6: Overcoming the Linguistic Challenges for Ethno-epistemology NSM Perspectives

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In this chapter I attempt to cover a lot of material, so inevitably the coverage will be selective. It is not exclusively a birds-eye view, because from time to time we will be swooping down to matters of fine detail, but inevitably there will be gaps and there will be leaps. Section 1 introduces the fundamental problem: how to decide on a non-ethnocentric metalanguage for ethno-epistemology, in particular, how to extricate epistemology from its current Anglocentric entanglements. Sections 2 and 3 articulate the proposed solution as it emerges from the Natural Semantic Metalanguage program in cross-linguistic semantics. Section 4 presents explications for some key words of Anglo ethno-epistemology (*knowledge, truth, believe*), resolving their meanings into simple cross-translatable words. Section 5 offers a brief treatment of some aspects of traditional Australian Aboriginal folk epistemology. Section 6 contains concluding remarks.

1. "Ethno-epistemology: Compared to What?"

In a celebrated paper, the psychological anthropologist Catherine Lutz (1988) asked: "Ethnopsychology: Compared to What?" Her underlying point (one of them, in any case) was that contemporary Western psychology itself is infused with and reflects a folk psychology of its own.

Needless to say, contemporary Anglo culture also has a folk epistemology of its own, and it seems indisputable to me that Anglo English folk notions have left their imprint on theoretical thinking in epistemology—paralleling the situation in psychology and in other areas, such as moral philosophy (cf. Wierzbicka 2014a, 2014b, 2014b). This contemporary Anglo folk epistemology can be broadly described as "empirical" in character and as manifesting a high degree of "epistemic caution"—an orientation that emerged from the British Enlightenment (Porter 2000; Bromhead 2009; Wierzbicka 2010).

Though originating in specialist discourses of philosophy and science, spearheaded by John Locke, post-Enlightenment epistemology has overtaken ordinary English language and everyday culture, and now shows itself in numerous aspects of modern English vocabulary and usage. The linguistic profile of Anglo folk epistemology has been documented and analysed by Anna Wierzbicka (2002, 2006, 2010) in a string of publications. It includes:

- (i) Anglo cultural key words such as *evidence, empirical, and experience* ("The Big three Three Big E's")—not to mention *fact* and *reality*
- (ii) English-specific epistemic verbs, such as *believe* and *understand*
- (iii) a proliferation of specialised epistemic adverbs, e.g. *probably, possibly, apparently, certainly, supposedly*

- (iv) the high-frequency parenthetical *I think . . .* formula, with its specific semantics (not just “I think like this” but also, roughly, “I don’t say I know it”) and related expressions, such as like *in my opinion, in my view*, and the like.

Obviously, many of these words and phrases—especially those in (i) and (ii)—are common coin in epistemological theorising. But here is the critical point: not one of the words or phrases in this list is cross-translatable into most languages of the world. By cross-translatable, I mean precisely translatable. Many languages lack any apparent counterparts, while others have “translation equivalents” that are listed in dictionaries but that do not coincide fully in meaning (see section 4 for a worked example of Russian vs. English). In my opinion, there can be little doubt that Anglo folk notions such as those itemised earlier have influenced professional epistemology. The only real issues are: to what extent? and what to do about it?

In drawing attention to the importance of Anglo English epistemic terms such as *evidence, empirical, experience*, and *believe*, I am in full agreement with Stephen Stich and Masaharu Mizumoto (2018), who wrote as follows in their Manifesto to the collective volume *Epistemology for the Rest of the World* (Mizumoto et al. 2018):

Thus, the most important claim of our Manifesto is that *epistemologists (and linguists, and psychologists and experimental philosophers) should pay much more attention to the epistemic language and epistemic concepts that prevail in cultures around the world.* Cross-linguistic and cross-cultural analysis of epistemic terms, sentences and concepts has a crucial role to play in philosophical epistemology.

In their Manifesto, Stich and Mizumoto focussed almost exclusively on the English word *know (that)*, holding out the possibility (indeed, the likelihood, in their estimation) that it may not have exact equivalents in other languages. The counter-position, that there is a universal and semantically primitive concept KNOW, was argued by Wierzbicka (2018) in the same volume, and although I contend, with Wierzbicka and other NSM researchers (e.g. Farese 20186), that there is a universal semantic prime KNOW, it is not my purpose to take up that issue—at least, not directly. Rather, I would like to focus on the challenges of translatability more generally for the “ethno-epistemology” project and for related projects that are predicated on successful cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication and understanding.

These challenges are severe. They include: How to communicate effectively across language barriers? How to access and “think through” the unfamiliar lexical concepts of other languages? How to model the thoughts and meanings of people from unfamiliar cultures and languages, avoiding the dangers of assimilating their thoughts and meanings to the researchers’ home languages—especially, in this age of English as a global lingua franca, to the categories of the English language?

