Cliff GODDARD & Anna WIERZBICKA, *Words and Meanings. Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages and Cultures*

Oxford University Press, 2016, 2014, 316 pages

Cathy Parc

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/3514>
DOI: 10.4000/lexis.3514
ISSN: 1951-6215

Publisher

Université Jean Moulin - Lyon 3

Electronic reference

Cathy Parc, « Cliff GODDARD & Anna WIERZBICKA, *Words and Meanings. Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages and Cultures* », *Lexis* [Online], Book reviews, Online since 25 August 2019, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/3514> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/lexis.3514>

This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.

Lexis is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Cliff GODDARD & Anna WIERZBICKA, *Words and Meanings. Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages and Cultures*

Oxford University Press, 2016, 2014, 316 pages

Cathy Parc

REFERENCES

Cliff Goddard, Anna Wierzbicka

Words and Meanings. Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages and Cultures. Oxford University Press, London, 2016 ISBN: 978-0-19-878355-8, Price: £44.95, 316 pages

- 1 *Words & Meanings. Lexical Semantics across Domains, Languages, & Cultures* was written by Cliff Goddard, Professor of Linguistics at Griffith University, and Anna Wierzbicka, Professor of Linguistics at Australian National University, published as a hardback by Oxford University Press in 2014, as a paperback in 2016. Both authors have worked extensively on cross-cultural pragmatics and contrastive semantics either individually or together. In their numerous articles, books and lectures, they have promoted the study of a linguistic area of research which in their own words “is often characterized as the poor cousin of contemporary linguistics, and understandably so” and which “[c]ompared with phonology, morphology, and syntax [...] is strikingly underdeveloped and enjoys a correspondingly lower level of disciplinary prestige” (p. 260). By honestly taking stock of a situation that they ascribe to “methodological failings – above all, the failure to take seriously the central problem of semantic metalanguage” (p. 260), they are thus inviting not only specialists but also the common reader to ponder over the deadends to which some ethnocentric approaches have so far led and to consider the

need for a new theoretical framework that will provide an escape and open up new vistas.

- 2 According to the authors, such is the goal that NSM – Natural Semantic Metalanguage – can achieve provided the method of “semantic description” (p. 13) it relies on be followed step by step. Hence, the purpose of *Words & Meanings* is to gradually introduce the reader to the discovery of “semantic primes”, i.e. non-artificial universals that can be found at “the intersection of all languages” (p. 13) once “a process of reduction” (p. 27) has taken place: “After nearly forty years of sustained research, both within selected individual languages and across many languages, linguists in the NSM program are prepared to claim that they have discovered the complete inventory of simple universal concepts that are embedded in the lexicons of all (or most) human languages” (p. 11). Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka are aware though that this “breaking down of complex meanings into configurations of progressively simpler meanings” (p. 27) might imply “a certain loss of idiomaticity” (p. 18). They have divided their book into ten chapters of approximately twenty or thirty pages each, among which the reader is guided through a general introduction to “Words, meaning, and methodology” (chapter 1), to better understand chapter 2, “*Men, women and children: the semantics of basic social categories*”, chapter 3, “*Sweet, hot, hard, heavy, rough, sharp: physical-quality words in cross linguistic perspective*” and chapter 4, “*From “colour words” to visual semantics: English, Russian, Warlpiri*”. These respectively focus on the way we as human beings define our belonging to apparently separate entities, and deal with some fundamental features of our sensory experience. Chapter 5, which is entitled “*Happiness and human values in cross-cultural and historical perspective*”, marks a turning-point at about the first third of the book in that it materializes the transition to feelings, together with chapter 6 which, at the interface of body and mind, asks the following question: “*Pain: is it a human universal? The perspective from cross-linguistic semantics*”, while chapter 7 centres around “*Suggesting, apologizing, complimenting: English speech-act verbs*”. Chapter 8, “*A stitch in time and the way of the rice plant: the semantics of proverbs in English and Malay*” offers a comparison between two distinct cultures in completely different geographical areas around a unique linguistic phenomenon at the crossroads of the literal and the figurative while it is the aim of chapter 9, “*The meaning of “abstract nouns”: Locke, Bentham, and contemporary semantics*” to move towards an even greater degree of abstraction from a historical point of view. Finally, by way of conclusion, chapter 10, which precedes the detailed 29-page list of “References” and the 24-page “Index” of both keywords and authors, lets the reader contemplate “*Broader horizons: beyond lexical semantics*”.
- 3 As the title points out from the outset and as is highlighted in each of these chapters, meaning is to be conceived of in the plural, not only because of the polysemy of some words, but also because several of its instances may appear in a certain number of cultures and not in others: meaning for NSM linguists “is first and foremost a conceptual phenomenon, albeit with social and cultural underpinnings” (p. 39). That may go towards explaining why the colourful illustration chosen for the front cover and in the subdued tints of a filigree for the back cover, is Paul Gauguin’s fine 1892 painting *Ta Matete (We shall Not Go to Market Today)* from the Kunstmuseum in Basel, Switzerland (The Bridgeman Art Library). Actually, in its foreground five Tahitian women can be seen chatting on an outdoor bench, one of them smoking a cigarette and two others holding what looks like books in one of their hands. They are using them as

