all specialists of Louisiana and of those interested by situations of language contact in general. 


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In this book, Wierzbicka proposes a new method for the study of culture, a method relying on two central assumptions. The first assumption is that a culture is most distinctively and transparently expressed by certain "key words" in a language. The second assumption is that the key words of any culture can be translated without residue into a universal semantic metalanguage devised by Wierzbicka for the purpose of cross-cultural comparison. Once key words from different cultures have been translated into this universal language, the social scientist can go about the task of comparing different cultures simply, as it were, by inspecting her glosses.

The actual task of carrying out such an analysis is not without difficulties, of course. To begin with, there is no general method for finding the key words of a culture. The initial choice of key words must be an "inspired" choice (p. 16); failing inspiration, the choice is, at the very least, a matter of intuition. Second, Wierzbicka's universal metalanguage—which plays the role of a Leibnian alphabet of thought—is really just a simplified English, believed to represent "universal human concepts" (p. 24) and defended by appeal to a very distinctive outlook on linguistic meaning and language universals.

Wierzbicka's view that "utterances are built, so to speak, out of simple elements which can be understood by themselves" (p. 25) runs contrary to most current views of meaning. It is equally at variance with the main discoveries of modern semantics (e.g., that the semantic properties of words depend on their syntactic position and distribution) as well as of pragmatics and discourse analysis (e.g., that utterance meaning is a context-dependent affair). Although Wierzbicka relies heavily on assumptions of semantic atomism and contextual-invariance, she presents no arguments for these views. The resulting account of word meaning can only be described as linguistically naive.

The approach to language universals also differs sharply from contemporary approaches. The main difference is that Wierzbicka's universals are formulated independently of any feature of the structure of human languages. What is universal in this picture is not any aspect of language structure but the applicability to all human languages of a particular metalinguistic operation, the act of glossing words from any language into a universal semantic metalanguage. This latter language, which consists of a repertoire of semantic primitives and a logical syntax for devising the formulae in which word glosses are stated, is a universal language only by assumption. As it happens, Wierzbicka's universal concepts are all expressed by selected English words, and her universal syntax by a fragment of English syntax. Wierzbicka believes that such a reduced or "basic English" would turn out to be functionally equivalent to a similarly reduced version of any other language, e.g., "basic Japanese" (p. 24). It is a characteristic feature of this book that its most implausible claims, such as this one, are asserted entirely without argument.

Interestingly, Wierzbicka's approach does not require that the basic concepts of her universal metalanguage be lexicalized in actual human languages by separate words (p. 28). Hence, the lexical repertoires of any actual human language may vary in an arbitrary way from the repertoire of universal or basic terms. All that is required is that words in all human languages be paraphrasable into sentences containing basic terms. Yet, despite the centrality of translation to this enterprise, this book offers neither a theory of translation nor a discussion of the relative merits of different methods of paraphrase. Indeed, the issue of the faithfulness of her glosses—the issue of the extent to which her glosses preserve or transform the semantic and pragmatic properties of the words glossed—is never discussed. Wierzbicka does insist, however, that the terms of this universal metalanguage have been checked and cross-checked against lexical repertoires in a large number of languages, both by her and by her co-workers. This is not reassuring. For it is obvious that any translation-based account of language universals, unconstrained both at the level of form (i.e., arbitrary correspondences between the forms to be glossed and the forms used in the glosses) and at the level of meaning (i.e., unencumbered by any account of the varieties of meaning, or of principles of translation), faces no problems in formulating semantic metalanguages of this kind. This is the whole problem. The difficulties are too few. There are too many non-equivalent ways of formulating such semantic metalanguages. The difficulty is not that the problem can't be solved, but that it has an indeterminate number of solutions in the manner posed.

How do we distinguish a culture's key words (i.e., the words to be glossed) from the basic terms of the universal language (i.e., the words used in the glosses)? We are given no principled criteria for distinguishing the two. In a chapter devoted to the cross-cultural study of friendship, Wierzbicka begins by observing that most sociologists who seek to understand the nature of friendship in other societies fail to recognize that the English words friend and friendship are not universal concepts, merely cultural artifacts of English-speaking societies. This failure leads to the English words being "absolutized and treated as clues to human nature in general" (p. 33). Evidently, Wierzbicka believes that her semantic primitives are not susceptible to this difficulty, just that the English word friend is not a semantic primitive. Why? No plausible reason is given. Her only argument for ruling out the English word friend from the repertoire of universal concepts is the observation that the meaning of this word has changed historically. Yet this criterion rules out all English words from the status of universal concepts, not just this one.

