Evaluation of cultural universality with reference to culture-specific lexicon in Greek

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Abstract

The present study attempts to provide an insight as to whether cultural terms can be described through the theory of Natural Semantic Metalanguage proposed by Anna Wierzbicka. Thirty-five Greek Cypriot informants were asked to provide culturally loaded words they believe to be specific to the Greek Cypriot culture. Adopting the basic premise of the theory, i.e. that languages have *key words* which mirror cultural values and traditions, we performed the relevant explications of the seven most frequently identified Greek culture-specific words. which, however failed to demonstrate the claim that cultural terms of any language can be fully explained through the use of Wierzbicka's primes.

Key words: Natural Semantic Metalanguage, universalism, relativism, semantic primes, Greek lexicon, Cyprus, culture-specificity, key words, Wierzbicka's model.

1. Introduction

What is the relation between the medium in which we think and the medium in which we speak? How great is the influence of language upon thought? Opinions vary: some scholars favour relativism, others advocate universalism. Linguistic relativity alludes to the idea that culture, through language, affects the way we think, especially our classification of the experienced world. This stands in opposition to universalism, which emphasises commonality. Controversies related to these two thoughts resulted in a plethora of works, which emerged from such disciplines as linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology.

A scholar who tries to approach culture-specificity of meaning is the Polish

linguist Anna Wierzbicka. Wierzbicka tries to demonstrate that every language has certain *key words* that reflect the core values of a given culture. She provides four criteria for the selection of these words: they have to be (1) common, (2) frequently used in one particular semantic domain, (3) at the centre of a whole phraseological cluster, and (4) frequently used in proverbs, sayings, popular songs, book titles, and so on (Wierzbicka 1997: 16). However, her main emphasis concerning *key words* is not on proving that certain words deserve such a label, but on demonstrating that these words are significant because they are indicative of cultural salience. Thus, the aim of her theory is to nominate words about which nobody would hesitate to agree they provide a key to cultural spirit, national character and ethos.

Specifically, Wierzbicka seeks to show that through these words, cultures can be studied and even explained to outsiders. Her starting point is the existence of a very close link between the life of a society and the lexicon of the language spoken by it. The lexicon of a language for her, is the ultimate reflection of a society's cultural preoccupations and values. She views culture-specific words as conceptual tools that reflect a society's past experience of doing and thinking about things in certain ways. More specifically, Wierzbicka states that language — and in particular, vocabulary — is the best evidence of the reality of *culture*, in the sense of a historically transmitted system of *conceptions* and *attitudes*. Of course, "culture is, in principle, heterogeneous and changeable, but so is language" (Wierzbicka 1997: 21).

Furthermore, Wierzbicka argues that an explanation of a language's *key words* can take place through a universal metalanguage and proposes what she calls Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) (Wierzbicka 1980). The NSM consists of two components, lexicon and syntax. As far as lexicon is concerned, sixty (60) semantic primitives have been proposed. These primes are the key for the description of meaning. According to Wierzbicka, the necessary features of primitives are the following:

- they should be indefinable, that is they can be used to define the meaning of words but cannot be defined themselves
- they should be accepted as semantic primes, in terms of which all complex meanings can be coherently represented
- some primes may be realised in terms of morphemes and some in terms of lexemes.

The primes Wierzbicka has proposed so far (1997: 26) are:

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE/PERSON, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, BODY
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, MANY/MUCH, ALL, SOME
Attributes:	GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORD, TRUE
Actions, events, and movement:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence:	THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death:	LIVE/ALIVE, DIE
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, IF...WOULD
Time:	WHEN/TIME, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, NOW, FOR SOME TIME
Space:	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, UNDER, ABOVE, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, HERE
Intensifier, augmentor:	VERY, MORE
Partonomy and Taxonomy:	PART OF, KIND OF
Similarity:	LIKE

Wierzbicka does not only talk about lexical universals; she goes further and proposes what she calls the universal syntax of meaning, for in order to say something we need more than words —we need meaningful combinations of words. She argues that the universal syntax of meaning consists in universal combinations of universal conceptual primitives (Wierzbicka 1996: 20). Thus, her theory posits the existence of both an innate and universal lexicon of human thoughts and an innate and universal syntax of human thoughts.