screens the better to whisper to their neighbours so as not to be overheard by the two men who are carrying only two dead fish as we can guess from the sight of their cropped figures in the background. The emphasis is thus laid by the painter on talk itself and not on the activity of fishing although it is directly linked to it since the meagre catch of the day accounts for the words being pronounced. The exoticism conveyed by the picture and the striking difference in the length of its Tahitian and English titles are there to be felt as straightforward invitations to go on a linguistic journey of discovery in which cultures cannot but be taken into account, each in its own richness and uniqueness though specificity and diversity do not preclude universality: “If pragmatics is an important perspective on language and linguistics, semantics is even more so, and for most users of language – speakers and hearers, writers and readers – words are alive and “green”, whereas forms, symbols, and abstract formulae may seem cold and distant” (p. 8). The first impression the book makes on you through both words and images even before you open it is enhanced as from the table of contents where the phrase “cross-linguistic” is repeated from chapter 3 and to chapter 6 while the phrase “cross-cultural” is used for chapter 5. As a result, it quickly becomes obvious to the reader that the book is meant to be an eye-opener for anyone who tends to take for granted or to ignore what has been the overall tendency in linguistics over the past decades, i.e. ethnocentrism from a terminological point of view. It has mostly implied the use of English as a metalanguage, which has entailed corresponding cultural projections up to the point when it has generated meaningless semantic interpretations or even sheer nonsense. The deceptively simple words or everyday-life speech acts chosen for the purpose of the demonstration and featuring in the titles of the chapters in question are some of the many foundation stones upon which the authors build their theory so as to open the reader’s mind to what truly happens when one practises a language. Indeed, though in the form of a manifesto whose self-confessed aim is to further the revolution triggered by NSM, the undeniable interest and originality of *Words & Meanings* lie in its practical approach and in its acknowledgement of interdisciplinary influences, which stem from years spent doing field research.

- 4 The new methodology is all the more accessible to anyone interested in linguistics in general and in semantics in particular since it is set in perspective with those of the previous schools of thought like Cognitive linguistics (p. 5), Chomskyan generativism (p. 6), formal semantics (p. 7), pragmatics (p. 8), and structuralism (p. 38), with which it is advantageously compared though tribute is paid to “the Moscow School of Semantics and the Meaning-Text Model” (p. 7) for its contribution to the analysis of words and word meanings. The reader can also easily follow each line of reasoning thanks to the legibility of the format, which is based on the use of mostly short paragraphs, of a few tables and figures synthesizing key elements and of a different font for the explications, which “are not intended to be a picture of reality. [...] but a picture of the conceptualization implicit in [...] words” (p. 39): “The NSM approach is strongly opposed to what is variously termed “objectivism”, “referentialism”, or “correspondence theories of meaning”, i.e. to the view that meaning consists in a correspondence between a linguistic expression and the real world” (p. 39). Those entailments, which “aim to be predictive of the actual range of use of a word” (p. 39), derive from the principle according to which the metalanguage should not be “vitiating by circularity” as in many dictionaries nor by “ethnocentrism, or excessive abstractness” (p. 10). The clarity of the style, the latter being pedagogical without being

