In Praise of Minimal Languages

1: In praise of minimal languages

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1.1 What is a "minimal language"? What are minimal languages good for?

The year 2018 saw the launch of a new approach to clearer and more accessible communication, in the book *Minimal English for a Global World: Improved Communication Using Fewer Words* (Goddard 2018).[i] The key idea was that great benefits can be often gained by making the effort to express important thoughts and messages not in "full English", with all its wonderfully expressive resources of vocabulary and grammar but in so-called Minimal English: a radically simplified, core version of English, consisting only of words and grammar which are easily translatable into other languages.

The concept and basic design of Minimal English had emerged from decades of linguistic research in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework into how meanings are packaged and expressed differently in different languages. That research indicated that notwithstanding the dazzling global diversity of culture, history and geography, all languages apparently share a small common core of meaning. It follows from this that there is nothing linguistically special about Minimal English: it is just one minimal language among many (Minimal Spanish, Minimal Chinese, Minimal Finnish, and so on), all of which correspond very closely to one another. Minimal English has a special utility, however, on account of the status of English as a global lingua franca. Also, as a "de-Anglicised" form of English it presents a special opportunity to push back against the Anglocentrism of global English.

The minimal version of any language represents the bare essentials of that language: a core vocabulary of as few as 200-300 words and a restricted grammar. Expressing oneself in a language of minimal size can be difficult (that's for sure). It is a skill that has to be learnt and practised; but what is to be gained is maximal clarity and accessibility, on the one hand, and maximal translatability, on the other; and from this, many societal benefits can flow. *Minimal English for a Global World* provided a set of proof of concept studies showing how complex ideas in law, diplomacy, ethics, science education, and medicine could be re-worked into minimal language (Cf. also Sadow, Peeters, and Mullan (2020); Jordan 2017).

This book – *Minimal Languages in Action* – explores how early adopters have been putting Minimal English and other minimal languages into action across diverse fields: language teaching and learning, "easy language" projects, agricultural development training, language revitalisation, intercultural education, pediatric assessment, and health messaging. The projects and researchers

come from Australia, the USA, Finland, Poland, the Pacific, and South Korea. The focus is twofold: how are minimal languages being put into service, and what we are learning from this? That is, how are our ideas about minimal languages changing in response to practical experiences in different contexts? How can minimal languages be expanded, adapted, localised and implemented differently for different purposes?

Before moving to these and other matters, I would like to briefly itemise some of the benefits of Minimal English and other minimal languages. I will do so under four interrelated points. First, any minimal language, be it Minimal English or any other minimal language, is a tool or method for putting thoughts into words in a way that makes it easier for these thoughts and words to travel across a language barrier. It is important to point out that minimal languages are not only useful for translating or adapting existing texts. In much information-based writing, it makes sense to try to write in translatable words and grammar from the beginning. The resulting texts will be clearer and less "accident-prone" when they come to be translated. This should lead to financial savings on translation costs and greater effectiveness with the target audience.

It also helps reduce the so-called "invisible misunderstandings" that often occur when words of global English circulate in international discourse without necessarily being understood in the same way in different countries and contexts.

Second, using minimal language makes thoughts and messages clearer and more explicit. The point is, it is not just a matter of communication: using a minimal language helps one to think more clearly. With fewer words to choose from, one is forced to focus on the essentials, to avoid woolly thinking, and to forsake any temptation to indulge in rhetoric or linguistic virtuosity.

Third, from the consumers point of view, texts expressed in minimal language are more accessible to people without high-level language skills on account of cognitive impairments or lack of formal education, or because they are children, or because they are L2 learners, such as immigrants and refugees or language learners at school or university.

Fourth, texts expressed in simple and clear words are often more moving – "closer to the heart" – than those expressed in "higher" levels of language (cf. Wierzbicka, this volume Ch. 12).

Finally, it should be emphasised that minimal languages are solidly grounded in empirical linguistic research, conducted over 40 years in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework. This is what makes it different from, and much better than, other attempts over the years to simplify English (see Sect. 1.4). Minimal languages are the result of taking the findings of NSM research "out of the lab" and adapting them for practical uses by non-specialists in a wide and open-ended range of functions (cf. Sadow 2020).

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows. Section 1.2 gives a preview of some of the insights and issues discussed in this book. Section 1.3, the longest section of the present chapter, is a descriptive outline of minimal languages. It covers the core vocabulary and grammar of minimal languages and discusses several ways in which the core vocabulary can be expanded to suit particular domains or user communities. Section 1.4 follows with two brief examples of Minimal English and I take the chance to compare them with similar texts in Basic English and Wikipedia Simple English, with the aim of highlighting that Minimal English is more accessible, more evidence-based, and more cross-translatable. Section 1.5 gives an overview of the chapters. Section 1.6 looks briefly to the future for minimal languages.

1.2. Issues, Terms, and Labels

How strict should one be with the vocabulary and grammar of a minimal language? How precise with the expression? There is a spectrum of views. Depending which end of the spectrum one falls closest to, one is likely to view a minimal language either as a language variety of sorts, with delimitable contents and boundaries, or alternatively as an "approach", that is, as primarily a set of guidelines and heuristics.

Oversimplifying, one may say that the strict and precise end of the spectrum is represented by Wierzbicka's (2019) 'The Story of God and People', while the "free form" or "approach" end of the spectrum is represented by Vanhatalo and Torkki's (2018) advocacy of what they call the "65 words approach" for public discourse in Finland. On closer examination, however, one can see that these differing attitudes towards minimal language are connected to the differing purposes of the respective authors.

At about 25,000 words, Wierzbicka's (2019) 'The Story of God and People' is the longest single Minimal English text yet written. It is a "high end" product by an advanced practitioner, years in the making and with no effort spared. All this is connected with the author's goal, which is to distil the essentials of "what Christians believe" into maximally clear and cross-translatable language. Scholars in translation studies have often observed that prestige texts, such as holy books and high literature, typically receive the most detailed and concentrated attention from translators.

