

Wierzbicka, Anna. 2014. *Imprisoned in English. The Hazards of English as a Default Language*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. xii + 287. ISBN: 978-0-19-932150-6

The book under review takes as its main theme an issue which is almost nonexistent in today's social sciences and the humanities. The monograph develops the claim that the English language has dominated the academic world as the only tool for effective communication and that, as a result, it prevents its users from objectively describing the world around them. The volume consists of eighteen chapters divided into six parts: (1) *Every Language Draws a Circle...*; (2) *Emotions and Values*; (3) "Politeness" and "Cooperation"; (4) *Entering Other Minds*; (5) *Breaking Down the Walls of the Prison*; (6) *Kindred Thinking Across Disciplines*. Apart from the six core parts, the book also contains *Acknowledgements* and *Final Remarks*. The first four parts develop the central claim of the book, namely, the thesis that treating English as the *lingua franca* of the academic world prevents its users from understanding other cultures. In part five, the author argues that there is a way to achieve a culture-independent means of communication in social sciences and the humanities, and endorses the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) as an answer to the problem discussed. Part six concentrates on providing information about scholars who represent linguistics, as well as several other disciplines, and who have also observed the limiting power of English.

In *Every Language Draws a Circle...*, there are five chapters: (1) *Recognizing the Contingency of One's Own Language*; (2) *Naming the World or Construing the World?*; (3) *The Givens of Human Life*; (4) *Universal Words, Semantic Atoms and Semantic Molecules*; (5) *Human Bodies and Human Minds: What is Visible and What is Invisible*. In *Emotions and Values*, there are two chapters: (6) *Anglo Values vs. Human Values: Talking about Values in a Global World*; and (7) *Human Emotions and English Words: Are Anger and Disgust Universal?* In "Politeness" and "Cooperation", there are two chapters: (8) *Talking to Other People: "Politeness" and Cultural Scripts*; and (9) *Doing Things with Other People: "Cooperation," "Interaction" and "Obščenie"*. In *Entering Other Minds*, there are four chapters; (10) *Grammar and Social Cognition: The Hawaiians, the Dalabons, and the Anglos*; (11) *Thinking about "Things" in Yucatec and in English*; (12) *Endangered*

Languages, Endangered Meanings; and (13) *Chimpanzees and the Evolution of Human Cognition*. In *Breaking Down the Walls of the Prison*, there is one chapter: (14) *From Ordinary (Anglo) English to Minimal English*. Finally, in *Kindred Thinking Across Disciplines*, there are four chapters; (15) *Anthropology, Psychology, Psychiatry*; (16) *Philosophy, Theology, Politics*; (17) *Linguistics: Cognitive and Cultural Approaches*; and (18) *Bilingualism, Life Writing, Translation*.

At the very beginning of the book, the author states that the majority of scholars tend to overlook the fact that English is not a neutral language to use when describing the world. This, in turn, leads to the discussion of notions characteristic of non-Anglo cultures through the prism of Anglo values and assumptions, which hinders a better understanding of what is not familiar. This may be the main reason for the book being a groundbreaking and fascinating read, as it offers a truly sobering experience for those who have not realized the limitations of English as a metalanguage. However, one may wonder if the book's second main claim, that scholars should detach themselves from English when describing the world, is realistic at all. It is the English language that provides the only available way of universal communication in the globalized world. It is, therefore, quite natural for English to be also the language of communication in the academic world. One may also come to the conclusion based on one's everyday experience that, after all, English might be our best option in terms of global communication, and therefore, its conceptual model should be accepted as well. Nevertheless, contemplating Wierzbicka's ideas concerning overcoming the limitations of English is an eye-opening experience. This is accompanied by a sense of appreciation towards the author for taking the trouble to devise and elaborate a neutral metalanguage which may counterbalance Anglocentrism in the humanities.

In chapter one, *Recognizing the Contingency of One's Own Language*, the author brings to our attention the fact that people frequently take for granted the most familiar notions without realizing that they may not exist in other cultures, because, as the author states at the very beginning of the chapter, "every language equips its speakers with a particular set of cognitive tools for seeing and interpreting the world" (p. 3). English is not an exception here. It is not a neutral tool for describing the world, but a filter which alters and accommodates concepts, so that they correspond to the Anglo perception of the world.

