

# Journal of English Linguistics

<http://eng.sagepub.com/>

---

**Book Review: English: Meaning and Culture. By Anna Wierzbicka. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. vi + 352. ISBN: 0-19-517474-7; 0-19-517475-5 (pbk)**

Barbara Dancygier

*Journal of English Linguistics* 2009 37: 380

DOI: 10.1177/0075424209332966

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://eng.sagepub.com/content/37/4/380>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Journal of English Linguistics* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://eng.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://eng.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://eng.sagepub.com/content/37/4/380.refs.html>

## Book Reviews

Journal of English Linguistics

37(4) 380–384

© 2009 SAGE Publications

Reprints and permission: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

<http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

<http://jengl.sagepub.com>



*English: Meaning and Culture*. By Anna Wierzbicka. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. vi + 352. ISBN: 0-19-517474-7; 0-19-517475-5 (pbk).

DOI: 10.1177/0075424209332966

Looking at this book's spine or first page, one sees just one word: *English*. The effect is puzzling, especially given the now common complexity and length of an ordinary academic book title. The subtitle—*Meaning and Culture*—narrows the scope down just a little (not phonology, probably not syntax) while primarily pairing semantics and its cultural context. Only after reading the first chapter does one see the purpose and salience of the title's wording: it is a book about the English language and the aspects of its semantics that are specifically "Anglo" (Wierzbicka's shortcut for what is presumably shared by various Englishes of the world), by virtue of being deeply rooted in the English culture and history of ideas. The powerful argument presented throughout the text constructs a view of English that questions a number of assumptions that much of linguistics, and English linguistics, lives by.

First, Wierzbicka argues (expanding on some of her earlier work) that much of what has come to be understood as belonging to general linguistics is in fact English linguistics pure and proper—to give just two examples, politeness strategies and the importance of clarifying the speaker's epistemic stance. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, she shows that the communicative regime requiring speakers to carefully distinguish between fact and speculation, as well as appropriately grade their commitment to a belief, is not a matter of linguistic competence as such, or even English linguistic competence; it is, she argues, a matter of being immersed in a culture that values such distinctions. The bold argument presented in the book is that, in the case of English, the direction of language change and the emergence of new meaning, both in vocabulary and at the level of constructions, are dictated by shifting cultural concerns.

Part I consists of two chapters, jointly setting the stage for the argument to be developed throughout the book. Wierzbicka starts by explaining her concept of "Anglo English," as the linguistic-cultural core shared by all the varieties and dialects of English, both in regional contexts and in its global applications. As she points out, the global culture in which English has come to play a role of a lingua franca does not mean that the language exists in a cultural vacuum; on the contrary, it has brought its cultural underpinnings to the global fore. Understanding those underpinnings and their origins will not promote or perpetuate some cultural hegemony but will in fact put the role of English language and culture in the right perspective: as a creation of the history of a people. The concept of "understatement," the value of appropriately

measuring one's knowledge and another's autonomy, the primacy of thought over emotion, and the deeply ingrained respect for facts are all culturally motivated values that are written into the vocabulary of English. They need to be appropriately described and understood, argues Wierzbicka, rather than being swept under the carpet of cultural stereotypes. She devotes the rest of the book to a very careful and specific analysis of linguistic forms representing these cultural values—or, in other words, to the analysis of the cultural specificity of “Anglo English.”

Part II consists of three chapters, each devoted to a specific vocabulary item: chapter 3 discusses *right* and *wrong*; chapter 4 analyzes the concept of being *reasonable*; and chapter 5 focuses on the adjective *fair*. In each case, Wierzbicka includes similar components in her analysis. First, there is a review of how the concept has developed through the history of English. These arguments are perhaps not as rigorous as a standard account of language change might be, but the examples selected are very clear and support the general argument well. All three chapters in part II argue that the meanings of the lexical items in question have been shifting from various semantic domains in the direction of favoring rational thought. These processes prompted the emergence of ethics based on reason, rather than on moral absolutes of “good” and “evil,” in effect forcing modern English speakers to carefully weigh their evaluation of human behavior.