Vanhatalo and Torkki (2018), on the other hand, are not focussing on any particular text at all. Rather, they are trying to inspire Finns to see the advantages of using shared simple words to discuss contentious public issues. They wish to inject greater clarity into public discourse and to encourage the Finnish public to rely less on contested "trigger words" which often amplify conflict.

From their point of view, it does not matter greatly whether a high standard of minimal Finnish is achieved, so long as there is improvement in public discourse.

Complementary to the spectrum just described, minimal languages also vary along several other dimensions of difference, such as: the nature of the target user community, the intended purposes of the minimal language, and the degree to which the cross-translatable core vocabulary is augmented by domain-specific vocabulary. The latter issue can be deferred till Sect. 1.3, which deals with the linguistic aspects of minimal languages. To get a quick overview of the other two factors (users and purposes), it is instructive to take a look at various terms and labels employed by different contributors as purpose-specific alternatives to 'Minimal Language' – different brandings, if you will.

- Basic Human: used by Wierzbicka when using minimal language to reach the broadest possible audience – potentially, people everywhere – as in her work on global ethics (Wierzbicka 2018) or the 'Seven Essential Messages in the time of Coronavirus' (this volume, Ch. 12).
- Easy Language (formerly Easy-to-Read or EtR): used in the EU, especially for simplified language forms for people with cognitive challenges and other language difficulties (cf. Lindholm and Vanhatalo in press; Leskelä and Vanhatalo, this volume, Chap. 3). Easy Language is favoured by these users because it is itself easy to understand.
- Standard Translatable English: for use by teachers and students in English as a Second Language classrooms (Sadow 2019; this volume, Chap. 6). For these users, the idea of a "minimal" version of English was unappealing.
- Clear Explicit Translatable Language (acronym CETL, pronounced "settle"): for use by outward-facing medical professionals, such as pediatricians and community health workers (Vanhatalo, et al. forthcoming; this volume, Chap. 9)

Despite the value of these customised brandings, the term 'minimal language' (and specific language versions, such as Minimal English, Minimal Spanish, etc.) still has much to recommend it and is regarded as unproblematical in the chapters by Hill, Machin, Bullock, Lee and Juda.

In my view, the best way to view the multiplicity of labels is to use the expression 'minimal language' to designate radically reduced language forms informed by the findings and principles of NSM linguistics. Domain-specific or purpose-specific labels such as CETL and Standard Translatable English can be explained as "based on research into minimal languages".[ii]

The designation Basic Human is somewhat different because it is intended to be domain-general and not tied to any specific purpose (precisely the opposite in fact). Compared with 'minimal language', it has a couple of important advantages: it is easier to "get" at first sight and it conveys immediately the idea of a common language for all people. Obviously though, the term Basic Human is only appropriate for a minimal language which is entirely free of any culture-specific elements.

1.3 Design of a Minimal Language

1.3.1 Why "Plain English" is Not Enough

The idea of writing or speaking in simple cross-translatable words strikes many people as nothing more than common sense. After all, doesn't everyone recognise the value of putting things into plain English that everyone can understand? Actually though, it is a big mistake to equate "plain", that is, non-technical, jargon-free, English with simple, cross-translatable English. Many intuitively "plain" English sentences are not cross-translatable, because they use English-specific words or English-specific grammar. Examples (a)-(c), for instance, would strike most English speakers as pretty plain and simple English but none of them are as simple as they look.

(a) That's not fair.
(b) Let's stick to the facts.
(c) We have to do something about that.

In (a) the word *fair* is highly English-specific (arguably, an Anglo cultural keyword) and untranslatable into most languages of the world and the same goes for the word *facts* in (b) (cf. Wierzbicka 2006; Goddard and Ye 2015). Additionally, (b) also includes the near-idiom *stick to …*'. Though compact in English, sentence (b) would take a short paragraph to render accurately in many languages. As for (c), the problem here is a matter of grammar. Although the word 'do' is a semantic prime (and hence has equivalents in all languages), the expression 'do something *about* (something)' is semantically quite complex and English-specific.

Fortunately, after decades of cross-linguistic research into the deep semantics of many languages, we now know how to avoid such translation traps. Let's now take a look at the vocabulary and grammar of minimal languages, with a particular focus on Minimal English.

1.3.2 Choosing Words That Everyone Can Understand

At the core of any minimal language are (1) the 65 semantic primes discovered by NSM research, together with (2) a couple of hundred other basic meanings (termed 'semantic molecules' in NSM theory) which also appear to have equivalents in all or most languages. If necessary for specific purposes, this core minimal vocabulary can be expanded in various ways, provided that such expansion is done cautiously. In this and the next sub-section, I will elaborate on these points one by one.

Semantic Primes. The English versions of the 65 primes are shown in a user-friendly display in Fig. 1.1, arranged into groups. Semantic primes are also often listed in a table format. Comparable figures and tables are available for about 30 languages from various language families and geographical locations around the world.[iii]

