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The idea of a 'spoon': semantics, prehistory, and cultural logic

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ABSTRACT

The invention of the spoon may not be quite as ground-breaking in human history as the invention of the wheel or the needle, but arguably it is also a significant conceptual (as well as technological) event. It has been claimed that "all people in the world use spoons", that "spoons have been used as eating utensils since Paleolithic times", that chimpanzees in Gombe use "sort-of-spoons"… Can we draw a line, in a principled and precise way, between 'spoons' and 'sort-of' spoons'? For example, is the so-called "Chinese spoon" (tāngchí) a 'spoon'? Can we explain why a 'tāngchí' is different in many respects from a ('European') 'spoon' and similar in others? Most importantly, perhaps, can we reconstruct with any plausibility the conceptual model in the minds of the first prehistoric inventors of 'spoons'? Can we tell in what part of the world they lived, when they lived, what they wanted to eat with those first 'spoons', and why they found 'spoons' more suited to their needs than something like 'tāngchí' ('Chinese spoons')? These are some of the questions that this paper will address, using as a tool NSM techniques of semantic and conceptual analysis.

1. Introduction: a methodology for interpreting 'cultural kinds' concepts

I will start with three examples of sentences with the word *spoon* coming from different periods of English.

1. Supper was announced. The move began and Miss Bates might be heard from that moment, without interruption till her being seated at table and taking up her spoon. [Context: eating soup] (Jane Austen, 1833)
2. … Father Joseph lifted the cover and ladled the soup into the plates, a dark onion soup with croutons. The Bishop tasted it critically and smiled at his companion. After the spoon had travelled to his lips a few times, he put it down … (Willa Cather, 1927)
3. Sitting at the breakfast table after the grace, he watched MacAllister dip his spoon in his porridge and then in his buttermilk and slurp the contents noisily (Adair, 1993).

The spoons used in these three different periods may have been somewhat different, but the idea reflected in them all, and associated with words such as *soup*, *porridge*, *dip*, *slurp* and *table* appears to be the same.

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The title of this paper echoes that of Cardinal John Henry Newman's, "The idea of a university" (2009). 'University' is, obviously, a big idea, and 'spoon' may seem to be a very small one at best. Is it an idea at all? Isn't a spoon a thing rather than an idea?

Well, yes and no. A spoon is a thing, but so is a fork or a ladle. To decide whether an object is or is not a spoon we need to understand the meaning of the word *spoon*, and this meaning points to an idea, not a thing.

As I argued thirty years ago in relation to 'cup' and 'mug', words naming different kinds of artefacts in particular languages embody culture-specific ideas of great complexity and intricate internal logic:

> To state the meaning of a word it is not sufficient to study its applicability to things; what one must do above all is to study the structure of the concept which underlies and explains that applicability.
>
> In the case of words describing natural kinds or kinds or human artefacts, to understand the structure of the concept means to describe fully and accurately the IDEA (not just the visual image) of a typical representative of the kind, i.e. the prototype. And to describe it fully and accurately we have to discover the internal logic of the concept. This is best done not through interviews, not through laboratory experiments, and not through reports of casual, superficial impressions or intuitions (either of 'informants' or of the analyst himself), but through METHODICAL INTROSPECTION and THINKING. (Wierzbicka, 1984: 213; see also Wierzbicka, 1985)

The present study of 'spoons' builds on the same methodology on which my study of 'cups' and 'mugs' built thirty years ago, and also draws on the refinements of that methodology in the intervening decades. It is the methodology known as NSM: the use of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) based in its lexicon and grammar on the intersection of all (sampled) natural languages. The three key notions of this approach most relevant to the present study are 1. semantic primes, 2. semantic molecules, and 3. semantic templates.

Before briefly explaining these three notions (which have been extensively discussed elsewhere, see e.g. Goddard, 2011, 2012), I would like to say that from an NSM point of view, thinking methodically about 'spoons' (or any other cultural kinds) involves not only a systematic use of semantic primes, molecules and templates but also a systematic NON-USE of any words chosen ad hoc, any technical words or ordinary words used in some technical sense, and any words which don't have exact equivalents in the language whose terms are being scrutinised (Cf. Wierzbicka, 2014).

This excludes, for example, the use of the word *bowl* to describe part of a spoon, as English dictionaries often do, or reliance on words like *implement* or *utensil*, which are not used in everyday language. It also excludes the used of the English word *spoon* to state the meaning of the Chinese word *tāngchí* (so-called "Chinese spoon"), because Chinese doesn't have a word equivalent in meaning to the English word *spoon* (just as English doesn't have a word equivalent in meaning to *tāngchí*). These exclusions set the NSM apart from other approaches to semantics no less than its key notions of primes, molecules, and templates, to which I will turn in the next section.

The reason for these exclusions lies in the strong cultural focus of NSM research. Words are seen in NSM research as vehicles of culture. To try to explore the meaning of the Chinese word *tāngchí*, or the internal logic of this cultural kind, through English words like *spoon* or *implement*, would mean to distort this concept's cultural logic, that is, its links with Chinese cultural practices and ways of thinking. The same applies to the English word *spoon* itself: to try to explore the concept of 'spoon' through technical words would mean to distort its cultural logic, that is, its place in the thinking and the cultural practices of the inventors and users of 'spoons'.[1]

2. Semantic primes, molecules and templates

2.1. Semantic primes

"*Semantic primes*" are meanings which are so simple that they cannot be defined in terms of any other simpler ones. Decades of intralinguistic and crosslinguistic investigations carried out within the NSM framework (see e.g. Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1994, 2002, 2014) have led to the conclusion that there are 65 such meanings expressed as words (or word-like elements) in all languages. For example, the words DO and HAPPEN in sentences like "What are you doing?" or "What happened to you?" cannot be replaced in these sentences with any phrases composed of words more elementary than DO and HAPPEN themselves. NSM research indicates that such questions can be rendered in any language, and that the words DO and HAPPEN are, so to speak, "universal words", as well as being semantic primes. The full repertoire of such primes, in its most recent version, is given in Table 1.

[1] The term "cultural logic" comes from John Gumperz's 1982 book *Discourse Strategies*. It was first used in NSM research in my 1991 book *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*, where I contrasted it with George Lakoff's notion of "natural logic":

> 'Natural logic' provides a considerable range of options. The choices embodied in individual languages reflect not only 'natural logic', and not only a combination of 'natural logic' with historical accidents. They reflect also what Gumperz (1982: 182) aptly calls 'cultural logic'. (Wierzbicka, 2003 [1991]: 62)

More recently, the term has been adopted by N.J. Enfield and plays a prominent role in his 2014 book *The Utility of Meaning*.