The "Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)" Method for explicating the meaning of words and expressions: A linguistic approach to the study of emotion

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In this paper, a linguistic framework which explicates the exact meaning of words/expressions, namely the "Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)" method, will be introduced. The focus is placed on the application of this semantic method to the area of emotion study. Using this NSM approach, I will show how it can solve the problems in the study of emotion study which can not be solved by other approaches; especially the problems of 'translation', 'definition', and 'ethnocentricity', which have occurred mainly in non-linguistic, psychological, anthropological, or philosophical approaches.

1. Why and How is Linguistic Approach Important for the Study of Emotion?

While the study of prototypical emotions has been widely pursued by psychologists, (e.g. the 'differential emotion theory' of Ekman or Izard; Plutchik's 'psychoevolutionary theory' of emotions (cf. Blount 1984: 128)), the study of emotions in linguistics has until recently been relatively neglected.

However, a linguistic study on emotion is indispensable for improving the quality of integral emotion study in many respects. For example, Clore & Ortony (1987: 371) explain the importance of studying the language of emotions as follows:

Natural language items allow us to make many more distinctions between different emotions and between different intensities of the same emotion than can be captured in facial expressions, physiological indication, or any combination of these.

The anthropologist Lutz (1986: 267) also supports the important function of
language in emotion research by stating that words are important for labelling an internal state as well as for communicating the nature of one’s internal state to others.\(^1\)

In this paper, we will clarify why and how the linguistic study of emotion is important, first of all, by pointing out the weaknesses of the major psychological studies which result from their lack of interest in language issues, and then by showing how a linguistic study can contribute significantly to solving these problems. The observations in this section will be followed by further discussion in the section 2, where we will examine ways in which the proposed linguistic approach can efficiently solve the problems which arose in psychological studies of emotion.

1.1. Negative Views of Psychologists on the Importance of Language in Emotion Study

One of the major psychologists of emotion, Carroll E. Izard, is aware of the difficulty concerning the language issue in the study of emotion. Izard (1994: 295) states that “emotion recognition is a difficult task and that emotion labelling is much more difficult than emotion recognition”. However, most major psychologists studying emotion, including Izard himself, do not pay much attention to the language problem/issue in their studies. For example, Paul Ekman (1994: 270), one of the most representative psychologists of emotions, underestimates the important issue of words in the study of emotion by claiming that “emotion terms can be thought of as a kind of shorthand, an abbreviated way to refer to a package of events and processes that comprise the phenomenon”. In his studies in the last few decades, Ekman defends the position that it is not necessary to pay a great deal of attention to the linguistic problems in the study of emotion. Consider the following comments by Ekman (1994):

Words are superb for describing actions, direction, locations, thoughts, and so on, but emotions are hard to capture with words, particularly with single emotion terms. (p. 279)
We never claimed that facial expression evolved to represent specific verbal labels. Nor did we say that the meaning of an expression is limited to or best captured by a specific, single word. We used emotion labels for a very specific purpose: to demonstrate that despite all of the problems associated with labelling the emotion shown in a facial expression, subjects would do better than chance in this task. (p. 270)

Ekman (1994: 282) tries to justify his lack of interest in language as follows: “I have not been primarily interested in emotion words but in facial expression and more generally in emotion. Emotions words were but one tool we used to understand expression, in particular to counter the position that reigned before our work that facial expression is socially learned and completely culture specific”. In addition, Ekman & Davidson (1994: 46), criticizing Shweder who agrees in emphasizing the important function of language in emotion study, state that “the evidence for universality [of emotions] is not limited to words, but includes studies of expression that did not involve words as well as studies of physiology, antecedents, and so on”. Similarly, another psychologist Lazarus (1991: 193) affirms: “I am emphasizing that emotions are primarily psychological and not so much linguistic phenomena”.

Plutchik (1994: 15-16) also says that verbal reports are not wholly adequate ways to describe emotions, because, for example: verbal reports of emotions may be deliberate attempts to deceive another person; verbal reports of emotions may be distortion or partial truths for conscious or unconscious reasons; reports of emotions depend on an individual’s particular conditioning history, as well as his or her facility with words; young children or mentally defective people are unable to provide expression to their emotions as non-disabled adult people can do; observers may erroneously assume that no emotion exists because the subject has reported none, etc. Plutchik (p. 16) concludes that “a verbal report of an inner emotional state is only a rough approximation of whatever that states is”.

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1.2. The Importance of the Linguistic Study of Emotions

Thus, psychologists have often dismissed problems/issues on language as matters of connotation, cultural emphasis, etc. They argue that what is truly important is not a question of word meanings, but of real psychological processes. However, in reality we cannot ignore the important function of language in the study of emotion. If we take the psychologists’ task which underestimates the significance of language study, we cannot avoid the many problems.

One major reason why the meaning of emotion words is of fundamental importance to psychology is that, as Fehr and Russell (1984) put it: Part of the psychologists’ job is to understand emotion concepts as people use them in everyday life. In this light, semantic differences between words in the emotion lexicon should be viewed as part of the phenomena to be investigated. Studying words and phrases which people use on a daily basis to describe their emotional experiences is an invaluable key to understanding the folk psychology of the culture which makes use of that language (Fehr and Russell 1984: 483).


Among these scholars, Wierzbicka in particular criticises most psychologists’ failure to recognize the importance of language. She claims that psychologists do not see language as a reflection of thought; in their studies of human emotions, they tend to rely on measures such as reaction time, rate of learn-
ing, developmental sequences, “semantic memory” experiments, ranking of various terms, sorting tasks and so on. Wierzbicka is opposed to such approaches, saying: “When human beings try to study human beings there is no escape from language, and even supposedly nonlinguistic methods themselves are also based on unconscious (and often unjustified) linguistic assumption” (1994a: 432).