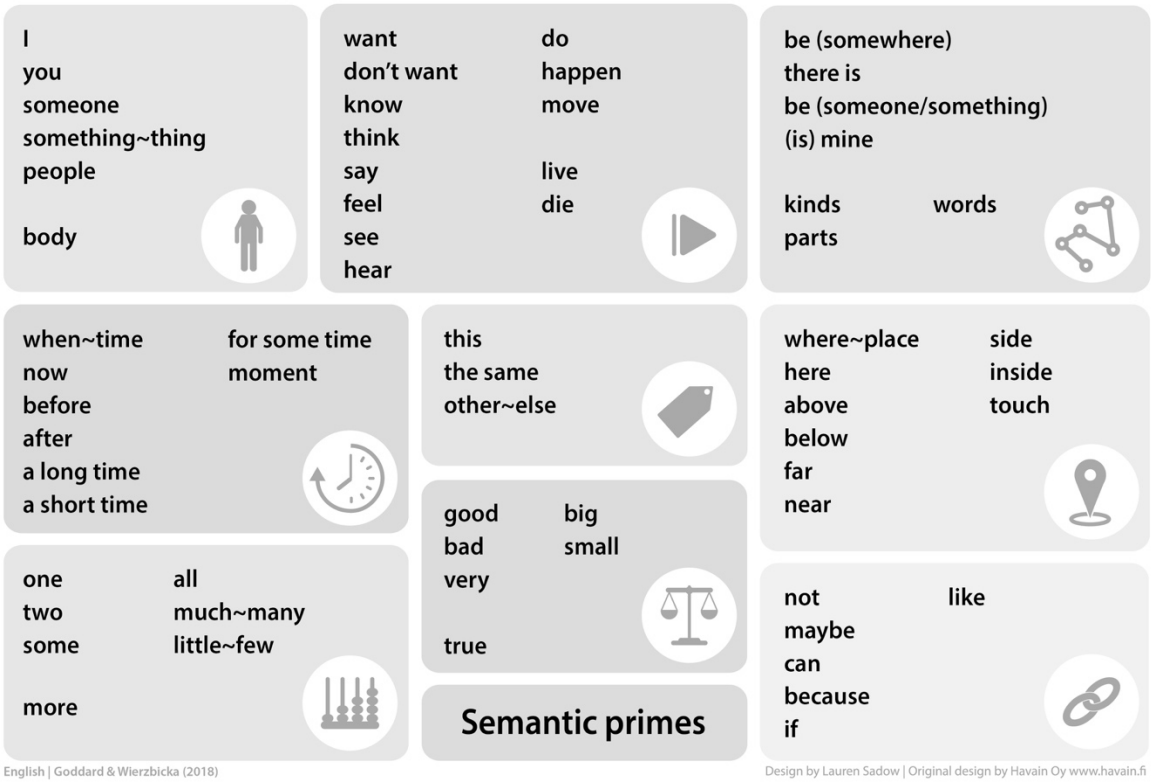

Figure 1.1 Semantic primes (English version)

The words displayed in Fig. 1.1 strike most English speakers as very basic and common vocabulary – and so they are. It has to be noted though that many of these words in fact have several meanings, a situation linguists term "lexical polysemy". High-frequency words in any language tend to be polysemous. In such a situation, the simplest of the meanings concerned is the semantic prime. Usually it is straightforward to indicate the intended meaning by giving a couple of simple sentences (see also Sect. 3.3. below). For example, the English word *see* has several

different meanings. The semantically primitive one is found in sentences like ‘I can’t see anything’ and ‘I want to see more’. Likewise, the English word *word(s)* has several different meanings. The semantically primitive one is found in sentences like ‘She said the same, but in different/other words’ and ‘In this language, the word for ‘dog’ (bird, tree, etc.) is —’.[iv]

Lexical polysemy can work quite differently in different languages, so when working in any individual minimal language (e.g., Minimal English or Minimal Spanish), one has to be careful to use the words for semantic primes appropriately. It is also important to note that Fig. 1.1 only gives a single word for each prime. There are often variant forms for a prime, however, and these are also allowed in the minimal version of any language. Very often such so-called allolexes are grammatical or discursive variants, e.g. *I* and *me*, *this* and *that* in English. Sometimes they are different words altogether, e.g. the English word *well* can be an adverbial allolex of ‘good’; *person* can be an allolex of ‘someone’. As well as allolexes, minimal languages can also employ portmanteau words, i.e. words that package several primes together, e.g. English *everyone* for “all someone(s)”; *often* for ‘at many times’.[v]

In order to combine the words for semantic primes into phrases and sentences, the English language makes use of various grammatical function words, such as the prepositions *in*, *at*, *of*, *with* and *about*, among others. When they are used to support and combine the primes, such function words also appear in Minimal English, as would their counterparts in other minimal languages. In some languages, of course, the equivalents of English function words are not separate words, but different case forms; in other languages, the same functions may be served by grammaticalised uses of certain verbs; and there are other possibilities too. The general point is that in any minimal language, the semantic primes bring with them a certain amount of grammatical machinery – or grammatical glue, if you will – needed to allow the vocabulary of semantic primes to combine into phrases and sentences in a natural way.

Table 1.1 lists most of the supplementary items – allolexes, portmanteaus, grammatical function words – needed in Minimal English.

‘in’, e.g. in this place, in the same place; in one moment
‘at’, e.g. at this time, at the same time; at this moment
‘of’, e.g. one of these people; one part of this thing; something of one kind
‘with’, e.g. do something with someone; live with someone; say something with words
‘about’, e.g. think about something; say something about someone
‘that’ (complementizer), e.g. I didn’t know that this can happen
‘to’ (complementizer), e.g. I want to do something
‘it’ (dummy subject), e.g. it is good if ..., it is bad if ...
‘a lot’ (a variant of ‘much~many’)
‘well’ (an adverbial variant of ‘good’)
‘as’, ‘such’, ‘way’ (variants of ‘like’, or portmanteau of ‘like’ and ‘this’’)
‘during’ (variant of ‘for …’ about time periods)
‘it’ for ‘this thing’
‘these’ (variant of ‘this’ used with a plural noun)
‘he’ or ‘she’ for ‘this someone’; ‘they’ or ‘them’ for ‘these people’ or ‘these things’
‘both’, ‘every’ (portmanteau words based on ‘all’)
‘nothing’, ‘no-one’, ‘nowhere’, ‘anyone’, ‘anything’, ‘anywhere’
‘often’, ‘sometimes’, ‘always’, ‘never’
‘who’, ‘where’, ‘when’, ‘how’, ‘why’

