Abstract Goddard's (1997) comparative analysis of English and Malay surprise words is critically evaluated. While his major aim to overcome ethnocentric semantic comparisons is generally laudable, the methodological tool in the form of a universal inventory of lexical items is argued to prove unable to perform this job. First, in its explication of surprise scenarios, the natural semantic metalanguage falls short of delivering more or better insights than traditional interpretative approaches to human actions and texts. Second, the discursive orientations and perspectives within which emotion terms are put to use in actual talk are washed out. Consequently, in order to achieve some richer understanding of emotion terms, particularly those of a foreign language, fuller contours of emotion talk need to be taken into account.

Key Words discourse, emotion talk, perspective, semantic universals, words

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Culture, Words and Understanding

Central to Goddard's (1997) endeavors is the thesis that any interpretation of words of a foreign language is constrained ('biased') by the previous understanding ('knowledge') of words in one's own (native) language. This bias—or 'ethnocentricity'—needs to be overcome in order to reach a true and full understanding of what the words of a foreign language mean. The means by which this true and full understanding can be achieved is by *translating* these words *out* of their culture-specific meanings *into* culture-free and language-independent concepts (a *'natural semantic metalanguage'* = NSM), so that any culture-specific interpretations no longer can interfere. This is the central claim of countless articles and collections of articles by Wierzbicka (1992a, 1992b, 1995a, 1995) and her follower Goddard (1995, 1997; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 1994). And if it wasn't that this body of work claims to be critical and in some basic opposition to the foundationalism of western psychology (Goddard, 1997, p. 157; Wierzbicka, 1992b), and that at times social constructionists seem to embrace this body of work as following this claim (Harré, 1995; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Much, 1995; Smedslund, 1995), one could take the empirical

works of Wierzbicka and Goddard for what they are worth, which are (most often) thorough discussions and interesting explications of lexical items in 'exotic' (= other than English!) languages, illuminating aspects of their usage, and thereby often revealing insights into the semantics of lexical items of the particular languages under investigation.

However, in its theoretical underpinnings, the basic idea of *neutralizing* culture-specific practices by use of so-called semantic primitives (*'universals'*) does nothing but erect false hopes, as if this were a more 'objective' or scientific procedure. It points in the wrong direction, and may become an obstacle for the *better* understanding of cultural practices and concomitant linguistic constructs. In the following I will start (in section 1: 'Basic Emotions') joining in Goddard's criticism of the universalistic claims of the *'basic emotion theory'*. From there I will turn back and explore more systematically how Goddard methodologically 'uncovered' the meanings of Malay and English surprise words (section 2: 'Perspective'). However, these insights do not seem to originate from the invention of a natural semantic metalanguage, but rather from other, quite traditional hermeneutic interpretative procedures (section 3: 'Interpretation'). Thereafter (in section 4: 'Universals'), I will scrutinize in more detail the assumptions of the NSM, which are not spelled out in detail in Goddard (1997), ending up (in section 5: 'Discourse and Conceptual Structure') by pointing to a more discursive approach within which the kinds of empirical investigations that Goddard (and Wierzbicka) undertake are much better housed. In all this, I will focus less on the question whether the words investigated by Goddard refer to 'emotions' or not, and I will stay clear of the question of what emotions *really are*. Others (Josephs, 1995; Van Geert, 1995; Winegar, 1995) have tried to take up these problems in their discussion of Wierzbicka's so-called 'semantic' approach to facial expressions in this same journal (Wierzbicka, 1995a) along more psychological lines of argument, but, as documented in Goddard's reply (1995) as well as in the article I am commenting on (1997), with next to no effects on the underlying assumptions of the NSM.