In her book Emotions across Languages and Cultures (1999: 28), Wierzbicka strongly argues for the importance of words in discussing emotions. She remarks that “the most important role for linguistics in ‘emotion research’ is to emphasize the ‘non-transparency’ of the language of description and the trap waiting for those who declare that they want to study ‘emotions as such’ and ‘are not interested in language” (p. 28). She states this is because “language stands between researchers and the ‘emotion’ that they wish to investigate and it cannot be ignored” (p. 28). Wierzbicka quotes the psychologist Lazarus (1995), who has criticised her approach:

Wierzbicka suggests that I underestimate the depth of cultural variation in emotion concepts as well as the problem of language (p. 250)

Words have power to influence, yet — as in the Whorfian hypotheses writ large — they cannot override the life conditions that make people sad or angry, which they can sense to some extent without words...

I am suggesting, in effect, that all people experience anger, sadness, and so forth, regardless of what they call it...Words are important, but we must not deify them.
(Lazarus in Wierzbicka 1999: 28)

Wierzbicka criticizes Lazarus for his reluctance to concede that there is a problem in the psychological study of emotion. She rejects Lazarus’ criticisms, arguing that “But by refusing to pay attention to differences between different languages, scholars who take this position end up doing precisely what they wished to avoid, that is, ‘deifying’ some words from their own native language and reifying the concepts encapsulated in them” (Wierzbicka 1999: 28).

Wierzbicka emphasises two equally important reasons why words matter
for the study of emotion: (1) words provide clues to other people's conceptualizations; (2) it is only by studying words that we can go beyond words:

First, words provide clues to other people's conceptualizations. Pace [sic] Harris, Ekman, Lazarus, Pinker, and many others, it is words more than anything, which allow us access to the "emotional universe" of people from another culture. Second, it is only by studying words that we can go beyond words. For example, if we are interested in "emotions" and uninterested in words..., we still have to take enough interest in words to notice that English words such as sadness, enjoyment, or anger are no more than the cultural artefacts of one particular language.
(Wierzbicka 1999: 28-29)

See also Harkins & Wierzbicka (2001) for further reference on the importance of languages in emotion study.

2. The Problem of English language-specific Ethnocentricity:
   The Reliance on the English Language

In the last decade there has been an explosion of psychological literature on emotions, and a number of different schools of thought have emerged. Despite their merits, most of these studies by contemporary psychologists, as Wierzbicka (1992a: 286) points out, "suffer from one important flaw: they seem oblivious to the problem of language. In particular, most of them take English emotion terms for granted and use English words...as if they stood for universal concepts and were reliable tools in the investigation of emotions".

As Van Brakel (1994: 189) points out, there has been a great deal of the problem of language-specific 'ethnocentricity' in the major psychological literature available on emotion study. These studies discuss the existence of basic emotions and "pancultural" facial expressions linked to these emotions. In order to examine this point, consider the following comment by one of the most major psychologists on emotion study, Paul Ekman (1973: 219):

Regardless of language, of whether the culture is Western or Eastern, industrialised or preliterate, these facial expressions are labelled with the same
emotion terms: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise.
[bold emphasis mine]

Commenting on this statement, Wierzbicka (1992a: 287) highlights the fundamental problem of English language-specific ‘ethnocentricity’ by stating that: “Ekman’s reasoning seems almost to imply that the whole world speaks English”. Since most languages of the world don’t have words corresponding in meaning to the English words ‘happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, and surprise’, Ekman’s statements such as the one above must be viewed with scepticism. Thus, “anglo-centricity” in the studies of emotion by major psychologists can be pointed out. Wierzbicka (1995: 228) claims that “From a linguistic point of view, the main point at issue is that the categorisation of emotions encoded in the English lexicon (or any other lexicon) is language-specific, and therefore cannot reflect a universal classificatory scheme”.

Considering this English language-specific ethnocentric problem, we should not categorise basic emotion with words for the English lexicon, such as ‘happy’, ‘sadness’, ‘anger’, ‘fear’, ‘disgust’, or ‘surprise’. In order to illustrate this point precisely, let us take the word “song” in the Ifaluk culture which is considered corresponding to English ‘anger’ (Lutz 1985). If the Ifaluk word “song” differs in meaning from the English word ‘anger’, and is associated with a different range of situations, feelings, and facial expressions, it seems clear that it would be ethnocentric to think of ‘anger’ rather than “song” as a ‘basic human emotion’.

For another example which illustrates the problem of English language-specific ethnocentricity, consider that fact that the word ‘happy’ is chosen for labelling one of so-called ‘basic emotions’ in most major psychological literatures on emotion. In modern English, presumably “happy” is an everyday word compared with its synonymous word “joy”, since “joy” and its derivatives are more literary and stylistically marked. However, we should note that in many other European languages, the closest semantic equivalents of ‘joy’ are much more common in everyday language than the closet semantic equivalents of ‘happy’. For example, if a German psychologist were to draw a list of ‘basic
emotions’ they would probably choose “Freude (roughly ‘joy’)” rather than “Gluck (roughly ‘happy’)”. Therefore, from the European people’s point of view the closest semantic equivalents of “joy”, rather than “happy”, would be chosen if they would have a word for labelling one of ‘basic emotions’ (cf. Wierzbicka 1992a: 298).

Furthermore, some languages do not have words which correspond exactly to the so-called English ‘basic emotions’ at all. For example, Wierzbicka (1992c: 119; 1999: 25) reports, as a native speaker of Polish, that Polish does not have a word corresponding exactly to the English word “disgust”. Moreover, Wierzbicka says that the linking of the smiling face with the term “enjoyment” (Ekman 1993: 384) is not justified, because there is no such category in the Polish lexicon and so she does not think in such terms. Here we should also remark Ekman’s statement; even Ekman (1994: 275) himself reports that “The Dani of West Iran are a culture whose language has no words for most of the emotions”.

Thus, it can be concluded from a linguist’s viewpoint that there are no emotion terms, which can be matched neatly across language and culture boundaries; there are no universal emotion concepts, lexicalised in all the languages of the world. In particular, it is certain that all languages of the world do not have words corresponding to the so-called “basic emotion concepts”: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust.

Wierzbicka (1999: 282–3), while concurring with Ekman’s hypothesis where some thoughts and feelings are attributed to facial gestures in his cross-cultural research, proposes that what people all over the world share is not the emotion concepts which can be labelled as ‘happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust’, but the message of these facial gesture. For example, the facial gesture of raising the corners of the mouth can be interpreted as meaning “I feel something good now”.