Table 1.1 Supplementary words (allolexes, portmanteaus, grammatical function words) of Minimal English

Semantic Molecules. Unlike semantic primes, semantic molecules are not ultimately simple (indefinable) meanings. On the contrary, they are themselves decomposable into primes and some of them turn out to be rather complex in meaning, especially since there can be molecules within molecules (cf. Goddard 2018b: Ch5, 2018c). These complications are not important for practical users of minimal languages. What is important is, first, that like semantic primes, semantic molecules are high-value “building blocks of meaning”, and second, that many of them are likely to be universal or near-universal, e.g. body-part terms such as ‘head’, ‘legs’, and ‘mouth’; environmental words such as ‘water’, ‘fire’ and ‘sky’; descriptors such as ‘long’ and ‘hard’; and some verbs, such as ‘hold’ and ‘laugh’. Some semantic molecules which are known to be not absolutely universal are still likely to have near-equivalents in most languages, e.g. ‘eat’, ‘fish’, ‘bird’. All of these words can be safely used in minimal languages.

Other semantic molecules are culture-specific in global and world-historical perspective, but are present in many (perhaps most) languages in today's world and are essential for talking and thinking about important topic areas. Examples are words like 'money', 'God', 'doctor' and 'number'. Still other semantic molecules are more localised, in the sense of being linked with particular geographic or cultural zones; but within these zones, they are widely known and thus may present no significant barrier to accessibility or translatability. Figure 1.2 gives 100 or so words representing different kinds of semantic molecules that form part of core vocabulary of minimal languages.

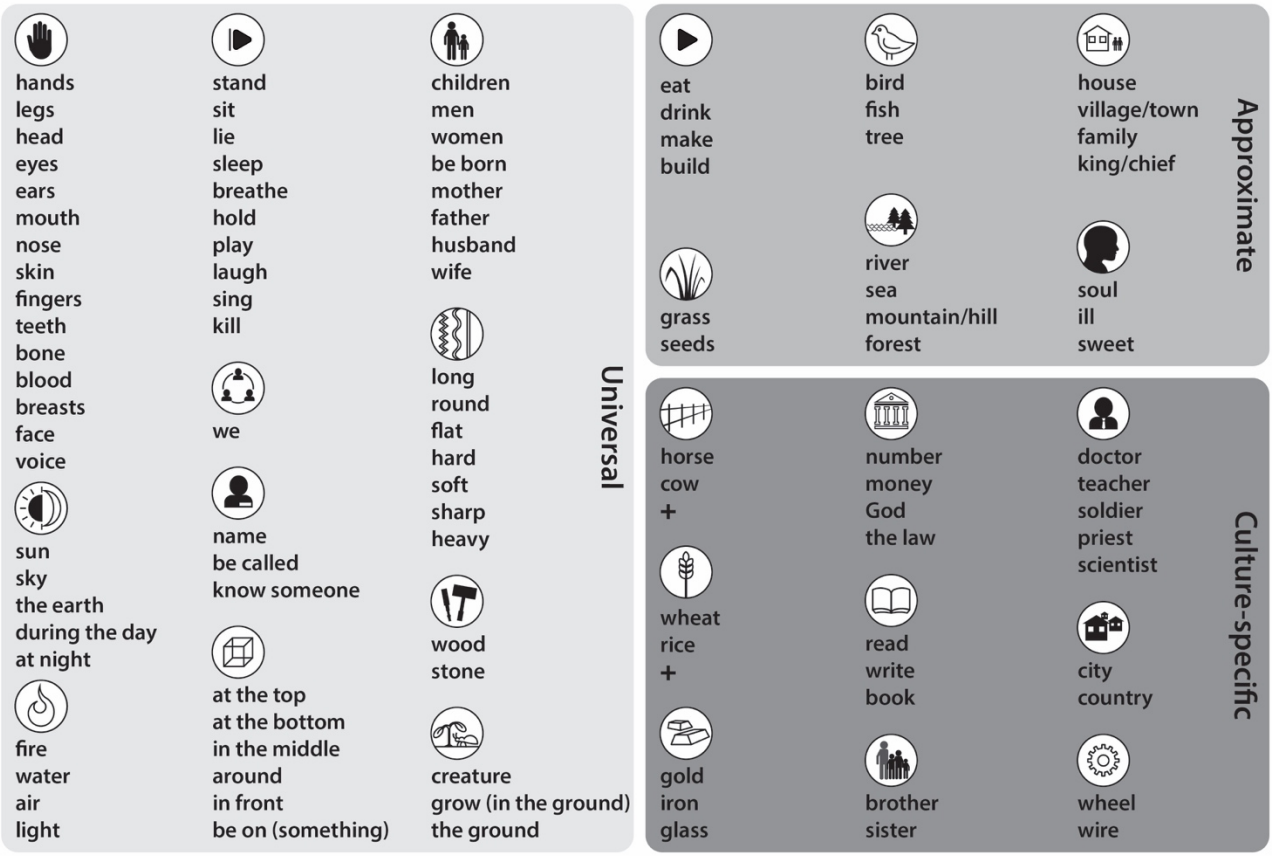

Figure 1.2 Samples of semantic molecules of different kinds (after Goddard 2018c)

Other. It appears that there are other words which are not necessarily semantic molecules, but which are still widely cross-translatable and may be very important for particular purposes; for example, words like 'hungry', 'stars', 'school' and 'mosquitoes'.[vi] Such words too can be used in minimal languages. Widely known international words, such as *taxi*, *hotel*, *passport*, and *cigarette* (or, *tobacco*) are also probably acceptable in minimal languages, if needed.

1.3.3. Expanding the Minimal Lexicon

What about situations in which one wishes to use non-translatable vocabulary in minimal language texts? There are two further strategies, and the choice of which to use, or whether to use both in combination, may depend on the purpose and context of use.

