REVIEWS

**Meaning and universal grammar:** Theory and empirical findings. 2 vols. Ed. by
CLIFF GODDARD and ANNA WIERZBICKA. (Studies in language companion series 60,
61.) Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002. ISBN 1588113221. $192 (Hb).

Reviewed by GEORGE VAN DRIEM, *Leiden University*

This set of studies is an intrepid quest to find 'semantic primes' or 'primitives', that is, meanings
shared by all languages and taken to constitute the core grammar of all human language. The
aim is no less than 'to lay the foundations for an integrated, semantically-based approach to
universal grammar and linguistic typology' (I, 3). The book consists of two volumes, each
containing five chapters. The first two and last two chapters are general theoretical discussions
written by either or both of the editors. The six chapters in between are attempts to find primes
in individual languages, two written by the editors and four by other contributors.

In the six language-specific studies, each author attempts to identify categories of meaning in
individual languages that can ostensibly be taken to be exponents of primes. CLIFF GODDARD
claims to find 59 such meanings in colloquial Malay; CATHERINE TRAVIS, 59 in Colombian
Spanish; HILARY CHAPPELL, 59 in Mandarin Chinese; ROBERT BUGENHAGEN, 56 in Mangaaba-
Mbula a.k.a. Mangap-Mbula (an Austronesian language spoken by approximately 3,500 people
on Umboi Island in Papua New Guinea); ANNA WIERZBICKA, 60 in Polish; and NICK ENFIELD,
60 in Lao. All six contributions are sensitive and insightful semantic studies which clearly
illustrate the methodology of the natural semantic metalanguage framework (NSM). At the same
time, this exercise calls into question the validity of the methodology and a number of the
theoretical premises of the NSM framework.

The core theoretical issues and the methodology of NSM are candidly presented in the four
general chapters by the editors. In his 'Opening statement', Goddard kicks off by saying 'the
prime IF . . . is postulated to occur universally in a biclausal frame, so that one could express in
any language the semantic equivalent of a sentence like ''if you do this, something bad will
happen'' (notwithstanding that in some languages the exponent of IF coincides with the exponent
of WHEN)' (I, 2). There's the catch. If we let ourselves get away with this, we sidestep the obvious
fact that the reason a naïve native speaker of German makes mistakes with English *when* and
*if* is precisely because the analogous categories of meaning in both languages happen not to be
semantically equivalent. Each such instance of 'notwithstanding' obviates the crucial point that
in different languages people actually say different things.

A central premise is that 'any language can be adequately described within the resources of
that language' so that all meanings can be characterized by reductive paraphrase in natural
language. These algorithms of reductive paraphrase characterize meanings in discrete, natural,
intelligible, and noncircular propositional terms. The NSM approach involves the empirical inves-
tigation of many languages. Its proponents rightly claim that, because NSM integrates meaning
and syntax from the very outset, their empirical approach is superior to the meaningless linguistics
of the Chomskyite school. The anachronism in the 'Opening statement', whereby Leonard Bloom-
field is retroactively faulted with Noam Chomsky's antisemantic vices, is jarring, however.

In practice, the NSM school has hitherto used plain English as the 'natural semantic metalan-
guage'. A novelty is that each of the six language-specific contributions includes two 'native'
NSM texts, one satisfactorily characterizing the concept of the Good Samaritan, the other offering
a debatable interpretation of the Chinese philosophy of the Middle Way. In fact, these metalan-
guage texts have been transposed from English originals into colloquial Malay, Colombian Span-
ish, Mandarin, Mangaaba-Mbula, Polish, and Lao.

Postulated semantic primes include I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, THIS, GOOD, BAD, HAPPEN, MOVE,
KNOW, THINK, FEEL, WANT, SAY, LIVE, DIE, WHERE, WHEN, NOT, MAYBE, LIKE, KIND OF, and PART OF.
Yet what does NSM make of ubiquitous inconveniences of life such as the fact that Nepali has
no word or expression that means the same thing as English *feel*? Nepali *châmnu* 'touch, grope,

caress, feel' and *chunnu* 'touch, feel, abut' are too exclusively physical, though they would presumably make good candidate exponents for another proposed prime, that is, BE TOUCHING (II, 306). The mental sense of the English-inspired prime FEEL finds functional translation equivalents in Nepali through impersonal constructions with the verb *lâgnu* 'impinge upon, begin to, appear to be, make itself felt'. Yet this does not change the fact that there is no Nepali equivalent for English *feel* and no English meaning equivalent to Nepali *lâgnu*. Similarly, one sense of English *wonder* can be translated by Dutch *zich afvragen* or French *se demander*, but neither Continental expression has the meaning of English *wonder*. Nobody has demonstrated the non-equivalence of comparable categories of meaning between languages in a more analytically incisive fashion than Wierzbicka herself in her many studies and monographs, with *Semantics, culture and cognition* (1992) perhaps representing the strongest statement of this kind.

So, while semantic primes are not ineffable, they appear to be transcendental. All that we can ever hope to find are their 'exponents' in individual languages. The manifestations or avatars of a single putative prime may take the shape of a verb, noun, idiomatic expression, turn of phrase, or whatever. This leads us to the problem posed by the methodological permissiveness that has crept into NSM. Wierzbicka stresses the crucial importance of crosslinguistic comparability in the empirical investigation of languages aimed at distinguishing between the accidental and the universal (II, 258). Ironically, in quest of primes, the traditional rigor of radical semantic analysis (RSA) has given way to a methodological pitfall that has perennially plagued semantic studies, viz. polysemy.