Basic Emotions

Goddard's finding that the three Malay words (from the semantic domain of surprise words) *terkejut*, *terperanjat* and *hairan* do not have equivalent counterparts in the English domain of surprise words is taken to constitute a major argument against the tenets of the basic

emotion theory, which argues that there are 5–7 categorial emotional distinctions that hold universally. All other emotions are made up out of components of these 5–7 basic ones. The main body of empirical work within this theory relies predominantly on the recognition of facial expressions, assuming that facial expressions are the translations of internal bodily states or processes. This means that people around the world, due to their biological givenness, share a common set of authentic emotions, which gravitate towards the same (facial) expression as long as no particular social, cultural or conversational context interferes. However, within particular contexts (and different languages *can* be taken to represent different contexts), these basic emotions do not necessarily represent themselves according to their authentic values, but are under the control of such emotion-external forces. Irrespective of whether or not 'surprise', which constitutes the ground-domain from which the Malay and English words are taken and compared, can count as a basic emotion, it is Goddard's contention that the basic emotion theory should predict 'surprise' to be linguistically represented in all languages; this argument, that all surprise words investigated in his article are expressing a 'surprise-like' concept (which is universally given), he finds untenable and ultimately ethnocentric.

It is at this point, however, that my line of argument begins to diverge somewhat from Goddard's. Although I fully share Goddard's—and to that effect Wierzbicka's (1995a)—criticism of the basic emotion theory, I contend that we (all) engage in a way of speaking as a practice when we communicate in a particular language to our compatriots (who we assume 'understand' those practices), and we often do this in ways that can be characterized (and criticized) as 'ethnocentric'. If, for example, someone labelled another person as *angry* to an American English-speaking audience (as I happened to do in Bamberg, in press), it would be conceived of as utterly humbug if one continued to say in the same breath that 'of course that person was not really *angry*, because to an Italian speaker s/he would be *rabbia*, and to a native speaker of Ilongot *liget'* (as Wierzbicka, in press, forcefully suggests one should). We have to recognize that emotion ascriptions in context are made to characterize a state of affairs in order to achieve communicative goals. To take a reflective stance and explicitly mention that this type of language-use is somewhat ethnocentric deters from that goal and becomes destructive for the achievement of any joint understanding. Along these lines, I would like to further contend that proponents of the basic emotion theory follow the same communicative principles when they use *surprise* to refer to the

'kind of' surprise-like scenarios that all those surprise words share. Although Wierzbicka and Goddard are correct to admonish that technically speaking it is not really *surprise* that forms the center or core of all surprise-like words, particularly non-English ones, I see nothing wrong in continuing to pretend that there is something that holds those words together, and for those communicative purposes I give it a name. Having said this, however, I want to underscore again that I share Goddard's conviction in his critical stance vis-à-vis the basic emotion theory that there is no reason to assume a universally shared set of emotions that in one way or another regulate human behavior, particularly our use of language. The question whether there are any reasons to assume conceptual (or semantic) universals has not been touched upon, and will be addressed in due course.

Perspective

Turning to the distinction outlined in Goddard (1997) between the two English lexical items *surprised* and *amazed*, it is interesting to see how he arrives at something a layperson might describe as a simple difference in intensity: '*Amazed is when you're really really surprised*', as a 13-year-old American described it to me. The way the scenarios for 'feeling surprised' and 'feeling amazed' are layed out is particularly interesting, since they consist of two different stances on what seems to be the same situation: the first and the last line of both scenario descriptions consist of a third-person point of view (*X thought something like this; X felt something because of this*), while the two middle propositions are made up from a first-person perspective (*something happened now; I didn't think this would happen* [for 'surprised'], and *I didn't think something like this could happen* [for 'amazed']). In sum, the voice of personal experience (*I*), representing the actual emotional event and the personal evaluative stance, is inserted into a more detached discursive stance of an anonymous third-person character (*X*), one who is thinking and feeling like anybody else. Thus, what springs to existence by this kind of scenario description is a mixture of two discourse presentations, resulting in a form of explanatory discourse about the way things usually happen, or are supposed to happen in this world.

