

# SEMANTICS, CULTURE, AND COGNITION

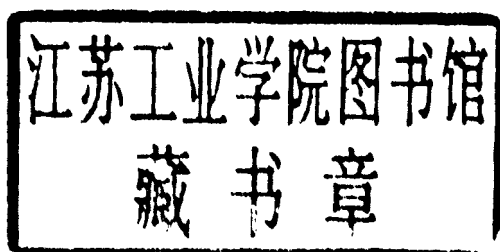
*Human Concepts in  
Culture-Specific Configurations*

ANNA WIERZBICKA

# SEMANTICS, CULTURE, AND COGNITION

*Universal Human Concepts in  
Culture-Specific Configurations*

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# Semantics, Culture, and Cognition





# Introduction

## 1. Are Languages ‘Essentially the Same’ or ‘Essentially Different’? Universalism and Cultural Relativism

Language is a tool for expressing meaning. We think, we feel, we perceive—and we want to express our thoughts, our feelings, our perceptions. Usually we want to express them because we want to share them with other people, but this is not always the case.<sup>1</sup> We also need language to record our thoughts and to organise them. We write diaries, we write notes to ourselves, we make entries in our desk calendars, and so on. We also swear and exclaim—sometimes even when there is no one to hear us. The common denominator of all these different uses of language is not communication but meaning.<sup>2</sup>

But if language is a tool for expressing meaning, then meaning, at least to some extent, must be independent of language and transferable from one language to another. Yet this essential separateness—and separability—of meaning from language has sometimes been denied. For example, the eighteenth-century German thinker Johann Gottfried Herder maintained that thinking is essentially identical with speaking and therefore differs from language to language and from nation to nation. “The human spirit thinks with words”, he maintained (1877–1913, v.21:19). “What is thinking? Inward language. . . . [T]alking is thinking aloud” (v.21:88). Consequently, “every nation speaks . . . according to the way it thinks and thinks according to the way it speaks”. Thoughts cannot be transferred from one language to another because every thought depends on the language in which it has been formulated.

Profound semantic differences between languages were also emphasised by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who saw different languages as bearers of different cognitive perspectives, different worldviews. He wrote:

[E]ach language . . . contains a characteristic worldview. As individual sound mediates between object and person, so the whole of language mediates between human beings and the internal and external nature that affects them. . . . The same act which enables him [man] to spin language out of himself enables him to spin himself into language, and each language draws a circle around the people to whom it adheres which it is possible for the individual to escape only by stepping into a different one. (1903–36, v.7:60)

Similar ideas were forcefully put forward by Edward Sapir, who wrote in a famous passage:

Language is a guide to 'social reality'. Though language is not ordinarily thought of as of essential interest to the students of social science, it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached. (1949:162)

Similarly, Whorf wrote:

[Language] is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. . . . We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (1956:213–14)

Other students of language—for example, Noam Chomsky—regard languages as differing from one another almost exclusively in form. Thus, Chomsky sees the lexicon of a language not as a unique system of categorisation imposed on external reality, nor as a 'shaper of ideas', but essentially as a set of labels to be attached to concepts which are language-independent and are determined not culturally but biologically.

Language and thought are awakened in the mind, and follow a largely predetermined course, much like other biological properties. . . . Human knowledge and understanding in these areas . . . is not derived by induction. . . . Rather, it grows in the mind, on the basis of our biological nature, triggered by appropriate experience, and in a *limited way* shaped by experience that settles options left open by the innate structure of the mind. (1987:25; emphasis added)

Much depends, of course, on the intended interpretation of phrases as “in a limited way”. Humboldt (1903–36, v.4:2), too (unlike Herder), used qualifying phrases of this kind. For example, he wrote that “thinking is not merely dependent on language in general but, *up to a certain degree*, on each specific language” (emphasis added). But to what degree?

According to Chomsky, to a very low degree indeed. Chomsky (1987:18) recalls, in this connection, ‘Plato’s problem’ as formulated by Bertrand Russell: “How comes it that human beings, whose contacts with the world are brief and personal and limited, are nevertheless able to know as much as they do know?” He comments: “[A]cquisition of lexical items also poses Plato’s problem in a very sharp form, and we must assume . . . that the conceptual resources of the lexicon are largely fixed by the language faculty *with only minor variation possible*” (1987:48; emphasis added). Humboldt’s view of the proportions between the universal and the culture-specific aspects of languages in general, and of their lexicons in particular, was entirely different:

To be sure, a midpoint, around which all languages revolve, can be sought and really found, and this midpoint should always be kept in mind in the comparative study of languages, both in the grammar and lexicon. For in both there is a number of things which can be determined completely *a priori*, and which can be separated from the conditions of a particular language. On the other hand, there is *a far greater* number of concepts, and also grammatical peculiarities, which are so inextricably woven into the individuality of their language that they can neither be kept suspended between all languages on the mere thread of inner perception nor can they be carried over into another language without alteration. (1903–36, v.4:21–23; emphasis added)

In fact, Humboldt goes so far as to suggest that there are very few words in any language which do have exact equivalents in other languages.