The Achilles's heel of these English-inspired primes is that 'many of these English words are polysemous, and only one sense of each is proposed as a prime' (I, 14), so that exponents of a prime in various languages need match only in 'a single specifiable sense' of their meaning. Is it not trivial to claim that one sense or usage of a meaning can be found to be satisfactorily expressed by one sense or application of an otherwise nonequivalent grammatical or lexical meaning in another language? What remains of the proposition that certain meanings are universal if a one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning is abandoned? What is left of linguistic empiricism if meanings are presumed to exist other than meanings whose formal expression, including zero morphs, is demonstrable and, moreover, demonstrably language-specific?

To aggravate matters, the novel notion of 'noncompositional polysemy' or 'motivated homonymy' is invoked whenever two putative primes are found to be expressed by a single form. For example, Yankunytjatjara *kutjupa* is found to express both the primes SOMEONE and OTHER. I suppose that Limbu *na:pmi* 'someone, somebody else, other' would be taken to do the same. Samoan *fai* is taken to express both the primes DO and SAY. Such counterexamples go away when 'noncompositional polysemy' permits a single form to 'express two different indefinable meanings'. Meaning is presumably a neuroanatomical construct. Meanings in natural language behave like nonconstructible sets in the mathematical sense, as linguists of the Leiden School have argued. What then distinguishes 'definable' from 'indefinable' meanings?

NSM even introduces a new device known as allolexy, a phenomenon whereby 'several different words or word-forms (allolexes) express a single meaning in complementary contexts' (I, 20). The English forms *I* and *me* are taken to stand for the same prime. Regardless of the veracity or falsehood of Goddard's contention that 'it is impossible to state, in the form of a substitutable paraphrase, any semantic difference between *I* and *me*', English *I* and *me* do not mean precisely the same thing, just as '*do* and *did* are semantically distinct; and obviously, therefore, not in an allolexical relationship' (I, 22). Grammatical meanings are often more challenging to characterize than lexical meanings. Yet they are no less real, and they shape conceptual reality even more fundamentally and insidiously. The cop-out of allolexy also assumes the guises of 'combinatorial allolexy' and the portemanteau.

Whereas Wierzbicka's early work grappled with such subtle categories of meaning as Polish aspect, her subsequent work has increasingly focused on more tractable lexical rather than grammatical categories. In the lexical realm, semantic primes are analogous to grammatical labels which lead lives of their own, guiding modern typologists inexorably to 'discern' aspect and tense in each newly investigated language, even though all the like-labeled categories in different

languages mean something different. This approach is essentially no different from the practice of medieval grammarians who applied the Latin terms *perfectum* and *imperfectum* to formally analogous grammatical categories in European vernaculars, though the tenses thus labeled conveyed different meanings. Modern typologists pose questions like: Is there a perfective aspect in this language and how is it expressed? So, too, a proponent of NSM poses the question: What is the exponent of prime *x* in this language? Wierzbicka's RSA is a powerful tool which, ironically, has shown precisely why such questions are misguided.

NSM undertakes to test the interesting 'hypothesis that there is substantial universality in both the lexicon and the grammar of semantic metalanguage' (I, 9). But equipped with polysemy and allolexy, how could we fail? In fact, NSM has failed to demonstrate the universality of primes without resorting to polysemy and allolexy. Yet NSM is a success and a major step forward in linguistics for two reasons. First, the issue addressed is fundamental to language itself, and the essentially negative finding is of momentous importance to the science of language. Second, the instrument of natural semantic metalanguage and the methodology of RSA is the way forward in charting the plethora of lexical and grammatical meanings that make our languages all different, not just in form but in content. If the twenty-first century is to be a bright one for the study of meaning, as the last sentence of the book portends, then this advance will in no small measure be due to RSA.

So, what have they found really? It is hardly surprising that functional translation equivalents can be found between human languages because of commonalities in our experience as bipedal primates, living in human societies and sharing the same neuroanatomical sensory interface within the same shared natural and man-made environments. The purported exponents of primes are nothing more than functional translation equivalents reflecting commonalities in semantic functionality shared by disparate meanings in languages of various speech communities. Because our primate minds plan ahead, languages have means of expressing contingency. Not surprisingly, it is possible to find functional translation equivalents for English *if* in other languages. This does not mean, however, that there exists a transcendental prime IF that finds expression in all languages. Identifying such shared functionality in human language is in itself a truly great achievement which tells us a lot about our species, but accepting the independent existence of primes requires a leap of faith.

Once this leap has been made, the accretion of new articles of faith can begin in earnest. Accepting the independent existence of primes opens the door to entertaining other beliefs like the reality of the distinction between definable and indefinable meanings (I, 26) and between deep and surface cases in universal grammar (II, 276–81). In her recent book *What did Jesus mean?* (2001), Wierzbicka defines 'God' in the reductive paraphrase of NSM and appears to satisfactorily capture the Christian supreme being and father figure. The fact that NSM for Wierzbicka is part of a larger spiritual quest does not render her search for the *Mittelpunkt* of all languages suspect. God does not invalidate the hypothesis of a universal semantic core common to all languages. The NSM approach is truly a scientific realist enterprise, as Goddard is eager to point out (II, 314). The hypothesis remains unsubstantiated because we are compelled to resort to polysemy, allolexy, and noncompositional polysemy in order to find the purported 'exponents' of the hypothetical primes.

## REFERENCES

WIERZBICKA, ANNA. 1992. Semantics, culture, and cognition: Universal human concepts in culture-specific configurations. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
WIERZBICKA, ANNA. 2001. What did Jesus mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the parables in simple and universal human concepts. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Himalayan Languages Project
Leiden University
P.O. Box 9515
2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands
[Dzongkha@compuserve.com]