

I. МОВНІ СИСТЕМИ: ПРОБЛЕМИ РОЗВИТКУ ТА ФУНКЦІОНУВАННЯ В ПОЛІЕТНІЧНОМУ І ПОЛІКУЛЬТУРНОМУ ПРОСТОРИ



1.1. АКТУАЛЬНІ ПРОБЛЕМИ СЕМАНТИКИ

UNIVERSALS IN LINGUISTIC SEMANTICS

Volodymyr MANAKIN (Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine)

The paper surveys the state of the art in the field of semantic universals. We examine potential semantic universals in two areas: the lexicon, and semantic “glue” in pragmatics. We predict that the general mechanisms in semantics are universal, but suggest that the precise nature of presuppositions (elements/components) may be subject to cross-linguistic variation.

У статті демонструється стан дослідження проблеми встановлення універсалій в семантиці, зокрема у двох сферах: лексиці та прагматиці. Зроблено припущення про те, що загальний механізм семантичного устрою мов має бути універсальним, проте ймовірні елементи/компоненти семантики є основою міжмовного варіювання.

Introduction

Semantics is concerned with the way natural languages express meanings. Meanings of complex phrases and sentences arise compositionally from the meanings of their parts (down to the smallest meaning-bearing elements: morphemes). The compositional derivation of meanings depends systematically on the syntactic structure of the complex expressions. Further, once an expression is actually used in an actual context, pragmatic mechanisms lead to further enrichment and modification of the grammatically composed meanings. So, when we ask what in the realm of meaning is universal and what is language-particular, we need to look at three areas:

- (1) the inventory of lexical/content morphemes;
- (2) the mechanisms that compose meanings:
 - a. the inventory of functional “glue” morphemes,
 - b. the inventory of composition principles;
- (3) the mechanisms of pragmatics.

One can easily find statements such as this one: “In contrast to phonological and syntactic universals, very little attention has been paid to the study of semantic universals.” [11: 111] and, in the same volume, “Most of the work on universals of human languages has been concentrated on the phonological, morphological, and syntactic properties of languages, with much less attention being devoted to the semantic side of language” [16: 155]. We believe that the reasons for this comparative dearth of work on semantic universals are mostly mundane: semantics in a theoretical and formal vein is a particularly young and understaffed discipline, which has only quite recently started to seriously look at cross-linguistic variation and uniformity.

Before we delve into the composition of meaning, we will address some overarching issues.

1. Sapir/Whorf and Linguistic Relativity

Common culture (what one might call “folk linguistics” or “folk anthropology”) frequently assumes that languages not only differ widely in their semantics but that these differences are correlated with deep differences in the “world view” of the speakers of different languages.

Languages do look quite different from each other on the surface, which makes the leap from noticing that superficial variety to presupposing an underlying variety, even at the level of meanings, rather tempting. This mentality is nicely characterized by Bloom and Keil [5: 364–365]: “[O]n a subjective level, languages are extremely different from one another. A monolingual

speaker of English, for instance, will hear Chinese or Turkish as gibberish — as odd and unfamiliar noise. The phenomenally alien nature of other languages might lead to the impression that there must be profound differences at deeper cognitive levels as well”.

Serious questions of semantics were considered pretty much intractable in early formal linguistics and their treatment was to be delayed until there was a suitable analytical framework in place, which was not expected to happen any time soon, or ever. It wasn't until semantic methods from formal logic began to be applied to natural language in the 1960s that the discipline of formal semantics coalesced. See Partee [12] for a personal perspective on this history. Perhaps not unexpectedly, the new methods were first applied to well-studied languages such as English and German. Pioneering contributions to cross-linguistic semantics are the 1995 volume on cross-linguistic quantification arising out of an NSF-funded collaborative research project, Carlota Smith's work on aspect (Smith [13]), and Maria Bittner's work (see for example Bittner [4]).

However linguistic differences must lead to commensurate differences in other areas of cognition. This impression is magnified by cultural differences that so often correlate with linguistic differences.

Reinforcing the leap from superficial variety to presupposing underlying incommensurability may be a psychobiological tendency to assume that other people and cultures, since they are not like us, must be fundamentally different, not just superficially so. The denial of human universals, unsurprisingly, has a long intellectual history (see Brown [6] for crucial discussion).

Infamously, “Eskimo” speakers are supposed to have at their disposal many different words for snow, which is taken to reflect the fact the “solid phase of water” is of paramount importance for their culture.^{3,4} Other times, the direction of causation might be said to go in the other direction; deep distinctions in the grammar of a language might influence the way speakers of that language look at and think about the world — an idea that is often called the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis, or, less tied to those particular scholars, the hypothesis of Linguistic Relativity (the term given to the idea by Whorf himself). Who knows but it is quite possible that Sapir and Whorf “borrowed” into linguistics the idea and term as well from Einstein, and his special Theory of Relativity.

If Linguistic Relativity is correct, linguists in search of semantic universals may be doomed to failure, tilting against windmills. We do not however believe that the thesis is correct to a degree that would make cross-linguistic semantics impossible. We concur with Bloom and Keil when they say : “We think the intuition here is wrong in two ways: Languages do not really differ as much as people think they do. Our “folk linguistics” is wrong in this regard. And correlation is not causation; the fact that people who speak different languages tend to belong to different cultures does not entail that language has a profound influence on thought. So although there is a strong impression that the language one speaks must influence how one thinks, we think that this impression is more seductive than it is instructive [5: 365].

As we will outline below, the truth as usual is probably somewhere in the middle and only extensive research will establish how much of Linguistic Relativity is correct [1: 25-52]]. All languages have the formal and expressive power to communicate any ideas, beliefs, and desires of their users. From this vast range of possibilities, human communities select what they want to say and how they want to say it. This stance is at its core the same one that explains why the Elizabethans habitually used terms for falconry and we do not, what does Ukrainian “kozak” mean, and why English speaking vacationers at Aspen and Vail find it natural to develop terms like sugar, powder, and granule to amplify their heretofore impoverished means for discussing the state of the snow on the slopes, etc. In the end, it's the thought that counts.

In other words, effability — while a universal property of natural languages — might be formulated in a language-relative way: each language provides the expressive power needed by its speakers, which allows the possibility that different language communities have different needs and thus different languages have different sets of meanings that they can express. We may detect the same weak thesis in the quote from Sapir in the text above. NB: Again, the solid phase of water is mentioned, albeit not referring to Eskimos but to Rocky Mountain skiers. So far we have taken the view that necessary coinage of new vocabulary items and

possibly complex rephrasing are not principled problems for the thesis of translatability. But there are other problems that do raise the possibility that languages sometimes cannot quite convey the same meanings, at least when one considers subtle aspects of meaning.

Challenges to translatability are of course legion in the theory and practice of actual translators; Brown [6] has some illuminating discussion and examples. Let us grab one such example from the cabinet of semantic curiosities. Burushaski, a language spoken in Pakistan, has two relational nouns to denote siblings, much like English sister and brother, except that the morpheme *cho* means “sibling of the same gender” (as the internal argument of the nominal) and *yas* means “sibling of the opposite gender” (from that of the internal argument). So, a male speaker would call his brother *a-cho* “my same sex sibling” and his sister *a-yas* “my opposite sex sibling”, while a female speaker would use *a-cho* to refer to her sister and *a-yas* to her brother. Now, whether John calls Peter my brother or my same-sex sibling doesn’t seem to make a difference at the level of denotational semantics. But as soon as we consider situations where the sex of the speaker is uncertain, the two phrases give rise to different propositions. As Yancey (2000: 10) puts it: “a Burushaski text in which the gender of the speaker has purposefully not been mentioned until the end, at which point the reader discovers that the speaker and her *a-cho* are both female, would not be readily translatable into languages which would force a gender specification. In English one could say sibling, but this would most likely tip off the reader to the surprise at the end”.

In any case, even if we assume such a universal effability/translatability claim to the effect that at the level of core truth-conditions, any meaning expressible in any language is also expressible in all other languages, we need to be aware of the limits to translatability: (1) aspects of meaning like presupposition

and expressive meanings, where languages may in fact differ in effability, and (2) a suspicion that the grammars of particular languages highlight different aspects of reality in ways that might influence certain aspects of the world view of speakers. Let’s remind an idea of Roman Jakobson: “. . . the true difference between languages is not in what may or may not be expressed but in what must or must not be conveyed by the speakers” [10: 491]. We will see that this is indeed pretty much what one finds.

2. Sources of Universality and Variation

In what follows, we will rarely comment on possible sources of a claimed universal. We believe that the state of the art in semantic universals is largely too immature to allow explorations of their sources. But perhaps, a few words on this topic are in order. We assume that the part of the human genetic endowment that has any relevance to semantics is constant throughout the species. Any differences in the semantics of different languages would therefore have to be traced back to accidents of history, environment, and culture. How much in the way of semantic universals we expect to find then correlates with our expectations about how strongly the genetic component, the shared physical environment, the shared biology, shared cultural traits constrain the structure of individual languages. There can be widely varying positions on this question. As we said, methodologically we recommend that universality be the null hypothesis, only rejected case by case after extensive cross-linguistic checking.

