
THE MINIMAL LANGUAGE APPROACH: FOUNDATIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND PRACTICE

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1. Introduction

The “minimal language” approach is an adaptation of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (henceforth: NSM), designed to address communicative challenges in fields where effective communication is crucial. A minimal language vocabulary consists of the 65 semantic primes of NSM, 200–300 semantic molecules, and a small number of context-specific words (Goddard 2021a). It is a research-based take on simplified language for heightened accessibility and cross-translatability. Minimal language promotes the idea that easily translatable texts are also easy to understand, because cross-translatable words represent the concepts most “basic” to human language (Wierzbicka 2020). The approach has gained traction over the last few years, with application in fields such as language teaching (cf. Sadow 2021), science communication (cf. Wierzbicka 2018) and health (cf. Goddard et al. 2021).

The minimal language approach was conceptualized by Anna Wierzbicka in *Imprisoned in English: The hazards of English as a default language*, which discusses the challenges of using English as a global lingua franca (Wierzbicka 2014). In that volume, Wierzbicka proposed a solution for more effective community-wide communication: “Minimal English”. The central idea is that NSM can offer valuable insights to address accessibility issues in fields where effective communication is key. To make NSM more applicable “outside the lab” of theoretical semanticists, Minimal English was introduced as the applied version of NSM (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2018). While there is overlap between NSM and Minimal English, there are also crucial differences. Where NSM requires strict adherence to the vocabulary of primes and allowable constructions, Minimal English offers grammatical and lexical flexibility.

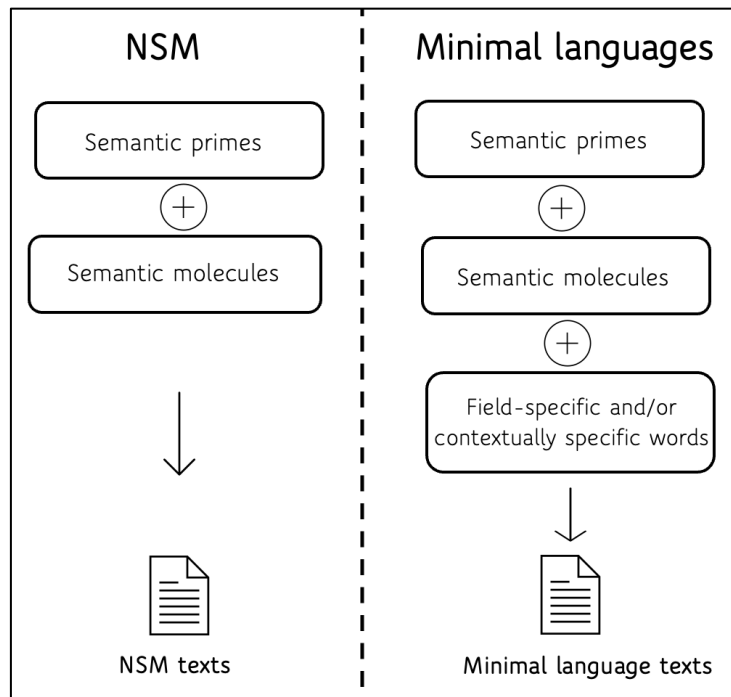


Figure 1: The differences in vocabulary between NSM and the minimal language approach.

The approach relies on a core vocabulary of primes and molecules and can include a (limited) range of field-specific or contextually necessary words (Figure 1). For example, if applying Minimal English to the field of transportation, it may be useful to use words such as *car*, *train*, *boat*, and *plane*, which are not part of the core NSM vocabulary (Sadow 2020). Additionally, the approach offers expanded grammatical freedom: for example, use of closed-ended question constructions. Though flexible, the choice of words, phrases and grammatical constructions should be carefully weighed and considered. The approach requires an awareness of what is the most accessible and cross-translatable solution in a given context. This awareness should guide decisions about what words and constructions to use.

