Language and cultural values

Adventures in applied ethnolinguistics

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Mentioning in one go the words *language* and *culture* (or their counterparts in other languages) has become second nature to a majority of researchers in the language sciences and allied disciplines. The phrase *language and culture*, in particular, adorns book covers, either in its own right (Graddol et al. 1993; Kramsch 1998; Shaul & Furbee 1998; Risager 2006a) or as a prominent part of a longer title (Byram & Morgan 1994; Lee 2006; Risager 2006b; Hall 2013; Sharifian 2015). It also features in titles of journal articles and book chapters (Kasper & Omori 2010; Kramsch 2014), as well as in titles of entire journals--such as the one in which this special issue appears.

Talking about *language and cultural values* is not quite as trendy yet, but in a world in which references to cultural values are on the rise, this may change before too long. The papers in this theme issue of the *International Journal of Language and Culture* all deal with language and cultural values, and all adopt the principles of the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach, in which references to cultural values abound.

Before we attempt a definition of the concept of ‘cultural values’, it may be useful to say a few words about the NSM approach, already illustrated in a previous issue of this journal (vol. 1(2)), as not much detail will be provided in individual papers. The natural semantic metalanguage, i.e., the descriptive tool after which the approach is named, is the result of decades of empirically validated research by Anna Wierzbicka, Cliff Goddard, and an expanding group of collaborators with expertise in a large number of geographically and typologically diverse languages. For a broad introduction that is not overly technical, the reader is referred to Goddard (2011). In addition, hundreds of other bibliographical references dealing with many different languages and cultures are available on the NSM home page.¹

At the heart of the NSM approach lies the concept of ‘reductive paraphrase’. To account for the meaning of culturally specific and semantically complex words and phrases, all the

¹ <https://www.griffith.edu.au/humanities-languages/school-languages-linguistics/research/natural-semantic-metalanguage-homepage/what-is-nsm>

papers in this special issue rely on this concept. To better understand what it involves, we need to remind ourselves of an apparently basic assumption that--somewhat surprisingly--many other frameworks appear to have little or no time for. That assumption holds that there is only one worthwhile way to successfully account for what is semantically complex and/or culturally specific: the complexities and specificities have to be removed. This can be done only by providing a paraphrase that is simpler and easier to understand than the original, i.e., a 'reductive paraphrase'. As explained on the NSM home page:

Reductive paraphrase prevents us from getting tangled up in circular and obscure definitions, problems which greatly hamper conventional dictionaries and other approaches to linguistic semantics. No technical terms, neologisms, logical symbols, or abbreviations are allowed in reductive paraphrase explications--only plain words from ordinary natural language.

Not everything can be subjected to reductive paraphrase. Another central tenet of the NSM approach is that, in spite of enormous differences, all natural languages share the same set of maximally simple meanings. NSM researchers have painstakingly established that common, irreducible core through a long process of trial and error, which has now gone on for almost half a century, and which has resulted in an inventory of 65 semantically primitive universal conceptual building blocks, which cannot be explicated any further. These building blocks are called 'primes' or 'semantic primes'. Most papers in this special issue provide the latest table of primes, either in a monolingual English version or in a bilingual version including English and the language that is the focus of the corresponding paper. The building blocks come with their own combinatorial properties, i.e., their own rigorously controlled grammar, replicated--like the primes themselves--in all the languages of the world. This lends extra credibility to the claim that NSM is true to its name and is indeed an intuitively intelligible mini-language, unlike many other semantic metalanguages, which are neither intuitive nor semantically simple. In addition, unlike *all* other semantic metalanguages, this one has as many strictly isomorphic versions as there are languages in the world. This is because, in the absence of irrefutable proof to the contrary, all its ingredients (primes and grammar) are deemed to be universal. Although, for obvious reasons, the English version has been privileged, all other versions lend themselves equally well to the explication of language- and culture-specific ways of speaking, acting, thinking, and feeling.

