"*It's rude to VP*": The cultural semantics of *rudeness*

Sophia Waters [*]

Linguistics, School of Behavioural, Cognitive and Social Sciences, University of New England, Armidale, NSW 2351, Australia

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Abstract

Over recent years, linguists have given an increasing amount of attention to impoliteness studies (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper et al., 2003; Kienpointner, 1997; Meier, 1995a,b; Mills, 2009). Oddly however, little attention has yet been paid to the semantics of the English word *rude*. Lacking precise translation equivalents in many languages, *rude* is a keyword revealing much about socially accepted ways of behaving in Anglo society (Wierzbicka, 1997; cf. Fox, 2004). In Australian English, as in English generally, it is the primary ethno-descriptor in the domain of "impoliteness". This paper provides a detailed lexical semantic analysis of *rude* in the productive formula *It's rude to VP*, and also in the fixed expression *rude word*. The semantic explications are framed in the simple universal primes of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002; Peeters, 2006; Wierzbicka, 1996). The argumentation is supported by data on Australian English collected from Google searches.
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1. Introduction

Over recent years, linguists have devoted increasing attention to impoliteness studies (cf. Bousfield and Locher, 2008; Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996, 2009, 2010, 2011; Culpeper et al., 2003; Kienpointner, 1997; Meier, 1995a,b; Mills, 2009). While these studies make valuable contributions to the study of "impoliteness", none of them has provided a detailed lexical semantic analysis of the key English ethno-descriptor in this domain, namely, the word *rude*. In Australian English, as in English generally, *rude* is more basic, more common, more collocationally productive and holds a more prominent position in folk discourse about "impoliteness" than *impolite* (cf. Culpeper, 2009, 2011). The present study clears a section of this blind spot in the literature by providing semantic explications for the productive formula *It's rude to VP*, and for the fixed collocation *rude word*, as they appear in Australian English. Essentially it is an emic study of the English-specific concept of *rudeness*.

Meier (1995b:388) claims that "politeness" (and I would extend this to "impoliteness") is a universal concept to the extent that in every society there are some sort of norms for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, even though these norms will inevitably differ. Be that as it may, what needs to be stressed is that the words used to describe such behaviours are not universal. They are language-specific and they reflect particular culture-specific construals of what is appropriate and inappropriate and why. Not recognising their culture specificity risks ethnocentricity. In English, inappropriate behaviour can be variously described as *rude*, *as impolite*, or as *bad manners*. Although they are related, each of these descriptors carries its own semantic and pragmatic nuances, but a lexical semantic study of *impoliteness* and *bad manners* is beyond the scope of this paper.

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[*] Tel.: +61 2 6773 3318.

  E-mail address: swaters2@une.edu.au.

People's expectations with regard to appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are culturally determined. The words and concepts designated by sociality terms across languages and cultures frequently mismatch. Cross-linguistic comparisons reveal the depth of these differences (cf. Goddard, 2008). In French, for example, the nearest-equivalent for English *rude* is *mal élevé* [lit. 'badly raised/brought up'] or *impoli* [lit. 'impolite'] (Waters, in preparation, 2009). Unlike *rude*, both of these expressions reflect directly and negatively, on one's family and upbringing. To take an example from another language, the nearest Polish equivalent to *rude* is *cham* [lit. 'boor'], but unlike as with *rude*, Polish *cham* implicitly compares a person's behaviour with that of the uncouth lower classes.

Knowing and understanding the concept of *rudeness* is an important part of the pragmatic competence of Australians and speakers of English generally (cf. Fox, 2004). While child socialisation in Anglo culture involves heavy discouragement of *rudeness*, French does not have a direct equivalent feature. There is no French formula exactly comparable to *It's rude to VP*. French children are taught *ça ne se fait pas* 'that is not done'. Where the French proscribe the behaviours outright, the Anglos, as I will show in this study, appeal to the image one has of oneself in interpersonal interactions.

Rudeness is such a fundamental concept to speakers of Anglo English that its meaning is taken for granted (cf. Wierzbicka, 1992). *Rude* is a keyword revealing much about a complex set of accepted ways of behaving in Australian society, and possibly in Anglo society generally. Its keyword status is affirmed by its non-translatability, frequency, and collocational productivity (cf. Wierzbicka, 1997).

2. Data and methodology

Data gathering for lexical semantic analysis uses a variety of methods. The example sentences that appear in this study are part of a collection amassed over a two and half years between January 2008 and August 2010 from systematic internet searches using the search engine Google. The web pages were restricted to 'pages from Australia' rather than 'from the web', in an attempt to weed out other varieties of English such as American English or British English. It is important to emphasise that Google was used solely as a data-gathering tool. It was not used to confirm frequencies because it is notoriously unreliable, with the number of indexed web pages changing daily (cf. Lüdeling et al., 2007). There are persuasive arguments for using the internet as a source of data. Although written, much of the text is very close to speech patterns, especially in blogs and chat rooms. Any compiled corpus ages quickly, whereas the freshness of current word meanings is prolific online. The contemporary genres of blogs and online forums are very productive. The cost and convenience of the web is also compelling (Fletcher, 2007:27). Please note that I have not made any attempt to 'clean up' the data; thus spelling errors and other anomalies will occur throughout the examples presented.

One of the guiding principles behind the data collection was to enter the search terms in inverted commas in order to bring up sentences containing that exact expression. Thus when searching for *It's rude to VP* examples, the search term entered was ''it's rude to''; likewise for *rude word*, ''rude word''. These searches revealed any web pages containing this expression. To contextualise the usage of the expression it was necessary to visit the webpage. The expression was then copied, along with some surrounding sentences for context, into a separate document with its webpage location and date of access. A complete list of the web addresses for the examples cited in this paper is provided in Appendix A.

The acceptability of expressions was tested with six native speaker informants. For example, among the informants there was unanimous agreement that the sentence *It's rude to talk* is implausible. After adding various adjuncts that indicate particular contexts, the acceptability was retested; for example, *It's rude to talk **loudly in the movie theatre**. It's rude to talk **about someone when they're out of the room**. It's rude to talk **on the phone when you're on the toilet**.* The addition of further context took **It's rude to talk* from unacceptable to acceptable. The tests revealed that the permissible verb phrases for the *It's rude to VP* formula necessarily involve the possibility of someone else feeling something bad because of the behaviour.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) is a rigorous decompositional system of meaning representation grounded in natural language. It is a highly disciplined yet flexible mini-language of simple indefinable meanings ('semantic primes') that, along with their basic combinatorial properties, can be found as words (or word-like elements) in all or most languages. There are 64 of these indefinable universal human concepts; for example, I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, CAN, WANT, THINK, KNOW, SAY, FEEL, GOOD, BAD. The semantic primes are catalogued in full using their English exponents in Table 1. The inventory has been developed over almost four decades of empirical cross-linguistic research (Goddard, 2006, 2008; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1994, 2002; Peeters, 2006, 2010; Wierzbicka, 1972, 1996, 2003; see also Goddard, 2012). Defining the meaning of a word or an expression using the NSM means explaining it using simple universal human concepts that do not need additional explanation themselves. Explications are reductive paraphrases framed in terms of semantic primes. They are an attempt to say in other words what a speaker is saying when he or she utters the expression being explicated.