Wierzbicka (1999: 286–288) states there are certain cognitive components which appear to be universal as reference points for basic emotions concepts. These components should not be labelled in English specific term like “fear”, “anger”, but should be described as the message which is composed of the
crucial cognitive components as presented below:

“fear-like” emotions: something bad can happen to me
I don’t want this to happen

“anger-like” emotions: I don’t want things like this (to happen)
I want to do something because of this

“shame-like” emotions: people can think something about me
I don’t want this to happen

Linguistic anthropologists such as White and Shweder take a similar position on this issue. They also point out the problem of English language-specific ethnocentricity which widely occurs in emotion study. White (1993: 30, 33) criticises psychological approaches where English terms are regarded primarily as referential labels for universal feeling states or “basic emotions modes”, and remarks that such an approach has “contributed to the relative neglect of cultural modes of emotion and problems of translation” (p. 33). Shweder (1993: 424) also states that none of the English words signify the full and equivalent set of meanings associated with an emotion word in non-English languages.

Shweder (1994: 35) agrees with Wierzbicka’s argument that “there are no basic emotions because emotion concepts (e.g. angry, sad) are not conceptual simples; they are themselves complexes, which are reducible to more elementary or primitive concepts (e.g. feel, bad, want, think)”. Shweder (1994: 33, 35) supports Wierzbicka’s opinion, saying that:

“the whole world does not speak English; that English words such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust encode concepts that are “different from those encoded in emotion terms of different languages”... There are NO emotion terms which can be matched neatly across language and culture boundaries... There are NO universal emotion concepts, lexicalised in all the languages of the world”.

Shweder (1994: 33) declares that “Undoubtedly most anthropologists will
appreciate Wierzbicka's sensitivity to the all too often glossed over problem of translation”.

Thus, unlike social psychologists who tend to regard the problem of translation as a mere methodological nuisance – something to be ignored so that they can move on to implementing familiar research techniques, anthropologists, not surprisingly, tend to be relatively more sensitive than most psychologists to the possibility of deep-rooted conceptual differences between languages and cultures.

3. Problems of Translation and Definition in Currently Available Dictionaries

In this section, we will discuss the difficulty of defining emotion words/expressions or translating them from one language to another, for instance, taking a particular Japanese culture-specific word “setsunai” as an example. Defining emotion words/expressions or translating these in one language to another language presents various kinds of issues which need to be examined closely. For example, Diaz (1992 : 110) comments on the ‘translation problem’ by saying that for Humboldt, “translating means being able to translate the language as well as the character or ‘spirit’ of speakers. In that way, truth in translation means being true not only to the form, but to the whole culturally determined content of the text being translated”.

It is said that there is not a good English translation for the Japanese-specific emotion word “setsunai” (cf. Yamada 1993; Furuuchi 1996). One of the current biggest Japanese–English Dictionary, Kenkyusha's New Japanese–English Dictionary (Koo 1993; hereafter KNJED) lists for the meaning of “setsunai” : (1) oppressive, suffocating; (2) painful, trying, distressing. However, these English words give very little insight into the concept of “setsunai”, which is crucial and commonly used in Japanese culture. These words are usually offered as approximate glosses, and not as exact equivalents. By looking at the list of these English words, we cannot grasp the exact meaning of a “setsunai” feeling.6

In Nakamura’s dictionary of emotion terms, Kanjoo Hyoogen Jiten (1993), the author does not give a definition of the meaning of each emotion term.
Instead, he provides a citation of several sentences including the emotion word for each emotion term. Surely we could get some idea about how, and in what situation, these words are used, from the citations? If the quotations are sufficient, is the definition of an emotion word unnecessary? In answer to this question, it is worthwhile to examine Wierzbicka’s (1987: 19) argument for ‘the importance of a definition’. She says that a method of only providing citations, including an emotion term, “puts the whole burden of analysis on the reader’s shoulders (since the reader has to deduce the meaning from the quotations)

Citations are crucial in a dictionary — not only as illustrations of the way a word is used but also as a standard against which a definition must be assessed, and as a crucial test of its validity. They can never replace a definition, but they play an essential role in validating it. (p. 19)

[bold emphasis mine]

For the translation of a word in a work from one language into another, there are choices between “free translation” and “overly literal translation”. Grace (1981: 41) discusses the difficulty of the task of translation as follows:

There is a long history of arguments favouring the use of relatively free or relatively literal approaches to translation. If content form is sacrificed and a very free translation is produced, something of the original point of view is lost. I said above that in saying something in a language we construct a reality; a free translation is likely to involve a change of perspective so that the circumstances of the thing being reputed appear different.

On the other hand, an overly literal translation which ignores idiomatic requirement may actually be incomprehensible or at least misleading, and at best it will have an awkward character.

[bold and underline emphasis mine]

Adopting either approach, we cannot capture the essential, unique nature of an emotion concept of a word, as long as we continue to use vague analogies from the English language and culture specific words, such as ‘oppressive’ or ‘painful’ for the meaning of the Japanese emotion word “setsunai”.

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We need definitions for understanding other cultures and for making ourselves understood. Concepts of emotions can be defined. However, definitions are needed in the form which is free of ethnocentric biases; that is, definitions couched in terms of universal, culture-free, primitive concepts. Otherwise, we cannot capture the invariant of the emotional term, we fall into the fundamental trap of all traditional dictionary definitions: their 'circularity'.

The perennial problem of 'circularity' in a definition in dictionaries can be illustrated here. The following are the definitions of two words 'kind' and 'gentle' which are provided by Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987):

“Kind” — Someone who is kind behaves in a gentle, caring and helpful way towards other people.
“Gentle” — Someone who is gentle is kind, mild, and pleasantly calm in character or behaviour

Here, 'kind' is defined in terms of 'gentle', but conversely, 'gentle' is defined in terms of 'kind'. The reader is sent from one adjective to another, and back, and can never discover the individual meanings of 'kind' or 'gentle'. Defining a word in terms of others that are of equal complexity in the same language ultimately leads to circularity where words are defined by each other. In this 'vicious circle' of definitions, the meaning of a word is not really stated. The meaning of a word is explained by its being replaced with a series of similes. Therefore, the meaning of a word is alluded to, but it is not spelled out explicitly.