A hundred and fifty years separate Chomsky’s reflections from Humboldt’s, and it might be expected, in view of this fact, that they would be based on a much firmer empirical basis. This, however, is not the case. If anything, the opposite is true. For example, Humboldt wrote:

When, for example, in Sanskrit the elephant is sometimes called the twice-drinker, otherwise the double-toothed one, otherwise still the one-provided-with-a-hand, many different concepts are designated, even though the same object is meant. For language does not represent objects but rather the concepts which, in the process of speech, have been formed by the mind independent of those objects. (1903–36, v.7:89–90)

This is an interesting example pointing, convincingly, to some language-specific conceptualisations of certain aspects of reality. By contrast, Chomsky’s examples, intended to illustrate the supposedly innate and culture-independent character of most concepts, seem at times somewhat fanciful.

Chomsky (1987:22) maintains that “there is no clear alternative to the assump-

tion that acquisition of vocabulary is guided by a rich and invariant conceptual system, which is prior to any experience". Except for the adjective "rich", this assertion can be seen as essentially consistent with Humboldt's view. But then Chomsky goes on to say:

Many have found this conclusion completely unacceptable, even absurd: it certainly departs radically from traditional views. Some, for example Hilary Putnam, have argued that it is entirely implausible to suppose that we have 'an innate stock of notions' including *carburetor*, *bureaucrat*, etc. If he was correct about this, it would not be particularly to the point, since the problem arises in a most serious way in connection with simple words such as 'table', 'person', 'chase', 'persuade', etc. But Putnam's argument for the examples he mentions is not compelling. (1987: 33)

The idea that even concepts such as *carburetor* or *bureaucrat* may be innate and universal was presumably not intended to be taken literally,<sup>3</sup> but the idea that "simple words" such as *table*, *chase*, or *persuade* stand for such concepts apparently *was* so intended. And yet it would have been enough to discuss the matter thoroughly with one or two bilingual persons to find out that words of this kind do not have exact equivalents in other languages, and therefore cannot stand for concepts which are innate and universal.

For example, in Polish (my own native language) *table* has not one counterpart but two: *stół* and *stolik*, both of which differ in some respects from *table* (and from one another). For example, a coffee table or a telephone table would have to be described in Polish as *stolik*, whereas a dining table would have to be called *stół*. The verb *chase*, too, has two different counterparts in Polish, *ścigać* and *gonić*, both of which differ in some respects from *chase*. (Roughly speaking, *ścigać* implies an intention to move faster than the target, where *gonić* implies an intention to catch.) As for *persuade*, it has only one equivalent in Polish, *przekonać*, but in this case the Polish word has two different equivalents in English, *persuade* and *convince*, both differing in some respects from each other (cf. Wierzbicka 1987b) and from the Polish word.

The idea that English words such as *table*, *chase*, and *persuade* are just English 'labels' for innate and universal human concepts suggests that Chomsky's thoughts on the subject of lexical universals are based on speculative reflection rather than on any empirical investigations. Speculation of this kind has been occurring for centuries. It is time for it to be replaced by systematic empirical investigations, on a broad cross-linguistic and cross-cultural basis.

## 2. What Is Universal in Language and Thought?

There seems hardly any need to argue at length against the two most extreme views concerning the relationship between meaning and language: the view that meanings cannot be transferred *at all* from one language to another, and the view that meanings can be *fully* transferred.

On the one hand, it is obviously the common experience of mankind that translation *is* possible. In particular, the Gospels or parts of the Gospels have been translated into more than one thousand languages, and if they haven't been translated into *all* the languages of the world it is not because of any inherent linguistic difficulties. On the other hand, it is almost equally a truism to say that a translator is necessarily a betrayer: *traduttore traditore*, say the Italians, and no bona fide translator would disagree with this judgement. Even more importantly, it is a common conviction of bilingual and bicultural people all over the world that they lead a 'double life', and that the meanings they express in one language differ from those expressed in the other (cf. Hunt and Banaji 1988; Green 1989; cf. also Wierzbicka 1985c).

The real question, then, is not *whether* meaning can be transferred from one language to another but *to what extent* it can be so transferred; not *whether* meaning is language-independent but *to what extent* it is. Or, to put it differently, to what extent languages are shaped by 'human nature' and to what extent they are shaped by culture.

In particular, we should ask whether there really are some meanings which can be expressed in separate words (or perhaps separate morphemes) in all the different languages of the world. Are there, say, some words in English which would have exact semantic equivalents in all languages and which could therefore be regarded as 'labels' for innate universal human concepts?

