Introduction

Anna Wierzbicka is Professor of Linguistics at the Australian National University and the recipient of various awards for her outstanding contributions in linguistics and semantics (for example, the Humboldt Prize for Foreign Scholars in the Humanities, election to the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences).

*English*, the latest in her studies is an application of her natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) to explain the meaning of certain words and expressions. NSM comprises some 60-plus semantic primes to explicate the underlying meaning of various words and phrases in English (and other languages).

The cover of the book is resplendent with an art piece by Thomas Gainsborough called *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*. In their eighteenth-century English costume (Mrs. Andrews seated with bonnet and sweeping dress and Mr. Andrews with a three-cornered hat, breeches, long stockings, gun and dog) and with the countryside as background, they clearly represent an arch-typical cultural scene and script of England.

The book is divided into four parts: Part I briefly summarizes the cultural universe of English, its general concepts of meaning, history and culture as embedded in certain words and expressions; Part II examines English words from philosophy to everyday discourse; Part III is a study of Anglo culture as reflected in English grammar and Part IV summarizes Wierzbicka’s conclusions about English and its significance in the world at large. An extensive bibliography (with 39 of her own entries and two co-authored with Goddard) and an index conclude the book.

English as a world language

English is the most widely used language in the world, but there is English and there are Englishes. What Wierzbicka represents in her study is Anglo English (actually, Anglo culture), which is English as spoken in the USA, UK, Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, or
English of the “inner circle” (p. 6). On the other hand, English in the “outer circle” would be varieties such as Singapore English.

Wierzbicka is an immigrant to Australia herself (p. 7) and has had to absorb “Anglo-Australianess” into her way of speaking. She is well qualified to remark on the idea of the cultural scripts that are associated with words like *fair*, *reasonable*, and *presumably*, which she explicates in detail. Another example is the concept of “fairness,” found, for example, in Australian expressions such as *fair dinkum* and *fair go*.

**English and its culture**

Wierzbicka quotes Humboldt in his view of language as “the repository of the history of a people” (p. 9) and therefore does not see language as culturally neutral. She focuses upon “the roots and trunk” of English, rather than on its branches, using the metaphor of a banyan tree (p. 10). English is studied in its cultural context because cultural misunderstanding often mars linguistic and social progress (p. 11). In other words, there are cultural assumptions and values that underlie the use of words. Her argument is “that the cultural semantics of [various] concepts and of the discourse patterns associated with them require careful and systematic study and that a study of this kind requires a suitable methodology” (p. 16). The methodology is the NSM with its associated metalanguage and literary conventions.

**The Natural Semantic Language (NSM) and cultural scripts**

Following the introduction to NSM and its power to explicate English semantics and pragmatics, the second chapter discusses Anglo cultural scripts as seen through Middle Eastern eyes. Cultural scripts are patterns of thought, a cognitive approach to culture and society allowing a description of cultural norms and values from within the society (what Pike would call an emic view), but revealing a universal set of concepts. These concepts are found in word-like form in all languages (p. 24), so that the NSM relies on “hard linguistic evidence” (p. 25). The following is what the author provides as the generalized Anglo cultural script:

[people think like this]
“when I want to say something about some things
it will be good if I think about it like this:
“I will say some words now
I want to say something with these words
I don’t want these words to say more”

Wierzbicka outlines John Locke’s use of “I think” versus “I know” in his *Essay on Human Reason* (1690) and claims that his influence has been highly influential in the modern Anglo culture in respect to its search for “facts” (p. 41). What follows in Anglo culture is not truth, but knowledge and the representation of “facts” (p. 44). Some “[t]hree hundred years after the first appearance of Locke’s Essay, the norms articulated in these scripts are so well entrenched in Anglo culture as to seem self-evident….” (p. 55).
Wierzbicka deals with several modern key words (entitled, consideration, fairly, equity, autonomy, imposition) that epitomize Anglo cultural scripts. As native speakers of English and monolingual Anglos we take them for granted, but for immigrants they may be unfamiliar and alien (p. 58).

Cultural implications lie behind words

Chapter 3 is devoted entirely to a study of the words right and wrong and their cultural underpinnings. While every language seems to have words for good and bad (which are therefore considered as universal themes and are also semantic primitives), the same is not true for right and wrong. Wierzbicka concludes that the moral, intellectual and conversational uses of right are related to entrenched ways of thinking that reflect attitudes, values and worldview. Other European languages do not have equivalents for the Anglo words right and wrong.

There is also a direct link between right and reason, whereby speakers of English talk of the right decisions, the right choice or the right solution. Again, Wierzbicka refers back to Locke, who grounded his ethics and religion in reason (p. 74). Right is therefore a neutral ground between what is good and what is true. However, there is a growing asymmetry between what is right and what is wrong such that “English-speaking people are increasingly reluctant to call any personal opinion wrong” (p. 85). Wierzbicka relates this to the democratic viewpoint of many speakers of English, who value freedom of thought and expression more than the identification of something as wrong. Chapter 3 concludes by reminding us that cultural scripts and key concepts are usually interrelated and are most visible in everyday conversation routines, like greetings, swearing, forms of addresses and other exchanges. The use of right and wrong in English is clearly related to our folk philosophy.