How Goddard arrives at the description of the scenarios for the Malay and English words remains unclear. However, in its attempts to reconstruct a context within which the use of the particular item could make sense, his approach loosely resembles a mixture of Fillmore's (1978, 1981) 'frame semantics', Geertz's (1973, 1983) 'thick description'

and Labov & Fanshel's (1977) 'method of expansion'. In contrast to studying how speakers and listeners in discourse jointly attend to the lexical items under investigation, Goddard relies on the intuitions of informants for the Malay items, and on himself for the English items. Thus, the meanings of words are investigated in a typical linguistic tradition of explicating what the native speaker 'knows'. This knowledge is subsequently translated into what Wierzbicka and Goddard have termed a natural semantic metalanguage.

My first objection to the claim that this methodology results in any better or more real understanding of what words—particularly of a foreign language—mean is that most interpretative ethnographers, including Geertz or Garfinkel (1967), as well as semanticists of the Fillmore/Lakoff tradition, have always stressed that the explication of lexical meanings is never complete, but at best an approximation. I will return to this point in the next section. My second objection to Goddard's methodology is directed at his conflation of the different voices and discursive perspectives that seem to be highly relevant when it comes to the understanding of emotional scenarios. In some of my own work (Bamberg, 1996a, 1996b, in press) I have repeatedly stressed that a presentation of, for instance, an anger event from the first-person perspective (when *I* once was angry) results in a different structure (and content) when compared to one represented from a third-person perspective (when *John* once was angry). And both are quite different, again in terms of the structure of the account as well as the content, when the 'same' situation is presented from the perspective of the generalized other (when *one* is angry). In addition, I also compared accounts that presented emotion scenarios from the perspective of the undergoer (*when I once was happy*) with those from the perspective of the instigator (*when I once made someone happy*). Again, the accounts differed radically in terms of the structure of the account and the contents that were presented, leading me to the conclusion that perspective matters tremendously in how emotion scenarios are construed and understood. Thus, in the attempt to generalize across contexts in which emotional encounters between people take place, and across the personal involvements therein, these differences in perspective are washed out in Goddard's and Wierzbicka's explications of emotion terms. Consequently, the ensemble of different discourse perspectives that make up culturally relevant experience is replaced and overridden in the attempt to construe a more neutral and objective stance toward an emotional scenario that is supposed to be valid for everyone.

Interpretation

The questions that spring to mind at this point are (1) whether the creation of a more neutral and seemingly objective stance in the explication of emotion terms is actually tenable, and (2) whether it is a desirable enterprise. Starting again from Goddard's differentiation between 'being surprised' and 'being amazed', what seems to be avoided is the circularity of the everyday explication of the 13-year-old, defining one term in terms of the other, underscoring the increase of intensity (thereby taking 'surprise' as the baseline) or lack thereof (with 'amazement' as the base). Instead, in Goddard's explication the discriminating feature between the two terms is *'this would'* vs *'something like this could'*, pointing toward a difference in the horizon of expectations of the *'I'*, who experiences the happening (= the undergoer). Thus, what appears at first sight to be an explication of both lexical items in their own terms, independent of each other, turns out at closer scrutiny to have taken place from the *tertium comparationis* (= a common baseline) of what is commonly expected. And, through the back door, so to speak, the same issue of 'intensity' sneaks in, though relabelled as 'more' vs 'less expected'.

Faced with the question of what to make of the distinction between a layperson's and Goddard's semantic explication, one could grant his to be 'more precise', inasmuch as it singles out more clearly where to locate 'intensity'; but this does not imply that my 13-year-old layperson would not have arrived at the same insight after further interrogation. In other words, the seemingly circular definition of 'amazement' in terms of 'surprise' (or the other way around) can achieve its goal of laying out the meaning of a particular term as well as a more elaborate exegesis. It is just a first attempt, and, if not sufficient, needs to be followed up by further attempts. Similarly, if Goddard's explication is not sufficient to an interactant, it might be followed up with further interpretative insights, such as, for instance, that we can surprise others, while we can't 'amaze' them in the same way: the two statements *'I amazed my mother with a birthday present'* and *'I surprised my mother with a birthday present'* do not JUST differ in my mother's expectational horizon. They also differ against an evaluative horizon of what it means to 'surprise' someone (for a particular occasion), and of what it means to stipulate 'amazement' in others. In sum, 'amazements' and 'surprises' have different contextual embeddings, and they are oriented to differently by their participants. Without going into further detail, this difference in cultural orientations can be explicated when these two terms are further scrutinized.