There is also another problem. If a dictionary does manage to define a word without relying on such a vicious circle, it is likely to achieve that definition by not even attempting to capture the invariant. Lexicographical devices such as “or”, “etc.” “often”, or “usually” are signs of the lexicographer's failure to find a semantic invariant (cf. Wierzbicka 1992c; Goddard 1998: 30, 34) The use of “or”, for example, reveals a failure to capture the
semantic invariant. Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English (McArthur 1981; hereafter LLCE) defines the word “provoke” as ‘to make (a person or animal) angry or bad tempered’. However, this disjunctive definition with the word “or” does not capture the semantic invariant. These putative options ‘angry’ and ‘bad-tempered’ need to be replaced with one expression which covers both situations. The use of the word ‘etc.’ in a definition is also a problem. For example, for the meaning of the word “badger”, LLCE gives ‘to tease, worry, annoy, etc. (someone) especially again and again with questions, requests, small actions, etc.’. This is just enumerating a number of different possibilities covered by a concept instead of capturing the invariant. The use of the abbreviation “etc.” specifically includes variations, so any definition incorporating “etc.” could potentially apply to the definition of words other than “badger”. In order to capture the semantic invariant, the definition needs to be minimal (not too broad, not redundant, not using elegant variation), but sufficient. Moreover, “usually” cannot be used in defining a word. For the word ‘trick’, LLCE gives “to make (someone) believe what is not true, usually in order to get something”. Yet the word “usually” cannot be used in defining the word ‘trick’, because “usually” means only ‘in most cases’ and not ‘always’. In order to capture the semantic invariant, we need to state invariant definitions which cover all situations of the word. For similar reasons, the word “often” cannot be used for the definition of a word.

Thus, so far there have not been any dictionaries or texts available which successfully provide the appropriate, invariant definition for the meaning of the emotion word/expression, such as the meaning of a unique Japanese emotion word “setsunai”. Nobody has been able to capture the exact meaning of this word. However, the NSM method aims at proving that defining the unique nature of the concept of any culture-specific words/expressions, such as ‘setsunai’, is possible if we use a particularly rigorous linguistic semantic method (cf. Hasada 2000).
4. Using the "Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)" Method for Defining the Meaning

In this section, we will show that the "NSM" semantic methodology developed by Anna Wierzbicka and her colleagues is effective for defining the meaning of words/expressions. Wierzbicka, in her many articles and books, has pointed out that other models used by linguistic psychologists, linguistic anthropologists, and other linguists do not successfully define the meaning of words/expressions, since their methods include words which are not culturally or linguistically universal. For example, while there are many scholars such as Averill, Hochschild, Kövecses, Myers, Ortony et al, as seen in table 1 in Van Brakel (1994 : 181), who have defined the meaning of the 'angry'-like emotion word, their definitions lead to a problem, the problem of English language specific ethnocentricity. All of their ‘definitions’ include non-universal English language-specific words/expressions whose meaning is too complex, obscure, and unintelligible. Defining the meaning of the full conceptual content of indigenous terms or expressions will not be successful without a sound methodology for lexical semantic analysis.

4.1. Universal Semantic Primitives

If we want to define concepts of emotions in a way which would be truly explanatory, we must define them in terms of words which are intuitively understandable (non-technical) and that are not themselves names of specific emotions or emotional states. Wierzbicka claims (1992c : 138), that what is ‘untranslatable’ on the level of words is nonetheless translatable on the level of “universal semantic primitives” and near-primitives. Universal semantic primitives consist of a set of words which are considered to be available in all languages of the world.

History of the Search for "Semantic Primitives"

Here, I will outline the history of the search for the "semantic primitives".
<Ancient times – the 17th century>

The beginning of the search for semantic primes goes back more than two millennia, to the era of Aristotle. Aristotle said:

What matters is...semantically more basic and thus inherently more intelligible. (....) The “absolute order of understanding” depends on semantic complexity. For example, one cannot understand the concepts of ‘promise’ or ‘denounce’ without first understanding the concept of ‘say’. (....) (In Wierzbicka 1972 : 10)

The search for the universal, non-arbitrary, “elements of human thought” was greatly advanced, by seventeenth-century thinkers; Descartes, Pascal, Arnauld, Leibniz, and Locke.

First of all, for René Descartes (1596-1650) wanted to establish which concepts are so clear that they cannot be understood better than by themselves; and to explain everything else in terms of these. He states:

Further I declare that there are certain things which we render more obscure by trying to define them, because they are very simple and clear, we cannot know and perceive them better than by themselves. (Descartes 1970/1931 : 324)

Similarly, another philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) comments as follows:

It is clear that there are words which cannot be defined; and if nature hadn’t provided for this by giving all people the same idea all our expressions would be obscure. (Pascal 1667/1954 : 580)

Pascal claims that without a set of “primitives” whose meanings cannot be defined further, all descriptions of meaning are actually or potentially ‘circular’.

Likewise, consider the following comment by Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) who also suggested the existence of semantic primitives:
Our first observation is that no attempt should be made to define all words; such an attempt would be useless, even impossible, to achieve. To define a word which already expresses a distinct idea unambiguously would be useless: for the goal of definition....
(Arnauld 1662/1964 : 86-7)

The following is a quotation from another outstanding 17th (and 18th) century philosopher, G. W. Leibniz (1646-1716), who claims that complex and obscure meanings can be effectively defined (explicated) in terms of simple and self explanatory primitive words:

If nothing could be comprehended in itself nothing at all could ever be comprehended. Because"what can only be comprehended via something else can be comprehended only to the extent to which that other thing can be comprehended, and so on; accordingly, we can say that we have understood something only when we have broken it down into parts which can be understood in themselves.
(Leibniz 1903/1961 : 430)

Lastly, examine John Locke's (1612-1704) statement which also supports (albeit from a different perspective) the existence of elementary semantic words whose meaning cannot be defined any further:

The Names of Simple Ideas are not capable of any Definition; the Names of all complex Ideas are. It has not, that I know, been yet observed by anybody, what words are, and what are not, capable of being defined. (....) This being premised, I say, that the Names of simple Ideas, and those only, are incapable of being defined. (Locke 1772 ; 25-26)

Commenting on this statement by Locke, Wierzbicka (1972 : 7) argues that the determination of what words are, and what are not capable of being defined should be the central task of contemporary semantics.

