

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.

Research >
Southeast Asia

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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 *malu*, 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 “hypersensitiveness to what other people are thinking about one”. It is one of the prime forces for conformism in the Malay *kampung* (village). Explication [A] presents *malu* 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 *rasa* (“feels”) *malu* =
X thinks something like this:
people can know something about me
people can think something bad about me because of this
people can say 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*: it is variously glossed as “self-esteem”, “dignity”, or “pride”. Explication [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 *ada* (“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 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 *hormat*) 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 that to this end you behave in a deliberately selective way in terms of what you do, what you say, and how you say it. (Malay culture emphasises linguistic etiquette to a much greater extent than in European cultures, e.g. avoidance of the pronouns *aku* “I”, and *kau* and *awak* “you”, use of various honorific words, and using a refined (*halus*) 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, when 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 *fikir dulu* “think first” (*fikir panjang* “think long”, *fikir dua kali* “think twice”, etc.) and the proverbial saying *Ikut rasa binasa, ikut hati mati* “follow feelings suffer, follow heart die”. 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
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 one’s own amour propre and to avoid disturbing the same feelings of dignity and self-esteem in others” (Vreeland et al 1977: 117).

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

[E] people think:
it is not good if when I say something to someone, this person feels something bad because of this, when I want to say something to someone, it is good to think about it for some time before I say it

[F] people think:
it is not good to say something about someone, if other people might think something bad about that person because of it
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. ◀

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More info >

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