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Theoretical and Methodological Genesis of the Semantic Primes System: Typological Foundations of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage Approach

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ABSTRACT

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, developed by A. Wierzbicka and C. Goddard, is based on the assumption that even the most complex meanings can be decomposed into simpler, universal conceptual units – semantic primes, or metalexemes. These units constitute an irreducible semantic core found across all natural languages and make it possible to paraphrase meanings precisely through ordinary vocabulary. The present study aims to examine the theoretical and methodological genesis of the semantic primes system and to describe the typological foundations of the NSM approach. The study employs descriptive-analytical, comparative-typological, and semantic classification methods, together with the method of reductive paraphrase (explication), which avoids the circularity typical of conventional dictionary definitions. The theoretical views of scholars such as F. de Saussure, E. Sapir, J. Derrida, A. Wierzbicka, C. Goddard, and Sh. Safarov served as the scholarly foundation of the study, while cross-linguistic data from typologically diverse languages, including English, Uzbek, Pirahã, and Australian Aboriginal languages, served as its material. The analysis systematises an evolving inventory of approximately sixty-five semantic primes grouped into sixteen semantic categories – among them substantives, determiners, quantifiers, evaluators, mental predicates, time, and space – and defines the function of each metalexeme in

semantic explication. It is shown that the metalexemes THIS, THE SAME, and OTHER constitute the minimal yet universal basis of reference, identification, and differentiation. The findings reveal the deep connection between grammar and fundamental human conceptualisation and confirm the significance of NSM for establishing semantic equivalence, describing conceptual differences, and studying cognitive universals in intercultural communication.

Keywords: Natural Semantic Metalanguage, semantic primes, metalexemes, explication, reductive paraphrase, lexical universals, semantic core, cross-linguistic typology, cognitive semantics, intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the most complex systems in the world, and it cannot be compared to mathematics, since there is no precise equation for solving its problems. Language is composed of words, and each word has its own collocations: certain words do not naturally occur together with other words in the same context. This phenomenon is related to lexicogrammar, that is, the close relationship between lexis and grammar, and it shows how crucial the lexicogrammatical structure is within the language system. For example, the Uzbek phrase *suratga olmoq* is expressed in English as "taking a photograph," while in German it is rendered as *ein Foto machen* (literally, "making a photograph"). Both are grammatically correct, yet they differ in their manner of expression and semantic approach. This demonstrates that words and their grammatical structure are not separate from one another; meaning is formed precisely through this interaction. For this reason, language cannot be regarded as a system governed by strict rules, since it is a far more complex and subtle phenomenon.

In the exact sciences, there can be a single correct solution to a problem, namely a formula, whereas language cannot be described with such rigour. This is particularly evident in translation. Every translator brings a distinctive style and interpretation to the work being translated, and it is therefore

natural for differences in meaning and expression to arise between translations. Each language, drawing on its own culture and distinctive character, imparts a particular shade of meaning. It is difficult to convey the full essence of a single word through translation alone, since every word reflects its own cultural environment. Dictionary definitions, too, often fail to fully express a word's original meaning, since in many cases it must be grasped through explanation or synonyms.

As F. de Saussure noted, language is a system of signs that serves to express thought (Saussure 1959: 16-17). Through language, human beings express thought, form concepts, transmit knowledge, and preserve culture. Ch. Morris defines semantics as the analysis of the relationship between signs and their designata, that is, the objects they represent (as cited in Safarov 2008: 43). In other words, semantics examines how the meanings of words, phrases, sentences, and texts are formed and studies their semantic relationships.