The Minimal English approach offers benefits for effective communication. The use of cross-translatable words means more effective translations. It reduces the toll on translators, as most words used have near- or exact equivalents in the target language, and additionally minimises the risk of flawed translations when using

machine translation.¹ Further, the approach minimises the influence of inherently Anglo concepts and worldviews embedded in the English lexicon (Wierzbicka 2014). Thus, Minimal English is “minimally” English (Goddard 2018).

The approach was originally conceptualised as Minimal “English” because of the global status of English and the need for more cross-translatable communication using English. However, theoretically, because of the core vocabulary of translatable words, the approach can be applied in any language. It is therefore often referred to as a *minimal language(s)* approach (Goddard 2021b). Over time, other names have been attached to the approach as well. Depending on the field of application, different aspects of the approach may be highlighted in the name. Other names include ‘Standard Translatable English’ (STE) (Sadow 2019) and ‘Clear, Explicit, Translatable Language’ (CETL) (Goddard et al. 2021).

2. Minimal languages: A young and rapidly growing approach

The minimal language approach is a novel approach. However, the idea of simplified or reduced vocabulary for effective communication has been theorised before. Such approaches have been proliferating for decades, often focusing on accessible English language communication. For those unfamiliar, what sets the minimal language approach apart from others may not be immediately evident. There are key similarities—all such approaches share a goal of creating accessible communication. Approaches like “Basic English” (Ogden 1929, 1930) and “Globish” (Nerrière 2004; Nerrière & Mellott 2010) use a limited vocabulary including complex words that are difficult to translate, such as *multiplication*, *therefore*, *substance* (Basic English) and *fair*, *right*, and *wrong* (Globish) (Goddard 2019). The “plain language” (Blunden 2007; Eagleson 1998) and “easy-to-read” or “easy languages” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2009; Government of the United Kingdom 2020; Lindholm & Vanhatalo 2021) approaches are authorship guidelines that can be effective, but which rely on principles such as “use short sentences”,

¹ Note that the objective of the approach is not a universally applicable version of English where no cultural and linguistic adaptation is needed. Rather, the objective is to decentre the role of English-specific words and phrases and achieve textual products that are more accessible and suited for cross-translatability. The approach should assist in efforts to provide widespread translations and communication for minority linguistic communities but should not replace such efforts.

which are vague in nature, which means results can vary (Chinn 2019; Leskelä & Vanhatalo 2021). The most obvious difference between these other approaches and minimal languages is that only minimal languages explicitly prioritise translatability.

Scholars have made significant advancements in the application of minimal languages. An edited volume about the approach, *Minimal English for a global world: Improved communication using fewer words*, was published in 2018 (Goddard 2018). The book included research applying minimal languages to the fields of science communication (Wierzbicka 2018), narrative medicine (Marini 2018), history (Christian 2018), and more. Advances were additionally achieved in the fields of agriculture (Caffery & Hill 2018) and second language teaching (Sadow 2019). In 2020, another edited volume was published, *Studies in ethnopragmatics, cultural semantics and intercultural communication: Minimal English (and beyond)* (Sadow et al. 2020). This book included more recent advances, including lexicography (Barrios Rodriguez 2020). Most recently, *Minimal languages in action* was published (Goddard 2021b). This volume included minimal language approaches to language revitalisation (Machin 2021), second language teaching (Bullock 2021; Lee 2021; Sadow 2021), and health communication (Diget 2021; Goddard et al. 2021; Juda 2021; Wierzbicka 2021).

