

Natural semantic metalanguage (NSM)

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The motivation for the NSM approach

- The NSM approach is motivated by
 - problems with the usual kinds of definitions
 - **circularity** (cf. previous slides and below)
 - **obscurity**
 - *take* = 'accept / receive possession of'
 - *make* = 'to produce by any action or causative agency'
 - *pepper* = 'a pungent condiment obtained from the dried berries of various plants either whole or ground'
 - *hiccup* = 'involuntary spasm of respiratory organs, with sudden closure of glottis and characteristic sound'
and cf. previous slides
 - **superfluous components and disjunctions**
 - *weapon* = 'an instrument of offensive or defensive combat; something to fight with'
 - *tempt* = 'to persuade or try to persuade (especially into doing something wrong or unwise) by the prospect of pleasure or advantage'
 - *tempt* = 'to try to persuade (especially into doing something bad) by the prospect of something good'

The motivation for the NSM approach

- The NSM approach is motivated by
 - problems with the usual kinds of definitions
 - circularity
 - obscurity
 - superfluous components and disjunctions
 - accuracy
 - too broad vs. too narrow
 - open-ended definitions with "etc.", "esp.", and other wildcards
 - a desire to develop and use a **universal, non-decomposable alphabet of human thought**

NSM analyses: overview

- The semantic analysis of a concept in the NSM approach is a definition referred to as
 - an **explication**
 - a **reductive paraphrase**
- it avoids obscurity and circularity by
 - using only **the simplest possible words/morphemes** in the definiens
 - avoiding words in the definiens that are from the same domain as the definiendum
- strictly speaking, not all words must be semantic primitives, but
 - no term in the definiens must be more complex than the definiendum
 - each term in the definiens must be definable using only the simplest possible words
 - the terms allowed for defining are lexical universals
- test criterion: **total substitutability**

NSM analyses: the semantic primitives

- Substantives
 - *I, you, someone, something, person*
- determiners
 - *this, the same, other*
- quantifiers
 - *one, two, some, all, many/much*
- evaluators
 - *good, bad*
- descriptors
 - *big, small*
- mental predicates
 - *think, know, want, feel, see, hear*
- speech
 - *say, word, true*
- actions/events/motion
 - *do, happen, move, touch*

NSM analyses: the semantic primitives

- Existence/possession
 - *is, have*
- life/death
 - *live, die*
- time
 - *when, now, before, after, a long time, a short time, for some time, moment*
- space
 - *where, here, above, below, far, near, side, inside*
- logic
 - *not, maybe, can, because, if*
- intensifier
 - *very, more*
- taxonomy
 - *kind (of), part (of)*
- similarity
 - *like*

NSM analyses: the NSM syntax

- Of course, if NSM is a metalanguage, then it does not just need a set of words, it also needs a syntax
- it is hypothesized that **certain patterns of combinations of primitives are universal**
- for example, in every language, one can say 'someone said something bad about you' (note: *about* is not in the list of primitives)
- other hypothesized universal syntactic patterns
 - maybe something bad happened
 - I want to do this
 - I did it like this
 - that place is far from here
 - if you do this, people will think something bad about you

Examples and applications

- X is Y's *mother*
 - at some time before now, Y was very small
 - at that time Y was inside X's body
 - Y was like a part of X
 - because of this, people can think something like this
 - X wants to do good things for Y
 - X doesn't want bad things to happen to Y
- *plants*
 - living things
 - these things can't feel something
 - these things can't do something
- it was *dark/light* in there
 - sometimes, people *can't/can* see much because the sun *is not / is* in the sky
 - it was like this in there

Examples and applications

- X was *watching* Y
 - for some time, X was looking at Y
 - as if X was thinking
 - maybe something will happen
 - I want to see it
- X was *glaring at* Y
 - for some time, X was looking at Y
 - as if X was thinking
 - I feel something bad about you
 - if I could, I would do something bad to you now
- X *broke* Y
 - X did something to Y
 - because of this, something happened to Y at this time
 - because of this, after this Y was not one thing any more