〈 The Modern stream of the search for semantic primitives 〉

The first modern linguist to have turned his attention to the search for “elementary semantic units” appears to have been Edward Sapir (1884-1939),
in a series of works written in the early 1930s (e.g. Sapir 1930).

In the 1950s and 1960s, a deepening and greater articulation was brought to the purely theoretical aspects of the search for semantic primitives through the work of such people as Louis Hjelmslev (1899–1965), in Denmark, and his student Holger Sørensen. Hjelmslev proposed the singling out of elementary constituents which he called “figurate”, at two levels - content and expression.

In the 1960s, the idea of “componential analysis” became very popular in linguistic study. In 1963 Katz and Fodor made an attempt to graft this kind of analysis onto the stock of generative grammar. In the sixties, most linguists followed Katz and Fodor in being interested only in the theoretical aspects of semantics. It was left to Manfred Bierwisch to produce the first concrete semantic analyses of the universal and non-arbitrary character of semantic primitives. In his article “Semantic Universals of German Adjectives”, Bierwisch (1967: 3) states: “A semantic analysis of a lexical item is finished only if it leads to a combination of basic elements that are true candidates for the universal set of markers”.

In the 1970s, when “componential semantic analysis” was still popular, the works of Jurij Apresjan in Moscow occupied a special place. Apresjan saw semantic analysis as being a kind of translation from natural into “semantic” language, the “words” of which are what he calls “elementary meanings” (Wierzbicka 1972: 10). Another original approach to the problem of basic semantic units was provided by the joint work of Žolkovskij and Mel’čuk on “elementary particles of meaning”.

All the concepts presented by those scholars listed above (Sapir, Hjelmslev, Bierwisch, Mel’čuk and Žolkovskij, and Apresjan) are undoubtedly some kind of linguistic equivalents to Leibniz’s ideas. However, they did not aim at finding the “elementary semantic units in the form of indefinables” whose meanings are maximally simple and clear.

The first person to have put forward a concrete and elaborated program for the search for universal semantic elements was Polish linguist Andrzej Bogusławski in the years 1965-6. The central proposition in Bogusławski’s program is that non-arbitrary and universal “primitive elements” of content
are to be found in the elements of maximally articulated expressions, that is
to say in their indefinable sub-units (Wierzbicka 1972: 12). Wierzbicka (1996:
13) states that her interest in the pursuit of non-arbitrary “semantic primal-
tives” was triggered by a lecture on this subject given at Warsaw University
by Andrzej Bogusławski in 1965. The “golden dream” of the seventeenth-
century thinkers, such as Descartes, Pascal, Arnauld, Leibniz, and Locke,
which couldn’t be realized within the framework of philosophy and which was
therefore generally abandoned as an unattainable Utopia, could be realised,
Bogusławski maintained, if it was approached from a linguistic rather than
from a purely philosophical point of view.¹⁰

In 1972 Wierzbicka published her first book Semantic Primitives which
attempted to take up and partially carry through the program proposed by
Andrzej Bogusławski. Her objective was to search for those expressions in
natural language which themselves are impossible to satisfactorily explicate,
but in terms of which other expressions (utterances) can be explicated. The
list of indefinables should contain only those elements which are really
absolutely essential, while being at the same time adequate to explicate all
utterances.

The Candidates for Semantic Primitives

The size of the lexicon of the semantic primitives has greatly increased
since Wierzbicka produced her first book in 1972. In 1996, Wierzbicka publi-
shed a book Semantics: Primes and Universals (1996) which is based on
linguistic research undertaken (by colleagues and Wierzbicka herself) over
three decades. This book proposes a hypothetical table of fundamental human
concepts; a table of “lexical universals”. If we really want to study, in a
rigorous way, correlations between forms and meanings, we need “semantic
primitives (or semantic primes)” included in that table whose efficacy has
been demonstrated for a quarter of a century.

When we compare a list of semantic primitives proposed in 1972 with that
of the most up-date one in 2001, while there were only 14 hypothetical
semantic primitives in 1972, currently the lexicon of the NSM metalanguage
numbers about 60–65 elements. Some of the primitives which were proposed in 1972, such as “imagine”, “world”, “become”, were omitted from the list, and many words which were not considered as ‘primitives’ in 1972, such as “if”, “time”, “more”, “very”, “the same”, “can”, “good”, “bad”, or “all” are now included in the current list. Yet the current list of semantic primitives is still not final. It is thought that it may well prove necessary to revise it in some particulars which corresponds to reality in all languages available in the world.

The latest set of semantic primitives in English is as follows:¹¹

**TABLE OF CONCEPTUAL PRIMITIVES AND LEXICAL UNIVERSALS [ENGLISH VERSION]**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substantives</th>
<th>I, YOU, SOMEONE(PERSON), SOMETHING(THING) PEOPLE/PERSN, BODY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determiners</td>
<td>THIS, THE SAME, OTHER/ELSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantifiers</td>
<td>ONE, TWO, SOME, MANY/MUCH, ALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Predicates</td>
<td>THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>SAY, WORD, TRUE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions, event, movements</td>
<td>DO, HAPPEN, MOVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence and possession</td>
<td>THERE IS, HAVE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life and Death</td>
<td>LIVE, DIE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical concepts</td>
<td>NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>WHEN(TIME), NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>WHERE(PLACE), HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR; ON (ONE) SIDE, INSIDE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensifier, Augmentor</td>
<td>VERY, MORE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxonomy, partonomy</td>
<td>KIND OF, PART OF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similarity</td>
<td>LIKE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As this paper is written in English, the English version of the set of these primitives is used, but cross-linguistic studies have shown that a similar set of basic terms can be identified in each language.¹²

Until recently, this assumption that all languages have a set of semantic primitives was based largely on theoretical considerations rather than on
empirical studies of different languages of the world. This situation, however, has changed with the publication of Semantic and Lexical Universals edited by Goddard and Wierzbicka (1994). This book is a collection of systematic studies across a wide range of languages from different language families on different continents. This first large-scale attempt to test hypothetical conceptual primitives cross-linguistically did not answer all the questions, but the studies included in the volume did strongly support the hypothesized set of primitives.