Occasionally (only when required), alongside semantic primes, reductive paraphrases also make use of carefully selected non-primitive meanings. These so-called ‘semantic molecules’ (e.g., *laugh [m]* and *children [m]*) function as integrated units or conceptual chunks, and may be used alongside semantic primes for the explication of concepts of great semantic complexity. They are either universal or near-universal, and have been identified in NSM literature by means of an upper-case ‘M’ in subscript or a lower-case ‘m’ in square brackets. The latter notation appears to be the standard today: it is simpler, easier to type, and less prone to formatting glitches. [m] is used in Goddard (2011), Goddard and Wierzbicka (2013), and various other recent articles. Importantly, semantic molecules must be explicated separately, and cannot be taken for granted.²

Semantically complex meanings are thought of as being made up of primes (and sometimes molecules): not just strings of primes (or molecules), but primes combined into universally intelligible segments, in accordance with the universal combinatorial properties mentioned a few moments ago. These segments are known as *semantic explications*, because they serve to *explicate* culturally specific meanings. The NSM approach to semantic explication aims at a maximally transparent and culturally neutral representation of semantically and culturally complex and distinctive meanings. Because these are couched in a culturally neutral metalanguage, explications are universally intelligible to cultural insiders and outsiders alike. This, in turn, facilitates cross-cultural comparison and circumvents the dangers of Anglocentrism, to which many areas of linguistics (and other scientific disciplines) often unwittingly succumb. NSM explications can be readily translated from one version of the metalanguage into another, without any loss or distortion of meaning. For concrete examples, see the papers that follow. In this issue, where applicable, explications will be presented in more than one language, to illustrate their direct translatability. NSM explications also allow the norms and values that underpin the lexical resources of a language to be revealingly studied, compared, and explained to cultural outsiders. Explications of norms and values are referred to as *cultural scripts*.

Having (very) briefly outlined the basic tenets of the NSM approach, we shall now return to the subject matter of this special issue: language and cultural values.

My own interest in cultural values was triggered by Béal’s (1993) groundbreaking study of French conversational data published in the journal *Langue française* (issue 98, guest-edited

² Only two papers in this special issue (Tien and Peeters) rely, to a very limited extent, on semantic molecules.

by myself), as well as by Wierzbicka's (2003: 69) reference to cultural values in what she calls the "four basic premises in intercultural communication":

- (1) In different societies, and different communities, people speak differently.
- (2) These differences in ways of speaking are profound and systematic.
- (3) Different ways of speaking reflect different cultural values, or at least different hierarchies of values.
- (4) Different ways of speaking, different communicative styles can be explained and made sense of in terms of independently established different cultural values and cultural priorities.

I came to realize that it is through immersion in a foreign culture that the most important differences with one's own culture come to the fore, and that the most important differences are *not* differences in customs, traditions, art forms, etc. Rather, the most important differences are differences in cultural values.

But talking about cultural values is one thing; defining them is another. The term is often taken for granted, including by NSM scholars. So, what do we *mean* by cultural values? The answer obviously depends in the first instance on our definition of the term *value*. In the French sociological tradition exemplified by the occupant of the first chair of social psychology at the Sorbonne, Jean Stoetzel (1910-1987; see, e.g., Stoetzel 1983), values are defined as models, ideals stored deep in the human psyche that guide individuals to act in certain ways. Unlike opinions and behaviors, which are surface phenomena, they can only be reached through inference based on external observables. People may waver in their values, and values may change over time, but they will always be there to inspire our actions and to define who we are. In the oft-quoted formula used by the American philosopher John Dewey, values are "what we hold dear." At a different level, they are general beliefs which determine how we assess real or imagined behaviors (others', not our own), deeming some of them appropriate, desirable, or valued, and others inappropriate, undesirable, or poorly valued. Australian psychologist Norman Feather (1996: 222) adds a few more interesting points:

The values that people hold are fewer in number than the much larger set of specific attitudes and beliefs that they express and endorse. Values are not equal in importance but they form a *hierarchy of importance for each individual, group, or culture*, with

some values being more important than others. Values have some stability about them but they may change in relative importance depending on changing circumstances. They are not cold cognitions but are linked to the affective system. *People feel happy when their important values are fulfilled; angry when these values are frustrated.* (italics added)

Now, what about *cultural* values? In light of what has just been said, they can be defined as values that appear to be widespread within a languaculture, values that underpin the beliefs, convictions, attitudes, and communicative habits generally associated with that languaculture. They are not all equally important, hence the idea of a hierarchy. They are not universally shared by all members of a languaculture either, hence the use, in the second sentence of this paragraph, of the words *widespread* (with direct reference to cultural values) and *generally associated* (with reference to the kinds of things that are arguably underpinned by cultural values).