Secondly, Wierzbicka argues that the roots of such a broad application of the concept of reason are to be found in the writings of the Enlightenment, first of all in the work of Locke. Situating the emergence of the current meanings of lexical items such as *reasonable* or *fair* in the intellectual history of England constitutes a powerful argument in favor of the shared “Anglo” roots of various forms of modern English, which continue to recognize these distinctions. Thirdly, Wierzbicka describes each of the meanings through formulae composed of the semantic primitives introduced in her early work and used in all her work since then, allowing her to be very specific in revealing the subtle differences among different words and their uses. Finally, there is some comparison with other languages (e.g., German, French, or Russian) that typically shows that the concepts in question are either untranslatable or inevitably distorted in translation.

Part III explores three areas of English grammar that give support to the salience of cultural scripts embedded in the language. Chapter 6 presents an impressive variety of English causative constructions as evidence of the “Anglo” need to carefully measure the degree of acceptable imposition on the autonomy of others, while chapters 7 and 8 are devoted to “epistemic phrases” (such as *I think*, *I suppose*, *I believe*) and “epistemic adverbs (such as *probably*, *evidently*, *apparently*). These epistemic expressions, as Wierzbicka argues, represent the Anglo cultural need to carefully distinguish between things that can be communicated as knowledge and those that do not allow for such a strong commitment and to appropriately suggest the weighing of available evidence. In all three areas of usage, as Wierzbicka argues, English has an overwhelmingly wider scope of choices than other languages and distinguishes available options in terms of the most minute detail of the degree of commitment, the availability and source of evidence, and the accuracy in representing epistemic stances of

others. While comparing her results with other work on the emergence of epistemic and subjective meanings (mainly Traugott 1989), Wierzbicka reaffirms her claim that such a direction of semantic change is not necessarily universal, while it can be shown to have specific historical and cultural roots in the case of English.

In the final part IV, Wierzbicka reviews the “cultural baggage” of English, in its historical perspective and its significance for cross-cultural communication as well as its role as the lingua franca of science, business, and aviation. Indeed, Wierzbicka’s argument can be expected to have a significant impact on how English is taught and used in all of these and many other contexts.

As the above overview of the book suggests, there are many areas of linguistic and cultural studies to which Wierzbicka’s book will be relevant. It is very accessible and full of fascinating detail, and it makes its point with clarity and force. The proposed descriptions of the fine differences among words, constructions, and phrases are accurate and convincing. As a synchronic study of a range of expressions, Wierzbicka’s book constitutes an enormous step forward, proposing model accounts of words and phrases that have notoriously escaped satisfying analysis.

There are just a few areas where reaching further into broader literature in linguistics might have enhanced some themes and added caution to other claims. One such area is the reflection of epistemic stance in grammar, especially verb forms. While Wierzbicka looks carefully at selected lexical items and phrases, she could have strengthened some of her points by referring to descriptions of the use of tense as representative of epistemic distance. Of immediate concern is Fillmore’s work (1990) on stance in conditional and temporal constructions (so that *If you do X, I will do Y* marks the protasis with neutral stance and *If you did X, I would do Y* marks negative stance, while both can refer to the future). Also of relevance are Fleischman’s (1989) discussion of the distancing effect of tense (as in *I was wondering if X*, or using past modals in questions acting as requests) and the discussion of the English-specific noncommittal role of the present in Dancygier and Sweetser (2005).

Looking further afield, there is a wealth of literature noting the carefulness with which English distinguishes attitude with tense in represented speech and thought (compare the more committed *I said I am X* with less committed *I said I was X*). Furthermore, inclusion of some studies of patterns of change in grammar—to name just two examples, Traugott’s (1995) study of *going to* or Bybee & Pagliuca (1994)—would have significantly added to the linguistic impact of the argument.