As for combinations of semantic universal primitives, or universally available grammatical constructions, a workshop on ‘Universal Grammatical Constructions’ was held in 1994 at the Australian National University. This problem has been in focus in recent research, and is the subject of a forthcoming collective volume Meaning and Illustrated Grammar (Goddard and Wierzbicka, eds./ Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company).

A proposed set of semantic primitives must be proved by tests as to whether they are available in a range of languages in the world. The presence or absence of a word for a universally given concept cannot be established by a simple or easy method. Empirical and pains-takingly accurate analysis from the perspective of various (ideally all) languages in the world is required in order to identify which words are “semantic primitives”.

Identifying exponents of semantic primes across languages is complicated by various factors, especially by differences in secondary meanings (i.e. polysemic meanings). To give an instance of the polysemy, cross-linguistic investigations show that the pattern of polysemy which links “feel” with body part terms such as “liver”, “insides”, or “stomach” is very common (Goddard 1994; Wierzbicka 1999: 277). For example, Heelas (1986: 234) observes that the Javanese of Ponorogo employ liver talk; ’it is the liver (ati) that appears in idiomatic expressions indicating emotion. Levy (1984a: 221) also finds that in the Tahitian language the feelings can arise spontaneously in the “intestines”.

For another example, Harré (1983: 125) shows that the Maori vocabulary has ‘heart-emotion’, ‘bowel-emotion’, and ‘stomach-emotion’. Goddard & Wierzbicka (1994) states that “it appears that in some such cases, the true
exponent of FEEL has been overlooked (or treated as metaphorical) on account of its being identical with a concrete meaning such as 'belly' or 'intensities'.

A single word may have two related meanings, one indefinable and the other definable. For example, Goddard & Wierzbicka (1994: 32) says that "English feel is polysemous between its semantically primitive sense (I feel good/bad), its action sense (I felt her pulse) and its cognitive sense (I feel it is wrong). The assertions about "polysemy" of this kind are not purely impressionistic. Consider the following comments on "polysemy" by Goddard and Wierzbicka (1994: 35):

It goes without saying that polysemy must never be postulated lightly, and that it has always to be justified on language-internal grounds: but to reject polysemy in a dogmatic and a priori fashion is just as foolish as to postulate it without justification. Polysemy is a fact of life, and basic, everyday words are particularly likely to be polysemous (cf. Zipf 1949) We may therefore expect that exponents of semantically primitive meanings will frequently be polysemous.

For further discussion on the problem of polysemy, see also Goddard (1994: 23).

4.2. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) Method

The indefinable "semantic primes" are universal elements in terms of which all complex meaning can be coherently represented. If we want to define concepts behind any term or expression in a way which would be truly explanatory, we must define them in terms of a set of semantic primitive words which are maximally clear, maximally self-explanatory, maximally simple, and maximally universal. Such a set of semantic metalanguages are independent of any particular language or culture.

The "Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM)" method, which is based on these semantic primitives, has been developed over many years of cross-linguistic semantic research (e.g. Wierzbicka 1996, 1999; Goddard & Wierz-
bicka 1994; Goddard 1998). The NSM method uses these semantic primitives which are supposed to be possessed equally by all languages in the world. NSM aims at capturing the semantic invariant of a word/expression and representing it by means of a paraphrase composed of these semantic primitives. By using this approach the differences in the use of two or more words or expressions can be reflected and accounted for in the differences between their explications. Wierzbicka (1992c: 135) states:

...no matter how ‘unique’ and ‘untranslatable’ an emotion item is, it can be translated on the level of semantic explication in a natural semantic metalanguage and...explications of this kind make possible that “translation of emotions words” which seems otherwise impossible to achieve.

The approach of NSM method makes it possible for the definition of words/expressions to capture their semantic invariant. If certain terms or expressions are analysed into universal, language-independent, self-explanatory NSM elements, such as ‘want’, ‘feel’, ‘think’, ‘say’, ‘good’, or ‘bad’, there is no threat of overt or covert circularity. Through the use of this NSM framework, the analysis of certain expressions can be free from circularity and all concepts encoded in those expressions can be clearly and rigorously portrayed.

NSM method, which consists of these semantic primitives and also relies exclusively on simple and universal grammatical constructions, allows us to explore human emotions from a universal, language-independent perspective. Moreover, by using the framework of NSM, words/expressions across cultures can be also represented and compared with those in different cultures from a universal perspective. For example, let us compare the meaning of English ‘angry’ and that of Ilongot ‘liget’, which is often glossed as “energy, anger, passion” in English (Rosaldo 1980). Wierzbicka (1992c: 141) provides the following definition for each word:

[angry]
X thinks something like this:
this person (Y) did something bad
I don’t want this
I would want to do something bad to this person
because of this, X feels something bad toward Y
because of this, X wants to do something

[liget]
X thinks something like this:
other people can do something
they could think that I can’t do it
I don’t want this
because of this, I want to do something
I can do it
because of this, X feels something
because of this, X wants to do something
when someone feels like this, they can do things
that they can’t do at other times

Although “the categorisation of emotions encoded in the English lexicon (or any other lexicon) is language-specific, and therefore cannot reflect a universal classificatory scheme” (Wierzbicka 1995c: 228), by using NSM, we can explicate the definition of meaning of both English ‘anger’ and Illongot ‘liget’, clarifying the similarity and difference between these two words.