This point is further developed in chapter three, *The Givens of Human Life*, where the author discusses the fact that what is considered universal by speakers of one language may not even exist for speakers of another. The chapter offers an in-depth analysis of several Anglo “givens of human life”, words like “sex”, “pain”, and “sister”, in order to prove that even these are not universal. The author, however, does not content herself with highlighting the problem. Having discussed these falsely assumed givens, she moves on to propose several universal givens that she considers true. She does that on the basis of “empirical cross-linguistic investigations” (p. 29) which show that, although many words in one language do not have their exact semantic counterparts in other languages, there exist some that do. In the book, they are divided into “existential givens”, which include words for the concepts “live” and “die”; “biological givens”, which refer to, for example, “body” and “head”; “psychological givens”, including “think” and “want”; “socio-biological givens”, among others, referring to “mother” and “father”; and, finally, “moral givens”, which consist of words for the concepts “bad” and “good” (p. 29). The author claims that, if one intends to objectively describe the world, he or she has to do it with concepts that are pancultural.

The aforementioned assumption leads to the claim discussed in chapter four, *Universal Words, Semantic Atoms, and Semantic Molecules*. Here, the author goes on to claim that there exists a set of words that mean the same in all languages of the world, and that effective cross-cultural communication is only possible through these words—“it is the **shared** words that provide the bedrock of genuine human understanding” (p. 32). These “universal words” are further divided into “semantic atoms” and “semantic molecules” (p. 33). “Semantic atoms” are words that, apart from being universal in all cultures of the world, are also the most basic ones—they cannot be described by means of other words (examples of semantic atoms include “see”, “hear”, and “know”). On the other hand, “semantic molecules” are complex universal words which can be described by means of “semantic atoms” (for example, “mother”, “child”, “water”). “Semantic atoms” and “semantic molecules” constitute the basis of the NSM.

In this volume, the author refers to the NSM theory several times. It is linked to the title of chapter four with the claim that “the key to the NSM approach lies in the notion of «universal words»” (p. 33). The NSM is Wierzbicka’s life-long project, which aims at narrowing down the lexicons and grammars of all languages of the world to a list of words that, as Wierzbicka claims, have the same meaning in every language. These words shared by all languages are called “semantic primes”, “semantic primitives”, or “semantic atoms”. Thus far, Wierzbicka has established 65 primes, which include, for example, the concepts of “good”, “bad”, “say”, “true”, and “live”. Apart from semantic primes, there are about twenty semantic molecules, which are decomposable into primes, and are allegedly available in every language (e.g., “hands”, “sky”, “children”, “men”). Among its other applications, the NSM is supposed to be used as a metalanguage for discussing and describing languages. It is also claimed to allow its users to formulate clear wordage of their thoughts which is translatable into every language in the world and is free from the Anglo slant. There is, however, some confusion as to the NSM theory being the solution to the problem of the domination of English in the area of social sciences and the humanities. It appears that NSM is not a remedy to the Anglo domination, but rather a neutral metalanguage which avoids the bias rooted in any language. Nevertheless, the author draws a relation between NSM and a “mini-English”, which is explained in the book as follows: “an English trimmed to the bone and matching the universal «bone structure» (the scaffolding) underlying all the diverse cultural embodiments of the human mind” (p. 16). Wierzbicka herself admits that “there is a crucial similarity between the «mini-English» and the «maxi-English» here: because of the current position of English in the world, they can both have a vast outreach” (p. 34).

Staying with the NSM theory, it is worth noting that the model is constantly being developed. The number of semantic primes is continuously growing. In Wierzbicka’s 1972 book, *Semantic Primitives*, there were only fourteen semantic primitives proposed. Nowadays, the repertory of primes is almost five times larger, but, thus far, it has not been declared complete. What is more, it is quite difficult to imagine that one day we will arrive at a final list of semantic primes as languages keep evolving. Furthermore, it is possible that new primes start to modify

the previously established ones, which may pose some problems for the NSM users.

Let us now move on to Part Five of the book under review which sums up the claims formulated in Parts One to Four, and offers a clearly stated solution to the problems raised. Specifically, this part shows how to avoid the problematic English-as-a-“conceptual cage” situation, which was mentioned at the very beginning of the volume, in the *Acknowledgements* (p. ix). Part Five also suggests how to attain “the English version of «Basic Human»” (p. 195), which may be used as a *lingua franca* for explaining and clarifying what we mean. According to this chapter, the concept of English “Basic Human” would by default be the English version of NSM, that is semantic primes expressed through English. It should be noted that translating from a maxi-language into a mini-language, for example, from a maxi-English into NSM English, is quite an effortful and time-consuming exercise, at least for beginners. Thus, as Wierzbicka herself notes, “«Basic Human» cannot be an all-purpose practical global means of communication” (p. 195). Nevertheless, one may use it when special clarification of meaning is needed.