Hence the importance of simple, cross-translatable words to the ethno-epistemological project. I will expand under three points. First, if we were able to speak and think in cross-translatable words, it would be easier to communicate clearly and without distortion across language barriers.

Second, if we were able to formulate our thoughts in simple words, it would help us avoid implicit definitional circularity, reduce the dangers of the bewitchment of language, and counter any temptation to indulge ourselves in linguistic virtuosity for its own sake.

Third, using simple cross-translatable words would offer the prospect of modelling the thoughts and meanings of ordinary speakers of other languages authentically, i.e. the prospect of gaining an “insider perspective”, as linguistic anthropologists sometimes term it, on the folk epistemologies of other languages and cultures.

But are there any simple, cross-translatable words? This is where the decades-long program of cross-linguistic research known as the NSM (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) program comes in.

2. The NSM Program: Theory and Empirical Findings

The twin hallmarks of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach are its use of reductive paraphrase as a mode of lexical and conceptual analysis and its claim to have discovered an inventory of irreducible lexical meanings—semantic primes—that are apparently universal or near-universal in the world’s languages (Wierzbicka 1996, 2006, 2006; Goddard 2011, 2018, 2018a; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002, 2014a, 2014a, 2014b; Peeters 2006; Levisen 2012; Levisen and Waters 2017; Ye 2017; and other works).

The principle behind reductive paraphrase is that to explain the meaning of a word, phrase, etc., the explanation must use words that are clearer and easier to understand than the original expression. This is necessary for clarity and to safeguard against circular (i.e. self-referring) definitions.

To the extent that reductive paraphrase is possible, it implies the existence of some terminal elements of the reductive process, i.e., a set of indefinable meanings or “semantic primes”. After more than three decades of empirical research and conceptual experimentation, NSM researchers claim to have discovered (note: discovered, not stipulated) a viable set of 65 semantic primes. Examples include I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, DO, SAY, WANT, GOOD, BAD, BIG, IF, BECAUSE—and, most notably for the emergent “inter-discipline” of ethno-epistemology: KNOW. See Appendices A and B for full tables of semantic primes in English, French, and Japanese. Parallel tables of primes in about 20 languages, including Finnish, Vietnamese, Ewe (Ghana), and other non-Indo-European languages, are available from the downloads section of the NSM Homepage [short URL: bit.ly/1XUoRRV].

Many of the ideas behind the NSM program can be traced back to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who argued that all explanations must ultimately be grounded in a “catalogue of primitive concepts” (Wierzbicka 2001). Leibniz’s program was revived in the 1960s by the Polish linguist Andrzej Bogusławski and was subsequently taken up by Anna Wierzbicka, beginning with her 1972 book *Semantic Primitives*. Born and educated in Poland, Wierzbicka migrated to Australia in the early 1970s and has been based at Australian National University since then.

The NSM approach is still strongest in Australia, but it is on a steady upward trajectory, and there are now NSM scholars based in Denmark, Finland, Poland, Singapore, Spain, Canada, Israel, and other countries. There are dozens of NSM books and hundreds of scholarly papers. A bibliographic database is available at [nsm-approach.net]. The development of NSM theory has been periodised in Goddard (2018b: 33–36). For present purposes, the main points are that systematic cross-linguistic studies into semantic primes have been ongoing since the 1990s and that though for some time the inventory of primes was gradually increasing in number, it has been stable at 65 members since 2008.

NSM researchers expect that semantic primes will be lexical universals, in the sense that each semantic prime should have a lexical equivalent in every human language. The

existence of lexical equivalents of the semantic primes has been confirmed in more than 25 languages—as diverse as French, Russian, Polish, Danish, Spanish, Malay, Lao, Korean, Ewe, Akan, Amharic, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Koromu (PNG), and East Cree. It has to be stressed, however, that the term “lexical” is used broadly to include bound morphemes (e.g. suffixes) and fixed phrases, as well as words proper. In addition, semantic primes can have variant forms or alloloxes, such as English “other” and “else”.

It is important to note that words for semantic primes can have other meanings in addition to their simple meaning, a situation that linguists term “lexical polysemy”. For example, in many languages the word for DO can also mean “make”; the word for HAPPEN can also mean “appear” or “arrive”. Patterns of lexical polysemy vary from language to language. Many claims about the absence of semantic primes in particular languages turn out to be due to failure to take account of local lexical polysemy, cf. Goddard (2000, 2008: 8–11), Wierzbicka (2006: 20–25).

Semantic primes of course have a syntax, a grammar of combination, and this also appears to be universal as well. For example, as far as we know, the primes SOMEONE, SOMETHING, SAY, BAD, and YOU can be combined in any language to say the equivalent of “someone said something bad about you”. An important point about the syntax of semantic primes is that many of them can appear in several different grammatical frames. [Note ¹]

Semantic primes and their associated grammar comprise a kind of mini-language: hence the term Natural Semantic Metalanguage. It is an invaluable tool for conceptual analysis and cross-cultural communication. The metalanguage of semantic primes can be used in two modes of analysis: semantic explications and cultural scripts. Semantic explications are explanatory paraphrases of word meanings. [Note ²] Cultural scripts are representations of cultural norms, attitudes, and tacit understandings, not necessarily embodied in any single word-meaning. Both modes of analysis are relevant to ethno-epistemology, though in this chapter I will concentrate mainly on semantic explications.