The realization that many foreign language textbook authors do not seem to be very good at singling out and commenting on cultural values led to the elaboration, some eight to ten years ago, of what I originally called the *ethnolinguistic pathways model* (Peeters 2009), a series of pathways which can be used in the advanced foreign language classroom and which are specifically intended to do two things: on the one hand, help advanced language learners use their burgeoning language skills to discover the cultural values commonly attributed to speakers of their chosen foreign language; and on the other, make them aware that the language they are learning contains numerous cues they can use to enable them to gain a better understanding of those cultural values. The ethnolinguistic pathways model was eventually renamed and is now known by the term *applied ethnolinguistics* (Peeters 2013a, 2015a). There are currently five pathways that may be used to posit hypothetical cultural values, depending on whether the starting point is a *culturally salient* (Peeters 2015a) word (ethnolexicology), phrase (ethnophraseology), syntactic pattern (ethnosyntax), figure of speech (ethnorhetorics), or communicative behavior (ethnopragmatics). The discovery procedure critically relies on an abductive process (Peeters 2015a): a sixth pathway, known as ethnoaxiology, is available to corroborate initial hypotheses reached on the basis of the other pathways.

The labels are perhaps not very user-friendly; some roll off the tongue, others do not. What led to the choice of these labels rather than any others is the fact that some of them

were already in use in work carried out using the NSM approach, which I have always insisted on relying on in my own experiments with applied ethnolinguistics. I simply coined a few additional ones, and provided definitions for all. These have evolved somewhat over the years; the current versions are as follows:

- **ETHNOLEXICOLOGY** (for a French example, see Peeters 2013b) is the study of culturally salient lexical items. It relies on linguistic as well as non-linguistic evidence, with a view to discovering whether any cultural values, previously known or newly discovered, underpin these items. This may or may not be the case, but if it is, values which were previously known will be better understood, whereas the reality of newly discovered values will subsequently have to be proven via other means. Defined in this way, **ETHNOLEXICOLOGY** is a successor to what, in earlier work (e.g., Peeters 2009), was called **ETHNOSEMANTICS**.
- **ETHNORHETORICS** (for a French example, see Peeters 2015b) is the study of culturally salient metaphors and other stylistic devices. It relies on linguistic as well as non-linguistic evidence, with a view to discovering whether any cultural values, previously known or newly discovered, underpin these devices. This may or may not be the case, but if it is, values which were previously known will be better understood, whereas the reality of newly discovered values will subsequently have to be proven via other means.
- **ETHNOPHRASEOLOGY** (for a French example, see Peeters 2014) is the study of culturally salient phrases and idioms. It relies on linguistic as well as non-linguistic evidence, with a view to discovering whether any cultural values, previously known or newly discovered, underpin these phrases and idioms. This may or may not be the case, but if it is, values which were previously known will be better understood, whereas the reality of newly discovered values will subsequently have to be proven via other means.
- **ETHNOSYNTAX** (for a French example, see Peeters 2010) is the study of culturally salient productive syntactic patterns. It relies on linguistic as well as non-linguistic evidence, with a view to discovering whether any cultural values, previously known or newly discovered, underpin these patterns. This may or may not be the case, but if it is, values which were previously known will be better understood, whereas the reality of newly discovered values will subsequently have to be proven via other means.
- **ETHNOPRAGMATICS** (for a French example, see Peeters 2013c) is the study of culturally salient communicative behaviors. It relies on linguistic as well as non-linguistic

evidence, with a view to discovering whether any cultural values, previously known or newly discovered, underpin these behaviors. This may or may not be the case, but if it is, values which were previously known will be better understood, whereas the reality of newly discovered values will subsequently have to be proven via other means.