The first is to simply add a certain number of words, striving to keep the number to a minimum. If the minimal language text is intended for translation, it is a good idea to identify these words in a glossary, with explanations composed in core minimal language.

In narrative or procedural texts, it is often necessary to describe the settings and characters with terms designating items of local geography, material culture, occupations and social categories. 'The Story of God and People', for example, was largely set in Biblical Palestine and included many scenes of daily life from that cultural context. Wierzbicka (2019) used the "local" words listed below, in addition to the more general words discussed in the previous section.

> Biological: lamb, dove, rooster, oxen, bush. Geographical: lake, desert, rock. Material culture: table, cup, bread, wine, linen. People: carpenter, fisherman, shepherd, soldier, slave. Kinship: son, brother

In this book, Hill's chapter on agricultural training in the Pacific (Chap. 2) discusses localisation issues at some length. She explains that the words 'village', 'garden' and 'food' are essential to describing everyday life in the Pacific.

A second way in which additional words can brought into minimal languages is the "*called* mechanism". It rests on the fact that the expression 'be called' is posited as a universal semantic molecule.[vii] This means that new words can be introduced into minimal language texts and briefly glossed at first mention. In Chap. 4, Machin uses the "*called* mechanism" to introduce the names of different parts of speech. For example, after mentioning 'tree', 'dog' and 'house' as sample words, her Minimal English text continues: 'words like these are called *nouns'*. Machin's strategy depends on adducing examples. Another strategy is to give a brief, partial explanation. For example, in 'The Story of God and People', the word 'prophet' is introduced as follows:

> When God wanted to say something to the people of Israel, God said it to someone not like many other people. After this, this someone said it to the people of Israel; someone like this was called a prophet.

Similarly, new words can be introduced by describing an event, and adding 'when this happens, people say …' (or similar); see Sect. 1.4.2 for some examples.

Overall, the structure of minimal language vocabularies can be diagrammed as in Fig. 1.3. Despite the need for minimal languages to include a selection of local and/or domain-specific words

in many contexts, it is important to be cautious in selecting them and to keep the number as small as possible. Adding complex and non-translatable words willy-nilly for "convenience" is a trap to be avoided. In particular, it is wise to be wary of abstract words, such as words for emotions and values. Deeply cultural words like these are often extremely difficult, if not impossible, to match across languages (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; Levisen and Waters 2017).

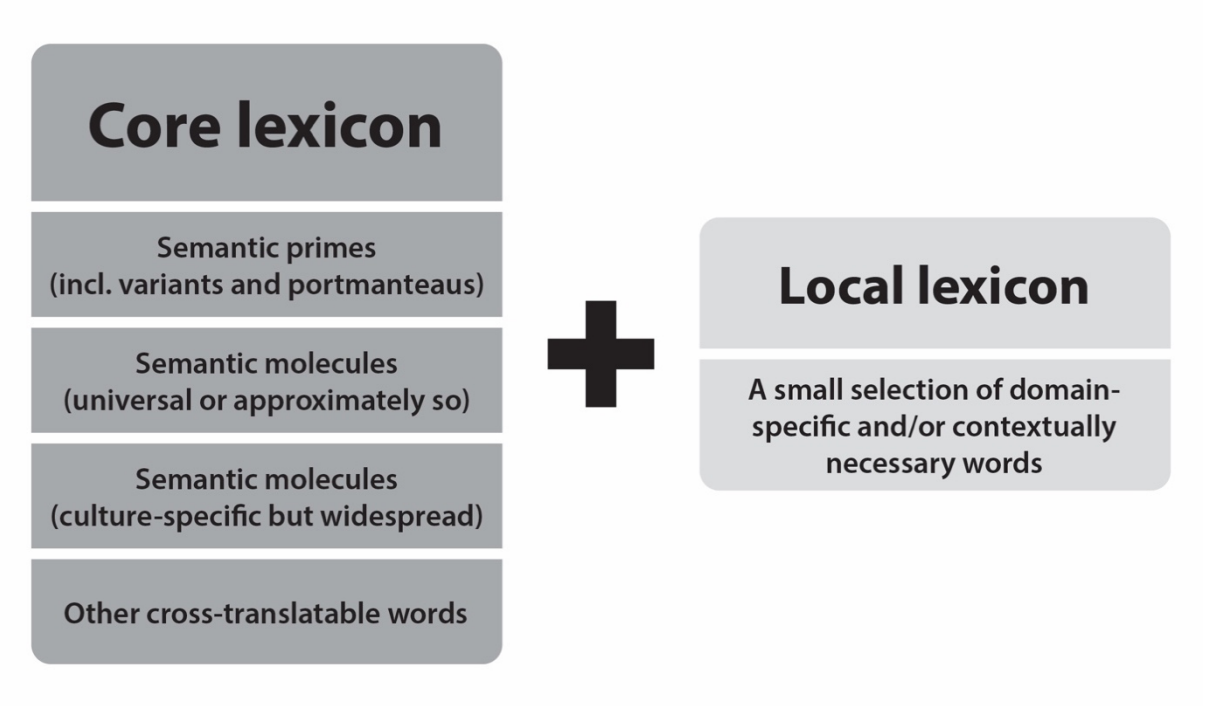

Figure 1.3 Components of a minimal language lexicon

1.3.4 Using Simple Translatable Grammar

Learning Minimal English isn't just learning how to choose and use simple translatable words. It also involves learning how to choose and use simple grammar.

Staying within the bounds of translatable grammar is in some ways the trickiest thing for writers of minimal language texts. The problem is not that little is known about the topic. As research into semantic primes has proceeded over past decades, a great deal has been learnt about "universal grammar". The grammar of semantic primes (their grammatical properties and the patterns by which they combine) is part and parcel of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage and can rightly be regarded as the core of universal grammar. The problem, in part at least, is that it is more difficult to summarise and teach about this grammar than it is to summarise and teach about semantic primes. After all, one can list the semantic primes (no matter that such lists necessarily leave some questions unanswered), but how does one go about "listing" a grammar?