A unified and generalised model of analysis is needed in linguistics in order to study the language system and linguistic activity comprehensively and to identify their internal laws and distinctive features. The search for such a universal analytical foundation has been advanced by many scholars, including J. Baudouin de Courtenay and E. Sapir (Baudouin de Courtenay 1963; Sapir 1968). The effort to find a system of analysis capable of providing a well-grounded and, at the same time, objective account of linguistic phenomena continues to this day. The problem remains urgent, and finding the "core" idea capable of underpinning a generalised system of analysis is important for the advancement of the discipline. Today this need is being met by NSM theory, which has entered contemporary linguistics as a new model. NSM is a metalanguage designed to explain linguistic meanings by means of the simplest words whose universality has been demonstrated: complex words and concepts exist in every language, but they can all be expressed through simple words that are present in all languages. For this reason, NSM is of pressing importance as a theoretical foundation that makes it possible to analyse the language system in a consistent, objective, and universal manner.

A foundational assumption of the NSM framework is that even the most complex meanings are ultimately decomposable into simpler conceptual units and can therefore be rendered through paraphrases composed of terms more elementary than the expression under analysis. While NSM originated as a theoretical construct within semantic analysis – developed to identify the language of thought and to isolate the lexical and grammatical core shared across all natural languages – subsequent research has established its considerable applied relevance beyond descriptive linguistics, most notably in cross-cultural communication and in the negotiation of knowledge within an increasingly globalised, English-dominant intellectual landscape (Wierzbicka 2015).

Within this framework, the analytic procedure is designated "reductive paraphrase," and its resulting outputs are termed "explications." This procedure is specifically designed to circumvent the circularity and indeterminacy that frequently undermine conventional lexicographic definitions. Explications constructed under this method exclude technical terminology, neologisms, formal logical notation, and abbreviations, drawing exclusively on the ordinary vocabulary of natural language. Accepting reductive paraphrase as a valid analytic method entails a further theoretical commitment: namely, that every language possesses an irreducible "semantic core" – a residual set of meanings that cannot be paraphrased any further. This semantic core is understood to exhibit language-like properties, comprising a lexicon of indefinable expressions, termed semantic primes, together with a grammar specifying the combinatorial principles governing these primitive elements.

The existence of such an irreducible semantic core across languages is substantiated not through a priori stipulation but through sustained empirical investigation: the systematic attempt to explicate diverse meanings across typologically distinct languages, with the explicit aim of minimising the lexical inventory required for each explication. This empirical programme has constituted the central research agenda pursued by Wierzbicka and her collaborators for more than three decades, yielding an inventory of sixty-five semantic primes that

continues to undergo refinement rather than being treated as definitively established (Wierzbicka 1992, 1996, 1999, 2015; Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002, 2014; Goddard 2008, 2010). Wierzbicka's (1992) identification of DO, BECAUSE, and GOOD as semantic primes – units capable of rigorously and comprehensively characterising meaning across all semantic domains and all languages – rests on two interrelated claims: first, that these elements are indispensable to the explication of numerous other lexical items and grammatical constructions; and second, that they themselves resist non-circular definition, indicating that their meanings are conceptually irreducible.

The main purpose of the present study is to examine the theoretical and methodological genesis of the semantic primes system and to describe the typological foundations of the NSM approach. To achieve this purpose, the following tasks have been set: 1) to generalise the theoretical views on the search for a universal basis of semantic analysis; 2) to describe the methodological principles of NSM, including reductive paraphrase and the notion of the semantic core; 3) to systematise the semantic categories of metalexemes and define the function of each of them in NSM analysis; and 4) to determine the significance of the semantic primes system for cross-linguistic and intercultural research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In contemporary linguistics, the question of meaning and its universality is one of the areas receiving particular attention, and NSM theory is of considerable importance in analysing the relationship between language and thought. The concept of NSM was put forward by A. Wierzbicka in the 1970s (Wierzbicka 1972) and was subsequently refined in collaboration with C. Goddard. NSM is a universal metalanguage system based on metalexemes (Safarov 2013) – that is, basic meanings that cannot be broken down into simpler units – common to all languages. Using this model, the meaning of any complex concept or word is analysed through simple, universal units. In this way, NSM makes it possible to interpret the semantic structure of any language independently of its cultural colouring.