The present paper looks at the theory proposed by Anna Wierzbicka — which proposes to varying degrees, both universalism (i.e. her universal meta-language) and relativism (i.e. her proposed *key words*)— with reference to Modern Greek lexicon. The study applies Wierzbicka's metalanguage to the ex-plication of Greek culture-specific words (as used in Cyprus) and attempts to show that the meaning of these words is not fully captured when described through the NSM.

2. Data collection

Thirty-five (35) Greek Cypriot students at the University of Cyprus in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures participated in the study. The concept of 'culture-specific words' was explained to them in detail and il-lustrated by the example of the word φιλότιμο, which is, for most Greek people, a culture-laden word. It means "one's honour, pride, dignity or face" (Oxford

Greek Dictionary 1982). This word is known for its non-translatability into other languages because of the exclusively Greek connotations it carries.

The words proposed by the informants were: *πατρίδα,* 'country', *θρησκεία,* 'religion', *οικογένεια,* 'family', *φιλοξενία* 'hospitality', *λεβέντης* 'fine, upstanding fellow', *μάτιασμα* 'evil eye', *γλέντι* 'merrymaking', *παλληκάρι* 'young, brave man', *γενναίος* 'brave man', *ήρωας* 'hero', *τιμή* 'honour', *προξενιό* 'match-making', *προίκα* 'dowry', *αντάρτης* 'guerrilla', *κέφι* 'gaiety', 'high spirits', *πεσκέσι* 'gift', *πεπρωμένο* 'destiny', *μπέσα* 'one's dignity or face', *νοσταλγία* 'nostalgia', *τσιμπούσι* 'a long period of merrymaking', *ξενιτιά* 'leaving one's home country', *μερακλής* 'a man who does something with passion', *μάγκας* 'macho man', *τσαχπίνης* 'a man full of coquettishness', *φουαρτάς* 'generous man', *καραπουσιουκλής* 'dark, handsome man', *κορμοστασιά* 'stature', and *εικονοστάσι* 'shrine'.

From these twenty-eight (28) words, the seven (7) most frequently identified Greek culture-specific words were selected and analysed according to the NSM. Following the analysis of the seven *key words*, an attempt will be made to provide an answer to the question: *Can cultural terms be described through a universal metalanguage?*

3. Application of the NSM to Greek culture-specific words

The seven most frequently Greek key words will be analysed according to the Natural Semantic Metalanguage are: *πατρίδα* 'country', *θρησκεία* 'religion', *οικογένεια* 'family', *φιλόξενος/η* 'hospitable', *λεβέντης* 'fine, upstanding fellow', *μάτιασμα* 'evil eye', and *γλέντι* 'merrymaking'. Once the application of the theory to the seven words is completed, the assessment of the theory will follow.

(1) Πατρίδα: The Pocket Oxford Greek Dictionary (1982) defines *πατρίδα* as 'country'. According to Wierzbicka, a simple definition such as this is unsatisfactory. Instead, we must define the word using her proposed primes, with the addition of the word under analysis, something which is permitted in her theory as a 'shortcut' in the definition. Using the word 'country' rather than a series of whole sentences in order to refer to the concept of *πατρίδα*, makes the explication much easier to read (Wierzbicka 1996: 302).

Πατρίδα
1. a country
2. I am a part of this country
3. I can't be a part of any other country
4. I was born in this country
5. I like this country

6. when I think about this country, I feel something good
7. I feel that this country is not like any other country
8. I feel that this country is very good
9. this country did many good things for me
10. I want to do good things for this country
11. if this country wants me to do something, I have to do it
12. if something bad happens to me when I do something the country wants, other people will feel good because I did something good

(2) Θρησκεία: *Θρησκεία* is always translated as 'religion', but in the Greek culture it means much more. It is more than an institution — it is an important part of the Greeks' lives. It binds them together as a homogeneous nation and helps them to move forward, at least so far. For the analysis of this word, the word 'believe' will be used in addition to the primes.