Actually, the NSM literature does include a number of studies which have discussed the grammatical frames available to each and every prime (cf. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002). There is also a summary Chart of NSM Semantic Primes available on the internet.[viii] This Chart gives some of the key grammatical frames and combinatorial possibilities for each of the 65 primes. Though a valuable resource, however, it is not exactly "easy reading" for the non-linguist.

To further cloud the issue, there is the following to consider. The core vocabulary of minimal languages consists not only of semantic primes but also includes universal and near-universal semantic molecules, even though these are decomposable into primes. The same applies to the grammar of minimal languages. Some grammatical constructions are widespread in the world's languages, despite being decomposable into simpler elements; for example, expressions like 'I know that …' and 'they knew that …' (Wierzbicka 2018; Goddard 2020). Likewise, it seems highly probable that so-called 'yes/no' or polar questions, e.g. 'What happened', 'Who's there?' are sayable in all languages. If so, there is no harm using these in minimal language texts.

There is a pressing need for user-friendly materials designed for non-linguists who want to use minimal languages. In the meantime, a couple of "Do's and Don'ts" are as follows, expressed with reference to Minimal English.

- DO use simple sentence patterns as far as possible.
- DO use when-clauses and if-clauses when necessary, but only one of each per sentence.
- DO use semantic primes in all the grammatical patterns listed on the Chart of NSM Semantic Primes, which can include using English function words like *about, to, for*, and *with*. For example, it is alright to use 'do' and 'say' in the patterns below.

  … do something good <u>for</u> someone, … do some things <u>with</u> some other people

  … say something (good/bad) <u>about</u> something, … say something <u>to</u> someone

  All four of these patterns are translatable, though their equivalents in other languages may use different function words or different linguistic devices, e.g. case endings, serial verb constructions, word-order.
- DON'T use so-called indirect speech, that is, the 'say that …' construction in a sentence like 'Mary said that John did it'. It is not possible in some languages. It is best to re-phrase using direct speech, for example: 'Mary said: "John did it"'.
- DON'T use relative clauses (it is alright, however, to use structures such as 'in a place where …' and 'at a time when …')

- DON'T use comparative constructions, e.g. expressions like 'better (than)' or 'bigger (than)'. Some languages don't have words like *better* and *bigger*.

In addition, it is advisable to avoid using *and*, *but*, and *or*, as far as possible. Some languages do not have matching words. For example, Polish has two words (*i* and *a*) corresponding to English *and*, and though the difference is subtle neither is an exact match for *and*. Many Australian languages lack words corresponding to *or*. Admittedly, it can be difficult to eliminate these seemingly essential discourse-binding elements from Minimal English, but it is always possible. It usually calls for more use of repetition and parallelism in the text. This can make the text less natural sounding, but, on the other hand, more use of parallelism can make a text clearer and easier to digest.

1.4 Minimal Language Vignettes

To flesh out the picture of minimal languages, this section presents two short Minimal English texts, titled 'An angel visits Mary (Mariam)' and 'What is a Tropical Cyclone?'. One is a narration (an incident from the New Testament), the other a scientific explanation. These examples have been chosen because they afford the opportunity to contrast the Minimal English texts with comparable versions in Basic English and Wikipedia Simple English, respectively.

1.4.1 An Angel Visits Mary (Mariam)

When many people first hear about Minimal English, they think "Oh, that sounds like Basic English" – even though they may have no very clear idea about what Basic English actually is, or was.

Basic English is usually credited to C.K. Ogden (1930, and other works), a Cambridge philosopher of language. He and his associate I.A. Richards were the prime movers in devising and popularising a system originally called BASIC (British American Scientific International Commercial). Especially popular in the wake of WW II, BASIC was intended as an international auxiliary language, "covering everything necessary for everyday purposes" with a primary lexicon of 850 words. BASIC lost impetus in the 1950s and it is now essentially lost in its original conception. The legacy of BASIC lingers on, however, in both the popular and scholarly imaginations. It is instructive therefore to look briefly at what BASIC actually is (or was).

Though the figure of "850 words" is often cited, most people have no idea what these 850 looked like in reality. Many would be surprised to learn they include hundreds of complicated and highly-English specific terms, such as those listed below. Notice the high proportion of abstract nouns.

> agreement, authority, business, chemical, competition, control, distribution, experience, fiction, humour, industry, manager, organisation, political, private, power, representative, responsible, request, right, suggestion, sense, society, structure, system, violent

The abstractness and Anglo character of much of the BASIC vocabulary is due to two factors, one attitudinal and one technical. Firstly, Ogden was a firm believer in the superiority of the English language and its associated ways of thinking. Cross-translatability into other languages was not a consideration for him. Secondly, to get by with a minimum of verbs, the BASIC system ingeniously relied on an English-specific paraphrasing strategy based on multi-functional grammatical verbs, such as *come*, *have*, *give*, *make*, *let*, and *put*. For example, in BASIC one would not say *decide*, but *come to a decision*. One would not say *know*, but *have knowledge of*.

All these factors give BASIC a curiously distant and abstract "feel", quite different to that of Minimal English. To see this, we can consider two closely parallel passages based on a scene from the New Testament (Luke 1: 28-31). [ix]

> 'An Angel visits Mary' in BASIC
>
> And the angel came in to her and said, Peace be with you, to whom special grace has been given; the Lord is with you.
>
> But she was greatly troubled at his words, and said to herself, What may be the purpose of these words?
>
> And the angel said to her, Have no fear, Mary, for you have God's approval. And see, you will give birth to a son, and his name will be Jesus.