The task of comparing all the words of all known human languages on an item-by-item basis is a daunting and, presumably, impossible one. The only realistic prospect must be a different one: to form a number of alternative hypotheses and to test them.

One hypothesis, advanced by Swadesh (1955), took as its premise the idea that universal human concepts are probably determined by the universal conditions of human life, above all by the universal features of the human environment. All human beings know from experience the sun, the moon, the stars; all human beings know rain, wind, water, and fire. Moreover, all human beings are familiar with their own bodies. It was assumed, then, that concepts which might have equivalents in all languages should be looked for among words for natural phenomena such as the sun, the moon, rain, water, or fire, and among words for parts of the human body such as ears, eyes, hands, or legs.

The more this search for universal human concepts based on nature proceeded, however, the more obvious it became that it was doomed to failure. Certainly, all human beings have heads, eyes, ears, and hands; and all human beings know the sky above their heads and the ground under their feet. But they don't think about these things in the same way. And language doesn't reflect the world directly: it reflects human conceptualisation, human interpretation of the world. As a result, words referring to parts of the body, and words referring to the world around us, can be as language-specific as those referring to customs, rituals, and beliefs.

For example, the Eastern Aztecs in Central America don't have a special word for the side of the body—they only distinguish between the thorax and the abdomen—so that when a Bible translator wants to say that Jesus was pierced in the side, he must decide whether he was pierced in the side below the ribs or between

the ribs, because there is no general word for 'side' (Nida and Taber 1969). Many languages use the same word for 'hand' and 'arm' (for example, Slavonic languages, Irish, Greek, Hausa, Tibeto-Burman, Australian languages).

What holds for body parts holds also for the features of our physical environment. For example, not all languages have a general word for wind. They may distinguish several kinds of wind, such as 'zephyrs', 'tornadoes', 'hot winds off the desert', and 'freezing winds', without having a general word for 'wind' (cf. Nida and Taber 1969). Not all languages have a general word for 'cloud'. For example, Polish distinguishes lexically between grey or greyish clouds which suggest rain (*chmura*) and light white clouds which don't (*obłok*). Not all languages have a general word for the sun. For example, in the Australian Aboriginal language Nyawaygi, there is one word for 'sun low in the sky in the morning and in the evening' and another for 'hot sun, when overhead'. In the same language there is no general word for 'moon', but there is one word for 'full moon' and another for 'new moon' (cf. Dixon 1980:104).

The native classification of animals and plants differs notoriously from language to language. For example, in the Australian Aboriginal language Nunggubuyu (Heath 1978) the word for 'bird' includes fruit-bats and some flying insects such as grasshoppers. In the Australian Aboriginal language Warlpiri (Hale, Laughren, and Nash 1983–86) there is no general word for animals. Edible animals are distinguished from non-edible ones, the word for edible animals being the same as the word for meat. Similarly, there is no general word for 'plant', but rather for edible and non-edible plants.

The names of species, too, are language-specific, to some degree. For example, Japanese doesn't distinguish lexically between mice and rats, calling them both with one word (*nezumi*), which, of course, has no equivalent in English. Australian Aboriginal languages don't have a word for 'kangaroo', because they distinguish lexically between different species which in English can all be called, indiscriminately, *kangaroo*. And so on. (For a further discussion, see Wierzbicka 1990c.)

It is clear, then, that if we are to find truly universal human concepts, we must look for them not in the world around us but in our own minds.

The idea that universal human concepts are to be found in the inner world of human thought goes back at least as far as the seventeenth century, to the great rationalist thinkers of that century: Leibniz, Descartes, Pascal. In particular, Leibniz believed that every human being is born with a set of innate ideas which become activated and developed by experience but which latently exist in our minds from the beginning. These innate ideas are so clear to us that no explanation can make them any clearer. On the contrary, we interpret all our experience through them.

Leibniz (1903:430) called those ideas with which, he believed, every human being was born "the alphabet of human thoughts". All complex thoughts—all meanings—arise through different combinations of simple ideas, just as written sentences and written words arise through different combinations of letters from the alphabet. He wrote:

Although the number of ideas which can be conceived is infinite, it is possible that the number of those which can be conceived by themselves is very small; because

an infinite number of anything can be expressed by combining very few elements. On the contrary, it is not only possible but probable, because nature usually tends to achieve as much as possible with as little as possible, that is, to operate in the simplest manner. . . . The alphabet of human thoughts is the catalogue of those concepts which can be understood by themselves, and by whose combination all our other ideas are formed. (1903:430)

Complex meanings codified in separate words may differ from language to language because each language may choose a separate word for a different combination of simple ideas. But 'simple ideas', on which human speech and human thought are based, are presumably the same for all people on earth.<sup>4</sup>