The theoretical and methodological foundations of the semantic primes system, as articulated within the NSM approach, are rooted in a cross-linguistic and typologically informed perspective on meaning. Central to this framework is the identification of semantic primes – basic, universal concepts that underpin the semantics of all natural languages (Wierzbicka 1996; Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002). These primes serve as the foundational building blocks for constructing semantic descriptions that are both precise and applicable across diverse linguistic contexts (Goddard 2012). The methodological significance of the approach lies in its capacity to describe the typological characteristics of languages through a set of universal primitives and to compare languages with different syntactic and lexical properties (Goddard 2008). The methodology adopted by A. Wierzbicka and her colleagues involves testing these primes across numerous languages of diverse origin, thereby reinforcing the universality claim and demonstrating the applicability of the approach to typologically unrelated languages (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, 2014).

Typological considerations are integral to the NSM framework, since they provide the empirical basis for validating the universality of semantic primes. The emphasis on cross-linguistic testing ensures that the identified primes are not language-specific but are fundamental to human cognition and communication. The methodological robustness of the approach is further highlighted by its capacity to shed light on issues of semantic fieldwork and lexical universals, offering insights into how semantic primitives can be employed to analyse lexical items across languages (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014).

The NSM framework offers a universal, culture-independent approach to analysing and explicating meaning across languages and cultures. Central to NSM is the use of empirically established semantic primitives, which serve as building blocks for expressing complex cultural and linguistic phenomena (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002). This approach facilitates the study of culture-specific concepts by breaking them down into universal primitives, thereby enabling clearer cross-cultural comparisons. A. Wierzbicka's work demonstrates the utility of NSM in

explicating culturally significant keywords, such as the Japanese concepts *amae*, *enryo*, *wa*, *on*, *giri*, and *seishin*; she shows how NSM helps clarify these culturally embedded notions, making them accessible beyond their specific cultural contexts (Wierzbicka 1991b).

Further, the application of NSM extends to the formulation of cultural scripts – widely held norms reflected in language, including keywords, phrases, and routines. A. Wierzbicka (2002) emphasises that such scripts must be expressed in terms of universal human concepts encoded in words with exact semantic equivalents across languages, which ensures that cultural norms can be analysed systematically and comparably. C. Goddard (2008) describes the state of the art in NSM, noting its extensive use in cross-linguistic lexical semantics and typology. In addition, A. Wierzbicka (2009) emphasises the importance of language in understanding human emotions: traditional emotion terms often lack cross-linguistic validity, whereas NSM provides a means of studying emotions from a genuinely cross-linguistic perspective.

C. Goddard (2009) applies NSM to specific cultural expressions, such as the Australian English phrase "taking yourself too seriously," developing semantic explications that reveal the cultural attitudes and norms embedded in language use. His later work discusses the key concepts of semantic primes, semantic molecules, and semantic templates, illustrating how NSM underpins lexical typology and cross-linguistic analysis (Goddard 2012). The exploration of emotive interjections, such as expressions of surprise and disgust, also demonstrates the potential of NSM in emotion research: although all languages possess emotive interjections, they have been underexplored in emotion studies (Goddard 2014). The ongoing development and dissemination of NSM, as exemplified by C. Goddard's (2018) lectures, continue to expand its scope of application and deepen its theoretical foundations.

The analysis of the studies cited above shows that NSM provides a powerful, empirically grounded framework for analysing cultural and linguistic phenomena. However, the theoretical and methodological genesis of the semantic primes

system, as well as the functions performed by each category of metalexemes in semantic explication, have not yet been sufficiently generalised in a single systematic description. This gap defines the direction of the present study.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on a qualitative, theoretical-descriptive research approach. Its material consists of the fundamental works of A. Wierzbicka & C. Goddard on the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, the collective volumes on semantic and lexical universals (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, 2002), and cross-linguistic data from typologically diverse languages – English, Uzbek, German, Pirahã, Yankunytjatjara, Kayardild, Lao, and Papuan languages – as described in the NSM literature. The descriptive-analytical method was used to generalise the theoretical views on semantic primes; the comparative-typological method, to trace how metalexemes are realised across languages; the method of reductive paraphrase (explication), to describe the principles of semantic analysis adopted in NSM; and the method of semantic classification, to group metalexemes into categories and to define their functions.