overly didactic, enables stimulating linguistic analyses to be carried out without resorting to any jargon as a wide variety of really interesting authentic examples from different languages is proposed. Besides, when necessary, easily understandable definitions are provided for words that pertain to a specialist's discourse either directly in the text or in footnotes where additional information is also available to those who might like further explanations or bibliographical mentions. What saves the book from any doctrinal tone, although its ambitions are great, is the authors' insistence on a rational progression through arguments and counter-arguments, which they are always keen on illustrating by quoting examples of single words or of longer utterances with references to Wordbanks Online and Google searches (see p. 41 for instance). Consequently, whenever a linguist's claims are criticized, the reader has the feeling that the intention is not to raise yet another subject of controversy between specialists, but to point out what are considered to be weaknesses, with the sole view to improving the tools for semantic description. In this way, and often with a sense of humour, the authors of *Words & Meanings* try to build bridges between scholars from different countries and between disciplines that have up to now remained too much in their own separate worlds, not to say bubbles, though it gradually becomes clear to you that NSM can have various applications in a wide range of domains like anthropology, ethnology, sociology, philosophy, psychology or medicine, to name but a few. Indeed, it has the potential to sound and resound like a rallying-call if only scholars and experts become aware of prejudices that may have been overlooked and are ready to overcome their differences. To some extent, this has already been recognized at an official level since the reader can learn page 261 that "NSM was honoured by two high-profile international prizes awarded to Anna Wierzbicka, the Dobrushin prize established in Russia primarily for mathematicians, and the Polish Science Foundation prize".

- 5 If you start by reading the comments on the back cover, in the end you will agree with the publisher that the book is "fascinating" and "for everyone interested in the relations between meaning, culture, ideas and words" or with John Newman that it "has an intellectual richness that makes it uncommonly satisfying". However, apart from the very few misprints ("petis" (p. 149) instead of "petits", *suffrir* (p. 151) instead of *souffrir*, "1000 cancer specialists" (p. 164) instead of "1,000 cancer specialists", "this someone does not think about it well before" (p. 199) instead of "this someone did not think about it well before", *Cet appartient* (p. 233) instead of *Cet habit appartient*), you might come across odd translations into French such as "[L] Ceci est *chaud* ('this is warm/hot'). [French]" (p. 64) in lieu of "[L] Ceci est *chaud/très chaud ou même brûlant*" or *douleurs rhumatismales* (p. 147) in lieu of *douleurs rhumatismales*, and *liberté c'est* (p. 234) in lieu of *La liberté, c'est*. You may also challenge the truth of the following sentences "What is being argued here is that while in the case of *pain*, the main point of reference is an affected part of the body, in the case of *douleur*, it is the whole body" (p. 146) and "evidence suggests that the conceptual prototype of *pain* (in contrast to that of *douleur*) is indeed localized" (p. 147) since in French, you can use such phrases as "une douleur au ventre / à la hanche etc.", i.e. "une douleur au + a body part for which a masculine noun is employed" and "une douleur à la + a body part for which a feminine noun is employed" or even "des douleurs aux + body parts for which a plural noun can be employed", especially when you do not know precisely where you feel the pain or which scientific noun accurately defines that place.
- 6 You might find the assertion "The third subcategory – which is the one of interest to us – consists of human nouns which are not inherently evaluative; for example, *a real man*,

a real woman, a real scholar, a real polyglot, a real expert, a real artist" (p. 43) somewhat puzzling since the term "expert" seems to be evaluative in itself. For instance, one speaks of "being an expert in one's field", which implies that the person is highly skilled. To a lesser degree, the same goes for the term "scholar" when its acceptance is "a learned person, an erudite".