ETHNOPRAGMATICS as defined here has a more limited scope than in Goddard's work going by the same name (e.g., Goddard 2006); it includes not only the study of culturally salient speech acts (e.g., *râler* or whinging the French way), but also that of 'discourse lubricants' such as discourse particles, words comparable to *please* and *thank you* in English, etc.

- ETHNOAXIOLOGY (for French examples, see Peeters 2015c, 2015d) is the pathway aimed at confirming the reality of hypothetical cultural values commonly thought of as being defining features of the languaculture they are usually associated with. The corroborative process is predicated on a search for linguistic as well as non-linguistic data in support of a presumed value. An ethnoaxiological examination will often be preceded by one of the other approaches, but may also be carried out in its own right, independently of any preceding investigation.

In my own work, all of the above have been essentially applied in nature; that is, applied with the foreign language classroom in mind. But they can be 'applied' in other ways as well, as most of the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, provided they contribute to a better understanding of the language-culture nexus and underscore the rich and complex relationship between language and cultural values.

1. Tien's paper on Chinese Hokkien profanities in the languages of Singapore is an exercise in ethnolexicology. Tien shows that the profanities included in his research are culturally salient in more than one way: not only are they commonly used in the local varieties of Hokkien, Tamil, Malay, and English, but they are symptomatic of Chinese cultural values that are widely shared by members of the Chinese *and* non-Chinese subcultures that define Singaporean culture as a whole.
2. Levisen and Jogie's paper on the Trinidadian 'theory of mind' is another exercise in ethnolexicology. The authors' aim is to launch a new wave of postcolonial research into creoles such as Trini, which has adopted the English word *mind* but has given it a meaning of its own. The Trini meaning reflects local cultural values; it is not because the word is (originally) English that the underlying cultural values must be English

too. Levisen and Jogie's paper is the first to use the Trini version of the natural semantic metalanguage.

3. Krijtenburg and de Volder's paper on UN and Giryama 'peace' is an exercise in *comparative* ethnolexicology. The authors see their study as a contribution to an ongoing debate within and outside the UN on ways to improve the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping operations. They would like UN negotiators to note that peace talks led by the UN should be conducted with due reference to local peace concepts, which may be very different from the international concept of 'peace' encapsulated in the UN's use of the Anglo term *peace*. Krijtenburg and de Volder's paper is the first published study to use the Kigiryama version of the natural semantic metalanguage.
4. Peeters' paper on *tall poppies* in Australian English is an exercise in ethnorhetorics. It revisits and partly corrects the author's earlier work. A detailed study of the tall poppy metaphor, which can be replicated in the foreign language classroom, is used to make advanced language learners aware of an important Australian cultural value, i.e., egalitarianism. For language learners, this value is not a given but something they can learn more about through their study of the (Australian) English language.
5. Levisen and Waters' paper on Danish *lige* is an exercise in ethnopragmatics, both in the broader and the more narrow meaning of the term. It serves as a reminder that English words such as *please* and *thank you* are not the alpha and omega of universal politeness. Danish *lige* is pragmatically comparable to English *please*, but it is used differently and is symptomatic of Danish cultural values. A remarkable feature of the paper is the proposal of some pedagogical cultural scripts to help Anglo learners of Danish to 'unlearn' some of their own scripts underlying the formulation of requests.
6. Cramer's paper on German *Ordnung* is an exercise in ethnoaxiology. The author does not use the term *ethnoaxiology* as such, but refers to *ethnopragmatics* instead, with her use of that term being consistent with the way it is used by Goddard (2006 and later work). Cramer studies the well-known German cultural value referred to in German as *Ordnung* "order." *Ordnung* underpins commonly used phrases such as *Alles (ist) in Ordnung* and *Ordnung muss sein*, and seems to have contributed to a shift in meaning of the German adjective *locker* "loose."

This is the first collection of papers published under the banner of applied ethnolinguistics. I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to all contributing authors for their patience, to the anonymous peer-reviewers for ensuring the papers are of the highest possible quality, and--

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