The basic assumption underlying the description and comparison of meanings in NSM is that, unlike other approaches to meaning, it relies neither on special formulas expressed in ordinary language nor on the analytical formulas of technical metalanguages requiring additional explanation – that is, artificial languages that express meaning through special symbols and terms not native to natural language – but on paraphrases constructed in the self-explanatory form of NSM. Because NSM is directly grounded in natural language, paraphrases constructed within it may be regarded as self-explanatory (Dixon). They rely, however, not on the full resources of natural languages but on their smallest common core.

The methodology of semantic description within the NSM approach and its theoretical foundations are set out in the scholarly literature on NSM (Wierzbicka 1972, 1980a, 1980b, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1991a, 1992, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2006;

Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, 2002; Peeters). The basis of this approach is expressed through metalexemes, lexical universals, categories and parts of speech, the universal syntax of meaning, polysemy, allolexy, and valency options.

Many debates concerning meaning can be resolved by means of metalexemes. It is not possible to determine the semantics of every word in a language, since this criterion is constantly changing. The elements used to determine the meaning of words are not themselves defined in further terms; rather, they must be accepted as metalexemes – an "indefinability" through which all complex meanings can be consistently expressed. One of the central assumptions of A. Wierzbicka's semantic theory is that meaning cannot be described without a set of metalexemes. Conceptual metalexemes can be identified through the in-depth analysis of any natural language. In fact, every basic human concept is a language-specific manifestation of a universal set, and therefore the set of metalexemes identified by this method also corresponds to universality. These ideas are based on the assumption that the basic concepts of human beings are innate.

Until recently, this assumption rested more on theoretical considerations than on empirical research. The situation changed, however, once semantic and lexical universals were extensively investigated in world linguistics. In these studies, conceptual metalexemes established on the basis of several languages were systematically examined across many languages of various nations and continents (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994). Recent research has identified more than sixty metalexemes that may hold the status of universal semantic primes.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Within the scope of the study, the metalexemes analysed within the NSM framework were divided into the following principal semantic categories.

Substantives: I/ME, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE, THING, BODY
Given that these words exist as common-use words across typologically diverse languages, they have been selected as

metalexemes. Within NSM, each of the selected metalexemes has its own designated role: I/ME is the centre of the utterance, YOU is the interlocutor, SOMEONE stands in place of the pronouns "he/she," PEOPLE denotes society or a group, THING is used to explain all inanimate and abstract entities, and BODY is used to explain the body or a bodily part. Substantives not included in this list vary across the object-language layer of each language depending on number, gender, and domain of use. These metalexemes are simple, common-use, and indivisible words shared by all languages, and millions of other nouns ("book," "house," "friend," "tree," "time," "teacher") are explained through them. Through these units, the system of substantives of any language can be reduced to a minimal, universal, and cognitively transparent model.

Determiners: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER

Although English and other languages possess numerous determiners, precisely these three deictic determiners have been selected as metalexemes, since nearly all languages have exact equivalents for them. Each of them performs a distinct function in NSM analysis. THIS points to whatever is at the focus of attention in an utterance and expresses the meaning "I am talking about this." THE SAME expresses non-difference in the sense of "exactly that," "the very same," conveying comparison and identification. OTHER expresses distinction, conveying the meanings "not this," "another one," and indicates that the selected object is a different one. Within NSM, the metalexemes THIS, THE SAME, and OTHER constitute the minimal yet universal basis of the processes of reference, identification, and differentiation in human thought. This triad serves as a sufficient semantic foundation for marking relations among objects in any language system.