What is reasonable?

Chapter 4 is all about being reasonable, “a key Anglo value” (p. 103) that is culture specific and can be viewed historically. Reasonable in many contexts can be replaced with “reasonably good” so that a “reasonable man” is one that we can attribute common sense to, one who thinks, says and does things in a reasonable, culturally acceptable manner.

Wierzbicka outlines several possible stages in the semantic history of reasonable:

1. “endowed with reason” as in the phrase “a reasonable creature”
2. a link with the ability to think well, i.e. compatible with reason
3. an association with doubt, “reasonable doubt”
4. self-limitation, as in “a reasonable assumption” or hypothesis
5. a link to what is realistic or pragmatic
6. a call for “reasonable compromise” or toleration

The modern use of reasonable suggests that we include limiting our claims on others and at the same time we appeal to reason (p. 135).
What is fair?

Chapter 5 is on “being fair,” which is considered one of the most important Anglo values. Both *fair* and *unfair* occur frequently in English discourse but do not have equivalents in other European languages (p. 141). Wierzbicka’s definition of *fair* has three parts, expressing the speaker’s judgment, background assumptions and a justification of the speaker’s judgment. Her explication has the following components (p. 151):

*That’s fair*

  a. I say: people can know that when this person (X) did it (W), X did NOT do anything bad
  b. if other people know about it they will say the same because they all think about some things in the same way
  c. they think like this:
  d. when people want to do some things with some other people they know that they can do some kinds of things
  e. at the same time they know that they can’t do some other kind of things
  f. because if they do things like this, it will be bad for these other people
  g. they know that people can think that no one will do things like this
  h. people can know that when this person (X) did it (W), X did NOT do anything like this
  i. because of this, other people can NOT say to X “you can’t do things like this”

*Fairness* is a part of Anglo political philosophy as well, such that the public has an agreed-upon standard that they expect. Returning to Locke, this underlying concept promotes notions of civil society, individual rights and the shaping of governments (p. 155).

*Fairness*, as already mentioned, is not a universal concept although it is often treated as such, for example in Steven Pinker’s book, *The Blank Slate*. Pinker in turn derived his claim mostly from Donald Brown’s book, *Human Universals*. *Fairness* is not the same as *justice* and Wierzbicka draws on her own experience as a Polish immigrant to Australia to demonstrate how, because there was no Polish word for *fair*, she found the Anglo concept alien, offensive and hurtful (p. 163). She claims that the words *fair* and *unfair* are untranslatable in many languages (p. 167), although their meanings can be explicates in any language using the apparatus of her theory, the semantic primitives.

What it means to “cause” something

The third section of the book deals with how Anglo culture is reflected in English grammar. Chapter 6 analyzes causation and its relationship to interpersonal relations. In her judgment and analysis a study of this sort is one of ethnosyntax, demonstrating links between culture and grammar. In this respect, she echoes Sapir in his demonstration of the relationship of vocabularies to certain cultural underpinnings in language. To test this hypothesis Wierzbicka uses the NSM and explicates the semantics of different constructions that have traditionally been labeled as types of causatives. Instead, her conclusion is that a detailed semantic analysis shows
that causative constructions are often unique in meaning but a configuration of cross-linguistic and universal concepts are encoded in them. Her analysis deals with causatives of these types:

- Having someone do something
- Getting someone to do something
- Manipulating someone
- Making something happen

Dealing with causatives leads to the “let” construction in English and the cultural ideal of noninterference, for example:

- The let of permission (Let him go to the party)
- The let of tolerance (Let her be)
- The let of shared information (Let me know what happened)
- The let of offering to perform a service (Let me open the door for you)
- The archaic let of voluntary cooperation (Let us do Z)
- The let of cooperative dialogue (Let me conclude by saying...)
- The let of cooperative interaction (Let me talk to him)
- The let of cooperative thinking (Let me think...)

Wierzbicka sums up the chapter by saying that the causative differences are “qualitative rather than quantitative” and uses the NSM to demonstrate their unique semantic components (p. 202).

### English epistemic phrases

Chapter 7 studies the rise of epistemic phrases in modern English, particularly “I think.” Other such phrases studied in this chapter are:

- I suppose (I suppose things change, don’t they?) (p. 208)
- I guess (I guess I’ll go)
- I gather (I gather there is considerable upheaval about this)
- I presume (Dr. Livingston, I presume)
- I believe (I believe you can get low fat custard these days)
- I believe that (I believe that there is a real need...)
- I find (I find it ridiculous)
- I expect (I expect you talked to him)
- I take it (I take it for granted...)
- I understand (That’s the way I understand it)
- I imagine (I imagine that would really be interesting)
- I bet (I bet that happens a lot)
- I suspect (I suspect they’d run into all sorts of trouble)
- I assume (I assume you have a good idea of where it is)

Wierzbicka concludes that the leitmotif of epistemic phrases “is the acknowledgment of the limitations of one’s knowledge and the tentative status of most of the things that we say.” She sees a strong correlation in the semantics of such phrases and the grand themes of the British
Enlightenment, with a causal link between them (p. 242). NSM provides the rigorous semantic analysis to establish a major semantic and grammatical class in modern English.

