literary criticism may seem to have become entirely unfeasible or pointless. Some readers may prefer to endorse that view. But there's an alternative possible conclusion, and we might hope that Foucault had at least looked at it: his logic could equally serve to demonstrate that throwing out the author never was such a great idea.

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UNDERSTANDING CULTURES THROUGH THEIR KEY WORDS: ENGLISH, RUSSIAN, POLISH, GERMAN AND JAPANESE. Wierzbicka, Anna. Oxford University Press. 1997. 317 pgs. $NZ69.95

This book aims to demonstrate that "the semantic perspective on culture is something that cultural analysis can ill afford to ignore" (pg 1). But, to establish the validity of a linguistic analysis of culture, Wierzbicka must first deal to linguistic and cultural universalists, as well as those who dispute the relevance of the concept "culture" to the study of human behaviour. Wierzbicka does this with characteristic clarity and logical elegance in her introductory chapter.

Pinker's claim (1994:58) that "[t]here is no scientific evidence that languages dramatically shape their speakers' ways of thinking" is countered with a demonstration of the (obvious) existence of culture-specific words — English 'marmalade' (*orange jam), Polish 'powid(a ("plum jam"), Russian xristosovat'sja (to 'exchange a triple kiss as an Easter salutation'), Japanese miai (a formal meeting between the families of prospective bride and groom) etc. and the self-evident claim that such culture-specific words can only be accompanied by culture-specific thought, from the trivial to the portentous.

The principle of 'cultural elaboration' is also invoked, re-vitalised by many fresh examples from Philippine and Australian languages, and, against Wolf's sceptical suggestion (1994:6) that " notions of a common cultural structure ... sound a bit too much like a little cultural homunculus built into everyone through the process of socialisation..." Wierzbicka places powerful statements from bi-lingual and bi-cultural writers that there are " topographies of experience one cannot guess from within one's own limited experience." (Hoffman 1989:204). The commonality of each such "topography of experience" is further documented, here and throughout the book, with numerous quotes illustrating similar interpretations of the same words by many individuals.

Such definitions are only ever similar, Wierzbicka argues, because writers misguidedly attempt to express complex culture-specific concepts via equally complex and culture-specific concepts from other cultures; a perfect match is highly unlikely. The latter part of the introduction describes

and justifies aspects of a methodology, developed by Wierzbicka and colleagues over three decades, that can overcome this problem by explicating complex concepts on the basis of a limited stock of putative universal indefinables — Natural Semantic Meta-language (NSM).

This introductory chapter stands alone as a useful summary of Wierzbicka's position, rationale and methodology for those unfamiliar with her work to date. The remaining five chapters demonstrate how NSM can be used to elucidate similarities and differences between culturally and politically significant concepts from different cultures and to explicate general values-systems of individual cultures.

Chapter 2, examines interpersonal relationships in Polish, Russian and Anglo societies, and undermines the notion that "friendship" is universal, arguing instead that the domain of interpersonal relationships is divided quite differently in these three cultures. Wierzbicka acknowledges heterogeneity within larger cultural groupings in her discussion of mateship in Australian culture.

Chapter Three contrasts liberty and freedom, Russian svoboda and Polish wolność, and Chapter Four continues this political theme with a discussion of names for places people come from: German Heimat vs Vaterland, Russian rodina vs otečestvo and Polish ojczyzna.

Chapter five moves a little closer to home, with an analysis of the Australian "national character" via chyack, yarn, shout, dob in , whinge and the b-words (bloody bugger, bastard and bullshit) , and Chapter six performs a similar type of analysis on Japanese "key-words" amae, enryo, wa, on, giri, seishin and omoiyari..

Much of Keywords has in fact been previously published as separate articles. Consequently, each chapter stands well on its own, but there is little in the way of progressive development of ideas or serendipity. Instead we have a rather idiosyncratic patch-work of subject-matter. Nonetheless, within the chosen domains, the focus is on current topics and major concerns within established literature.