Quantifiers: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH, LITTLE/FEW

These quantifiers are expressed by a specific word in every language. NSM has been tested in more than 70 languages; for instance, in Pirahã (an Amazonian language) only the quantity

words ONE, TWO, and MANY/MUCH are used, and in Australian Aboriginal languages, too, only the words for "one," "two," and "many" exist. The functions of the quantifier metalexemes in NSM analysis are defined as follows: ONE – a distinct unit, necessary for distinguishing it from another; TWO – the second simplest number, the basis of pairing and multiplication; SOME – an indefinite plurality, the most universal form of indefiniteness; ALL – indicates a boundary, "nothing else remains"; MANY/MUCH – a large quantity, used for comparison; LITTLE/FEW – a small quantity, expressing the notion "not enough." All complex numbers and quantities – for example, "three," "four," "ten million," "half," "dozens," thousands – are analysed through these metalexemes step by step.

Evaluators: GOOD, BAD

These evaluative words are equally common-use across all the world's languages and are clear and comprehensible. They exist as indivisible semantic units. In Lao and in the Amazonian language Pirahã, only these two words exist for evaluation, and all complex evaluations are expressed through them. Complex evaluations such as "great," "wonderful," "excellent," "beautiful," "useful," "terrible," "average," "ugly," "bitter," and "harmful" are all explained as units falling within the scope of these metalexemes.

Descriptors: BIG, SMALL, LONG

These metalexemes are common-use words for expressing size and distance across typologically diverse languages. In some languages (such as that of the Yankunytjatjara people of Australia) only the words "big," "small," and "long" exist, while in some Aboriginal languages only "big" and "small" exist, with "long" being explained through these same words. Adjectives such as "wide," "narrow," "low," "deep," "shallow," "huge," and "tiny" can all be expressed through these metalexemes. Within NSM, BIG, SMALL, and LONG are interpreted as the simplest and most universal units expressing human perception of space and size; through them, complex adjectives, spatial characteristics, and even abstract concepts are explained.

Intensifier: VERY
Within NSM theory, the metalexeme VERY is the sole word selected to express the intensification of meaning, since in many languages there is no other word equivalent to "very." Intensification is otherwise expressed through reduplication (e.g., "big-big") or the addition of another word (e.g., "extremely"), and sometimes no additional word is used at all. In Pirahã, Yankunytjatjara, Kayardild, and Papuan languages, only the word corresponding to "very" is used; words corresponding to "most" or "almost" do not exist in these languages (Wierzbicka 1994). The concepts expressed by the Uzbek intensifiers *o'ta*, *nihoyatda*, *ancha*, *biroz*, *deyarli*, *mutlaqo*, *eng*, and *battar* are all encompassed by the metalexeme VERY. VERY is the sole universal means of expressing intensity and the heightening of evaluation; by simplifying other complex intensifiers, it creates a general semantic model shared by all languages.

Mental predicates: THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
These verbs were identified as metalexemes by A. Wierzbicka and C. Goddard. All complex verbs related to mental states – such as "understand," "remember," "forget," "learn," "believe," "doubt," "fear," and "hope" – are analysed through them. These metalexemes are the most basic units expressing human cognitive, emotional, and perceptual activity, and for this reason all complex mental states are analysed precisely through their combinations.

Speech: SAY, WORD, TRUE
In many languages, the verbs "to speak" and "to talk" share exactly the same form as SAY. "To write" and "to read" exist only in languages that possess a written form and are absent in purely oral languages such as Pirahã (Wierzbicka 1980a: 28; Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002: 10). Within NSM theory, SAY expresses uttering words aloud, WORD is the smallest unit of meaning known to people, and TRUE expresses speech-related meanings such as "this is the truth," "it is so," or "it will be so." All complex speech acts – "to speak," "to write," "to read," "to command," "to request," "to promise," "to lie," "to advise," "to

joke," "to whisper," "to shout," and "to remain silent" – can be expressed by means of the formula SAY + WORD + TRUE + WANT + BECAUSE + PEOPLE. These metalexemes constitute the simplest yet most universal semantic basis of speech activity.