Let us turn to the issue of culture. There are two opposing tendencies, or directives, that guide Wierzbicka's concern with culture. One is the problem of differences between cultures; the other is the problem of the positive content of any given culture. The tension between these two preoccupations is never entirely resolved. Wierzbicka attempts to solve the problem of differences between cultures by equating the boundaries of a culture with a nation-state. Hence, she speaks of differences between Russian culture, Japanese culture, Polish culture, and so on. The second problem, the problem of the positive content of a culture,
is then solved by appeal to lists of words from each language. A culture becomes a set of inert semantic essences, ostended by words of a national language. Hence, we are told: “If Russian culture is epitomized by three untranslatable Russian words, duša (roughly, ‘soul’), sud’ba (roughly ‘fate’), and toska (roughly ‘yearning/melancholy’) . . . traditional Australian culture is reflected above all in the word mate” (p. 198). For Wierzbicka, mate is the most “key” of Australian key words, though there are nine other words as well. Australian culture “is also reflected in such characteristically Australian speech act verbs as dob in, chiack, yarn, shout, and whinge . . . and also in a number of characteristic Australian ‘b-words,’ including, in particular, bloody, bastard, bugger, and bullshit” (p. 198). There are certain sampling problems, we might say. Why should these ten words count as the key words of Australian culture? Why should four of them be expletives? It is true, as Wierzbicka notes, that the forms and/or meanings of these words distinguish Australian English from other varieties of English. But can differences between lexicons tell us anything about the key words or “core values” (ch. 5) of a culture? If so, a different set of core values will emerge each time the language of contrast differs.

There are sampling problems on the side of culture as well. Since Wierzbicka treats the word “culture” as meaning roughly “national culture,” she is forced to take an explicitly political stance in cases where different social groups press competing claims for a place within a national culture. We are told that the cultures of most ethnic minorities in Australia—such as those of Greek, Vietnamese, or Chinese Australians—are hardly “uniquely Australian creation[s]” (p. 199). We are told that the only authentic ethnic minorities in modern Australia are the Aboriginal Australians. At the same time, white Australians (especially “intellectuals”) are chastised for not valuing the distinctiveness, authenticity, and uniqueness of white Australian culture. The real irony here is that modern disputes within Australia regarding the authentic Australian past are not themselves seen as cultural phenomena but as standing outside of culture and potentially dangerous to its core values. Will the core values of Australian culture please stand up?

**Physical Anthropology**

**Conceptual Issues in Modern Human Origins Research.**


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The debate in anthropology regarding the origin of modern humans is one of the most visible and long-standing controversies in our field. Anthropological disagreements over our origins have persisted for decades, centering on a number of possibilities that might explain the origin and subsequent demographic success of our species. Since the 1940s, this controversy has usually involved two contrasting alternatives. The first possibility, often attributed to Franz Weidenreich, is that modern humans arose more-or-less independently in all parts of the world. All regional variants of an ancestral species, Homo erectus, underwent an evolutionary transformation to populations now inhabiting various areas of the Old World. The second possibility could not be more different: modern humans arose in a single geographic area, most probably Africa. Replacement of indigenous “archaic” populations followed dispersal of modern humans into other areas of the Old World. The contemporary version of this scenario is generally traced to W. W. Howells.

These positions, with important and compelling variations (Brauer 1992; Duarte et al. 1999; Smith et al. 1989), have been evaluated mainly on the basis of fossil evidence, with complementary evidence supplied by archaeology (Klein 1992). However, as is nicely detailed by Charles Oxnard in this volume, insights into this problem from molecular biology have emerged with increasing force over the last 30 years. This totally new line of anatomical evidence has reinvigorated and revolutionized investigations into our origins, but it has also precipitated new levels of controversy. Molecular inquiries have significantly changed the debate in major and sometimes unexpected ways. For instance, questions about precisely what constitutes appropriate biochemical evidence for even approaching this problem are now evident.

Clark and Willermet’s volume fleshes out these new levels of controversy by investigating the study of modern human origins as a scientific endeavor. More specifically, they attempt to explore “the enormous differences in the preconceptions, assumptions, and biases that different workers [contributors] brought to the resolution of problems” regarding the origins of modern humans (Clark and Willermet, p. 1). This is an intriguing objective, but it is not met with uniform success. Moreover, as several of the contributors indicate, it is not clear how important this aim actually is. Underlying Clark and Willermet’s goal is the notion that research into modern human origins is fraught with standard science, mainly because few researchers consider either the paradigms that they utilize or their unconscious biases (see also Clark 1999). Thus, Clark insists that “human paleontology remains mired in strict empiricism” (p. 65; see also Clark 1999).

He implies comparable narrowness among geneticists, particularly in his critiques of the first major mitochondrial DNA studies of human origins (p. 73). A stereotyped rendition of cladistics tops off his argument that the field of modern human origins research is underdeveloped relative to other sciences (p. 71). Paradoxically, the contributors are largely successful in obviating Clark’s claims. They do this, almost uniformly, through critical, intriguing, thoughtful, and thorough expositions of their research. This ultimately results in an excellent volume that provides an exceptionally well-rounded perspective on the modern human origins debate.

Before highlighting some of the more significant articles, it is important to illustrate how the contributors demonstrate that modern human origins research need not be considered substandard compared to other disciplines. First, palaeontologists and geneticists are working with an extremely strong general theory