Having made this point, it should have become clear that I do appreciate Goddard's exegetic attempts in laying out aspects of contextual implications of lexical items, particularly those I am not familiar with, as in the surprise terms in Malay. However, his attempts in exegesis are in no way different from other more traditional attempts in the hermeneutic tradition, where this kind of business is well established.[1] In this sense, then, his approach does not offer any 'new analytical and descriptive tools' (Goddard, 1997, p. 176) and most definitely is not superior to approaches that take discourse conventions and perspectives into account, as Wierzbicka repeatedly has claimed (cf. Wierzbicka, 1995c, in press). Furthermore, the claim that this approach 'reduces the dangers of terminological ethnocentrism' (Goddard, 1997, p. 176) is not built into its methodology, but rather a (possible—though not guaranteed) side-effect of becoming more 'reflective' in the attempts to take more and 'thicker' account of contextual implications.

Universals

What, then, is the use of introducing a universal metalanguage in the attempts to come to a better and clearer understanding of lexical items? Examining what counts as a universal, the reader is confronted with a troublesome definition: lexical items that are found in all languages count as primitives, that is, all explications such as the ones I used in my previous discussion ('amazement' and 'surprise') are made up of these primitives. And in an attempt to give an exemplary list of these primitives, Goddard cites some of Wierzbicka's list of 55 (or so) primitives, containing items such as PERSON, DIE, TIME, GOOD, BAD, and the like.

For two reasons, I would like to introduce two major caveats to the natural semantic metalanguage approach offered by Wierzbicka and Goddard. First, its discovery procedure is highly problematic and circular: comparing a large variety of different languages, how would we decide which words are 'the same', if we do not have established universal inventory previous to this comparison to serve as the *tertium comparationis*? In other words, the inventory cannot be established empirically independent from any a priori assumptions. Thus, which words are 'really' the same across all languages is impossible to establish.[2] In addition, I would expect words like AND and/or OR to fall into this list. Why are they not included?

Second, in light of the vast amount of literature that tries to document—in my opinion convincingly—that the notion of 'person' is

not the same across different cultures (and languages), that 'to die' means something quite different in different historical times and cultural traditions, and that certainly what is considered 'good' and 'bad' is dependent on the shared local practices in families, communities, societies and cultures, I am wondering whether it is a good idea to take the criterion 'shared by all languages' to distil an essential metalanguage that is culture-free. Harré (1993) has 'tested' the personal pronoun 'I', which, according to Wierzbicka and Goddard, is a semantic universal, and concluded that 'I' does not mean the same thing across languages. In sum, the attempt of approaching culturally specific 'concepts' through an inventory of 'semantic' universals is unnecessary. In the business of a more precise description and a better understanding of culturally specific practices, semantic universals, even if they could be empirically established, do not lend themselves to do this job, as long as a reflective perspective on the part of the researcher is lacking. The dangers of ethnocentrism are only avoidable through reflexivity, and not by adopting a set of assumptions, even if they were universally shared. The appealing rhetoric of the Goddard/ Wierzbicka approach of seemingly being able to step out of one's own horizon of cultural understanding, and to approach a foreign practice on the neutral grounds of primitives, where everything is shared, and no miscommunication possible, misses that communication and understanding presuppose differences. The understanding of foreign practices is only possible by a 'melting' of the two different horizons of understanding (*Horizontverschmelzung*) into a new one (Gadamer, 1960), and not by giving up one's own, adopting a neutral, universal one, and from there approaching the foreign. The ideal of a full, complete and objective understanding lurking behind the metaphor of semantic universals may even obstruct a better understanding of other cultures and their communications, because it posits the possibility of perfection and truth, while traditional interpretative and hermeneutic approaches are satisfied with the approximations that are desirable and in constant need of being reflected in light of historical changes and cultural affordances. In sum, then, I do not see any reason to give up well-established interpretative practices that have been tested in the interpretation of foreign texts and cultures in exchange for the promises of the natural semantic metalanguage approach.