> 'An Angel visits Mary (Mariam)' in Minimal English
>
> The angel said: "I want to say something very good to you, Mariam. God is with you, God feels something very good towards you." Mary didn't know why this was happening to her. She didn't know what she could think about it.
>
> Then the angel said: "Don't think like this, Mariam: 'something bad can happen to me now'. Think like this: 'something very good is happening to me now.'

> In a very short time, something will happen to you; it will happen because God wants it to happen. Because of this, after some time you will give birth to a child (a son). You will call him Jesus.

These examples show, I hope, that BASIC is not what most people imagine it to be. BASIC doesn't look or feel particularly "simple", and it isn't. For example, the passage above uses the passive construction ('to whom special grace has been given"), difficult lexical expressions such as 'greatly troubled', and complex grammar and phrasing ("What may be the purpose of these words?" and "for you have God's approval").

The Minimal English text, in contrast, is phrased in much simpler vocabulary and grammar. Admittedly, it does include some unusual-sounding expressions (such as 'God feels something very good towards you' and 'something very good is happening to me now'), but these are easy to understand.

1.4.2 "What is a Tropical Cyclone?

Just as many people believe that there is a thing called Basic English, so too many people believe that there is something called "Simple English" – particularly because there is a division of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia called Simple English Wikipedia, with nearly 150,000 articles. Wikipedia deserves to be commended for supporting the use of simple English, but it is important to understand that there is no system of simple English as such, and very few guidelines. The main guideline is: "use Basic English words and shorter sentences". The articles are generally re-written into simple English, based on entries in the main encyclopedia. They are evaluated and deemed to have reached a threshold standard before publication, but there is great variety in their consistency and quality from a minimal language point of view.

For the purpose of demonstration, I undertook to adapt part of an existing Simple English Wikipedia entry on Tropical Cyclone.

> 'What is a tropical cyclone?' (Extract from entry in Simple English Wikipedia)
>
> Tropical cyclones, hurricanes or typhoons form when convection causes warm, moist air above the ocean to rise. They begin as a group of storms when the water gets as hot as 80 °F (27 °C) or hotter. The Coriolis effect made by the Earth's rotation causes the winds to rotate. Warm air rises quickly. … The "eye of the storm" is the center. It has little rain or wind. …
>
> Tropical cyclones are powered by warm, humid ocean air. When they go onto land, they weaken. They die when they spend a long time over land or cool ocean water.

The goal of the Minimal English version (below) was to render the key scientific information in this passage. Some of the challenges were as follows: (1) the passage uses the term *convection* without explanation (albeit with a hot link to another entry), (2) it uses the expressions *warm, moist air* and *warm humid air* as synonyms, but without explaining either, (3) it uses the word *rotates* without explanation, and without linking it explicitly to the expression *circular air movement*, (4) there is a lot of English-specific grammar and phraseology, such as *causes*, *gets hot*, *made by*, *go onto land*.

To order to unpack the key information using a much smaller vocabulary, the Minimal English text turned out to be about three times longer than the "simple English" text. Partly this comes from the need to do without semantically complex words like *convection*, *storms*, *humid*, and *rotates*, and partly it is because the Minimal English text spells out the chains of causation more explicitly.

'What is a tropical cyclone?' in Minimal English[x]

Some people (scientists) know many things about cyclones.

They know why there are cyclones in some parts of the earth (tropical places) at some times of the year. It is because at this time of year in these places the water in the sea is hot. Likewise, the air above the sea is hot. Because of this, there is a lot of water in the air.

(People can't see this water, at the same time they can feel something not like at other times. When air is like this in a place, people say: the air is 'humid'.)

When air is hot, it moves upwards quickly. When there is much humid air in the sky above the sea, it rains a lot because of it; at the same time the wind blows very much because of it. After some time, there is a cyclone above the sea.

They (scientists) know that in a cyclone the air (wind) moves not like air moves at other times. It moves like something moves when it is turning around in one place.

When something turns around in one place like this, it is called 'rotating'. People say: in a cyclone the wind 'rotates' around one place. This place is in the middle of the cyclone. The wind blows very little there. This place is called the 'eye of the cyclone'.

Scientists know why the wind in a cyclone moves like this, they know why it rotates. It is because planet Earth is always turning around. Because of this, there is something called the 'Coriolis effect'. Many people don't know what this is.

One linguistic point of detail worthy of note is that this Minimal English text uses verb-based expressions for "weather phenomena" (e.g. 'it rains a lot', 'the wind blows very much') in preference to noun-based expressions (e.g. 'there is a lot of rain', 'there is a lot of wind'). This is because the verb-based expressions appear to be freely cross-translatable into a greater range of languages.

Working with minimal languages is not easy. Why should it be? It requires learning and practice, concentration and collaboration. It is an iterative process, involving repeated cycles of conceptual analysis, drafting, trialling and revision.

It is time to preview how and why the contributors to this book approached these tasks, and what they have to show us.

1.5 Review of Chapters

The studies in *Minimal Languages in Action* are arranged into three parts. Part I. Chapters 2-4 are concerned with 'Finding the Best Words' – in different minimal language versions, for different purposes, and in different locations. In Chap. 2, 'Balancing the local with the universal: Minimal English and agricultural training in the Pacific', Deborah Hill reports on efforts to decide the optimal balance of universal and local words in settings that will be, for many readers, a world away: the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

Chapter 3, 'The hunt for the simplest possible vocabulary: Minimal Finnish meets Easy Finnish' is by two Finnish authors, Leealaura Leskelä and Ulla Vanhatalo. Finland is one of the most advanced countries in the European Union in providing "easy language" materials for people who have various linguistic troubles. The authors report on experiments and trials that endeavour to assess whether Minimal Finnish can provide core vocabulary for the simplest level of Easy Finnish.