Once a universal has been discovered and has held up to cross-linguistic scrutiny, the question arises as to its source. Is the feature universal because it is genetically hardwired or because languages couldn’t fulfill their function otherwise? Giving an answer to this question for a particular universal is not easy, and we will refrain from speculations on this matter in this article. We agree that, in principle, the following typical course of argumentation is reasonable: if for a particular universally attested feature under investigation there is no plausible functional explanation, the feature can reasonably be assumed to be part of the genetically hardwired Universal Grammar (UG). But we do not think that at this point, we have sufficient material to even consider possible functional explanations for given semantic universals.

2.1. Lexical Universals

The idea that different languages have differential access to different parts of reality truly is a widespread meme. The schema “language X has no word for Y” holds endless fascination for many

people. In the same vein, perhaps everyone remembers from their first linguistics course the claim that languages put arbitrary labels on reality and that they can differ quite a bit on how they do that.

There are several lists of proposed universally attested lexical items, for example:

- Swadesh lists, prepared not as claims for universal lexical status, but as reliable tools for wide-scale lexico-statistical and glotto-chronological investigations (see for example in : Swadesh [15];

- (quoted from Immler [9: 39]): rustle, soil, [many animals], [many plants], [parts of the body], sleep, big, small, heavy, light, fast, slow, sick, talk, call, ask, believe, decide, birth, wave, up, down, hunger, life, death, danger, fear, want/will, power/authority, be allowed, be obliged, mother, man, woman, caress, high, deep, warm, cold, air, water, rain/snow, wind, sun, pain, pleasure, we, they, group, drink, shelter, make love;

- the list of “semantic primes” proposed by Wierzbicka [17] and other researchers working in the Natural Semantic Meta-Language (NSM) approach. Immler claims about such lists “we are immediately convinced of the validity of these universals, not only so: we are sure of them — and this without having verified them by empirically looking at all the languages of the world” [9: 39].

We cannot share Immler’s confidence. On the contrary, many of the words in these lists are probably not universal. First, as argued by Goddard [8], a claim about a universal lexical item is interesting only insofar as the correspondences in meaning of that lexical item across languages are reasonably precise. Goddard notes, for instance, that the claim that all languages have words for “black” and “white” [3] is only approximately true, since in languages with only those two color terms, the terms do not mean the same thing as they do in English, Russian, and other European languages. For instance, some African languages have another opposition that sounds funny for us, i.e. ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ colours. Surprising as it may seem to English speakers, ‘water’ is probably not a universal lexical unit. Japanese has two words (mizu and yu) for ‘water’, with yu (often with an honorific prefix o-) being reserved for hot water [14: 51–52]. Mizu cannot be used about hot water. Furthermore, combining the adjective atsui ‘hot’ with mizu sounds unnatural — Suzuki calls it “self-contradictory” — though there is no such restriction in relation to other liquids, e.g., atsui miruku ‘hot milk’ [17: 229]. These facts imply that mizu and yu both have a reference to temperature built into their meanings.

Here’s the (short) list of items that survived Goddard’s scrutiny: 15: *man, woman, child, mother, head, eye, ear, nose, hand, day, kill, make, people, good, bad, big, small, think, know, want, see, hear, say, do, happen, live, die, here, above, below, inside, a long time* [8:57].

There are many others “lists” of semantic primitives. But the question is do they really have any effect for speakers and scholars as well?

Thus, we strongly suggest that it is possible to find the simplest way for discovering semantic universal element using noospheric theory.

All my publications for the past 15 years are permeated with V.I. Vernadsky’s ideas about noosphere, Universal Mind, about language as the level of noosphere, etc. In any case, it carries on the main idea about the miraculous power of the harmonious universe where human language is a unique phenomenon, whose general structure has to reproduce macrocosm and microcosm, all living things on Earth and Space.

In brief, these ideas come down to the assumption that the language at the level of noosphere exists as a cognitive-semantic continuum that is dissolved in the specific languages of the world. The noospheric level as an organizing and unifying force of the planetary human consciousness is the basis for cognitive activity and world conceptualization. The **cognitive-semantic continuum** in its turn is the source of speech activity, a latent model of such activity, thus a possible system-mediator among world languages as a true treasury of general mental meanings of the Universe.

