

# ENGLISH

# IMPRISONED IN



The Hazards of English as a Default Language

**ANNA WIERZBICKA**

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THE HAZARDS OF ENGLISH AS A DEFAULT  
LANGUAGE

Anna Wierzbicka



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For my grandchildren  
Elizabeth, Nicholas, Catherine and Therese

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The main purpose of this book is not to argue with others but to point to what I see as a serious problem in contemporary social sciences, and to propose a solution. Since this problem, however, is a blind spot in the social sciences (or so I contend), perhaps inevitably, it is also a polemical book—and it owes a great deal to many people who will disagree with it. The idea that English—which is understandably widely perceived as history’s gift to the world—can also be a conceptual cage, especially for scholars, has sometimes been the object of derision, incredulity, and scepticism for some of my colleagues. These negative reactions have been a great stimulus to me to write this book.

The title of this book came to me in the course of an informal discussion of these matters in January 2012, at a linguistic party on a farm near Canberra, when my colleague David Nash said to me, with friendly Australian sarcasm, “I know, I know, I’m a prisoner of English”. What a great title for a book, I thought—and I started to write this book (only slightly adjusting the title) on the same day. I’d like to thank David for provoking me in this way. I am also grateful to other colleagues, who created a milieu within which thoughts developed in this book could be tested and contested. In particular, I’d like to mention in this context Avery Andrews, Nick Evans, Harold Koch, Patrick McConvell, Andy Pawley, Alan Rumsey, and Jane Simpson.

I am also indebted to some more distant interlocutors who over the years have engaged in controversy with me and thus pushed and provoked me to sharpen my ideas and arguments—to mention a few, Paul Kay, Rolf Kuehni, Paul Ekman, the late Richard Lazarus, Carroll Izard, Rupert Stash, Leonard Katz, Kristen Lindquist, Ray Jackendoff, Dirk Geeraerts, Asifa Majid, Nick Riemer, Jan Wawrzyniak, and Daniel Everett.

When I look deeper into the recesses of my heart and mind, I must acknowledge that I am also indebted to some fellow linguists who have studiously avoided mentioning my work (when writing about linguistic relativity, language universals or the relationship between languages and cultures).

Having one's ideas ignored or marginalised can also have a stimulating effect on one's thinking and writing. We do need intellectual friends, but we also need our opponents, detractors, and bêtes noires. They can all fuel the fire of what philosopher Peter Goldie (editor of the *Oxford Handbook on Philosophy of Emotions*) calls "affect in intellectual activity", and consequently increase our passion and motivation.

Goldie quotes the French psychologist Theodule Ribot (1897), according to whom, "Malebranche [seventeenth-century French philosopher, A.W.] was nearly suffocated by palpitations of his heart when reading Descartes" (2012: 122). Ribot doesn't say what these thoughts and passions provoked by the reading of Descartes were, but whatever they may have been, it is clear that they were stimulating and motivating for Malebranche.

I don't mean to compare myself to Malebranche and I don't think that I have ever experienced "palpitations of the heart" while reading scholarly literature, but I have often felt strong emotions—not always positive, but always motivating. The message that I have been trying to put across—that to reach a non-ethnocentric perspective on languages and human beings we need to get out of the historically-shaped conceptual vocabulary of English—is a challenge. In my view, facing that challenge can bring anyone great intellectual benefits, but it necessitates getting out of the comfort zone of familiar Anglophone academese. It should not be surprising that not everyone wants to hear this message. But this, too, can increase the desire to try to make this message heard by those whose ears can be open to it.

Having acknowledged my indebtedness to many opponents, as well as to colleagues who are valued interlocutors without being intellectually very close, I now want to thank my closest intellectual friends. Cliff Goddard's support for this book, and his input, were essential to its progress from start to finish. I'm grateful to Cliff, and for Cliff, more than I can say. I am also very grateful to, and for, my other friends who share the over-all approach to meaning, culture and the human mind that underlies this book and with whom I was able to talk frequently while writing it, or who made their presence felt through their work, especially Helen Bromhead, Anna Gladkova, Carsten Levisen, Bert Peeters, Carol Priestley, Catherine Travis and Zhengdao Ye. Among linguists outside Australia whose friendship and support has been particularly nourishing to me, I'd like to mention Andrzej Bogusławski and Jerzy Bartmiński in Poland, Juri Apresjan, Lena Paducheva and Aleksey Shmelev in Russia, and Igor Mel'čuk in Canada.

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I am grateful to my daughter Mary (Besemerer), whose 1998 article on Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* and 2002 book *Translating One's Self* continue to be a source of inspiration for me in thinking about the role of English in self-translation of "language migrants" as well as in the habitual thinking of "native Anglos". I was fortunate to be able to talk to Mary about these themes throughout the writing of *Imprisoned in English*.