3. A Cross-translatable Metalanguage for Ethno-epistemology

For the purposes of ethno-epistemology, the key elements of natural semantic metalanguage are the following:

- semantic prime KNOW
- the combination “it is like this: . . .”
- TRUE (a semantic prime in its own right, irreducible to KNOW)

Other elements are important too, including THINK, SAY, and WANT; GOOD and BAD; SEE, HEAR, and FEEL; CAN, BECAUSE, and MAYBE, but in the present chapter I will focus on the group of three identified previously. I will briefly go over the main details of these items and then show how they can be used to explicate some key ethno-epistemological notions of English.

¹ The semantic primes and their grammatical frames are summarised in the Chart of NSM Semantic Primes, downloadable from the NSM page in English and French versions.

² Many NSM explications rely not only on semantic primes, but also on semantic molecules, i.e. non-primitive meanings that function alongside semantic primes as integrated units (or “building blocks”) in the composition of yet more complex lexical meanings. Examples include ‘children’, ‘long’, ‘hands’, ‘mouth’, ‘sun’, ‘water’.

3.1 Know

In the following I borrow heavily from a detailed treatment of KNOW in Wierzbicka's contribution to the *Epistemology for the Rest of the World* volume (Mizumoto et al. 2018).

NSM researchers have long maintained that KNOW is an irreducible semantic prime. It is presently believed to have the array of grammatical frames shown in the following list.

- (i) I know
- (ii) this someone knows it
- (iii) this someone knows something
- (iv) this someone knows something about something
(including also: know a lot about . . . , know more about . . .)

Table: Universal grammatical frames for semantic prime KNOW

Frame (i) is related to first-person, “dialogical” uses of KNOW. It is the grammatically simplest frame, though the simplicity is deceptive in that the sentence “I know” only makes sense in a dialogical context. Frame (ii) also requires an antecedent, but it is not inherently first-person in orientation. Frames (iii) and (iv) show that KNOW can have a substantive complement, and also a “topic” phrase (introduced in English with preposition *about*).

A very important combinatorial context for KNOW is “I want to know . . .”, a meaning component that is involved in the semantics of questions and question forms in all languages.

It is well known, of course, that some languages have several words that may—in other frames and contexts—translate as English “know”, and this has been well-studied in NSM semantics.

3.2 Complex But Universal Frames for “Know”

As well as the frames presented in (i)–(iv), many, perhaps most, languages also provide for “know that . . .” sentences, i.e. sentences that include a full sentence-like proposition. Such sentences can be decomposed as shown below. They represent a kind of grammatical packaging whereby several meaning components are expressed in a single complex sentence. [Note ³]

[A1] *I know that he did it.*

it is like this: he (= this someone) did it
I know it

[A2] *He knows that I did it*

it is like this: I did it
he (= this someone) knows it

³ These examples also show how the phenomenon of ‘referential opacity’ is modelled in paraphrases, but this is an angle we cannot pursue here.

Despite their non-primitive status, it appears that “know that . . .” sentences, especially in the first-person, can be part of more complex semantic structures. [Note ⁴]

3.3 “It Is Like This”

Note the important component “it is like this: . . .”. On current evidence, this is a formula that can be stated in all languages. It is a powerful device for “scenario-building” in semantic structures.

The component “it is like this: . . .” often corresponds to the impression of “factuality” from the speaker’s point of view.

3.4 True

Since at least 1996, NSM theorists have maintained that TRUE is a semantic prime, irreducible to KNOW and expressible by a word in all languages. Of course, in some languages the word for TRUE is polysemous; for example, it may also express a second meaning such as “straight”. It is also important to note that semantic prime TRUE has no simple or symmetrical counterpart analogous to the English word *false*. Unlike TRUE, the meaning of *false* is complex and English-specific.

The semantic prime TRUE has a very simple syntax (the simplest, in fact, of all semantic primes): a single grammatical frame: THIS IS TRUE

The situation is more complex from a discursive/contextual point of view, however, because TRUE can only be used about something that someone says (or, perhaps, thinks). TRUE is, essentially, a metalinguistic semantic prime (Goddard 2008: 79). [Note ⁵]

3.5 Other Elements

As mentioned, other important elements for ethno-epistemological analysis include THINK, SAY, and WANT. Although there is no time for details, it is important to note that English *think* allows some uses that are not part of the universal grammar of THINK. Unlike many languages, English allows “think that . . .” sentences with a general “opinion” sense (Goddard 2005; Goddard and Karlsson 2008). To ensure cross-translatability, no such uses of THINK are allowed in NSM explications. On the other hand, an allowable (and favourite) grammatical frame for THINK is: this someone thinks like this: “—”.

4. Semantic Explications for Some Key Words in Anglo Ethno-epistemology

To illustrate the technique of semantic explication, it is useful to focus on some semantic subtleties and peculiarities of English. A semantic explication is a paraphrase composed of simple, cross-translatable words. A good explication should be well-formed, coherent, and “substitutable”, i.e. it should satisfy native speaker intuitions about uses of the word in

⁴ Likewise, all or most languages have grammatical packaging for talking about categorical knowledge (wh-complement, “embedded question”). This is related to the existence, in all languages, of questions that seek specific categories of information (cf. Wierzbicka 2018).

⁵ Another distinctive hallmark of TRUE, especially as compared with GOOD and BAD, is that it cannot be modified by VERY (notwithstanding that the combination *very true* is possible in contemporary English).

context. There are no fixed “discovery procedures” that lead directly from language data to an optimal paraphrase analysis. In practice, the process is a qualitative version of the method of successive approximations, i.e. one formulates a coherent explication, tests it against examples of usage, and revises iteratively (usually over weeks or more). If a word has two or more distinct-but-related meanings (lexical polysemy), each needs to be explicated separately. For more detailed accounts and exemplifications of how NSM explications are developed, refined, and tested, see Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014a, 2015).

4.1 “Knowledge” and “Truth”

At least one prominent epistemologist (Williamson 2000) has argued for the primitive status of knowing, but Williamson’s discussion slips back and forth between the words *know* and *knowledge*. From a linguistic point of view, these words are quite different. As Wierzbicka (2018) observes:

The range of use of the noun *knowledge* is quite different from that of the verb ‘to know’, and much more restricted. The word is used a lot in the context of education, in university studies, in philosophy, in encyclopedias, and so on, but far less commonly in everyday life or with reference to momentary states of affairs. For example, if I know what time it is, it doesn’t mean that I ‘have knowledge of what time it is’—at least not in ordinary language.

A partial explication of the “knowledge concept” can be given as follows in [B]. The explication is partial because it omits the introductory framing components associated with the status of *knowledge* as an abstract noun. These and other issues connected with abstract nouns are discussed in Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014a: 205–237). It would consume too much time and space to reprise them here. Suffice it to say that an abstract noun like *knowledge*, *trauma*, or *violence* reifies a certain potential situation by linking it with “a word of its own” and thereby establishes it as a potential discourse topic. The core of any abstract noun meaning and what makes it different in content from other abstract nouns is the potential scenario. Explication [B] presents the potential scenario evoked by the word *knowledge*—the “knowledge scenario”, if you will. It is introduced by “it can be like this: . . .”.

[B] *knowledge* (partial explication, potential scenario only)

. . .

it can be like this:

some people know some things about something

they want to know more

because of this, they do some things for some time

after this, these people know more about it (as they wanted)

it is good if it is like this

Ordinary English examples of this sense of the word *knowledge* include: (i) common expressions and sayings, such as *the pursuit of knowledge* and *knowledge is power*, (ii) collocations that speak of *knowledge* being *acquired*, *gained*, *shared*, *disseminated*, and the

like, (iii) phrases in which *knowledge* is combined with a modifier indicating a domain, e.g. *scientific knowledge*, *medical knowledge*, *knowledge of history*. [Note ⁶]

Unlike *know*, then, the idea of *knowledge* is not simple and indefinable. On the contrary, it is complex: a bundle of notions that combines *know* with other components. These components imply something like a cumulative, goal-directed activity that is valued. The complexity of the “knowledge concept” is of course consistent with the fact that English-speaking children acquire the word “knowledge” much later than “know”.

Something similar applies to *true* and its corresponding noun *truth*, i.e.: “[T]he noun *truth* . . . includes some additional components of meaning. Roughly speaking, *truth* means that something is not only true but also important” (Wierzbicka Forthcoming). For example, one can use the adjective *true* about something trivial, as in ‘It is true that I don’t like spinach’, but normally one would not use the noun *truth* like that.

[C] *This is the truth.*
 someone says this about something: “it is like this”
 this is true
 it is good if people want to know it

Wierzbicka (Forthcoming) draws out the significance of particular details of this explication as follows:

The element *good* links *truth* with values, the element *know*, with ‘knowledge’, and the element *people* gives it its social and human dimension.

Further, the element *say* provides the necessary opening for the entry of *true* into the conversational space, and . . . allows the introduction of the key statement ‘it is like this’, which, arguably, underlies the intuition that European philosophers often seek to express by linking the word ‘truth’ with the phrase ‘objective knowledge’.

At this point, it may be useful to remind ourselves that explications [A] and [B] are intended to capture the meanings of the words *knowledge* and *truth* in ordinary everyday English. The professional jargon of epistemologists often uses ordinary words of English well outside their normal uses, including words like *knowledge* and *truth*. For example, outlining some properties of “knowing”, Williamson (2000: 34) describes “knowing” as a “factive propositional attitude” and explains: “A propositional attitude is factive if and only if, necessarily, one has it only to truths. Examples include the attitudes of seeing, knowing, and remembering”. In ordinary English, people don’t use the word *truths* like that. In relation to sentences like “I know where I left the keys” or “I remember where I left the keys”, for example, no one would refer to the known location of the keys as a *truth*.

⁶ To be sure, the noun *knowledge* is polysemous, with several distinct meanings/uses aside from that explicated in [B]. Notably, the expressions *common knowledge* and *public knowledge* are quite frequent. Both are used to refer, loosely speaking, to a specific fact, e.g. *It was common knowledge that ...* Another fairly common usage appears in legalistic expressions such as *To the best of my knowledge, I have no knowledge of that*, and *He denied all knowledge*. A full treatment of the polysemy of the word *knowledge* is not possible here.

4.2 The Verb “Believe”

From the perspective of NSM semantics, philosophers are inordinately fond of the English verb *believe* (and its noun counterpart *belief*), with many self-incurred difficulties as a result. Part of the problem is that English *believe* is polysemous and occurs in several grammatical frames, e.g. “to believe that . . .”, “to believe someone”, “to believe in something”, but the more important point is that in any of these frames, the meaning of *believe* is complex and not cross-translatable.

I will confine myself to the “believe that . . .” grammatical frame. Roughly speaking, English “believe that . . .” conveys a considered conviction or commitment. It implies a certain gravitas, as shown by the fact that it can collocate with adverbs like *strongly*, e.g. *I strongly believe that . . .* [Note ⁷] Here a couple of naturally occurring examples:

- (i) *I believe that they shouldn’t have the vote.*
- (ii) *I believe that that is the key factor to being successful in this particular HEO role.*

These examples have first-person subjects, but the construction is equally at home with third-person subjects, including plural and generic subjects such as “people” (indeed, on corpus evidence it is probably more common with third-person subjects).

- (iii) *In the early 1900s people believed that radioactivity was good for you.*
- (iv) *Not long ago people believed that in the future we would work less, have more free time, and be more relaxed. But sadly this has not happened . . .*
- (v) *Before McDonald’s entered the European market, few people believed that fast food could be successful in Europe.*

Explication [D] for *believe that . . .* is based on Wierzbicka (2006: 216–218), with some modifications.

- [D] *I believe that—:*
when I think about it, I think like this:
“it is like this: —”
I know that someone else can think about it not like this
I know why I think about it like this, I can say it
it is good if people think about it like this

In explication [D], the first block expresses something like subjective certainty that something is a “fact”. The second block expresses the subject’s awareness of the possible existence of another point of view, accompanied by confidence that he/she can provide some kind of justification for thinking this way (for example, evidence that the proposition is

⁷ There is another distinct use of *believe* in the first-person conversational formula *I believe*, which has a “lighter” meaning. This usage cannot combine with *strongly* or other similar adverbs, nor can it be matched with any talk of *beliefs*. For example, I could say, using the conversational formula *I believe*, something like: *Oh, I believe the Library has a copy*; but one would hardly expect me to add any adverbs such as *strongly* to a statement of this kind, nor could I refer to *my belief* that the Library has a copy (Goddard 2003).

true, that it has been vouched for by a reliable source, etc.) and can explain or defend the value of thinking like this. [Note ⁸]

As one would expect from its complexity, the meaning of English *believe* is not replicated in many languages of the world. Some languages have no apparent translation equivalent at all. In other languages, dictionaries may give translation equivalents, but closer examination shows that the equivalence is illusory. Gladkova (2007) presents a case study of the Russian verb *sčitat'* that shows exactly this. She quotes the eminent Russian semanticist Jurij Apresjan on the kind of mental processes involved in *sčitat'*:

[It] is usually the result of a fairly long and thorough process of consideration of all observable facts (note the original idea of *sčet* [counting] which is present in *sčitat'*) . . . selecting [by an act of will] the interpretation . . . which he is prepared to uphold as correct. (Apresjan 2000: 149)

From an English point of view, the meaning of *sčitat'* can seem decidedly egocentric. It presents an opinion about which there is no longer any room for doubt and does not allow for or envisage other credible options and opinions.

Arguably, the meaning of English *believe* (in its post-Enlightenment sense) reflects a folk epistemology embedded in modern English. The larger point, however, is that it is counter-productive to employ the word *believe* (or *belief*) as part of the theoretical vocabulary of ethno-epistemology. It is not semantically simple and it is not cross-translatable. On the contrary, it has a highly language-specific set of meanings, complicated patterns of polysemy, and a complicated grammatical profile.

For the purposes of ethno-epistemology, an optimal metalanguage consists of simple, cross-translatable words and phrases such as “know”, “it is like this”, “think like this: . . .”, and “it is true”.

5. Some Glimpses into Australian Aboriginal Folk Epistemology

The metalanguage challenge for ethno-epistemology (and other projects involving cross-linguistic semantics; cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014b) emerges in a particularly sharp form when we consider linguacultures which are radically different from those of Europe, particularly small-scale, indigenous cultures without literacy and written traditions.

In the traditional languages and cultures of Aboriginal Australia, for example, one would find no word for “believe”, no words for “knowledge”, for “evidence”, or for “facts” (cf. e.g. Goddard 1996). It would therefore lead to inauthentic and cognitively implausible analyses if one were to depict folk epistemological aspects of Aboriginal people in terms of such foreign words. On the other hand, these languages do have words for KNOW and TRUE (and other semantic primes such as PEOPLE, THINK, SAY, and WANT) and simple ways to render the other phrases mentioned earlier.

In the space remaining, I will use examples from Aboriginal Australia to illustrate the two modes of NSM analysis mentioned in section 2, i.e., not only semantic explications but also cultural scripts.

⁸ The final pair of components, involving CAN SAY, imply something potentially dialogical, insofar as they imply that the person may wish to justify his or her belief, and perhaps can expect to be asked to do so.

5.1 The Australian Aboriginal *Jukurrpa* Concept: “Knowing Through Dreams”

It is widely assumed in Aboriginal Australia that some old men and women can acquire important “knowledge” through dreams. This is an aspect of the complex and culture-specific *Jukurrpa* concept [Note ⁹] (usually rendered into English as “the Dreamtime” or “Dreaming”). In a classic work, anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner offered the following characterisation, among others:

The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man. (Stanner 2003/1953: 58)

The *Jukurrpa* concept is the subject of an NSM study (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015) that seeks to explicate it into simple cross-translatable words. The resulting explication is long and intricate (see Appendix C), and not all of it is relevant to the concerns of ethno-epistemology. Some aspects are relevant, however, and, in my opinion, they are particularly fascinating.

The first two sections of the explication are given below. Key words for epistemology are underlined.

[E] Partial semantic explication for *Jukurrpa* (“Dreamtime”, “the Dreaming”)

When people say “*Jukurrpa*” (“Dreamtime”, “the Dreaming”), they think like this:

- a. at some time before, many things were happening here for some time, things like this
can’t happen now
when people here want to say something about all these things, they can say it
with one word, this word is *Jukurrpa*
many old men know a lot about this, many old women know a lot about this
they can say many things about it
these things are true
- b. people can know some things about this (about *Jukurrpa*),
because sometimes they see some things when they are asleep [in a dream]
not all people can know all these things

I want to draw attention to four aspects here. First, in the first section of the explication proper, it can be seen that the *Jukurrpa* concept involves people (especially old men and old women) knowing about some things and being able to say many things about it, and that “these things are true”. In mentioning “true”, the explication mimics a common way of speaking by Aboriginal people, e.g. “This is a true Dreaming story that I’m telling him, a true Dreaming story”.

⁹ Properly speaking, the word *Jukurrpa* belongs to the Warlpiri language of Central Australia. Other Australian Aboriginal languages have comparable terms, though it cannot be assumed that they correspond to the Warlpiri concept in every respect. *Jukurrpa* (and *Tjukurpa*, a cognate term from the Pitjantjatjara language, also from Central Australia) are becoming increasingly used in mainstream Australian English discourse. Other terms include *Altyerrengge* or *Altyerr* (in the Arrernte language of central Australia), *Ngarrankarni* (in the Kiji language of East Kimberley), and *Wongar* (North-East Arnhem Land), to name only a handful (Nicholls 2014).

Second, old men and old women are seen as special repositories of and authorities on knowledge about the *Jukurrpa* “Dreaming, Dreamtime”. The terms “old men” and “old women” correspond to indigenous social categories. Aboriginal languages often have a single lexeme or fixed expression for each of these categories. Later sections of the explication (not shown here) establish that men and women have access to different knowledge of the Dreaming.

Third, as stated in the opening of the second section, one source of this special knowledge is from actual dreams, i.e. experienced during sleep. Fourth, some knowledge of the *Jukurrpa* is restricted: “not all people can know all these things”.

Surely, this single key concept offers us a glimpse into an ethno-epistemological worldview far removed from that of modern, secular Anglo culture.

5.2 Traditional Aboriginal Attitudes Towards “Knowledge”

Considering that the “peak” knowledge concept (if we may so term it) of traditional Australian Aboriginal societies, namely *Jukurrpa*, already contains a reference to restricted access to this knowledge, it is perhaps not surprising that Aboriginal cultural attitudes concerning who can speak about these things and about the consequences are very different to those of modern European societies. Some anthropologists write about a “knowledge economy” (an evocative, but, unfortunately, ethnocentric term).

In an insightful NSM-informed study, linguist Sophie Nicholls (2013) has commented as follows about matters “of a secret/sacred nature”.