Speaking of the clarification of meaning, it is frequently the fact that the language of social sciences is so inexact and vague that even users of one language may have difficulty understanding each other. It is particularly visible while translating texts into other languages. In order to translate anything, one has to reach a deep understanding of the source text. Only then is one able to perceive the level of incoherence in the translated text. A good example of the lack of understanding which results from the vagueness of the source text is discussed on pages 187–90. There, Wierzbicka quotes two seemingly opposing views on the human morality: one expressed by Marc Hauser and the other by Jesse Prinz. Once the English-bound terms used by them are closely analyzed, one may assume that these concepts are quite ambiguous, and that some clarification of their meaning would be welcome. It is a serious problem for translators, whose task is to express as faithfully as possible the author’s words, so as the text may be understood by speakers of a different language. If the source text is vague, the translation, most probably, is vague too. As a result, following Wierzbicka’s statement, “when it comes to speakers of languages other than English, including students in different countries who are learning about current debates

through translation, the chances for achieving much understanding are, of course, even slimmer” (p. 189).

One reservation may be voiced with reference to Part Five. The book under review concentrates on social sciences and the humanities as the ground for Anglo domination. However, the author claims that “scholars working in natural and exact sciences are not in the same position, because they can rely, ultimately, on numbers rather than words” (p. 187). While it is true that mathematics provides a neutral metalanguage for presenting and explaining claims, specialists in the area of natural and exact sciences also rely on English in their publications. The English language dominates these domains because they too require words in order for concepts from these disciplines to be shared and discussed internationally. If one wants one’s work to become known in the world of science, one has to write about it and promote it in English.

In the last part of the book, entitled *Kindred Thinking Across Disciplines*, we read about scholars who have pointed out the problem of too large a dependence on the English language in social sciences. This part contains four chapters, each representing a group of disciplines: (15) *Anthropology, Psychology, Psychiatry*; (16) *Philosophy, Theology, Politics*; (17) *Linguistics: Cognitive and Cultural Approaches*; and (18) *Bilingualism, Life Writing, Translation*. Some of the aforementioned scholars explicitly state that the NSM approach may be an answer to the problem of Anglocentrism in contemporary social sciences. Those who support the NSM are: psychologist Richard Shweder, anthropologist Roy D’Andrade, theologian Waclaw Hryniewicz, political scientist Richard Collin, as well as linguists Vivian Cook, James Underhill, Jurij Apresjan, and Aleksej Shmelev. Wierzbicka presents their fields of expertise and their most notable works so as to show that the NSM model is widely supported by experts in a variety of academic disciplines. Apart from the above-mentioned scholars, who overtly support NSM as a solution to the problem of Anglo domination in social sciences, Wierzbicka cites other academics whose claims are, in one way or another, consistent with the NSM theory. One very vivid example of convergent thinking across disciplines is that of Eva Hoffman’s memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, which offers a more personal perspective on the fact that English is not a neutral language. It proves that discovering and acquiring the Anglo-specific concepts is a tedious and difficult task for a foreigner.

Let us now focus on a certain idea which seems to be of great importance in the context of “liberating” the humanities from their implicit Anglocentrism. It was only alluded to in the volume discussed. However, it is quite imminent from the perspective of a language teacher. One of the main assumptions underlying the thesis that English as the global *lingua franca* prevents its users from objectively describing the world is that the language we speak shapes the way we think. It does not mean that speakers of one language are incapable of understanding concepts that are not present in their mother tongue. It means, however, that they are likely to transfer their reality onto the other, without even realizing it. This is why learning languages is so important in today’s globalized world. With every language that we learn comes a set of new and unknown concepts which we are able to mentally acquire through that foreign language. This, in turn, makes us realize, explicitly or implicitly, that every language has its own conceptual categories, which may not have exact equivalents in other languages. That realization seems to corroborate what Wierzbicka invokes at the very beginning of the book discussed: “this blindness to what is exceedingly familiar applies also to Anglophone scholars and leads to various forms of Anglocentrism in English-based human sciences” (p. 4). Learning languages may be a solution to this blindness as it may open our eyes to differences between cultures.

The volume under review might be of interest not only to linguists, but to scholars in general, especially to those who write and publish in English. The book offers an eye-opening experience as it questions the very basis of scholarly practice. It is a bit of a poke in the ribs of many of the Anglophone scholars who normally ignore the fact that English is merely a tool and should be treated as such, rather than a guidebook with its own lexicon for others how to think. The book is also an excellent source of inspiration for translators who may find in it ideas on how to handle lack of precision and instances of intranslatability in the source texts. For language teachers, this book is a proof of how important it is to teach students that there exist major differences between how speakers of different languages perceive the world.

150 *Reviews*

The book under review constitutes an undeniably important contribution to the field of social sciences. It contains insights that one cannot ignore. The volume has been written in a very approachable manner. Its style is gripping, its observations—insightful. For some of us, it may be a truly sobering experience, for all—a great and absorbing read.

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