

Goddard, C and Wierzbicka, A. (2014). *Words and Meanings: Lexical Semantics across Domains, Languages, and Cultures*. Oxford: OUP

Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka in their book (*Words & Meanings: Lexical Semantics across Domains, Languages, & Cultures*, 2014, Oxford University press) tackle a long-ignored issue in language: the meaning of words. In the first chapter, they provide a history of the study of word meaning in the 20th century. Essentially, the enterprise during this period can be characterized as " 'linguistics without meaning and without words' ". Bloomfield felt that references to meaning, mind, and concepts were unscientific, and that the focus of linguistics should be on behavior and form, not word meaning. Goddard and Wierzbicka note that Chomsky's theory was anti-behavioristic, but nonetheless his notions of universal grammar and autonomous syntax were intensively form focused. The authors then note that linguistics, in attempting to construe itself as a science and as scientific, removed itself from the humanities. Some interest in words was expressed by Ray Jackendoff (1983; 1990; 2010), but only to the extent that the words were relevant to syntactic meaning. Another movement called, formal semantics, emerged, but it was only interested in words expressing logical relationships such as quantifiers and connectives. The authors note that even the cognitive revolution which began in the 1950s was largely divorced from the notions of mind and meaning. The authors, on a positive note, indicate that as we enter the 21st century, this deficiency is being addressed by Russian researchers in Moscow and Montréal and by other researchers exploring the authors' Natural Semantic Metatheory.

The authors argue that "concrete" can be equated with "physical", but that the meaning of "abstract" is less clear. They consider the claims that concrete nouns are those that have physical reference. They point out, however, that nouns such as "structure", "music", and "vision" can

refer to either physical or nonphysical entities. Thus, the distinction between physical and nonphysical reference is not clear-cut. Nonphysical is a problematic category, but as the authors argue, it is absolutely necessary in order to understand the massive symbolic world as well as the unambiguously physical world that has been the focus of science and the source of much of its remarkable success.

They observe that, "English carries with it particular mental ontologies, and given the role of English in the the contemporary world and its close association with science (as a global pursuit), it is particularly important for the language-based status of these ontologies to be recognized and acknowledged. With these broader considerations in mind, we propose here an approach to the semantics of abstract nouns which frees us from circularity, obscurity, and false cross-linguistic equations, and at the same time allows us to explain mental ontologies entrenched in the English language to native speakers of other languages and to unwitting adherents of other mental frameworks" (209).

Goddard and Wierzbicka enhance this history by examining the concrete-abstract distinction in the works of John Locke and Jeremy Bentham. Locke refers to abstract nouns as "mixed modes". He sees abstract nouns as resulting from combining ideas into a word and then treating the constructed notion as an essence that exists independently in the world in spite of the fact it is an entity created by human minds with human language. The essence then tends to become reified as a fact of nature, i.e. unconsciously thought of as a material entity/object. Barrett (2009) has pointed out this problem with respect to the concept, "emotion" and the names of various emotions (e.g., fear, sadness, anger, jealousy etc.). With this comes a tendency to assume that the named entity has a physical existence and can be examined

just as a concrete physical entity (gene, molecule, cell, organ) would be examined.

Goddard and Wierzbicka point out explicitly "that the meaning of a 'complex idea' embedded in an abstract noun is never just a some of a number of simple ideas"(218).

Jeremy Bentham (Ogden, 1951 ['s 1932]'s cited in Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2014, pp. 229-236) termed the concrete-abstract distinction as "real entities-fictions". A real entity was a tangible object and fictions were entities such as obligation, quality, operation, right. Like Locke, he was concerned about the human tendency to reify fictitious entities and to confound them with real things whereas at best they could be considered as verbal realities. But he also recognized that we couldn't really speak about them without some assumption that they are real. Of course, Bentham excluded from "fictions" the contents of stories or fables that we would consider fiction in making the distinction between fiction and nonfiction and literature.

Looking at the question of meaning from a multilingual perspective, Goddard and Wierzbicka point out that the meaning of the English concept "right" is quite different from the French word "droit". In English the word carries the meaning that something "ought to be". "The word *right* [is] unique in its emphasis on what is good and desirable for the individual and what an individual is 'entitled' to" (233). The French word, "droit" refers to an individual's freedom to do anything allowed by law. The authors do this to illustrate the important point that the translation equivalent of an abstract English word in another language like French does not necessarily have the same meaning. They go on to point out that abstract nouns are vague and indeterminate. "It has to be recognized that in the case of sentences with abstract nouns, an explanatory paragraph lays bare the inherent

vagueness and indeterminacy of those sentences due to the semantics of abstract nouns as such" (235). They offer the Natural Semantic Metatheory as a way such abstractions can be given rigorous and stable explications.

Reference

Barrett, L.F. (2009). The future of psychology: Connecting the mind to the brain. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*,4,326-339.