I have been sustained, as well as challenged, by the semantic workshops held twice yearly at the Australian National University and organised by Cliff Goddard and myself (and recently, also by Zhengdao Ye), and also, by discussions with several cohorts of students in my Seminar on Semantics at the ANU. The search for semantic understanding in dialogue with colleagues and students is a joy, and both these workshops and these seminars are times of very intensive and fruitful engagement with others. My heartfelt thanks to all the participants.

It has often been said (following Humboldt) that to learn to think outside the mold of one's native language one needs to move into another language. Up to a point, this is true, and this is why perspectives on the world arising from bilingual experience are invaluable. But there is also another path: not **out** of one's language and into another one, but **down**, deep down, to that core of simple words and concepts where all languages meet. As this book illustrates, relying on that shared human store of simple concepts (what Leibniz called the "alphabet of human thoughts") one can articulate complex thoughts precisely and clearly. But thinking and talking about any subject in very simple words is not easy for an adult, and perhaps especially for an academic. I've had great opportunities to practice this difficult art in talking about the world with my grandchildren, Elizabeth, Nicholas, Catherine and Therese. (Lizzie, the eldest, has also acted on many occasions as my special consultant and sounding-board.) This book is dedicated to them, with love.

My husband John has helped me, as usual, by editing my writing and at times softening my polemical tone, which after forty years of living in Australia still tends to follow Polish rather than mainstream Anglo cultural scripts of self-expression and engagement with others. "Intellectual emotions", Peter Goldie says, are good. But as the pejorative meaning of the English word "heated" testifies, a "heated" tone is usually seen as being out of place in post-Enlightenment Anglo intellectual discussions, and a tone of calm, understated, impersonal rationality is still generally required, even in these times of growing internationalisation and "inter-culturalisation" of scholarship. (Relatedly, if I were writing in Polish, I could say that I thank all those mentioned in these Acknowledgements "gorąco", that is, 'hotly', but in English, I can only thank them "warmly".)

Two people who deserve very special thanks are my two priceless Research Assistants, Helen Bromhead (in a different hat) and Kathleen Jepson. Helen assisted me throughout the work on the book, prepared the final version of the manuscript for publication, and produced the index, whereas Katie worked with me through the copy-edited manuscript and through the proofs. I am in awe of their computer skills, their competence and their professionalism.

Last but not least, I'm grateful to my editors at Oxford University Press, Peter Ohlin and Hallie Stebbins for their support, advice and guidance, and to my production manager, Peter Mavrikis, for his efficiency, patience and understanding. Thank you all very much.



## **Imprisoned in English**

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## PART ONE

# **Every Language Draws a Circle ...**



## Recognizing the Contingency of One's Own Language

"We don't see things as they are—we see them as we are" (Anaïs Nin). This is true not only of individuals, but also of human groups, especially groups defined by people's native language. As individuals, we often see things differently because we are different persons, with different interests, preoccupations, and assumptions. As speakers of different languages we see them differently because every language equips its speakers with a particular set of cognitive tools for seeing and interpreting the world. This applies both to the literally visible world of colors and light, and the "invisible" world of emotions, relationships, social structures, and mental life.

In his book *The Island of the Colorblind*, Oliver Sacks writes revealingly about the ways of seeing the world characteristic of the color-blind people on the Micronesian atoll Pingelap, where the prevalence of color blindness is exceptionally high. As Sacks says, the vegetation on the island, which for him and his "colour-normal" companions "was at first a confusion of greens," to the color-blind people on the island "was a polyphony of brightnesses, shapes, and textures, easily identified and distinguished from each other" (1996: 37). When asked how they can distinguish, for example, the yellow bananas from the green ones, the achromatopic islander James replied: "[Y]ou see, we don't just go by colour. We look, we feel, we smell, we know—we take everything into consideration, and you just take colour!" (ibid.)

Speakers of languages that have no color words as such, and have instead a rich visual vocabulary focusing on brightness and visual patterns (such as the Warlpiri people in Central Australia, cf. Hargrave 1982; Laughren et al. 2006; Munn 1973; Wierzbicka 2008a) are not color-blind, but they, too, "take everything into account," not just color—not because their physical perception is different but because, for cultural reasons (including their way of life), their interest in the visual world is different.

As the condition of achromatopsia shows, there is indeed a neurophysiological basis to color perception. But perception is not the same thing as

*attention*—and Oliver Sacks, for one, carefully distinguishes between “forms of perception” and “forms of attention” (see, e.g., 1996: 12). In different societies, the predominant “forms of attention” may be different, depending on people’s way of life, economy, technology, and culture; this is what linguistic evidence from diverse languages tells us.

Like any other language, English, too, has its own in-built culture-specific “forms of attention”—and native speakers of English are often blind to them because of their very familiarity. Often, this blindness to what is exceedingly familiar applies also to Anglophone scholars and leads to various forms of Anglocentrism in English-based human sciences, not only in description but also in theory formation.