Goddard (2000) states that, with the aid of these semantic primitives, it will be possible to explicate all words and expressions; not only individual words, but also sentences, and to account for all semantic relations existing between different words/expressions. Explication using these semantic primitives are able to capture very subtle differences between the meanings of related emotion terms/expressions, since these explications are readily intelligible. This kind of explication “reveal the hidden structure of the words or expressions and reveal the structural relations linking different words/expressions. Both the similarities and differences of the meanings of different words/expressions can be stated with these primitives” (Goddard 2000). Thus, semantic primitives offer us a tool for investigating the structure of semantic groupings or fields.
5. Prototypical Cognitive Scenario

To construct a form of explication of an emotional concept, we will adopt a framework of "(Prototypical) Cognitive Scenario". The prototypical cognitive scenario aims at representing the state of mind of a hypothetical individual. In this approach, the explication of a certain emotion is stated via a prototypical set of thoughts, this means that one will feel like a person who experiences certain thoughts characteristic of that particular situation (cf. Wierzbicka 1994a: 778, 1996: 180; Harkins & Wierzbicka 1997: 323-4; Goddard 1998: 95).

Wierzbicka has employed this concept from her earliest work on emotions. Wierzbicka takes her cue from a phrase suggesting subtle emotions by means of ingenious hypothetical scenarios. Consider the following passage by Wierzbicka (1999: 12) concerning the English translation of Tolstoy’s novel Anna Karenina:

In literature, feelings are frequently described by means of comparison: the hero felt as a person might feel in the following situation (description follows). (...)

He [Anna’s husband] now felt like a man who on coming home finds his house locked against him. “But perhaps the key can still be found”, though Karenin. (p. 123) (...)

The same mode of description is also often used in everyday discourse, as well as in popular songs and other similar texts.

Goddard (2000) states that references to imaginary situations of this kind, while highly evocative, are essentially individual and don’t have the force of generalisations. In Wierzbicka’s insight the emotion words of ordinary language work in a similar fashion, except that instead of linking feelings with illustrative situations they link them with "cognitive scenarios" involving thoughts and wants. These kinds of cognitive scenarios are used extensively in the NSM approach to emotions.

Wierzbicka (1999: 13) says, “There are many ways of describing to other
people how one feels but most of them can be reduced to two basic modes...: (1) one can tell other people that one “feels good” or that one “feels bad”, and (2) one can tell other people that one feels like a person feels in a certain situation and then identify, in one way or another that “prototypical situation”. All languages have some words for describing feelings based on certain thoughts. The framework of this prototypical cognitive scenario of emotion words/expressions include the following two components:

someone feels something
because this person thinks something

For example, the nature of the feeling of an emotion sentence “Person X was + {emotion word}” can be represented via the following prototypical cognitive framework:

[Person X was + emotion words (e.g. angry/afraid, ashamed/worried, etc.)] ⊳

person X felt something
because X thought something
sometimes a person thinks: [Y]

because of this person feels something
person X felt something like this
because X thought something like this

Ready-made labels for describing emotions/feelings are usually based on the same basic modes as seen above. Thus, emotion expressions can be defined via “prototype”, describing, in very general terms, a kind of situation (or a “scenario”), associated in minds with a recognizable kind of feelings.

Depending on which words or which grammatical constructions are used in a sentence about emotion, the prototypical scenario changes; some words, and some grammatical constructions, present the experiencer’s emotions as caused by a particular thought, or chain of thoughts; others do not imply any particular thoughts [the “cognitive” character (including a component
“sometimes a person thinks”) vs. the “non-cognitive” character (there is no component which refers to thought(s))]. In order to illustrate this point, Wierzbicka (1992a : 290 ; 1992c : 177) provides the following examples:

A: I am sad/depressed/happy/anxious today — I don’t know why.
B: I am disappointed/grateful/disgusted/angry/surprised — I don’t know why.¹⁴

Wierzbicka explains that:

....for some emotion concepts (e.g. for disappointed, grateful, or disgusted) we do need a reference to a particular thought (“X thought something like this”), whereas for others (e.g. for sad, happy, or anxious) we do not — although for the latter, too, we need a reference to a prototypical thought ( “sometimes people think something like this”) In both cases, however, there has to be a reference to a prototypical scenario, which identifies indirectly the emotion in question.
(Wierzbicka 1992a : 291)

Emotion terms like ‘sad/depressed/happy/anxious’ are defined only via a prototypical scenario, where no thoughts are attributed to the experiencer. On the other hand, when one feels ‘disappointed/grateful/disgusted/angry/surprised’, one feels LIKE a person who thinks certain thoughts, although one doesn’t necessarily think these thoughts oneself (cf. Wierzbicka 1999). Wierzbicka (1992a : 291) suggests the following format for the explication of the meaning of emotions words:

X is ‘sad’ (or ‘depressed’, ‘happy’, ‘anxious’)

X feels something
sometimes people think something like this:

X feels like this

X is ‘grateful’ to Y (or ‘disappointed’ in someone/with something, ‘disgusted’ with something, ‘angry’ with someone/about something)
when X thinks of Y, X feels something
sometimes people think something like this:

X thinks something like this
because of this, X feels like this

Conclusion

This paper was started to argue the importance of language in the study of emotion. It was strongly proposed that the “Natural Semantic Metalanguage” method which holds that universal semantic primitives are appropriate for defining the meaning of language. In my works (e.g. Hasada 1994a, 2000, 2001, 2002) I have divided the emotions concepts into groups according to the themes of evaluative components of the “cognitive scenario” which underline the emotion concepts: For instance, (1) “I feel something good towards somebody” (e.g. aisuru, koisuru, setsunai); (2) “something good happens/happened” and “good feelings” (e.g. uki-uki, waku-waku, iso-iso); (3) “something bad will happen” (e.g. kowai, osoroshii, zoQ-to-suru); (4) “I don’t want things like this to happen” (e.g. kuyashii, mukatsuku atama-ni-kuru); (5) “thinking about ourselves” (e.g. hazukashii, terekusai / tsurai, wabisshii); and (6) “thinking about someone else” (e.g. kawaiisoo, aware, ki-no-doku).

I would like to show how the NSM method works excellently for defining the meaning of these cultural specific words/expressions by giving concrete examples and discussions at the next opportunity.

Notes:

1. Lutz (1986: 267) observes that in societies such as those of the Oceanic peoples including Samoans, Pintupi Aboriginals, and Ara speakers of the Solomon Islands, emotion words are used for statements about the relationship between a person and an event, rather than as statements about introspection on one’s internal state.