Wierzbicka routinely takes apparently complex and esoteric philosophical issues — the difference between thought and language, the existence of culture-specific thought, the problem of the communication of thoughts — and grounds and clarifies them using the simplest and most accessible evidence and language, marking out the territory within the debate that is open to practical and methodical investigation.

Students of the particular cultures on which Wierzbicka happens to focus will naturally find much to engage with in detail; but those who study other cultures or languages not touched on here, will also find the issues addressed and the methodology demonstrated, pertinent and Wierzbicka's arguments and position worthy of careful consideration. And indeed, there is enough fascinating material, explicated with such insight, affection, humour and respect, as to make enjoyable and thought-provoking reading even for those who have just a general interest in the variety of human natures and cultures.

My major concern about this work relates to the methodology for identifying "key words". In the introduction, Wierzbicka argues that key words can be identified because they are common, at least in some domain, productive, featuring in a 'phraseological cluster' and can be shown to produce "significant insights recognised by others familiar with the cultures in question." This is a notable attempt to introduce some methodological rigour into the identification of key words. However, the role of frequency is particularly problematic, and a deeper discussion of the pitfalls of corpora is warranted if the book is to serve as a methodological primer for would-be cultural analysts.

How representative of a culture at large is its public discourse generally, and the chosen corpus in particular? And is it meaningful to compare frequencies from similar registers or domains if the role of those registers and domains differs across cultures? In some cultures, the more central to human lives an issue is thought to be, the more restricted the group that are socially licensed to discuss it — for example in Australian Aborigine communities there are restrictions on who is permitted to know and discuss alternative interpretations of their landscape, art and songs. There are also cultures, or at least registers, where expression is largely or frequently in metaphor, or in other kinds of recognisable 'untruth'. The keys to interpretation of such language are as much in the context, co-text or syntactic structures as in any lexical items. If discourse of this type were selected for analysis, frequency counts might indicate important concepts — not necessarily those 'mentioned' in the discourse, perhaps their "opposites" — but they certainly would not allow any straightforward extrapolation of the real affective content of the message. A much more careful contextually sensitive analysis is really the only acceptable methodology.

For the most part this is in fact what Wierzbicka herself practices. Generally, I found her analysis of Australian and Anglo words were hard to fault. Though I often questioned components on my first encounter, I generally found that deeper reflection soon brought evidence for Wierzbicka's proposals. But where that deeper reflection was not possible, precisely because the concepts discussed are so alien to my own cultural and personal experience, I became acutely aware of my concern about the adequacy of the proposed set of universals. For all their versatility — and Wierzbicka certainly demonstrates great skill in producing subtle distinctions of meaning — there are in fact many instances where these elements, or the explications built from them, seem incapable of capturing the full specific detail of a concept. For instance the affective content of many explications involves some formula like:

> "when I (people / men) think about (/ am with) these people
> (/ other men)
> I (/they) feel something good".

From Wierzbicka's explications, non-speakers may understand a word in the sense of understanding its place in the socio-linguistic system, but, I doubt

they could imagine or create the corresponding concept, in their own mind, much less respond to an explication with the same kind of affective resonance with which a native speaker might respond to the word; they can't know just what that particular "something good" feels like. Yet this is precisely what a semantic meta-language must make possible, if it is to fully answer Wolf's concerns about the mode of transmission of cultural knowledge.

Nonetheless, Wierzbicka defends articulately the position that cultures do have content, that that content varies in non-obvious ways, and that we can, and indeed must, use language to explain that content to each other. Failure to do so leaves us trapped in ethnocentrism and mutually unintelligible cultural isolation.

Wierzbicka's insistence that there must be a common conceptual basis among human beings, is, in the context of post-structuralism, and extreme cultural relativism, very refreshing. Also refreshing is the concreteness, explicitness and relative accessibility of meanings explicated in this way. It is this that makes Wierzbicka so easy to engage with, an engagement she openly invites and richly deserves. If you have never read her work, this book is as good a place to start as any.