In an arresting passage of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote:

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless that fact has at some time struck him.—And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (1953: 50)

I quoted this passage in one of my earlier attempts to challenge what is one of the most influential theories in human sciences in recent times, Berlin and Kay’s theory of “colour universals” (cf. Wierzbicka 2008a). My purpose was, of course, to draw attention to the way our native languages can blind us to the world as it presents itself to other people.

This applies, above all, to our native language: often, we are unable to notice the spectacles that we are always wearing. To many scholars working through English, English words on which they rely most (e.g., *reality*, *fact*, *evidence*, *mind*, *emotions*, *anger*, *self-esteem*, *fairness*, *reasonable*, *rights*, *privacy*, and so on) are simply invisible—as invisible as a pair of glasses that one never takes off. Often, such words constitute the real foundations of their inquiry—never examined and never noticed. The same applies to the word *colour*. (Wierzbicka 2005: 217)

Since I wrote this, the glow of the “B&K colour theory” has dimmed considerably (though it still has many adherents); but the blinding power of English as the global language of science and the unquestioned tool for interpreting the world has only grown.

The goal of this book is to try to convince speakers of English, including Anglophone scholars in the humanities and social sciences, that while English is a language of global significance, it is not a neutral instrument or one that, unlike other languages, carves nature at its joints; and that if this is not recognized, English can at times become a conceptual prison.

Anthropologist Ward Goodenough, in his 1970 book *Description and Comparison in Cultural Anthropology*, wrote, with special reference to kinship and family:

The use of one's own culture as a negative standard lies behind the entire set of evolutionary sequences formulated by nineteenth-century theorists. If we begin with ourselves as representing the most advanced state of human society and culture, then other societies can be readily conceived as falling on a continuum according to how similar in form to our family their nearest functionally equivalent institution appears to us. (p. 5)

Of course no one speaks anymore of "ourselves as the most advanced state of human society and culture." Yet the practice of implicitly treating the English language as a standard in relation to which all other languages and cultures can be analyzed and interpreted is still very widespread.

Speaking of a woman's progress through three marriages and three languages, the British writer Zadie Smith describes language, concisely and aptly, as "shared words that fit the world as you believe it to be" (2009: 5). Let me try to illustrate Smith's insight and the intimate relation between selective "forms of attention" and language-specific word meanings with a handful of examples from linguist Ken Hale's (1974) elementary dictionary of the (already mentioned) Australian language Warlpiri prepared for practical purposes (for use in the Yuendumu Warlpiri language program). I'll cite these examples under three headings: 1. Environment, 2. Animals, 3. Human relations and emotions.

## 1. Environment

*jarrarlpa*—"natural shelter, overhang"

*japi*—"entrance to sugar ant's nest"

*laja*—"hole or burrow of lizard"

From a Warlpiri speaker's point of view, words like these identify no doubt important features of the environment (potential sources of shelter and food), but there are no corresponding words in European languages (and, of course, in many other languages in other parts of the world).

## 2. Animals

*kuyu*—"meat; meated animal" [including edible birds, but not other birds]

*jinjirla*—"tail of rabbit bandicoot"

*karnpi*—"fat under the skin of emu"



*tarlti*—"contents of animal's stomach"

*yulu*—"limp, relaxed—of slain kangaroo whose hindleg joints have been broken (in preparation for cooking)"

*papapapa-ma*—"to make the sound of a male emu calling to its chicks"

Clearly, all these words reflect culture-specific forms of attention, often focused on animals as potential sources of food.

### 3. Human Relations and Emotions

*kurrurupa*—"bereaved sibling"

*papardipuka*—"bereaved elder brother"

Attention to bereavement and emotions related to bereavement is a salient characteristic of Australian Aboriginal cultures, as is also attention to the order of birth among the children of the same parents.

As these examples illustrate, the words of a language reflect the speakers' special interests. For the speakers of a particular language, their words "fit the world" as they see it—but how they see it depends, to some extent, on what they want to see and what they pay attention to. This is true also of European languages, and English is no exception, either.

The conviction that the words of our native language fit the world as it really is, is deeply rooted in the thinking of many people, particularly those who have never been forced to move, existentially, from one language into another and to leave the certainties of their home language.

In her splendid language memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffman (1989: 106) tells the story of how she became aware of "the relativity of meaning" and the contingency of her own language upon her family's emigration from Poland to America. In a key passage focusing on the word *river*, Hoffman invokes Ferdinand de Saussure's doctrine of the arbitrariness of linguistic signs, and his conception of a word as a union of two elements: "the signifier" and "the signified," that is, the word and what this word stands for.

mostly, the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. "River" in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essences of riverhood, of my rivers, of being immersed in rivers. "River" in English is cold—a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke.