THE SAME, OTHER |
| Quantifiers: | ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH |
| Attributes: | GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL |
| Mental predicates: | THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR |
| Speech: | SAY, WORD, TRUE |
| Actions, events, and movement: | DO, HAPPEN, MOVE |
| Existence: (alienable) | POSSESSION: THERE IS, HAVE |
| Life and death: | LIVE/ALIVE, DIE |
| Logical concepts: | NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, IF . . . WOULD (counterfactual) |
| Time: | WHEN/TIME, NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME |
| Space: | WHERE/PLACE, HERE, UNDER, ABOVE, PAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE |
| Intensifier, augmentor: | VERY, MORE |
| Taxonomy, patronymy: | KIND OF, PART OF |
| Similarity: | LIKE |

As the format of this outline suggests, the proposed set of primitives is not an unstructured set but, rather, a network of categories, which can be compared (somewhat metaphorically) with the parts of speech of traditional grammar. The main point is that the categories singled out (in a preliminary way) in the table above are, so to speak, both semantic and structural. They recognize certain natural semantic groupings such as, for example, time and space, and at the same time they pay attention to the combinatorial properties of the elements. Although the classification of semantic elements outlined above is by no means the only possible one, it is not arbitrary either.

What matters most from the point of view of this book is that the explications of meanings proposed here will be formulated largely (though not exclusively) in terms of the primitives listed in the above table.

Exceptions from this overall policy will be made sparingly, for the purposes of clarity and readability of the formulae. For example, in chapter 2 on “patterns of friendship,” words such as father, mother, and child will be used as if they were semantic primitives, and the word country will be similarly used in chapters 3 and 4.

In addition to such consciously introduced exceptions, proposed semantic primitives will also be used in a number of different forms, or “allolexes,” and with different “valency options.” Both these points will be discussed briefly below, as will also the important issue of polysemies. First, however, I will discuss the grammar of the primitives, which is as important to the explanation of meaning as is the set of the primitives themselves.

9.4 The universal syntax of meaning

In what has been said so far, the emphasis was on the elements: the primitive concepts, the indefinable words. To say anything meaningful, however, we need more than words: we need sentences in which words are meaningfully put together. Similarly, to think something we need more than “concepts”: we need meaningful combinations of concepts. Despite its obvious limitations, Leibniz’s old metaphor of an “alphabet of human thoughts” is still quite useful here. Conceptual primitives are components which have to be combined in certain ways to be able to express meaning.

For example, the indefinable word want makes sense only if it is put in a certain syntactic frame, such as “I want to do this.” In positing the elements I, WANT, DO, and THIS as innate and universal conceptual primitives, I am also positing certain innate and universal rules of syntax—not in the sense of some intuitively unverifiable formal syntax à la Chomsky but in the sense of intuitively verifiable patterns determining possible combinations of primitive concepts.

If one wants to explain the meaning of a sentence such as “I want to do this” to a nonnative speaker, the best one can do is to point to a semantically matching sentence in one’s own language. For example, to a Russian one could offer the following equation:

I want to do this = ja xoču éto sdelat’

where ja matches with I, xoču (1st Sg) with want, éto with this, and sdelat’ with do, and where the combination ja xoču matches with I want, the combination éto sdelat’
matches with to do this, and the whole combination ja xoču èto sledat’ matches with the whole combination I want to do this.

This is, then, what the universal syntax of meaning is all about: it consists in universal combinations of universal conceptual primitives. From a formal point of view, the grammar of the Russian sentence differs a great deal from that of the English one. But formal differences of this kind don’t detract in the least from the overall semantic equivalence of the two sentences, which is based on the equivalence of the primitives themselves and of the rules for their combination.

Thus, the theory assumed in this book posits the existence not only of an innate and universal “lexicon of human thoughts” but also of an innate and universal “syntax of human thoughts.” Taken together, these two hypotheses amount to positing something that can be called “a language of thought,” or, as I called it in the title of my 1980 book, “Lingua Mentalis.” It is this universal “lingua mentalis” which is being proposed, and tested, as a practical metalanguage (“NSM”) for the description and comparison of meanings.

9.5 Polysemy

Polysemy is extremely widespread in natural language, and common everyday words—including indefinables—are particularly likely to be involved in it. A semantic primitive cannot be identified, therefore, simply by pointing to an indefinable word. Rather, it must be identified with reference to some illustrative sentences. For example, the English word move has at least two meanings, as illustrated below:

A. I couldn’t move.
B. Her words moved me.

Of these two meanings, only (A) is proposed as a semantic primitive.

The NSM theory does not claim that for every semantic primitive there will be, in every language, a separate word—as long as the absence of a separate word for a given primitive can be convincingly explained (in a principled and coherent way) in terms of polysemy. The notion of different grammatical frames plays a particularly important role in this regard.

9.6 Allolexy

The term allolexy refers to the fact that the same element of meaning may be expressed in a language in two or more different ways. For just as one word (or morpheme) can be associated with two (or more) different meanings, one meaning can often have two or more different lexical exponents. By analogy with “allomorphs” and “allophones,” such different exponents of the same primitive are called “allolexes” in NSM theory.

For example, in English, I and me are allolexes of the same primitive concept (in Latin, ego, in Russian, ja). Often, the allolexes of a primitive are in complementary distribution; for example, in Latin the three forms hic, haec, hoc are all exponents of the same primitive this, and the choice between them depends on the gender of the head noun. In particular, the combination with another primitive often forces the choice of one of a set of allolexes. For example, in English, a combination of the primitives someone and all is realized as everyone or everybody, and a combination of all with something is realized as everything. In these particular contexts, one and body can be seen as allolexes of someone, on a par with someone; and thing can be seen as an allolex of something, on a par with something.

The notion of allolexy plays a particularly important role in the NSM approach to inflectional categories. For example, the forms am doing, did, and will do used without temporal adjuncts convey different meanings, but when combined with the temporal adjuncts now, before now, and after now, as in the sentences A, B, and C below, they are in complementary distribution and can be seen as allolexes of the same primitive do:

A. I am doing it now.
B. I did it before now (earlier).
C. I will do it after now (later).

This is why NSM sentences can be said to match, semantically, across languages, even though inflectional categories can differ considerably from language to language.

9.7 “Valency options”

The notion of “valency options” refers to different combinability patterns available to the same primitive. For example, the primitive do can occur in the following combinations:

A. X did something.
B. X did something to person Y.
C. X did something (together) with person Y.

Obviously, “doing something to someone” or “doing something with someone” implies “doing something.” Nonetheless, sentences B or C cannot be analyzed in terms of A and something else. It has to be recognized, therefore, that in each case the difference in meaning is due to the sentence as a whole, not to the predicate as such, and that the three sentences share in fact the same predicate (DO), although they realize different valency options of this predicate.

9.8 The trial and error approach

The project of devising a “Natural Semantic Metalanguage” based on natural languages and yet, in a sense, independent of them all may seem utopian. It is important to point out, therefore, that the foundations of such a metalanguage have already been laid in the work of myself and colleagues, undertaken, with this goal in mind, over the last thirty years, and that a number of successive approximations to a workable, effective NSM have already been developed and put to the test in many languages, including languages as diverse as Chinese (cf. e.g. Chappell 1983, 1986a, 1986b), Ewe (cf. Ameka 1986, 1987, 1990, 1991), Japanese (cf. Travis 1992, Hasada 1994), Malay
But there is no conflict between studying the meanings of words and studying
everyday discourse and everyday cognition. On the contrary, as this book seeks to
show, the lexicon is the clearest possible guide to everyday cognition and to the
patterning of everyday discourse.

For example, basic patterns of Japanese everyday discourse and the Japanese
"cultural scripts" reflected in them (cf. e.g. Wierzbicka in press a) are closely linked
with the semantics of Japanese key words such as enryo or wa, discussed in chapter
6; and the basic patterns of Anglo-Australian everyday discourse (cf. Wierzbicka
1991a and 1992b) are closely linked with the semantics of Australian English words
such as whinge, bullshit, and bloody, discussed in chapter 5. In a sense, words of this
type provide a condensed introduction to patterns of discourse and present the essence
of some everyday practices in a crystalline form.

While scholars such as Wassmann underestimate the importance of the lexicon,
their attitude is at least not downright hostile, but there is no shortage of real enemies
of "words." For example, Simon During (1995), a Professor of English at the
University of Melbourne, attacks the concept behind the Oxford English dictionary:
"[S]trange though it may seem, words do not have fixed and true meanings at all. They
are not so much rigid designators of specific meanings as flexible counters used to
build up phrases or sentences. It makes sense to say that a word has a different
'meaning' whenever it is used" (9).

In a sense, it is true that words have no "fixed" meanings because the meanings
of words change. But if they were always fluid and without any "true" content, they
could not change either. As this book seeks to demonstrate, words do have indentifi-
able, "true" meanings, the precise outlines of which can be established on an empirical
basis by studying their range of use. Of course, these meanings change, but this change,
too, can be studied and described only if it is understood that there is something there
that can change. What is fuzzy, fluid, and lacking in clear content is not words but
some recent theorizing about words, not supported, needless to say, by large-scale
systematic study of the lexicon of any language.

It is an illusion to think that we will better understand cultures if we reject Sapir's
fundamental insight that "vocabulary is a very sensitive index of the culture of a
people." On the contrary. We will better understand cultures if we try to build on this
insight and to learn to study vocabulary more deeply, more rigorously, and in a broader
theoretical perspective.

10. Conclusion

Wuthnow et al. note that "for all the research that has been made possible by survey
techniques and quantitative analysis, little has been learned about cultural patterns"
(1984:6-7), and they ask "whether it is possible to construct cultural analysis as a basic
tool capable of producing verifiable scientific knowledge at all, or whether the
study of culture necessarily remains a speculative venture" (257).

This book seeks to demonstrate that cultural patterns can be studied in a verifiable
and nonspeculative way on the basis of linguistic semantics, rooted in empirically
established linguistic and conceptual universals. It also seeks to vindicate the import-
ance of words, which alt too often are described these days as "isolated," "fuzzy," or
"static" and, consequently, rejected in favor of "taskonomies," "everyday practices,
"discourse," "schemas," "prototypes," and so on. For example, Wassmann (1995)
writes:

The opening of cognitive anthropology leads to new terminology appearing in
publications: 'category' and 'semantic attribute' have been superseded by 'schema',
'prototype', and 'proposition'... Thus, although language remains one of the focal
points, it is treated differently: no longer as a lexicon, but in everyday use as
'discourse' from which inferences must be drawn as to the intended 'message'.
(173-174)