Overcoming Terminological Ethnocentrism

Terminological ethnocentrism is an insidious, and often unrecognized, problem in cultural description. It occurs when words of one language/culture, typically English, are uncritically used to describe deeply cultural meanings of another language/culture, with an inevitable distortion of meaning. Scholars often view the so-called “problem of translation” as intractable, but new research in linguistics suggests a way forward.

A solution is offered by the programme of semantic research led by the distinguished linguist Anna Wierzbicka (1996, 1997). The key idea is that there is a small set of simple, basic meanings (semantic primes) which can be expressed clearly and precisely in all languages, for example:

I, you, someone, something, people, do, happen, say, think, know, want, good, bad, this, other, the same, when/time, where/place, because, if, can, not, like.

Semantic primes offer a way around terminological ethnocentrism while at the same time allowing culture-specific concepts to be explicated with great detail and clarity.

Three Cultural Key Words of Malay

As concrete examples from my own work (Goddard 1996, 1997, 2000, 2001), consider the following explications, phrased solely in semantic primes, for three “untranslatable” cultural key words of Malay (Bahasa Melayu). Of course, explications like these are unfamiliar and may seem peculiar, but unlike most semantic descriptions they are very clear and they can be transposed virtually word-for-word into Malay. To begin with mulu, it has a broad meaning, usually glossed in Malay-English dictionaries as “ashamed”, “shy”, “embarrassed”. One anthropological classic describes it, with a dash of ethnocentrism, as “hypersensitivity to what other people are thinking about one”. It is one of the prime forces for conformism in the Malay kampung (village). Explanation [A] presents mulu as an unpleasant and unwanted feeling due to the thought that other people could be thinking and saying bad things about one. Notice the lack of negative connotations, in contrast to English “ashamed”.

[A]  person-X has (“feels”) mulu = X thinks something like this: people can know something about me people can think something bad about me because of this I don’t want this because of this X wants not to be near people because of all this, X feels something bad

Secondly maruah is variously glossed as “self-esteem”, “dignity”, or “pride”. Explanation [B] presents it as a two-sided concern with the self - to maintain a positive view of oneself, and to maintain a positive profile in the eyes of others. In particular, to avoid being “looked down on” by others. Concern for maruah motivates one to do some things and to avoid others. (Like many culturally important Malay words, maruah originates from Arabic, but its meaning has since shifted somewhat.)

[B]  person-X ("has") maruah = X wants to think good things about him/herself X wants other people to think good things about him/her X doesn’t want people to think bad things about him/her this person is someone below me because of this, X wants to do some things, X doesn’t want to do some other things people think: it is good if a person is like this

Finally, menghormati (the verbal form of hormati) is usually glossed as “to show respect”. One sociologist has described it as “deference that is owed to a social position”. According to [C] the idea is to show someone that you recognize his/her higher standing and that you want to avoid his/her disapproval, and to the end you behave in a deliberately selective way in terms of what you do, what you say, and how you say it. (Malay culture emphasizes linguistic etiquette to a much greater extent than in European cultures, e.g. avoidance of the pronouns alu “I”, and kau and aku “you”, use of various honorific words, and using a refined (balas) speech style.)

[C]  person-X menghormati person-Y = X thinks things like this about Y: Y is someone above me I don’t want Y to think anything bad about me X wants Y to know this because of this X is with Y X does some things, X doesn’t do some other things X says some things, X doesn’t say some other things X says some words, X doesn’t say some other words

Three Malay Cultural Scripts

Semantic primes can also be used to formulate so-called cultural scripts, in place of conventional complex, English-specific descriptors such as “indirect”, “polite” or “collectivist”. The general layout of a cultural script is illustrated in [D]. This is intended to capture characteristic Malay concern for caution and prudent action; cf. everyday phrases such dikir dulu “think first”, dikir panjang “think long”, dikir duak kali “think twice”, etc. and the proverbial saying fak naun siunus, fak habit mari “follow feelings, follow heart diet”. Note that cultural scripts are not intended as a model of how people actually behave, but as a model of what “people think”, i.e. about a kind of interpretative backdrop for social action.

[D]  people think: I don’t want something bad to happen because I do something else because of this, it is good if I think about it before I do anything

The next two scripts show the close links between the culturally preferred communicative style and Malay key words sketched above. They can be compared with the following quotation, which is typical of conventional ethnographic descriptions: “The social value system is predicated on the dignity of the individual and ideally all social behaviour is regulated in such a way as to preserve ones own amour propre and to avoid disturbing the same feelings of dignity and self-esteem in others” (Vreeland et al 1977: 177).

Script [E] spells out the cultural priority placed on verbal caution and prudence, particularly in relation to hurting the feelings of others, cf. phrases such as jaga mulu “mind your mouth”, jaga hati orang “watch over other peoples feelings”, memilihara penasau “look after feelings”. This concern is not purely altruistic, in virtue of the strong cultural theme that people are likely to take to heart an offence against their maruah “dignity” or nama “reputation”, and to retaliate (detandem “revenge, pay-back”) in often subtle and calculated ways. As the saying goes: Rosak badan kerana mulu “The body suffers because of the mouth”.

If I do this, something bad might happen to me because of it

In a short article like this it is impossible to justify these semantic analyses adequately in proper detail or to describe the research process, so I have concentrated on the methodological angle. I hope it is clear that despite its small size the vocabulary of semantic primes offers a promising new medium for linguistic and cultural description, a medium which can improve precision and clarity while at the same time reducing the invisible ethnocentrism which comes from basing the language of description on English alone.

References


Prof. Cliff Goddard is Associate Professor in Linguistics at the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics of the University of New England Armidale, Australia. His academic specialty is linguistics, with an emphasis on meaning.

E-mail: cgoddard@metz.une.edu.au

NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ASIAN STUDIES

NZJAS welcomes submissions from any discipline on Asia-related topics. All manuscripts are refereed and should be submitted in duplicate, double-spaced, and on computer disk or email attachment (Macintosh P.0 in Word). The Journal is published twice a year and subscription information is available to the New Zealand Asian Studies Society (individuals NZN40; institutions NZN560; see www.nzjasa.waikato.ac.nz). Journal submissions should be sent to:

Dr Brian Moloughney
Editor, NZJAS
Department of History
University of Otago
PO Box 56, Dunedin
New Zealand
Email: brian.moloughney@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

For more information on the approach described in this article, readers can consult the “NSM Homepage” at
http://www.une.edu.au/arts/LCL/disciplines/linguistics/nsmpage.htm

“Chewing the West”

Interdisciplinary Workshop on Literature in Indigenous Languages.
See p. 59 in the “On the Agenda” section for more info.