Attempts to represent the cognitive-semantic continuum materially in the direct way are useless. It is a different metaphysical way of our consciousness existence where the key role

belongs to understanding the presence of the mental information field of the Universe that we, linguists, should accept the same way as representatives of other sciences did. By accepting this, a more complicated task will be to provide convincing proof that conceptual and language realities mutually coexist to express this information field. One more reason this task appears to be complicated is that contemporary science still lacks holistic theory about language and consciousness interrelation that makes us use speculative postulates only.

As a possible solution, in the first place we can begin by assuming that the sphere of the human mind including the highest level (noosphere) and linguistic semantics are using common notional units and categories, and this usage is not just a mere formality, it is a true, fundamental coexistence. Secondly, as linguistic clones of mental information quanta we see conceptual language units and their groups that are, according to organization principles and system hierarchy at all levels (at the level of the word – lexico-semantic group – linguistic world images), isomorphic to the general organization of the world, space, and noosphere. It would be logical to recognize semes as the smallest notional units, as unique atoms of the cognitive-semantic continuum. Recognizing semes as elementary units also correlates with the idea of the mutual symmetry, isomorphism between language and world dispensation.

On the one hand, semes function as quarks (in physics, a quark is something that bonds constituents together) in the system of linguistic semantics when notional bridges are built among different language units; on the other hand, these bridges join the language with the cognitive-semantic sphere through the perspective of the planetary or cosmic consciousness. The combinatorics of semes preserves, alters or modifies dramatically any semantics similarly to the chromosome combinatorics at the level of DNA. A good example is a seme analysis of any word meaning in any language.

Brief conclusion:

The ultimate proof that universal regularities exist in the world languages is the task for the new generation of scholars. However, we still hope that it is the way leading to a new understating of the world image [2], thus it will lead to a qualitatively new linguistic paradigm, moreover, to the uttermost mysteries of the Universe where “*God doesn’t play dice*” (Albert Einstein). Finally, this statement is connected with contemporary position of science which Dan Brown formulates in his book “Angels and Demons”: “*Science and religion are not odds. Science is simple too young to understand*”.

REFERENCES

1. Манакин В.Н. Сопоставительная лексикология. – К.: Знання, 2004. – 364 с.
2. Манакин В.М. Мова як енергетичний феномен // Світгляд. – 2008. - №2. – С. 48-51.
3. Berlin, Brent and Paul Kay (1969). Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution. Berkeley: University of California Press.
4. Bittner, Maria (1994). Cross-linguistic semantics. Linguistics and Philosophy 17(1):53– 108, doi:10.1007/BF00985041.
5. Bloom, Paul and Frank C. Keil (2001). Thinking through language. Mind and Language 16(4):351–367, doi:10.1111/1468-0017.00175.
6. Brown, Donald E. (1991). Human Universals. New York: McGraw-Hill.
7. Dediu, Dan and D. Robert Ladd (2007). Linguistic tone is related to the population frequency of the adaptive haplogroups of two brain size genes, ASPM and Microcephalin. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America doi:10.1073/pnas.0610848104.
8. Goddard, Cliff (2001). Lexico-semantic universals: A critical overview. Linguistic Typology 5(1):1–65.
9. Immler, Manfred (1991). Is semantics universal, or isn’t it? On the relation of language, thought and semantic structure. In Zaefferer (1991), 37–59.
10. Jakobson, Roman (1959). Boas’ view of grammatical meaning. In Selected Writings II, 489–496.
11. Mairal, Ricardo and Juana Gil (eds.) (2006). Linguistic Universals. Cambridge University Press.
12. Partee, Barbara H. (2005). Reflections of a formal semanticist as of Feb 2005, URL http://people.umass.edu/partee/docs/BHP_Essay_Feb05.pdf, ms. (longer version of introductory essay in 2004 book).
13. Smith, Carlota (1997). The Parameter of Aspect. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
14. Suzuki, Takao (1978). Japanese and the Japanese: Words in Culture. Tokyo: Kodansha International.
15. Swadesh, Morris (1952). Lexico-statistic dating of prehistoric ethnic contacts: With special reference to north american indians and eskimos. Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 96(4):452–463.
16. van Valin, Robert D. Jr. (2006). Some universals of verb semantics. In Mairal and Gil (2006), 155–178.
17. Wierzbicka, Anna (1996). Semantics: Primes and Universals. Oxford University Press.

ВІДОМОСТІ ПРО АВТОРА

Володимир Манакин – доктор філологічних наук, декан факультету журналістики Запорізького національного університету.

Наукові інтереси: лексична семантика.