- 7 Given the discursive qualities exemplified in the book, as a layman or woman, the reader might perhaps regret that the phrases "Occam's razor" (p. 134) and "a Likert scale" (p. 247) are not explained in any footnote even if they are supposed to be part of our common cultural heritage. And all the more so in the case of the former because in the *American Dictionary of the English Language* for instance you can read that William Ockham "rejected the reality of universal concepts" which is at stake in *Words & Meanings*.
- 8 It might have been interesting to contrast the NSM definition of happiness suggested page 120 with those that might be imagined for "joy" and "enjoyment" as it could be felt to apply to them as well:
 - "[H] *happiness* (e.g. the 'happiness' shown in someone's face, or in the behaviour of some kittens)
 - a. it can be like this:
 - b. someone feels something good for some time,
 - c. like people feel at many times when they think like this:
 - d. "something good is happening to me now, as I want
 - e. I can do something now as I want
 - f. this is good"
- 9 One might also wonder why page 186 the version chosen for one of the most famous English proverbs is "Don't count your chickens before they hatch" and not "before they are hatched", and this choice is not explicitly justified by the authors.
Page 188 one may ask why in the NSM definition of a saying no mention is made of a typical situation, as is often the case with sayings, although the phrase "RECURRENT SITUATION" is used in the NSM approach to proverbs page 190:
 - [A] *a saying*
 - a. words of one kind, not one word, not many words
 - b. people can say something in a short time with these words
 - c. when someone says something with words of this kind, people know that many people say the same thing with the same words
- 10 The reader might also disagree with the sentences "some metaphorical sayings (like *Out of the frying pan, into the fire*) lack the PROVERBIAL ADVICE" (p. 190) and "Some metaphorical proverbs – like *Out of the frying pan, into the fire* and *Birds of a feather flock together* – simply characterize recurrent situations by pairing them with a proverbial analogy, but without offering any particular advice" (p. 192). For each of these utterances, whose linguistic definition as "sayings" changes to "proverbs" from page 190 to page 192, might be used as a warning, which is tantamount to giving implicit advice to your addressee. One might make the same remark about the Malay example "Like a crab teaching its young to walk straight" (p. 198), which the author says is also devoid of PROVERBIAL ADVICE: is not the crab used as a counter-example so that the warning implicitly given to people is "Do not imitate that crab!" or, in an NSM-style sentence, "If someone acts like that crab, it is bad for them"? The same question might be asked about the other Malay proverbs "Where there's sugar, there's ants" (p. 203) and "Out from the tiger's mouth, into the crocodile's mouth" (p. 204) since line c. about PROVERBIAL ADVICE is left blank each time though you might think that there is an

implicit warning against hypocrisy in the former and against going away in the latter as the situation might be even worse elsewhere.

- 11 When analyzing a proverb “of the maxim variety” like “Practice makes perfect” (p. 193), the author states that “What is missing is the PROVERBIAL ANALOGY”. Yet, you might argue that even though the use of imagery is different here, the verb MAKE itself, functioning with the abstract noun “practice”, introduces an analogy with a typical situation in which something makes something happen in the sense that it causes something else to happen, a little in the way a causative construction does. The agent, who remains implicit as a direct complement of MAKE and as the subject of the omitted state verb BE or BECOME, as it might be any human being or even any animal, is thus supposed to perform an action repeatedly so as to achieve a certain result, i.e. perfection.
- 12 The reader might also think it a little intriguing that in the NSM definitions of *size* and *temperature* (p. 226-227), the average is not included, i.e. the medium size and warm or chilly temperatures, but only the extremes “small” / “big” and “cold” / “hot”, respectively.
- 13 Naturally, these are only observations about points of detail which do not mar in any way the great pleasure the reader will experience while reading *Words & Meanings* as it revivifies the rich philosophical background you can keep in mind when discussing the main topics: the authors demonstrate that beyond linguistic schools of thought, there is still a lot to learn from Jeremy Bentham, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, John Locke and John Stuart Mill to put things in perspective. They guide the reader from the general to the particular, from the generic to the specific, from the concrete to the abstract, from the simple to the complex, whenever they link one language to another, for instance English, French, Malay, Polish, Russian or Warlpiri, across a variety of cultures of which you will inevitably further your knowledge. As a result, the reader’s linguistic landscape cannot fail to be enriched because it becomes more diversified, as the sight of Paul Gauguin’s painting originally showed signs of promise somehow, although it is the unexpected that one may find the more striking.

AUTHORS

CATHY PARC

Cathy Parc, ICP, France.

Senior Lecturer in English at ICP, in charge of the English section at the Pôle Langues with a Ph.D. in English Studies from the Sorbonne-Université Paris IV, Cathy Parc passed the “agrégation” in English with a major in Linguistics. She has published *Calvin et Hobbes de Bill Watterson La philosophie du quotidien* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2013, ISBN 978-2-343-00054-1, 132 pages), a French translation of Elizabeth Jennings’s *Collected Poems 1953-1985* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014, ISBN 978-2-343-04434-7, EAN 9782343044347, 640 pages), *L’anglais du monde politique* (Paris: Technip et Ophrys Éditions, Collection anglais de spécialité, 2014, ISBN 978-2-7080-1401-5, ISBN

978-2-7080-1402-2, Vol. 1: 280 pages, Vol. 2: 224 pages), *English Words for Economics Vocabulaire anglais contemporain de l'économie* (Paris: Éditions Ellipses, 2015, ISBN 9782340-008373, 384 pages) as well as articles on literature and linguistics.