



The lexical semantics of *language* (with special reference to *words*)

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ABSTRACT

Language can be regarded as one of the key words of English, as well as the foundational term of the discourse of linguistics. It is well to remember, however, that the concept of a *language* lacks precise semantic equivalents in many languages. This study presents a semantic-lexicographic analysis of several meanings of the word *language* in contemporary English, using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage method of semantic description (Wierzbicka, 1996, 1997; Goddard, 1998, 2008). The study is similar in scope and approach to an earlier study (Goddard, 2005) of the word *culture*, which resembles *language* in several important respects. One distinctive aspect of the explications for *language* is their reliance on the proposed semantic prime WORDS, which is discussed at some length. Though primarily focused on English, the study makes reference to Yankunytjatjara, Chinese, and Russian, among other languages.

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1. Introduction

This study is first and foremost an investigation of the lexical semantics of various senses of the word *language* in ordinary contemporary English, conducted using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to semantic analysis (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1994, 2002; Peeters, 2006; Goddard, 1998, 2008; and other works). It is a companion paper to an earlier study of the lexical semantics of *culture* (Goddard, 2005); as we will see, there are important parallels in the semantic structure of the two concepts. As far as I know, no previous study has sought to bring the methods of linguistic semantics to bear on the word *language*. In addition to its primary goal, the study has several secondary goals: to shed light on the culture-historical positioning of the “language concept”; to clarify the NSM claim that WORDS (a crucial element in the proposed semantic structure of *language*) is a semantic universal and to refute certain overstated claims to the contrary; and to consider the utility and pitfalls of *language* as a key word of contemporary Anglophone discourse.

The general assumptions of the NSM approach are reasonably well-known. It is a conceptualist approach to meaning, whose method of description is reductive paraphrase. Its primary tool is a highly constrained vocabulary of 63 semantic primes (such as SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, DO, SAY, WANT, KNOW, GOOD, BAD, BECAUSE, CAN, and others), which have been arrived at after a lengthy program of semantic research, beginning with Wierzbicka (1972). The current inventory of semantic primes is displayed in full in Appendix A, in their English versions. Evidence suggests that semantic primes are present as lexical units, i.e. as discrete meanings of words or word-like elements (bound morphemes or phrasemes), in all languages; and furthermore, that they can be combined into phrases and sentences following combinatorial rules which are shared across all languages. Together, the semantic primes and their rules of combination constitute a kind of “mini-language” which is an ideal tool for semantic-conceptual analysis: hence the term “natural semantic metalanguage”. Versions of this metalanguage have been documented for French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish, Korean, Japanese, Mbula (PNG), Amharic, East Cree, and a variety of other languages, in various NSM publications (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002; Peeters, 2006; Goddard, 2008).

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The goal of an NSM lexical-semantic analysis is to arrive at a well-evidenced reductive paraphrase (an “explication”) framed exclusively in semantic primes for each discrete sense of the word (or other expression) under consideration.¹ I will argue that the word *language* has five main senses in contemporary English. Section 2 deals with the count noun sense of the word, according to which *English* and *Greek*, for example, are two different *languages*₁. Section 3 takes up the other main meanings of the word: *language*₂, roughly ‘language in general’ (a mass noun), as in expressions like *the origins of language*; *language*₃, roughly ‘word usage’, as in expressions like *bad language* and *Shakespeare’s language*; *language*₄, roughly ‘a specialised way of speaking’, as in expressions like *the language of science*; and *language*₅, roughly ‘an expressive medium’, as in expressions such as *the language of music*. For each of these senses I will propose and seek to justify a semantic explication phrased exclusively in the metalanguage of semantic primes. Naturally, the constrained metalanguage means that NSM explications turn out to be much lengthier than other modes of semantic description, and, as one would expect, the restricted choice of words gives them an unusual stylistic quality; but by relying on a small inventory of simple cross-translatable meanings, the NSM approach eliminates the circularity and obscurity that plague most dictionary definitions (and most scholarly discussions), enables an extremely fine-grained resolution of meaning, and safeguards against terminological ethnocentrism.

2. Language₁

In Sections 2.1 and 2.2, I provide some culture-historical and lexicographic perspectives on the meaning *language*₁, after which, in Section 2.3, I present and justify a reductive paraphrase explication. Section 2.4 reviews the status of this English concept in cross-linguistic perspective.

2.1. A brief culture-historical perspective

Linguistic historiographers and language historians have established that the concept of *a language*, as we know it in English, is linked with the social processes of language standardisation; and from the beginning, language standardisation was linked with territories and nations. A benchmark date is 1492. Not only was this the year of Christopher Columbus’s famous voyage, it was also the year of Antonio de Nebrija’s standardising grammar of Spanish. His *Gramática Castellana* was presented to the King of Spain as a way in which “to aggrandize the things of our nation” (Joseph, 2002, p. 3). Needless to say, there was (and still is) a great deal of variation in ways of speaking in different parts of the Iberian peninsula, but standardisation was based on the view that the continuum of geographical and social variation was a manifestation of imperfect approximations to a single “correct” form. Subsequently, the writing and promulgation of grammars formed an integral part of the nation building projects of post-Renaissance Europe, bringing with them the notion of multiple “languages” as distinct entities: hence the term “language making” used by some commentators (Harris, 1980). In short, the concept of *a language* is a cultural product of post-Renaissance Europe. As Haugen (1972) observed in a classic study, this basic insight was even recognised by some during the Renaissance itself. He quotes George Puttenham (1589), who wrote in his book *The Arte of English Poesie*: “After a speech is fully fashioned to the common understanding, and accepted by consent of a whole country and nation, it is called a language” (Haugen, 1972, p. 241). Conversely, it has also been argued that “print-languages” have been one of the foundational elements in the development of national consciousness; cf. Anderson (1991, pp. 43–46).

I raise these points simply to establish the culture-historical specificity of the “*language* concept”, rather than with a view to condemning or dismissing it as a myth or a fiction. I agree with Pennycook (1994, p. 117), who is highly critical of the “*language* concept”, that it is important to “historicize our view of linguistics ... [as] the legacy of very particular political and cultural circumstances in Europe”; but on the other hand, the culture-historical specificity and “constructedness” of a particular concept does not necessarily make it useless or insidious, provided it is well understood and handled with care (see Section 5).

2.2. Language₁ in lexicographic perspective

The meaning of a word, it is often said, reveals itself in the company it keeps. In linguistic terms, frequent collocations provide clues to semantic content.² To begin with, therefore, we will review the most frequent collocations of the meaning *language*₁ in a large corpus of the English language, namely, Collins Wordbanks Online: English. Although this exercise is an instructive one, it is also important to bear in mind that corpus techniques have their limitations. Any given corpus has certain local peculiarities; Wordbanks Online is skewed towards the English of the United Kingdom and this is evident in some of the collocation frequency figures. Furthermore, even a rather large corpus (Wordbanks has over 450 million words) does not

¹ In addition to semantic primes, some NSM explications make use of “semantic molecules”, i.e. certain relatively simple but non-primitive word-meanings (themselves decomposable into primes) which function as units in the semantic structure of other concepts (Goddard, 2010). No semantic molecules are used in the present study.

² In linguistics, this saying is often sourced to Firth (1957). In law, there is a well-known principle of interpretation (or canon of construction) *Noscitur a sociis* (‘a word is known by the company it keeps’), normally interpreted to mean that when a word is ambiguous, its meaning may be determined by reference to the rest of the statute.

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