

Anna Wierzbicka. **English Speech Act Verbs: A semantic dictionary.** New York: Academic Press. 1987. 397pp.

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Wierzbicka's (hereafter W) book is a foremost contribution to lexicography. The methodology is carefully outlined and the theory upon which it is based is clearly explicated. Further, it builds upon many years of classroom experimentation.¹

According to W, speech act verbs are crucial to a perception of the world. She defines them on the basis of their reduction into the semantic components which convey some illocutionary force.²

The purpose of the book is to provide practical aids for teachers of ESL as well as theoretical insights into the nature of semantic theory.

In consulting a dictionary a user immediately or eventually is frustrated by the circularity of the definitions. W attempts to overcome this dilemma by providing a reductive paraphrase which employs a metavocabulary.

Her language of definition consists of a minimum vocabulary of 185 or so conceptual building blocks. These are used in particular syntactic frames and are said to be relatively free of polysemy and synonymy (p.11). In considering the metalanguage she calculates their inherent intelligibility and their intuitive verifiability (13).

The book is divided up as follows: an introduction which provides the theoretical basis for the methodology; a section which lists the verbs described in the main text of the book, some 37 groups of them, e.g. the CALL group; next each group is designated in terms of the particular verbs within it (e.g. for CALL the verbs are summon, invite, call on, call for, order, book, and reserve), a citation from some literary work showing its use, a definition of its meaning vis-à-vis the metalanguage; finally, there is a discussion of the meanings of the verbs within each group justifying the components stipulated for each verb.

W makes a number of strong claims about the nature of her semantic theory. One is that other studies of speech act verbs in English do not go beyond the

superficial relationship of the particular speech act in question and related ones. Their precise semantic components are not stipulated. This is done in W's study by the use of the metalanguage and the metasyntactic frames.

Elsewhere she has stated (1986a:71n) that speech acts should be comparable between languages and that this can be done on the basis of the universal language of semantic primitives. To the extent that the primitives can be translated from one language to the other is the degree to which the speech acts, for example, are comparable.

In describing the SA verbs there are a number of pragmatic, as well as syntactic, considerations which W proposes. The range of modals and the 'degree' of performativity are two such items. Further, shared syntactic patterns are most likely to reflect shared semantic components (24). The frame:

X Ved Y to do Z would define verbs such as ask, beg and implore, but:

X Ved to Y for Z suggests verbs such as appeal and apply (24).

W admits that she has not been able to fully exploit the syntactic clues but finds them both a heuristic value and justification for some of the semantic formulae (26).

The SA verbs which are outlined in the study are part of a network of interrelated verbs. They contain no hierarchical structure in and of themselves, i.e. there are no hyponyms. Although her grouping of the verbs is partly arbitrary W does attempt to group related verbs so that the different meanings can be compared.

An appendix includes all of the lexicon which is used in the definitions.³

There are a number of items in the metalexicon which could be reduced, e.g. *more bad* instead of *worse*, *do bad* for *wrong*, *not true* for *untrue*, *more long* for *longer*, *not person* instead of *nobody*, *not something* for *nothing*, *all person* for *everyone*, *all thing* for *everything*, and so on.⁴

In the same manner, certain opposites (such as same vs. different, easy vs. difficult, first vs. last, good vs. bad, from vs. to, less vs. more, long vs. short), could be reduced further by the use of primitives such as not.

Overall, the work by W is a contribution to the whole 'science' of lexicography. It includes empirical data which can be tested easily by native speakers of English. The definitions incorporate the semantic components visualised by syntactic frames to support the examples taken from various literary works.

The volume should, because of its contribution on both practical and scholarly grounds, be required reading for anyone interested or involved in the semantic basis of lexicography.

Notes

1. For a more complete background see Wierzbicka 1985a, 1985b, and 1985c. W has applied her methodology to a number of domains, including tautologies (1987), human emotions (1986b), devices in English which convey illocutionary forces (1986a), and the folk names for speech acts and genres (1985). For a review of 1985a see K.Franklin (1987).
2. There is a great volume of literature on speech acts and most of the important items are reviewed in the references I have given on W. In speech act theory utterances have two kinds of meaning, propositional (or locutionary) meaning and illocutionary meaning (also called illocutionary force). It is the latter that W defines in the speech act verbs.
3. Not all of the metalexicon is listed: whom (48) is not given as a variant in the same way that those is listed with that or this with these. Further the convention (...) seems to be a variant of X (e.g. 294).
4. Others might be reduced by using time go for after, time come for before, cause be for become and make think for believe.

References

- Franklin, K.J. 1987. Review of *Lexicography and Conceptual Analysis* by Wierzbicka, *Notes on Linguistics* 39:47-50.
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- _____. 1987. "Boys will be Boys: 'Radical Semantics' vs. 'Radical Pragmatics' ". **Language** 63:95-114.