This information (related to ceremonies, songs, places and people) is not freely available. . . . There are restrictions as to who can discuss (or even mention) certain places, ideas, concepts and events and cultural strategies about how to approach talking about places, ideas, concepts and events. . . . Within the community only certain people, such as traditional owners or initiated men, are qualified to know about these things. Even when something is not secret or sacred, there are often areas of knowledge that [only] specific people are in a position to teach and discuss (Nicholls 2013: 295)

To capture some of these attitudes, Nicholls provides the following “cultural script”. Though written in semantic primes (and therefore expressible in Aboriginal languages, as well as in English), this is not a semantic explication, i.e. it is not a paraphrase of an actual lexical item. Rather, as indicated by the opening component (“many people here think like this: . . .”), it is a statement of a commonly held attitude.

[F] *An Aboriginal cultural script concerning knowing about secret/sacred matters*

many people here think like this:

“some places/things are like this:

many people can’t know a lot about these places/things like people

can know about other places/things

some people can’t know anything about these places/things

very bad things can happen if these people know anything about these places/things”

Noteworthy aspects of the script include the focus on places (“sacred sites”), as well as on things, the fact that some people are excluded from any knowledge whatsoever of the topics in questions, and the idea that there can be dire consequences if any breaches of restrictions occur (“very bad things can happen if these people know anything about these places/things”).

Wierzbicka’s (2018) chapter in the *Epistemology for the Rest of the World* volume includes a second, related script regarding “owners of information and talking for others”.

5.3 Summary

The general points I have been trying to make in sections 4 and 5 are: first, that cultural concepts and cultural norms concerning “knowing” can differ a great deal across human societies; second, that such concepts and norms are reflected in words, phrases and ways of speaking, observable facts about language and discourse; and third, that the metalanguage of semantic primes provides a means for explicating such concepts and articulating such norms without implicitly adopting the standpoint of any particular language or culture.

6. Why Languages Matter to Ethno-epistemology, Why Semantic Analysis Matters to Ethno-Epistemology

Words and their uses in ordinary discourse provide innumerable clues to assumed categories and societal attitudes, including categories and attitudes connected with “knowing”. This is key data for ethno-epistemology.

To have real dialogue across language barriers, we need to express ourselves clearly and translatably. This cannot be achieved if we are not prepared make the effort to speak in simple, cross-translatable words.

[U]niversal meanings such as KNOW, THINK, TRUE and MAYBE give us better tools for investigating ‘core folk epistemology’ across cultures than language-and-culture-specific ones like ‘believe’, ‘justified belief’ or ‘knowledge’. And not only across cultures, but also across times. (Wierzbicka 2018)

We need semantic analysis—conducted in simple, cross-translatable words—in order to decouple what we want to say from complex, non-translatable English words such as *evidence*, *facts*, *justification*, *intersubjective agreement*, and the like and thus to avoid or minimise Anglo-/Eurocentrism. Equally, we need semantic analysis—conducted in simple, cross-translatable words—in order for us to “hear” properly what other people are saying, when they express themselves using language-specific words of their own cultures.

Appendix A

Semantic Primes, English and French (after Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014a; Peeters 2006)

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING ~ THING, PEOPLE, BODY	substantives
JE, TU, QUELQU'UN, QUELQUE CHOSE ~ CHOSE, GENS, CORPS	
KINDS, PARTS	relational substantives
TYPES, PARTIES	
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER ~ ELSE	determiners
CE, LA MÊME CHOSE, AUTRE	
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH ~ MANY, LITTLE ~ FEW	quantifiers
UN, DEUX, CERTAINS, TOUS, BEAUCOUP, PEU	
GOOD, BAD	evaluators
BIEN, MAL	
BIG, SMALL	descriptors
GRAND, PETIT	
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	mental predicates
SAVOIR, PENSER, VOULOIR, NE PAS VOULOIR, SENTIR, VOIR, ENTENDRE	
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	speech
DIRE, MOTS, VRAI	
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	actions, events, movement
FAIRE, ARRIVER, BOUGER	
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	location, existence, specification
ÊTRE (QUELQUE PART), IL Y A, ÊTRE (QUELQU'UN/QUELQUE CHOSE)	
(IS) MINE	possession
(EST) À MOI	
LIVE, DIE	life and death
VIVRE, MOURIR	
TIME ~ WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	time
MOMENT ~ QUAND ~ FOIS, MAINTENANT, AVANT, APRÈS, LONGTEMPS, PEU DE TEMPS, POUR QUELQUE TEMPS, INSTANT	
PLACE ~ WHERE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	place
ENDROIT ~ OÙ, ICI, AU-DESSUS, AU-DESSOUS, LOIN, PRÈS, CÔTÉ, DANS, TOUCHER	
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	logical concepts
NE...PAS, PEUT-ÊTRE, POUVOIR, À CAUSE DE, SI	
VERY, MORE	intensifier, augmentor
TRÈS, PLUS	
LIKE ~ AS ~ WAY	similarity
COMME ~ FAÇON	