2. Some psychologists such as Russell or Frijda are aware of the issues of language problems in emotion. For example, Russell (1991: 433) says that when emotion words in different languages are translated one-to-one, the translation criteria of success is insufficient because “it can only achieve the best translation, which might not be an exact translation”. The following comment by Frijda et al. (1995: 22) also support Wierzbicka’
s position: “What is shared across languages or cultures, in fact, is not a set of emotions that each precisely matches any of the emotion words in any language. Rather, it is a set of general emotional structures or structural ranges that form the fabric of major emotional phenomena”.

3. However, some doubts have been raised about some aspects of his methodology and conclusions by psychologists like Russell (1994, 1995) or Fridlund (1994).

4. Ortony and Turner (1990) also claim that it is not emotions but some components (or subcomponents) of emotions which are universally linked with certain facial expressions, or rather with some components of facial expressions. However, Wierzbicka (1993b: 2) claims that, while Ortony and Turner’s idea of linking “components of emotions” with “components of facial expressions” is extremely promising, a more rigorous conceptual framework than the one employed in Ortony and Turner’s paper is required, in order to have the most fruitful definition of the meaning of the emotion term/expression.

5. However, researchers in cultural psychology and ethnopsychology (e.g. White and Kirkpatrick 1985; Lutz 1988; Harré 1986) are usually highly sensitive to the difficulties of translation.

6. Even though the English language may not have an equivalent for the Japanese word “setsunai”, the English people still apparently feel and express this emotion in their everyday lives. Wierzbicka (1992c: 21, 123-4) argues that the absence of a word does not prove the absence of the corresponding concept, or indicate on inability to form the concept, while the presence proves the presence of the concept, and, moreover, its salience in a given culture.

7. Wierzbicka (1996: 10) maintains that Aristotle was right, and that despite all the interpersonal variation in the acquisition of meaning, there is also an “absolute order of understanding”, based on inherent semantic relations among words.

8. He was born in Moscow, and now lives in the U.S.A.

9. He was born in Moscow, and now lives in Canada.


11. In order to avoid a long and unwieldy explication, I have used an expanded list of NSM, including words which, although not universal, recur widely in the languages of the world as separate lexical items.

12. Since this set of semantic primitives should be universally available in all language, a set of Japanese primitives should be obtainable and describable by means of a Japanese set of NSM. However, this requires a more lengthy study than can be accommodated in this paper.

Although several studies of the Japanese version of a set of NSM have been done so far (e.g. Oonishi 1994 for a lexical universal Japanese set of NSM; Hasada 1994b for universal grammatical constructions available in Japanese NSM; Oonishi 1997 for mental predicates; Hasada 1997b for the conditional construction; Hasada 2000 for
further study on mental predicates as well as their combination with ‘attributive’ primitives), further careful and insightful study will be required. This can be realized only when each Japanese primitive lexical and grammatical construction corresponding to those of the English version are investigated with careful experimentation.

13. For other similar phenomena where ‘feeling’ is associated with the “intestines”, see: Goddard (p.239) about the Australian language Yankunytjatjara (ljni “belly”); Evans (p. 212) about another Australian language, Kayardild (bardaka “stomach/feeling”); Hale (p.269) about the Misumalpan languages of Nicaragua; and Hill (p. 317) about the Australian language Longgu. (all in Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994)

14. Similarly, in Japanese, as Nishio (1972 : 31) points out, while predicates such as “suki (nom.adj.: like)”, “kirai (nom.adj.: ‘dislike’)”, “hoshii (adj.: ‘want’)”, “urayamashii (adj.: ‘be jealous of’)”, “nikui (adj.: ‘hate’)”, “natsukashii (adj.: ‘have a desire to go back/see again’)”, necessarily take the ‘stimulus object’ complement, as in:

Watashi wa **kare ga** suki/kirai/hoshii/urayamashii, etc.

I TOP he SUB ‘like/dislike/want/feel jealous’

(I ‘like/dislike/want/feel jealous of’ him.)

Adjectives like “sabishii (‘lonely’)”, “yuuutsu da (‘be depressed’), “tanoshii (‘happy’), “iya da (‘unpleasant’)”, do not necessarily require the ‘stimulus/object’ complement, as they can represent obscure feelings which are not caused by, nor directed toward any specific object. Thus, we could say:

Watashi wa **nazeka** sabishii/yuuutsu da/tanoshii/iya da.

I TOP somehow ‘lonely/depressed/happy/unpleasant’

(I feel ‘lonely/depressed/happy/unpleasant’, I don’t know why.)

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語彙・詞性定義のための意味論 Natural Semantic Metalanguage 法：
感情研究への言語学的アプローチ

HASADA, Rie
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本論では、理論言語学における意味論研究の中で Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) 法を他の分野、方法論と比較して、その優れた点を端的に位置付けている。NSM 法は、世界各国の言語に普遍的にみられる語彙と構文のみで意味の記述をするというものである。この NSM 方法論、そして NSM に使われる語彙、構文というものは、オーストラリア国立大学教授のアダムス維ツィック博士を中心に、世界各国の学者達によって、彼等の記述する様々な言語（例：ヨーロッパ諸語、アジア諸語、アフリカ諸語など）の分析において日々研鑚されつくされている。この方法論は、語彙だけでなく、統語論、また語用論的側面の意味の定義などにも広く使われている。ここでは主に、感情表現の研究においてこの方法論がいかなるメリットを持ちうるかを論じている。

ヴィルツィック博士による NSM 法の著書は、海外のメジャーな出版社から単独の単行本だけでも14冊ほど出版され、NSM 法は、海外では著名であるが、日本では翻訳書が一冊もないためか、それほど広まっていない。日本語の翻訳書が未だないのは、この方法論が翻訳にまつわる諸問題に非常に敏感であり、原書を他言語へ正確に翻訳するプロセスがかなり困難であるからである。また、NSM 法で使われる65あまりの「世界的に普遍とされる」語彙、及びそれらを組み合わせた構文の日本語ヴァージョンの判定は慎重に研究してからでないと判定できないという事実も他言語への翻訳を困難にしている原因の一つである。

この論文では、この NSM 法を紹介し、他の意見を持つ学者の方法論と比較・検討しながらその特徴を筆者の視点から考察したものである。

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