This brings me to an aspect of the book that some linguists will find controversial. In her final discussion of epistemic meanings, Wierzbicka comments on the account of subjectification given first in Traugott (1989), in which epistemic meanings are seen as arising from nonepistemic ones and general principles of subjectification in language change are proposed. Wierzbicka argues that the study of such general patterns should not overshadow language-specific patterns of change, and she insists on “a rise of epistemological concerns in Anglo culture at a particular time of its development” (295). In other words, she presents the cases of subjectification discussed in the book as a post-Lockean English-only phenomenon and argues for less focus on cross-linguistic general

patterns. However, the claim that subjectification processes may be strictly time-and-culture-specific seems to be overstated, and more importantly, unsubstantiated. The pragmatic dimension of Traugott's account, reinforced in her later work and brought to its peak in Traugott and Dasher (2002), openly addresses the discourse basis of subjectification processes and relies on attested, culturally salient data; it has also been fruitfully applied in studies of different languages. Wierzbicka's "post-Locke" argument is based mainly on examples selected from the *Oxford English Dictionary* bank of quotations that seem convincing but do not cover the whole historical spectrum. She does not (and cannot) describe the path of language change that would link Locke more directly to the use of, let's say, adverbs such as *probably* or *undoubtedly*—in other words, *post hoc* is not necessarily *propter hoc*. Furthermore, recent research (see Brinton 2008) finds epistemic uses of parenthetical expressions such as *I believe* as early as in Middle English, which undermines the main point of Wierzbicka's proposal—namely, that epistemic meanings emerge in the eighteenth century. As a result, it is not clear what English linguistics stands to gain from attributing so much to the Age of Reason, since the link between cultural facts and linguistic ones may turn out to be tenuous. It would seem still more difficult to substantiate such a correlation between philosophy and grammatical form, which further suggests that some added focus on epistemic uses of grammar might have prevented the unnecessary discord over the nature of subjectification.

Finally, Wierzbicka's claim that certain cultural scripts are absent from other languages and therefore impossible to translate may be too strong, simply because it cannot be proven. Wierzbicka is most probably right that the repertoire of epistemic phrases and adverbs in English is unusually broad and rooted in subtle differences of epistemic attitude, but it does not follow that absence of their translation equivalents in other languages limits the ability or need of speakers of other languages to express similar levels of commitment or imposition. Just as an example, the imposingly broad range of reflexive, middle, and impersonal constructions in Polish helps one carefully weigh the assignment of responsibility for thought and action, which in effect plays a similar role. While it is possible to defend the claim about the specificity of English, it has to be balanced against the strategies other languages employ. There is no reason to assume at this point that English is as unique in this respect as Wierzbicka's book suggests, even if its specific cultural scripts or focus on "reason" possibly are.

These general linguistic concerns do not affect Wierzbicka's impressive contribution to the study of English. Her book will be a great resource not only for future studies of English vocabulary and grammar but also for language-teaching materials and cross-cultural communication user guides, which are often quite one-sided in their ideological focus. Wierzbicka's book is saying loud and clear that focusing on culture does not equal de-focusing language, as both are part and parcel of the same communicative environment.

Barbara Dancygier  
*University of British Columbia, Vancouver*

## References

- Bybee, Joan & William Pagliuca. 1994. *The evolution of grammar: Tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Brinton, Laurel. 2008. The comment clause in English: Syntactic origins and pragmatic development. *Studies in English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dancygier, Barbara & Eve Sweetser. 2005. *Mental spaces in grammar: Conditional constructions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fillmore, Charles. 1990. Epistemic stance and grammatical form in English conditional sentences. *CLS* 26. 137-162.
- Fleischman, Suzanne. 1989. Temporal distance: A basic linguistic metaphor. *Studies in Language* 13(1). 1-50.
- Traugott, Elizabeth C. 1989. On the rise of epistemic meanings in English: An example of subjectification in semantic change. *Language* 65(1). 31-55.
- Traugott, Elizabeth C. 1995. Subjectification in grammaticalization. In Dieter Stein and Susan Wright, eds., *Subjectivity and Subjectivisation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 37-54.
- Traugott, Elizabeth C. & Richard B. Dasher. 2002. *Regularity in semantic change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.