Discourse and Conceptual Structure

In some previous work (Bamberg, 1991, 1993, in press; Bamberg, Ammirati & Shea, 1995; Bamberg & Reilly, 1996) I have put forth the

proposal to integrate lexical analysis of emotion terms into a framework that investigates emotion talk discourse analytically. Although Wierzbicka (in press) claims that this is exactly what she has been doing, and Goddard's (1997) paper can be seen as an exemplar representing this line of work, let me use the remaining space to clarify the differences between lexically based research within a natural semantic metalanguage, and a discourse-based approach to emotion talk.

A cognitive approach to lexical and syntactic constructions typically starts from the tenet that linguistic constructions, particularly words, 'mean' something, because they are conceptually represented units. As such, words do the job of 'referring' to something else. Consequently, an analysis of words along the lines presented by Goddard (1997) is supposed to reveal what speakers of a particular language 'know' about the meaning of these words. And the methods used to tap this knowledge are typical for traditional linguistic discovery procedures that lay open 'intuitions'.

The analysis of emotion talk starts from the assumption that words 'mean' something, because speakers and listeners *in particular contexts* attend to linguistic constructions in specifically local ways, and thereby make these units mean whatever they mean. As such, linguistic constructions have a local meaning that is dialogically achieved. Only due to their functions in repeated local practices of the same kind can conceptual generalizations take place, and something like a 'conceptual meaning' can come to existence. The analysis of emotion talk focuses on what people *do* in those practices, that is, how particular linguistic constructions are used to perform particular activities. For instance, emotion words are prone to function in contexts where accusations are made and charges filed in order to attribute blame to another person. Typical in those situations is the construction of the self as helpless and innocent (see Bamberg, 1996a, in press; Capps & Ochs, 1995). Thus, the study of emotion talk focuses on how emotion words actually *gain* their meanings in people's situated interactions, while cognitive theories disregard this *process* and seemingly focus on the products in the form of mental structures.

However, the assumption of analysing conceptual structures privileges one particular type of discourse which happens to be a type of uninvolved 'referring' or 'describing', disregarding that this is one of the many activities that speaker and audience may be engaging in simultaneously—for instance, attributing blame to someone, and constructing oneself as a victim in order to gain sympathy from the audience. Consequently, the discursive perspectives within which emotion terms functionally operate are levelled into the rationality of

describing an existing (objective) reality. If it is our business to attempt to overcome ethnocentric prescriptions, I am convinced we will fare better if we start with descriptions of what people *do* in contrast to what they *think*. Simultaneously, we should realize that we cannot spring out of the ethnocentric practices that we attend to when communicating, even in the business of doing 'scientific research', but that we can attempt to become more reflective of them, and part of these attempts are to better understand 'otherness'.

Notes

1. Interestingly, Wierzbicka (1995b) tries her hand at biblical exegeses of 'what Jesus really meant'. However, I wonder whether a set of semantic primitives can achieve getting at Jesus' 'true intentions' in light of the different mythological traditions and the corresponding audience expectations (Hellenistic vs Palestinian) that are engraved on the text segments. How, for example, would a natural semantic language translate the symbolic meaning that Jesus was born by the Virgin Mary, and simultaneously a descendant of King David through the genealogy of Joseph as the father of Jesus (as reported in the Scripts of Matthew and Luke). The fact that both versions make perfect sense against the horizons of two different discursive backgrounds, one that views a king as 'naturally' being born by a virgin (as in the Hellenistic tradition), the other viewing a king as 'naturally' being in a paternal line of descent with former kings (inheriting 'power' and 'authority' through them), does not pose a challenge to hermeneutic exegesis (Bultmann, 1967, pp. 316–317). But it definitely poses a problem for any attempt to overcome traditional exegeses by washing out culturally shaped symbolic perspectives and traditions through the imposition of a neutral and objective stance.
2. Please note that I am not arguing that it is impossible to scrutinize all languages in the world for an empirically 'true' comparison. I hold this kind of argument to be a moot point.

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Biography

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