Examples and applications: the domain of emotions

- The study of emotions is especially interesting since, e.g., Bloomfield (1933:139) said "we have no precise way of defining words like *love* and *hate*"
- Which emotion does this explication refer to? X is (feeling) ...
 - sometimes, a person thinks something like this
 - something good happened to this other person
 - it didn't happen to me
 - I want things like this happen to me
 - because of this this person feels something bad
 - X felt something like this
- ... *envy*

Examples and applications: the domain of emotions

- Which emotion does this explication refer to? X is (feeling) ...
 - X thinks something like this
 - someone did something very bad
 - I didn't think anyone would do something like this
 - if other people knew about this, they would think the same
 - I want other people to know about it
 - I want to do something because of this
 - because of all this, X feels something bad
- ... *outraged*

Examples and applications: the domain of emotions

- Which emotion does this explication refer to? X is (feeling) ...
 - X thinks something like this
 - I now know something very bad happened
 - because someone did something very bad
 - I didn't think something like this could happen
 - I don't want this
 - if I could, I would want to do something
 - because of all this, X feels something bad
- ... *appalled*

Examples and applications: the domain of emotions

- *Happy*
 - sometimes, a person thinks something like this
 - something good happened to me (personal)
 - I wanted this
 - I don't want other things now (absence of further desires)
 - because of this, this person feels something good
- *joyful*
 - sometimes, a person thinks something like this
 - something very good is happening now (unspecified, exuberant)
 - I want this
 - because of this, this person feels something very good
- *pleased*
 - sometimes, a person thinks something like this
 - something good happened (unspecified, less intense)
 - I wanted this
 - because of this, this person feels something good

Examples and applications: the domain of emotions

- NSM is particularly interesting for the characterization of emotions since it allows to precisely compare emotion concepts cross-linguistically / cross-culturally
- *glücklich* (German 'for' *happy*)
 - sometimes, a person thinks something like this
 - something very good happened to me
 - I wanted this
 - everything is very good now
 - I can't want anything more
 - because of this, this person feels something good

Examples and applications: the domain of speech act verbs

- Which speech act verb does this explication refer to? X **verbed** Y (...)
 - X said to Y
 - I want you to know I will do A
 - when X said this it was as if X was saying at the same time
 - I know you want me to do this
 - I know you think maybe I will not do it
 - I don't want you to think this
 - I know if I don't do A after saying this, people will think something bad about me
 - (alternative to the last one: I know if don't do A after saying this, people will not believe anything that I say I will do)
- ... ***promise***

Examples and applications: the domain of speech act verbs

- Which speech act verb does this explication refer to? X **verbed** Y (...)
 - X said something like this to Y
 - if you don't do this, I will do something that will be bad for you
 - when X said this it was as if X was saying at the same time
 - I know you don't want to do this
 - I say this because I want you to do it
- ... **threaten**

Examples and applications: the domain of speech act verbs

- Which speech act verb does this explication refer to? X **verbed** Y (...)
 - X said to Y
 - I want you to do A
 - when X said this it was as if X was saying at the same time
 - you know that if I say "I want you to do something", you have to do it
- ... **order**
- because
 - when someone gives an order, they express the assumption the addressee must comply
 - also, the addressee's recognition of that fact seems to be involved too (as opposed to *command*) (note: you give a horse/dog a command, not an order)

Another cross-cultural application: a communication verb from AustrEngl

- X **dobbed** Y **in** to Z
 - X knew that someone (Z) can do something bad to people like X and Y
 - X said something like this to this person (Z)
 - I want you to know that Y did something
 - I know you don't want Y to do something like this
 - people think it's bad if someone does something like this
 - people feel something bad when they think about things like this
- US-AmE near translations: *aspurse, denigrate, snitch, squeal, whistle-blow*
- German near translations: *anschwärzen, verpfeifen, petzen, denunzieren*