Language revitalisation is a huge challenge for Indigenous and minority language communities in many countries, none more so than in Australia. In Chap. 4 'Minimal English and revitalisation education: Assisting linguists to explain grammar in simple, everyday words', Elita Machin addresses one part of the problem: how to make basic linguistic terminology accessible for use with and by indigenous communities.

Part II. Chapters 5-8 are concerned with 'Language Learning and Intercultural Education'. David Bullock's Chap. 5, titled 'Using Minimal English (Spanish, etc.) for non-circular Learners' Dictionaries' reports one of the largest and most successful implementations of minimal language principles: namely, the creation of the 'Learn These Words First" online dictionary.

Dictionaries and other language education resources are also a key concern of Lauren Sadow's Chap. 6, titled 'Standard Translatable English: A Minimal English for teaching and learning invisible culture in language classrooms′. Sadow reports on the development of a cultural dictionary of Australian English, based on minimal language principles adapted to meet the needs of classroom teachers.

Until his untimely death in February 2021, Bert Peeters was one of the pioneers of using NSM in pedagogical applications. In Chap. 7, titled 'From cultural to pedagogical scripts: speaking out in English, French and Russian', he uses examples from three European languages to argue that minimal languages can provide a user-friendly vehicle to articulate unfamiliar cultural knowledge.

Intercultural education is also the goal of Jeongae Lee's Chap. 8, 'Using minimal language to help foreign learners understand Korean honorifics'. Lee ventures to unpack the formidable honorific system of Korean into cultural scripts and meaning explications that can help immigrants better understand Korean society and to navigate its different ways of speaking.

Part III is about 'Health.. Chapter 9 is titled "Adapting the Welch Emotional Connection Screen (WECS) into Minimal English and seven other minimal languages". It is co-authored by Cliff Goddard and Ulla Vanhatalo, together with Amie Hane and the originator of the WECS, Martha Welch. The WECS is an instrument for assessing mother-infant emotional connection. Different aspects of the adaptation process are described: conceptual, linguistic, and practical, including translatability testing into Finnish, Spanish, Polish, Russian, Korean, Chinese, and Akan.

Chapter 10, by Magdalena Juda, is titled 'Different ways of speaking and thinking about cancer: Poland, France and Spain'. The author uses a minimal language approach to summarise different ways in which cancer is perceived in three European countries. Juda's ultimate goal is to improve communication and reduce the anxiety produced by unhelpful discourse patterns about the illness.

At the time this book was being written, the world was in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. The final two chapters respond to different aspects of that crisis. Ida Stevia Diget's Chap. 11 focusses on public health communication about the virus. It is titled 'Minimal English for health: Reader accessibility in public health communication about COVID-19 in Australia (with contrastive reference to Denmark)'. Finally, in Chap. 12 Anna Wierzbicka describes and reflects on the development process for her 'Seven Essential Messages for the Time of the Coronavirus'. Seeking to formulate messages which are accessible to everyone, everywhere on earth, truly puts to the universal reach of NSM-based minimal languages to the test.

1.6 Where to from here?

Minimal languages face many obstacles, such as (1) the misplaced impression that using Minimal English (for good reasons, when necessary) means denigrating or even giving up on full English (the "love of English" factor); (2) fear of sounding "childish" or of not being taken seriously; (3) sheer disbelief that anything much can be accomplished using a reduced vocabulary and a simpler grammar. In the end, the best way to work around these obstacles is to simply to show that a minimal language approach works, that it helps, that it can make a difference. As well as nay-sayers and sceptics, there are many open-minded people who welcome new tools for clearer, more accessible, less Anglocentric ways of speaking and thinking.

Aside from the uses covered in this book and its predecessors (Goddard 2018a; Sadow et al. 2020), other potential uses include: combatting "academic Anglocentrism" in psychology, discourse studies, education research, linguistics, and other social science fields (cf. Levisen 2019), promoting more effective communication in mediation and counselling, in legal contexts with child witnesses, for "safety messaging" to children, e.g. on matters of internet safety, and for public discussion of social, scientific, and economic challenges facing humanity.

There is obviously a burning need for more resources and training about how to use minimal languages. But it is also true that there is a great deal to be learnt from the practical and inspirational experience of others. This book is an important contribution.

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[i] It was foreshadowed in Wierzbicka's (2014) *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language* (Ch14 pp185-196).

[ii] In the English writing system, it seems advisable to use initial capital letters when referring to a minimal version of particular language (e.g. 'Minimal English', 'Minimal Korean') and lower case otherwise (e.g. 'minimal languages', 'a minimal language approach').

[iii] For sources, and further discussion, see Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014: 10-18), Goddard (2018b: 25-62). For downloadable tables of primes and other NSM resources, go to [https://intranet.secure.griffith.edu.au/schools-departments/natural-semantic-metalanguage/downloads] or [nsm-approach.net].

[iv] Cf. '150 Sentences for identifying NSM semantic primes in different languages', available at the URLs given in the previous Note.

[v] Certain patterns of polysemy, allolexy and portmanteau expressions are known to recur in languages around the world. For discussion, see Goddard (2002: 20-30), Goddard and Wierzbicka (2021), Goddard (2012).
[vi] Mosquitoes are responsible for spreading many serious diseases throughout the world.
[vii] The corresponding expressions in other languages do not, of course, have to have the same "passive-like" formal structure as English 'be called'.
[viii] The Chart of NSM Semantic Primes is available at [nsm-approach.net].
[ix] The BASIC text is from Luke 1:28-31 [http://ogden.basic-english.org/bbe/bbeluke1.html#2]. The Minimal English text is from What *Christians Believe* (Wierzbicka 2019: 84). The latter is not intended as a strict translation of the Bible passage, but this can be disregarded for our purposes.
[x] Written by me, with input from Helen Bromhead, Anna Wierzbicka and Alena Kazmaly. Originally presented at the KLAARA conference, Helsinki September 2019 (Goddard 2019).