Actions, events, and movement: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
These metalexemes are expressed by a single common-use word across typologically diverse languages for describing events, activity, and movement. In some languages the verbs "to walk" and "to run" do not exist and are expressed through the verb MOVE. In Australian languages only DO, HAPPEN, and MOVE exist in this domain, and all other verbs are explained through them (Wierzbicka 1994). Within NSM, DO denotes a person's changing or performing something; HAPPEN denotes the occurrence of an event or phenomenon; and MOVE serves to explain the movement of a person or object from one place to another. All other verbs ("to walk," "to fly," "to eat," "to kill," "to build," "to destroy," to fall) can be described through DO, HAPPEN, and MOVE.

Existence and possession: THERE IS, HAVE
These metalexemes were selected to describe existence in some place or possession in relation to some person, because they exist as common-use words, or have a fixed grammatical form, in all languages. In NSM, THERE IS expresses the concept that something exists in some place, while HAVE expresses the concept that something belongs to someone. All related states – "absence," "property," "wealth," "taking," "giving," "keeping," "being found," "disappearing" – can be identified through the formula THERE IS + HAVE + NOT + PEOPLE + PART OF + WITH. The metalexemes THERE IS and HAVE thus serve as the basic units expressing, in the simplest and most universal form, whether things "exist or not" and "to whom they belong."

Life and death: LIVE, DIE
Within the NSM approach, these two metalexemes alone explain the beginning and end of biological life. In some languages the word "to be resurrected" does not exist and occurs only in religious texts, while "to breathe" or "the heart beats" occur only

in medical texts, whereas ordinary people express this as "to live." In Pirahã, for instance, instead of the verb "to die," the verb "to live" is used in its negated form, that is, "not living." The metalexemes LIVE and DIE explain all concepts related to life and death ("alive," "dead," "to give up one's spirit," "to be resurrected," "soul," "eternal life," "to be killed"). They are regarded as among the most fundamental universal categories of human experience, through which not only biological states but also cultural, religious, and psychological concepts are explained.

Time: WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME

Many other time-related words exist across languages, such as "yesterday," "today," "tomorrow," "last week," "next month," "year," "century," "hour," "soon," "later," "always," "never," and "forever." However, in some languages the words "yesterday," "today," and "tomorrow" do not exist, and "before," "now," and "after" are used instead; "minute," "hour," and "year" are specific only to cultures that follow a calendar. In Australian Aboriginal languages, only the words corresponding to "now," "before," "after," and "a long time" are used in relation to time (Wierzbicka 1994). All complex time-related concepts are therefore expressed through the metalexemes of this category. From this point of view, complex temporal lexical units appear as cognitive and cultural constructs formed at later stages of human thought: concepts such as "year," "month," and "hour" arose from humanity's need to measure natural phenomena, whereas "yesterday," "today," and "tomorrow" arose from the need to situate time relative to the moment of speech. The NSM approach shows that at the deepest level of human thought, time is perceived through very simple oppositions – "before – now – after" and "long – short" – on which every language relies, even those lacking a precise system for measuring time.

Space: WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, INSIDE

Only these words expressing location in space have been selected as metalexemes. Words such as "left-right" and "front-back" do

not exist in some languages, where direction is indicated only relative to objects. A. Wierzbicka notes that certain indigenous peoples of Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Latin America, who did not use maps or compasses, do not use words such as "north-south." In the language of the Yankunytjatjara people of Australia, only five spatial words are used: "here," "above," "below," "far," and "inside"; in indigenous Amazonian languages, direction is indicated relative to "the direction of the river's flow" (Goddard 2002; Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014). Words expressing location such as "beside," "opposite," "under," "on top of," "outside," "in the middle," "at the edge," and "around" can be explained through the construction WHERE + HERE + ABOVE + BELOW + FAR + NEAR + INSIDE + PART OF + SIDE.

Logical concepts: NOT, CAN, MAYBE, BECAUSE, IF

Through these connectives, almost the entirety of the fundamental logical operations of human reasoning is encompassed. The words "and," "but," and "or," for instance, are in some languages not expressed as separate word forms but conveyed by a pause connecting clauses (Wierzbicka 1992: 67-90; Goddard 1998: 90). In Pirahã only the words for "not" and "if" are used, while "must," "have to," and "should" do not exist (Wierzbicka 1996: 156; Goddard 2010: 396). Other logical connectives ("and," "or," "but," "therefore," "otherwise," "nevertheless") are all expressed through these five common-use words shared by typologically diverse languages.