Notes: • Exponents of primes can be polysemous, i.e. they can have other, additional meanings • Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes • They can be formally complex • They can have language-specific combinatorial variants (alloloxes, indicated with ~) • Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

Appendix B

Japanese Semantic Primes, with English equivalents (Asano-Cavanagh and Farese 2015)

私WATASHI, あなた ANATA, 誰か DAREKA, 何か ~もの~こと NANIKA~MONO~KOTO, 人々 HITO-BITO, 体 KARADA I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	substantives
種類 SHURUI, 部分 BUBUN KINDS, PARTS	relational substantives
これ KORE, 同じ ONAJI, 他 HOKA THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	determiners
一 HITO~ICHI, 二 FUTA~NI, いくつか ~何人か IKUTSUKA~NANNINKA, すべ て SUBETE, たくさん TAKUSAN, 少し SUKOSHI ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW	quantifiers
良い YOI, 悪い WARUI GOOD, BAD	evaluators
大きい OOKII, 小さい CHIISAI BIG, SMALL	descriptors
思う ~考える OMOU~KANGAERU, たい ~欲しい ~望む -TAI~HOSHII- NOZOMU, たくない ~欲しくない ~望まない -TAKUNAI~HOSHIKUNAI ~NOZOMANAI, 感じる KANJIRU, 見る MIRU, 聞く KIKU KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	mental predicates
言う IU, 言葉 KOTOBA, 本当 HONTŌ SAY, WORDS, TRUE	speech
する SURU, 起こる ~起きる OKORU~OKIRU, 動く UGOKU DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	actions, events, movement
(どこかに) いる ~ある (DOKOKANI) IRU-ARU, ある ~いる ARU~IRU, (誰か ~何か) である (DAREKA/NANIKA) DEARU BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	location, existence, specification
私のである (WATASHI NO) DEARU (IS) MINE	possession
生きる IKIRU, 死ぬ SHINU LIVE, DIE	life and death
いつ ~時 ~回 ITSU~TOKI~KAI, 今 IMA, 前 MAE, 後 ATO, 長い間 NAGAI AIDA, 短い間 MIJIKAI AIDA, しばらくの間 SHIBARAKU NO AIDA, すぐに ~一瞬 SUGUNI~ISSHUN WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	time
どこ ~所 ~どこか DOKO~TOKORO~DOKOKA, ここ KOKO, 上 UE, 下 SHITA, 遠い TOOI, 近い CHIKAI, 面 MEN, 中 NAKA, 触る SAWARU WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	place
ない NAI, 多分 TABUN, できる ~得る DEKIRU~ERU/-URU, から KARA, (も し) -ば (MOSHI) -BA NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	logical concepts
すごく SUGOKU, もっと ~もう MOTTO~MŌ VERY, MORE	intensifier, augmentor
よう ~ように YŌ~YŌNI LIKE~AS	similarity

Appendix C

Full Explication for *Jukurrpa* (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2015)

Jukurrpa (“Dreamtime”, “the Dreaming”)

When people say “Jukurrpa” (“Dreamtime”, “the Dreaming”), they think like this:
<p>at some time before, many things were happening here for some time, things like this can’t happen now when people here want to say something about all these things, they can say it with one word, this word is Jukurrpa many old men know a lot about this, many old women know a lot about this they can say many things about it these things are true</p>
<p>HOW PEOPLE CAN KNOW ABOUT THIS (ABOUT JUKURRPA)</p> <p>people can know some things about this (about Jukurrpa), because sometimes they see some things when they are asleep [in a dream] not all people can know all these things</p>
<p>WHAT PEOPLE OFTEN SAY ABOUT THIS (ABOUT JUKURRPA)</p> <p>people in this place often say many things for some time about this (about Jukurrpa) people in this place often want to hear these things when people in this place say these things, they say things like this:</p> <p> “many things happened at this time before, these things happened in many places some men did some things in some places, these men were not like men are now some women did some things in some places, these women were not like women are now some creatures of some kinds did some things in some places, these creatures were not like creatures of these kinds are now”</p> <p>people often say something like this about many places: “this place is like this because of Jukurrpa” people often say something like this about many things: “it is like this because of Jukurrpa”</p>
<p>WHAT PEOPLE DO BECAUSE OF ALL THIS (BECAUSE OF JUKURRPA)</p> <p>men now do some things in many places because they want to think about all this (about Jukurrpa) they do some things like many other men did at many times for a long time before when they do these things somewhere, something happens in this place as it happened before at some times women do things like this in some places if people don’t do these things, something very bad can happen</p>
<p>WHAT PEOPLE CAN’T DO BECAUSE OF ALL THIS (BECAUSE OF JUKURRPA)</p> <p>people in this place know very much things about all this (about Jukurrpa) because of this, they do not do some things if someone does something like this, people say: “this is very bad”</p>

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