What do we mean by probable and probably?

Chapter 8 deals with probably, analyzing it and other epistemic adverbs in terms of their cultural significance, in fact it is the most important qualifier in modern English/Anglo discourse (p. 267). This is because English has, “probably”, a greater repertoire of epistemic adverbs than any other language of the world. The set includes probably, possibly, clearly, obviously, presumably, evidently, apparently, supposedly, conceivably, undoubtedly, allegedly, reportedly, arguably, unquestionably, seemingly, certainly and likely (in American English). Wierzbicka provides tables (pp. 248 and 262) showing that English has at least twice as many epistemic adverbs as German, Dutch or French and that in the UK books probably occurs 312 times per million words, but only 219 in US books.

Epistemic adverbs are speaker oriented and express a lack of confidence by the speaker. From the speaker’s point of view these adverbs refer to thing and knowledge (or its lack) rather than to truth. Various examples are provided for adverbs of the set to show, for example, that the speaker cannot be disassociated from the proposition that is being pronounced. In addition, examples illustrate that the conclusion goes beyond what the speaker can actually know. The explication for presumably, in the sentence: Presumably, he did it himself, is as follows:

a. I want to say how I think when I think about it
b. I say: he did it himself
c. I don’t say I know
d. I think that I can know it
e. I think that other people can think the same

Section 8.2 of the book compares epistemic adverbs with discourse particles. The latter can be interactive whereas the former are monologic or speaker oriented. Section 8.9 outlines the history of epistemic expressions and shows a marked increase in the twentieth century. It follows that the different kinds and degrees of epistemic adverbs have “had an impact on ordinary ways of speaking, and on the English language itself” (p. 296).

General problems of cross-cultural communication in English

The final chapter has a provocative title: “The ‘cultural baggage’ of English and its significance in the world at large.” Wierzbicka is insistent that the spread of English as a global language resulted in a cultural core of unstated assumptions. However, these are often ignored or misunderstood in areas of the world that use English, especially when it is not their first language. She uses international law and international aviation to show how English words and expressions have been mistakenly applied, in many cases at the peril of the speakers and listeners. A classic example is the disaster that occurred on the Canary Islands in 1977 when a KLM Boeing 747 and a Pan American Boeing 747 collided, killing 583 people. The Dutch pilot said “We are now at take-off,” which translated literally from Dutch meant, “We are now
beginning to take-off.” The controller assumed that the plane was ready for take-off and would wait for final clearance and said “OK, stand by for take-off…,” but the pilot heard only “OK” and continued to roll down the runway, colliding with the Pan American 747 that was invisible in the fog on the same runway.

Examples of miscommunication in English, but without the ensuing disasters, can be multiplied around the world. Another example in this chapter is an exchange of business cards between American and Chinese businessmen. Each gets a different feeling and set of assumptions out of the exchange. What is particularly significant is that when each individual gives his name certain information is assumed by the hearer but, in each case, it is misinterpreted and, in the case of the Chinese businessman, leads to embarrassment.

Perceptions in the example given show that each person has a particular cultural script that he or she is not fully aware of and therefore makes assumptions regarding the transfer of information, often resulting in misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

Wierzbicka believes that an analysis of cultural scripts using a version of the NSM can teach intercultural communication and that explanations formulated in NSM can be readily translated into any other language (p. 308). Such a process is based on the NSM and demonstrates certain universal human concepts and is a start towards an “Anglo cultural dictionary,” one that is then translatable into any language, if it is written in the universal concepts embodied in the semantic primes of NSM.

Such an analysis reveals many of the cultural assumptions (which others call “baggage”) that are embedded in Anglo English and are “important for practical, as well as intellectual, reasons for language teaching, cultural literacy teaching, cross-cultural training, international communication, and so on” (p. 313). In this way the historically shaped meaning embedded in Anglo English are also identified and acknowledged.

**Some conclusions**

Wierzbicka presents a powerful argument on how language and culture are interrelated and how native speakers often do not understand their own cultural assumptions when they use their language in a cross-cultural context. Fieldworkers and translators, in general, should not have to be convinced of this fact. However, in checking translations and interlinearizing texts, the assumption seems to be that “anything can readily be translated into any language,” and we therefore accept the English gloss of a word or expression as accurately representing the source language words and expressions. For example, in translating the Bible, key terms are analyzed in terms of their Greek (or other source language) “meanings,” but not in terms of the basic semantic primitives that underlie them. I believe that if linguists and translators would consider the claims of Wierzbicka and put into practice her NSM they would be better qualified to know exactly what cultural assumptions and scripts underlie a given text. In the case of key words or terms (an undefined class, but generally theological in nature), this would be helpful to translators, but it would also assist linguists and anthropologists in their analysis of other semantic domains.

I highly recommend the book to translation, anthropology, and linguistic consultants.