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Is KNOW a semantic universal? *Shiru*, *wakaru* and Japanese ethno-epistemology¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the debated question of the universality of 'know' as a concept available to speakers of all languages. On the view of Natural Semantic Metalanguage researchers, all languages have a lexical exponent for the concept expressed in English by the word *know*. Epistemologist Mizumoto (in press) has suggested that Japanese is a counter-example, because in this language two verbs, *shiru* and *wakaru*, are used in propositional knowledge attributions and neither is, he claims, exactly equivalent to *know*. Drawing on linguistic evidence from a corpus of Japanese and from Japanese contemporary literature, this paper shows that *shiru* corresponds exactly in meaning to the English *know* and is the only Japanese exponent of the universal semantic prime KNOW. An NSM semantic explication of *wakaru* phrased in both English and Japanese is presented to show that *wakaru* is a complex concept which can be explicated via *shiru*, but not vice-versa.

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1. Introduction

The investigation of “knowledge” is a common objective of epistemology and linguistics. Epistemologists involved in the so-called “analytic project” (cf. Pritchard, 2009) study the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing something relying on epistemic intuitions, i.e. on subjective beliefs. Linguists study the words which people use to talk about what they know and the different attitudes to claiming “knowledge” in different linguacultures.² Although the two disciplines investigate ways of knowing from different perspectives, a common object of enquiry is whether or not “knowledge” is conceived and expressed in the same way in different languages and cultures.

The universality of the concept ‘know’ has been thoroughly tested over decades of cross-linguistic empirical research by the linguists who adopt the methodology of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (henceforth NSM, next section). In all sampled languages, a lexical exponent for the concept expressed in English with the word *know* has been identified. Recently,

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¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the International Ethno-Epistemology Conference in Kanazawa, Japan, June 4th 2016.

² See Wierzbicka (2006, 2010) and Asano-Cavanagh (2016) for a discussion of “epistemic caution” in English and Japanese.

the universality thesis has been challenged by epistemologist Mizumoto (in press, Section 3), who has argued that Japanese is a counter-example, because in this language two verbs are used in propositional knowledge attributions: *shiru* (知る), typically translated in English as ‘know’, and *wakaru* (わかる) translated as either ‘know’ or ‘understand’. Mizumoto claims that neither of these two verbs corresponds exactly in meaning to the English *know*, and therefore that there is no universal concept ‘know’ as NSM researchers contend. The case of *shiru* and *wakaru* is discussed in this paper with a two-fold aim: (i) to show that there is a Japanese lexical exponent for the prime KNOW , which is *shiru*; (ii) to show that *shiru* and *wakaru* are different in meaning and that *wakaru* cannot be a semantic prime, by definition a simple indefinable concept, because its meaning is complex and can be explicated via *shiru*, whereas it is not possible to explicate *shiru* via *wakaru* or in any other way.

To begin with, the general characteristics of NSM will be introduced in Section 2, with an emphasis on the prime KNOW and its relation to the English word *knowledge*. In Section 3, the study conducted by Mizumoto on numerous epistemological cases involving the choice between *shitte-iru* and *wakatte-iru* (the non-past, imperfective forms of *shiru* and *wakaru*, see Section 4.1.1) is critically examined. In order to question Mizumoto’s claim that neither *shiru* nor *wakaru* is exactly equivalent in meaning to the English *know*, a semantic analysis of *shiru* and *wakaru* is proposed in Section 4. Also discussed in this section are the semantic differences between *shiru* and *wakaru* and the English *know*. Section 5 of the paper is dedicated to the differences in meaning between the Japanese *wakarimasen* (the non-past, “polite” form of *wakaru*, roughly, ‘I don’t know’/‘I don’t understand’) and the English *I don’t understand* to show that *wakaru* is not exactly equivalent to *understand* either. The proposed semantic explication for *wakaru* is phrased in both English and Japanese exponents of the NSM primes to make the explication accessible to both speakers of Japanese and non-Japanese speakers.

2. The universality of KNOW from the perspective of cross-linguistic semantics

In this section two points are discussed separately: (i) the difference between ‘know’ and ‘knowledge’; (ii) the semantic prime KNOW as conceived in the NSM framework.

2.1. Anna Wierzbicka on “knowledge” and the use of Anglocentric labels in epistemology

In her paper ‘ I KNOW : a human universal’ (in press), Anna Wierzbicka discusses the question of a “universal folk epistemology”, i.e. whether or not there is a conceptualisation of ‘know’ which is independent of linguistic and cultural differences. She argues that *knowledge* is an English-specific word with no exact semantic equivalent in other European languages (let alone in less closely related languages like Japanese), whereas all languages have ways of expressing ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’. For this reason, she writes, ‘ways of knowing’ rather than ‘knowledge’ should be the object of enquiry of epistemologists and linguists interested in testing the universality of the concept ‘know’.

Wierzbicka criticises the use of the English word *knowledge* as a conceptual reference point in epistemology, arguing that “the question of whether or not all cultures have the same ‘knowledge’ concept is not quite the right question”, because there cannot be a ‘universal knowledge’ conceived through the English-specific word *knowledge*:

If the supposed ‘indigenous’ knowledge is described through English words which have no equivalents in indigenous languages, then the outcome does not represent authentic indigenous knowledge but an amalgam of indigenous knowledge and Anglo conceptualization (reflected in English-specific verbalization). By analogy with ‘referential opacity’ we could call this ‘cultural opacity’.

The avoidance of English-specific terminology advocated by Wierzbicka (2014, in press) raises the question of whether or not a culturally-neutral description of different ‘ways of knowing’ is at all possible. The purpose of this paper is to show that a maximally clear and accurate semantic analysis of a non-Anglo conceptualisation of ‘knowing’ (in this case Japanese), made without relying on English-specific terminology, but phrased in simple and cross-translatable words, is possible if the methodology of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage is adopted.

2.2. Characteristics of NSM

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage is a reduced language of sixty-five semantic primes, basic, indefinable concepts intended to represent the conceptual core shared by speakers of all languages. Over decades of cross-linguistic empirical investigation, lexical exponents for the primes have been identified in all sampled languages, although with different realisations in different languages (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1994, 2002, 2014; Goddard, 2011; Wierzbicka, 1996, 2014; Peeters, 2006). In spite of formal differences, the meaning of the primes is the same in all languages, and this makes the mini-lexicon of NSM directly cross-translatable. The primes are presented in their English and Japanese exponents in Table 1.

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