Θρησκεία
1. many people believe in this thing
2. these people like to believe in this thing
3. these people like to think that they believe in this thing
4. they like to say that they believe
5. when they believe they feel good
6. some people feel very good when they believe in this thing

(3) Οικογένεια: *Οικογένεια* is always translated as 'family'. In the Greek culture, this term includes extended family members, such as aunts, uncles and cousins. Emphasis is put on one's roots: past as well as present generations are part of *οικογένεια*.

X's οικογένεια
1. many people are part of this
2. X is part of this
3. these people are like one thing
4. when X feels something, s/he can say it to these people
5. when these people feel something, they can say it to X
6. X knows these people very well
7. these people know X very well
8. X sometimes does similar things with these people
9. X likes these people very much
10. these people like X very much
11. all feel like this

(4) Φιλόξενος/η: *Φιλόξενος/η* is always translated as 'hospitable', certainly a central theme of Greek ethos and spirit. A φιλόξενο person is one who loves showing warmth to guests, be it friends or strangers, showing love to them, treating them well and offering them food. In general, *φιλόξενος/η* suggests sharing things with one's guests or visitors.

I am *φιλόξενος/η*
1. I am like this:
2. I know these people now
3. maybe I knew them before, maybe I didn't
4. I like these people
5. I want them to know what I think
6. I want to do good things for them
7. I feel good when I do something good for them
8. I can't not do something good for them
9. these people feel very good because they like the good things I do for them
10. I am like this

(5) Λεβέντης: All informants nominated *λεβέντης* as one of the most important *key words* of Greek culture. *Λεβέντης* has only positive connotations and refers to a man who is very handsome, has a perfect stature and a well-built body and moves very elegantly. But *λεβέντης* does not only refer to the physical appearance; it includes notions such as 'bravery' and 'good manners'. *Λεβέντης* is the representative word for Greek manliness. The Pocket Oxford Greek Dictionary's definition of this word is "fine, upstanding fellow; brave and generous man".

X is *λεβέντης*
1. X is like this:
2. X does good things; X does not do bad things
3. X is very good
4. many people like the things X does
5. many people can see X is very good
6. people say he is like this

(6) Μάτιασμα: The Oxford dictionary translates *μάτιασμα* as 'evil eye', a superstition strongly held by Greeks. The fact that people are prepared to pay for the services of individuals who can 'exorcise' it is a testament to the strength of their belief in this concept and its central position in the Greek culture. It is believed that *μάτιασμα* can result from over-extensive praise. Verbal superstition is very common, and many proverbs exist in relation to its exorcism.

Μάτιασμα
1. this thing is very bad
2. people do not want this thing to happen because it is very bad
3. some people do this thing to other people
4. the people who do this thing are very bad
5. the other people feel bad because this happened
6. the same people do not want this thing to happen
7. the people who do the bad thing want the other people to feel bad
8. this thing is very bad

(7) Γλέντι: The Oxford dictionary defines *γλέντι* as 'merrymaking, party'. But *γλέντι* means much more than that. Firstly, it is one of the most important aspects of Greek culture; it involves people having fun and doing things together. What is necessary in a *γλέντι* is music, good food, drink and dancing. Greeks love *γλέντι*. Using the words 'sing', 'dance', 'eat', and 'drink' (each of which has its own explication), we can define *γλέντι* as follows:

Γλέντι
1. this thing is very good
2. all people like it
3. all people feel good when they do it
4. when this thing happens people sing, dance, eat and drink
5. when this thing happens people feel that this thing is very good

4. Discussion

An advantage of Wierzbicka's methodology is the use of relatively simple terms in the explications, a fact that distances her methodology from the method usually used in traditional dictionaries, which largely translate unknown words into other unknowns. Wierzbicka points out that her simple words, which are combined for the description of complex concepts, render definitions accessible to all humans, even to the point of being accessible to children. Indeed, in that point she is very right, for her simple definitions enable all readers to understand the descriptions without having to look other words up in dictionaries.

Another advantage is the fact that her metalanguage is not an artificial one. Artificial languages —*markereses* and *featureses*— have proved unable to faithfully describe the true meaning of words. As Lewis (1972) points out, translation into markerese tells us nothing about the relationship between the sentence and the conditions under which it would be true. As Wierzbicka rightly adv--

cates, insight into meaning can be gained via natural language and not by
"relying on any technical jargon or on mathematical and logical models, which, when employed in the study of language and language use, often give the impression of scientific rigour but in fact obscure rather than clarify the phenomena under consideration" (1991: 454).

However, Wierzbicka's theory has many drawbacks. Firstly, her definitions of words are too lengthy; sometimes tens of sentences are needed for the description of a concept. Her method is not economical and she provides no proof as to whether people can interpret such long descriptions. The psychological reality of these terms is very important, yet it seems to be non-existent in the case of these long definitions.

A further disadvantage can be found in Wierzbicka's claim that all concepts, besides the simplest ones, can be precisely defined. She suggests that we can pin down the exact meaning of words — not only of concepts — since she views words as accurate representations of cognitive concepts. Indeed she denies that the meaning of words is fuzzy. It may be optimistic but it is too harsh to claim that meaning at the level of lexicon can be stated in a precise and illuminating way. This is an atomistic view, which suggests that human cognition can be reduced to universal lexical atoms.

Rather, we tend to agree with Aitchison (1994: 40), who concludes that words are 'slippery customers', with vague boundaries and fuzzy edges. Let's take Wierzbicka's primes GOOD and BAD as an example. How do we know that there is such a meaning, as the one Wierzbicka proposes? Polysemy, surely, does not help since it can offer explications such as "he is a bad person", "he is bad at Maths" and "we had bad weather this morning". All concepts behind the term 'bad' refer to something different, although they are related. Yet, this difference is important.

Finally, Wierzbicka's claim that her exhaustive definitions of words can state meaning in a very illuminating way is unjustified. She proposes that via her method different communicative styles and different norms of social interaction can be explained. In simple terms, she suggests that via her metalanguage she can give a precise definition of cultural terms. Her descriptions are deeply inaccurate, although she holds firmly to the opinion that words can be rigorously defined. For the most part, the whole meaning is not put forward. For example, in the explication of the word λεβέντης, one cannot find information about the physical aspect of the word, due to limitations of the theory, and what makes φιλόξενος/η 'hospitable' specific to Greek culture is something that is lost when trying to describe it through the NSM. And maybe the element that is lost dur-

ing the description is the one which makes the difference in each language and culture. In other words, it appears that concepts have great depth, which is lost when Wierzbicka's method is applied.

As one can see from the resulting description of the seven Greek *key words* provided above, a major part of the concepts behind the words is being lost. Wierzbicka's NSM is inadequate to describe these concepts as it fails to capture the essence of the words, the actual 'feeling' of what they mean. We seem to be helpless when attempting to describe terms through the medium she suggests. The very fact that we have to add extra words for the description of cultural terms (for instance, in the case of γλέντι we need the words 'sing', 'dance', 'eat' and 'drink'), shows that Wierzbicka's theory is beset with insuperable methodological problems. There is, in a way, a certain dynamism in these words which makes them operate with a force beyond what we can simply give account of through the NSM.

One way for Wierzbicka's metalanguage to be improved is to account for the many functions of language. Her primes should not only deal with the one neutral meaning that she claims they have. Wierzbicka herself accepts that polysemy exists, so we should not totally disregard it. There are no absolute synonyms, for what is the point of having extra words, otherwise? (We should not forget that one of the aims of language is to be as economical as possible.) Taking GOOD as an example, since this prime has more than one neutral meaning, the other meanings should also be accounted for in the theory. All these meanings could be given in terms of bundles which will serve different functions, such as [factual information], [emotive information], [metaphorical information] and so on. If this is applied, then Wierzbicka's metalanguage will be able to provide descriptions for metaphors, which at present it is unable to do. Moreover, these modifications will make it clear that connotations, too, contribute towards meaning, and that for a semantic analysis we also need pragmatics. In that way, her theory will also be able to account for metaphors and for all the different interpretations of a word.

As it has been shown above, Anna Wierzbicka's theory of Natural Semantic Metalanguage cultural terms, which can be described and fully explained, has been shown to be inadequate as the explications of seven Greek *key words*, following her theory, have revealed that the meaning of words is not fully captured. A major part of the meaning seems to be lost due to the generality of some of the primes. This is an important point since the element that is lost during the description might be the one which makes the difference in each language and culture.

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