

Anna Wierzbicka: One linguistic approach to emotions

Diana Santos

ILOS

d.s.m.santos@ilos.uio.no

June 2015, day 2



Anna Wierzbicka: presentation

Anna Wierzbicka is Professor in the Department of Linguistics at the Australian National University in Canberra. ... she has lectured extensively in Europe, America and Japan and published twenty books in the fields of linguistics, anthropology and psychology.

Objective facts: born in 1938 in Warsaw, Poland, graduated from Warsaw university and emigrated to Australia in 1972, teaching since 1973 at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra.

- “Sadness” and “anger” in Russian: The non-universality of the so-called “basic human emotions”, 1998
- *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*, 1999
- When cultural scripts clash: Miscommunication in “multicultural Australia”, 2012.



Anna Wierzbicka: what is she most known for

- The proposal of a “Natural Semantic Metalanguage” (NSM) as early as 1972, in her book *Semantic Primitives*.
- Her studies (with colleagues) of Australian indigenous languages, “many years of cross-linguistic investigations”
- Her studies on colour, kinship, culture, moral, religion, typology, bilingualism and **emotions**
- She writes about English, Polish, Russian, German and French as near-native...
- the most relativistic universalist

Her basic claims on “emotions”

- “emotion” is an English-specific cultural word (for example, no counterpart in German or in Russian), as opposed to feelings or FEEL
- one should aim for maximally neutral, maximally culture independent concepts
- There are simple, undefinable terms in natural languages, the ones required by Leibniz, Descartes, etc. One can escape the hermeneutic circle.
- “Lexical exponent” of these concepts can be readily found in every language
- Quotes Geertz for the distinction of “experience-near” and “experience-distant” concepts, which is a cline

Concepts (...) can only be truly useful if they are previously anchored in something more fundamental and more self-explanatory (also to children, and to speakers of other languages) (page 10 of W99)

- Two basic ways
 - feel good/bad
 - feel like
- Words matter!

List of 60+ basic (undefinable) concepts

- FEEL, WANT, THINK, HAPPEN, MOVE, DO, LIVE, DIE, EXIST, HAVE, KNOW, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
- LIKE, VERY, MORE, KIND OF, PART OF
- GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
- PEOPLE, BODY, I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING
- SAY, WORD, TRUE
- Logical, time and space

Examples: *joy*: X felt joy

- 1 X felt something because X thought something
- 2 sometimes a person thinks:
- 3 “something very good is happening
- 4 I want this to be hapening”
- 5 when this person thinks this, this person feels something very good
- 6 X felt something like this
- 7 because X thought something like this

Examples: *happy*: X was happy

- 1 X felt something because X thought something
- 2 sometimes a person thinks:
- 3 “some good things happened to me
- 4 I wanted things like this to happen
- 5 I don't want anything else now”
- 6 when this person thinks this, this person feels something good
- 7 X felt something like this
- 8 because X thought something like this

Examples: *disappointed*: X was disappointed

- 1 X felt something because X thought something
- 2 sometimes a person thinks:
- 3 "I thought that something good would happen
- 4 I felt something good because of this
- 5 I know now: this good thing will not happen"
- 6 when this person thinks this, this person feels something bad
- 7 X felt something like this
- 8 because X thought something like this

Can you translate this into a label?

- 1 X felt something because X thought something
- 2 sometimes a person thinks:
- 3 "I thought that something bad would happen
- 4 I felt something bad because of this
- 5 I know now: this bad thing will not happen"
- 6 when this person thinks this, this person feels something good
- 7 X felt something like this
- 8 because X thought something like this

- Angst as a German concept
- Comparing Polish and Anglo-American emotional norms across languages and cultures
- Omoiyari as a core Japanese value (Travis 1998)
- Miscommunication in Australia

A kind of Japanese empathy

X-wa omoiyar ga aru (X has omoiyari)

- ① X often thinks something like this of people
- ② “I think I can know what this person feels/wants/thinks
- ③ if this person does not say it to me
- ④ I can do good things to this person because of this”
- ⑤ because of this, X does something

Emotional universals: working proposal in 1999

- ① All languages have a word for FEEL
- ② in all languages some feelings can be described as good and some can be described as bad (and possibly others are neutral)
- ③ words comparable with CRY and SMILE [bodily expression of good and bad feelings)
- ④ mouth corners up or down, wrinkled nose are universally connected to good or bad feelings
- ⑤ emotive interjections
- ⑥ “emotion terms” (cognitively based feelings)
- ⑦ feelings related to
 - something bad can happen to me
 - I want to do something
 - people can think something bad about me
- ⑧ described by (a) bodily symptoms, and (b) bodily sensations, and (c) figurative bodily images
- ⑨ alternative grammatical constructions to describe cognitively based feelings



Alternative grammatical constructions

Or, the grammar of “emotions”: different perspectives on feelings available to speakers within one culture.

- English: she was worried / she worried
- Russian: On byl grusten / Emu bylo grustno / On grustil
- Mbula: N-io an-moto / Kuli-n i-moto / Mot-ma-na i-kam yo
- Portuguese: tenho medo / estou com medo / fiquei com medo / assustei-me / apanhei um susto