Taxonomy and partonomy: KIND OF, PART OF

These classifiers are common-use words in almost all languages and possess a fixed form. They organise existence in human thought along two principal lines: classification and division into parts. Units such as "type," "class," "genus," and "category" exist mainly in scholarly language, while in everyday communication KIND OF is used; classifiers such as "member," "element," and "component" are expressed in many languages only in the form of PART OF. Within NSM, KIND OF expresses "what type is this?" ("classification," "hierarchy"), while PART

OF expresses "what is this a part of?" (composition, meronymy). Relations such as type, class, group, category, composition, member, element, and whole are shown to be expressed through the formula KIND OF + PART OF + LIKE + THIS.

Similarity: LIKE

Words expressing similarity, such as "analogous," "parallel," and "reproduction," are used mainly in scholarly language, whereas in everyday speech similarity is expressed as LIKE, conveying the meaning 'this thing has certain features in common with another thing.' According to NSM theory, LIKE is the simplest, most universal, and indivisible metalexeme of this domain, and all comparisons – "identical," "different," "equal," "matching," "analogous," "copy," "opposite," "almost" – can be expressed through it. LIKE appears not merely as a means of comparison but as one of the fundamental cognitive mechanisms of human thought, since human beings comprehend new concepts by comparing them with images already present in their minds. The metalexeme is also intimately connected with metaphorical thought: in the metaphor "life is a journey," the shared features of life and a journey – continuity, direction, and staged progression – are expressed through a LIKE relation. Furthermore, LIKE plays an important role in the pragmatic layer of language, since the speaker compares a new or complex concept with something more familiar in order to explain it to the addressee.

In order to summarise the semantic categories of metalexemes analysed above and their functions in NSM analysis, a table was compiled (Table 1).

Table 1. *Semantic categories of metalexemes (semantic primes) and their principal functions in NSM analysis*

No.	**Category**	**Metalexemes**	**Principal function in NSM analysis**
1	Substantives	I/ME, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE, THING, BODY	Participants, persons, objects and the body
2	Determiners	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER	Reference, identification, differentiation
3	Quantifiers	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH, LITTLE/FEW	Number and quantity

4	Evaluators	GOOD, BAD	Evaluation
5	Descriptors	BIG, SMALL, LONG	Size and extent
6	Intensifier	VERY	Intensification of meaning
7	Mental predicates	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Cognition, emotion, perception
8	Speech	SAY, WORD, TRUE	Speech activity and truth
9	Actions, events, movement	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	Activity, events, motion
10	Existence, possession	THERE IS, HAVE	Existence and belonging
11	Life and death	LIVE, DIE	Biological life and its end
12	Time	WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME	Temporal orientation
13	Space	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, INSIDE	Spatial orientation
14	Logical concepts	NOT, CAN, MAYBE, BECAUSE, IF	Logical operations of reasoning
15	Taxonomy, partonomy	KIND OF, PART OF	Classification and part–whole relations
16	Similarity	LIKE	Comparison, analogy, metaphor

These categories and the metalexemes belonging to them have been registered in world linguistics as NSM semantic primes, and according to NSM conventions they are written in capital letters in English (Wierzbicka 1972, 1980a). The classification shows that the proposed set of metalexemes is not an entirely newly constructed set but rather a network of categories comparable to the parts of speech in traditional grammar. The essential point is that it reveals the cognitive foundations of language by showing the connection between morphosyntactic constructions and metalexemes. This means that the grammatical structure of languages is not arbitrary but is deeply connected with humanity's fundamental concepts and ways of perceiving the world. Since metalexemes are common to all languages, they serve as a key to understanding the universal grammatical properties of language.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained raise the philosophical question of whether it is possible to go beyond the boundaries of an individual language. R. Appignanesi's idea that "there is no way out of language" (Appignanesi & Garratt 1995: 76) is not an invention of the twentieth century, although in recent decades it has been advanced with increasing insistence. In one sense this is true, since we use every word within some particular language, and even when we "translate" our thoughts from one language into another, we remain within the boundaries of language. In another sense, however, this claim appears not to hold, since the existence of conceptual and linguistic universals offers the possibility of an exception. To explain these views, the following hypotheses may be advanced:

- all languages share a common core, both lexically and grammatically, comprising concepts and categories common to all languages;
- this common core is innate and is shaped by a "preparation" that precedes speech (Bruner 1990: 22), meaning that the human mind is predisposed to language acquisition;
- the common core can be used as a minimal language sufficient to express any thought whatsoever, which in turn provides a foundation for interlingual communication.

If these hypotheses are correct, then a path leading "outside of language" already exists. Although this common core can only be identified and understood through language itself, it is independent of any particular language, since it is determined by an innate conceptual system and is free from the particularities of the structure of individual languages. In other words, a metalanguage is used as a system for discussing languages and cultures. If "English" and "Japanese" are isomorphic, then, although expressed in different languages, they share the same semantic basis, and in this respect it theoretically does not matter which "base language" is chosen, since every base language is isomorphic to all others and is directly grounded in a conceptual

system that precedes language and is presumed to be innate and universal.

If, in an absolute sense, there is no "way out of language," then, given the multiplicity of languages and the confusion that consequently arises, it is nonetheless possible to seek a way out through concepts common to all humanity. J. Derrida compares the "universality of languages" to Babel and gives only the second meaning of the word Babel as "the confusion of languages" (Derrida 1982: 132-139). In its original sense, however, Babel appears as a tower of power – a tower of a universal language system – and in this original sense NSM offers the possibility of a partial return to Babel through concepts common to all humanity. As J. Derrida describes the necessity and the impossibility of translation as a "double bind," a "prohibited transparency, an impossible univocity" (Derrida 1991: 243-253), translation provides only a partial solution, whereas the semantic primes system offers a principled basis for it.

The primary aim of NSM in linguistics is to determine semantic equivalence between different languages and cultures, to analyse conceptual differences, and to standardise semantics on a scientific basis. It is widely applied in semantic analysis, cross-cultural pragmatics, translation theory, cognitive linguistics, and language teaching. In today's era of globalisation, the relevance of NSM theory lies in the fact that it reveals the universal and cultural dimensions of human thought as expressed through language. This approach helps to grasp not only the structural but also the cognitive and cultural essence of language, and for this reason NSM is regarded as an important theoretical foundation in contemporary research on semantics, ethnolinguistics, and intercultural communication.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that the semantic primes system emerged from a long-standing search in linguistics for a universal, objective basis of semantic analysis and that, within the NSM approach, it rests on two interrelated principles: reductive

paraphrase, which avoids the circularity of conventional definitions, and the existence of an irreducible semantic core shared by all languages. The typological foundations of the approach are provided by the systematic testing of metalexemes across typologically diverse languages, which has yielded an evolving inventory of approximately sixty-five semantic primes.

The analysis of sixteen semantic categories of metalexemes – from substantives and determiners to logical concepts, taxonomy, and similarity – has demonstrated that each metalexeme performs a specific function in semantic explication and that complex lexical units of any language can be reduced to combinations of these simple, universal units. The metalexemes THIS, THE SAME, and OTHER constitute the minimal basis of reference, identification, and differentiation, while the categories as a whole form a network comparable to the parts of speech and reveal the deep connection between grammar and fundamental human conceptualisation. Thus, NSM is needed in linguistics in order to analyse meanings consistently, universally, and in a culturally neutral manner, to explain interlingual differences on a scientific basis, and to gain a deeper understanding of human thought through language. A comparative study of the realisation of metalexemes in Uzbek and English, as well as their application to translation and lexicography, is identified as a promising direction for future research.

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