Applying the approach

The development of minimal language texts is a heuristic process, where texts can go through several versions before being considered

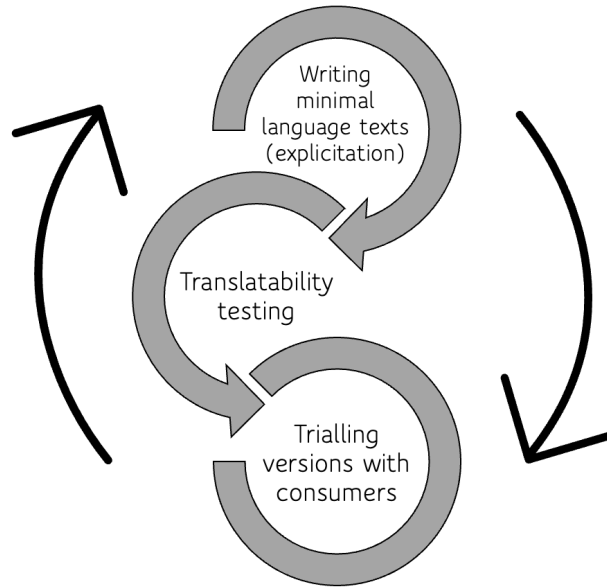


Figure 2: Visualisation of the iterative nature of developing minimal language texts.

final. This process is sometimes called “explicitation” (Goddard et al. 2021). As mentioned, the minimal language approach offers flexibility in both lexicon and grammar. However, flexibility should not be equated with total freedom, and all linguistic content must be carefully considered. One way to monitor if selected lexicon and grammar are working as intended is to conduct “translatability testing”, which helps identify translation pitfalls. This process can indicate what words or phrases may need further consideration. This may be achieved by consulting language experts and running trials with machine translation.

For example, if working with Minimal English, translatability testing using machine translation entails running an English language text through machine translation and assessing the acceptability of the outcome. This exercise is undertaken in the knowledge that machine translation has many shortcomings (Hofstadter, 2018). However, it can be a relevant tool for translatability testing, as such tools are sometimes used in community translations. For example, the

Australian federal government used Google Translate to translate COVID-19 information into community languages—albeit with dire results (Dalzell 2020). Further, non-native speakers of a majority language may use machine translation to translate distributed information such as health messages, weather warnings, or transport timetables. This was the case during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark, where members of linguistic minorities resorted to machine translation to keep up with press briefings, which were mainly given in Danish (Brønholt et al. 2021). It is therefore worth gaining awareness of what words and phrases may be problematic in machine translation and whether it is possible to circumvent such problems with minimal language texts.

Translatability testing with language experts can be done by consulting linguistic experts. These experts may be NSM researchers, linguists, professional translators, or simply native speakers of a given language. Consulting experts provides insight into translation blind spots in languages that the researcher may not be familiar with.

Finally, minimal language texts can be trialled with the target audience. This helps gauge how the intended audience regard the texts, as well any problems they perceive in them. The texts can then be evaluated and reworked accordingly (Figure 2).²

To illustrate the approach in practice, we can compare a conventionally authored English language text to a Minimal English text. We will use health messaging as an example—in this case coughing and sneezing etiquette.³ This text is from an Australian public health poster about COVID-19 (Victoria State Government Health and Human Services 2020):

Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. If you don't have a tissue cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve or elbow.

To rewrite this in Minimal English, key elements can be identified. The message must include both coughing and sneezing, instructions on which body part to cover, as well as what to cover it with. Primes

² The iterative process of developing minimal language texts as illustrated here has been implemented in studies like Goddard and colleagues (2021) and Diget (2021). The method is currently being evaluated and tested in Diget's PhD project.

³ This example was first used in Diget (2021).

should be used where possible, but words for body parts, as well as *cough* and *sneeze* are contextually necessary. In the original text, using a tissue is recommended. However, the English word *tissue* is polysemous, and can mean both biological tissue as well as paper tissue. Not all languages share this polysemy (e.g., Danish, Spanish) and may have different words for biological tissue and paper tissue, so this could cause difficulty in translation. It may be better to suggest coughing or sneezing into the arm, leaving out the instruction about the tissue.⁴ However, the word *arm* is not unproblematic from a translation perspective either: some languages do not have separate words for *arm* and *hand* (e.g., Russian, Polish). One way to work around this would be to choose more specific body parts, such as *elbow* instead of *arm*. However, *arm* may be more contextually common and recognisable to the public. A better route would be to make the distinction clear by saying *use your arm, not your hand*. This decreases the risk of misinterpretations, because it clarifies for potential translators that the distinction is important and using a word for arm/hand will not suffice without elaboration. Thus, we arrive at this option for a Minimal English text:

*When you cough and sneeze, cover your mouth and nose
with your arm, not with your hand.*

As the creation of this example illustrates, using the minimal language approach requires awareness of linguistic features that may cause problems in translation—human or machine—such as polysemy and culture-specific words and phrases.

3. English and beyond: Minimal languages in a Nordic setting

While much work with minimal languages has been conducted with Minimal English, other minimal languages are in development, including “Minimal Korean” (Lee 2021) and “Minimal Spanish” (Bullock 2021). To illustrate the relevance of the approach outside the English-speaking world, we can explore its use among Nordic scholars.

In 2016, a group of NSM researchers launched a Finnish language website promoting the widespread utility of Finnish NSM (popularised as the “65 words” approach). Vanhatalo and Torkki

⁴ This is done in some official government communication as well, for example, in one poster by the New South Wales government in Australia (New South Wales Government 2020).

(2018) relate how public and private sectors in Finland expressed interest in the approach, including religious institutions, speech pathologists, second language teachers, and business operators. For example, the approach piqued the interest of Finnish language teachers because of recent migration surges in Finland, and it was thought that using NSM for migrant learners of Finnish could be highly beneficial. Another study investigated “Minimal Finnish” as an alternative to “Easy Finnish” (Leskelä & Vanhatalo 2021). The study found that communicators and teachers with no prior training in minimal languages (but with experience writing Easy Finnish texts) could apply the principles of the approach to create easy-to-read texts, but that the task was challenging. The study underlines the need for the minimal language approach to be flexible and adaptable, depending on the intended purpose.

In their efforts to make NSM and minimal Finnish publicly accessible, the researchers of these two studies learned valuable lessons. They found that cultural adaptations of the vocabulary can be useful (e.g. a word like “earthquake” is less relevant to the Finnish public than to the Australian public) (Leskelä & Vanhatalo 2021). They also found that providing brief and simple guidelines, including FAQs and engaging visuals, are crucial in engaging members of the public (Vanhatalo & Torkki 2018).

In Denmark, Fernández (2020) has conducted research on applying the minimal language approach to learning. Fernández has investigated NSM in a range of learning scenarios, including at a Danish university. It was found that university students could create NSM explications with minimal instruction, though they evaluated the task as challenging and found using primes alone too restrictive, much like in the Leskelä and Vanhatalo (2021) study. Based on this finding, Fernández argues that the minimal language approach has more appeal than NSM in a classroom setting, as it offers more flexibility (Fernández 2020). Fernández additionally argues that minimal language can be useful in Spanish language teaching materials for upper secondary students in Denmark. This is particularly in the case of, for example, intercultural differences between Denmark and a given Spanish-speaking country. Fernández has argued, for example, that Spanish language teaching materials in Denmark do not adequately cover communicative norms (cf. Fernández & Goddard 2019). To combat this, Fernández suggests developing pedagogical scripts in minimal Spanish, which will be an accessible way for

students to learn about cultural norms (as done with Australian English in Sadow (2019)). This could potentially benefit other foreign language learning in Denmark, such as French and English.

This research by Nordic scholars illustrates that the minimal language approach has significant relevance outside the original conception of Minimal English.

4. Summary

This paper has outlined the foundations, important advances, and practical application of the minimal language approach, an applied version of the NSM approach. It has highlighted how the approach can benefit fields of communication such as health messaging, and its relevant applications outside its original conception as Minimal English, such as in Minimal Finnish. While the minimal language approach is still in its infancy, it is growing rapidly and will no doubt foster research interest for years to come.

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