The task of discovering the ultimate simples (the 'atoms of human thought') was seen by Leibniz as difficult and time-consuming, but by no means impossible. It had to be pursued by trial and error, that is, by sustained, systematic attempts to define as many words as possible, so that one could identify on an empirical basis those concepts which serve as the building blocks from which all others are constructed. The basic guideline in this search was the requirement that the set of simple concepts should contain only those which are truly necessary for defining all the others. Whatever *can* be defined is conceptually complex and *should* be defined; whatever *cannot* be defined (without circularity and without going from simple to complex and from clear to obscure) should *not* be defined. Only in this way can the true alphabet of human thoughts be discovered. "Reducenda omnia alia ad ea quae sunt absolute necessaria ad sententias animi exprimendas" (Leibniz 1903:281): 'All other [expressions] should be reduced to those which are absolutely necessary for expressing the thoughts in our minds.' If we do not discover this alphabet of necessary concepts which cannot be made clearer by any definitions ("quae nullis definitionibus clariores reddere possunt", 1903:435), we can never successfully elucidate meanings conveyed in language, because without this basic tool we will only be able to translate unknowns into other unknowns.

Leibniz (1903:430) illustrates the need for analysing all complex meanings into components which are self-explanatory with the following comparison. "Suppose I make you a gift of a large sum of money saying that you can collect it from Titius; Titius sends you to Caius; and Caius, to Maevius; if you continue to be sent like this from one person to another you will never receive anything." Definitions and other semantic formulae which send one from one unknown to another are like this. It is only by decomposing complex meanings into components which can be regarded as self-explanatory that any true understanding can ever be achieved.

A program similar to Leibniz' was proposed in the 1960s by Andrzej Bogusławski (1966; 1970), who saw in it a possible basis for linguistic semantics. I adopted this program in my own work, and in 1972, on the basis of empirical investigation of several semantic domains in a few European languages, I proposed in my book *Semantic primitives* a first hypothetical list of such elementary human concepts. It included fourteen elements: *I, you, someone, something, this, want, don't want, think, imagine, feel, part, world, say, and become*.

Since that time, semantic investigations based on the Leibnizian assumptions have been pursued on a wider empirical basis, extending to a number of non-Indo-



European languages (for example, to the African Tano-Congo language Ewe in the work of Felix Ameka, to Chinese in the work of Hilary Chappell, and to Australian Aboriginal languages in the work of Nicholas Evans, Cliff Goddard, Jean Harkins, Joyce Hudson and David Wilkins). This expansion has prompted the idea that the search for the 'alphabet of human thoughts' should be linked—directly and explicitly—with the search for lexical universals, that is, for concepts which have been lexicalised (as separate words or morphemes) in all the languages of the world.

As the empirical basis of the work expanded, and as the theoretical analysis continued over the years, the list of primes originally postulated was revised and expanded. My current hypothesis is that of the fourteen primes posited in 1972 ten are truly valid: *I, you, someone, something, this, say, want, don't want, (or: no), feel, and think*. In addition, I would now strongly postulate as valid the following three: *know, where, and good*. Other elements which are currently being investigated as possible candidates include *when, can, like, the same, kind of, after, do, happen, bad, all, because, if, and two*. Four older candidates, *part, become, imagine, and world*, are at present regarded as problematic but have not been definitely abandoned. (See Wierzbicka 1989a and b and 1991c; Goddard 1989a and b; Bogusławski 1975, 1989, and 1990; Wierzbicka and Goddard, eds., forthcoming.)

The 'list' of hypothetical semantic primitives proposed here is in fact not just a list, but a mini-language, with its own grammatical categories and its own syntax. Thus, the elements 'I', 'you', 'someone', and 'something' form something like a nominal class; the elements 'this' and 'the same' (or 'other') can be regarded as an analogue of determiners; 'good' and 'bad' as an analogue of adjectives; 'think', 'say', 'want', and 'know' as an analogue of verbs; and so on. I presume that the 'sentences' in the mini-language have the form of simple clauses, such as the following ones:

I think this  
I want this  
you do this  
this happened  
this person did something bad  
something bad happened because of this

The whole problem of the 'grammar of human thoughts' is of course as important as that of the lexicon of human thoughts. For reasons of space, however, it cannot be discussed here. (For some discussion, see the introduction to Wierzbicka 1988a; see also Wierzbicka 1991c and in press e.)

I believe that the final identification of the universal set of semantic primitives (that is, of the 'alphabet of human thoughts') is an urgent task of linguistic semantics, with vital consequences not only for linguistics but also for cognitive science and for cultural anthropology, as a universal and 'culture-free' analytical framework is indispensable for a rigorous analysis and comparison of meanings encoded and conveyed in language.