PEDAGOGICAL PRAGMATICS: NATURAL SEMANTIC METALANGUAGE APPLICATIONS TO LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Lauren Sadow
Griffith University
l.sadow@griffith.edu.au

Susana S. Fernández
Aarhus University

1. Introduction

The natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach to semantics and pragmatics[1] is useful in language classrooms because it offers a set of a few simple, cross-translatable concepts that can be used to explain complex language-specific grammatical and linguistic features, as well as communicative and social norms. The NSM approach is the only approach to semantics and pragmatics that tries to break down complex concepts using simple yet naturally occurring language in reductive paraphrases. Complex technical terms and long dense texts play no part in this approach.

The advantages of a simple language to explain complex culture-specific concepts was proposed in the field of second/foreign (henceforth L2) language learning even before the term "natural semantic metalanguage" was coined as a unified approach. Jean Harkins (1986) argued that traditional descriptions of particles were of little use to language learners and proposed that paraphrases written in simple language that explained what was conveyed, rather than an English equivalent, would be more practical for language classrooms. While her suggestions were not adopted in NSM literature until much later, the applicability of NSM to language learning has underpinned,

---

[1] For a full presentation of the NSM approach, see the introduction to this thematic issue.

and been included in, arguments for the NSM approach over the following 30 years.

Despite this, pedagogical NSM is still an emerging field. At present, a number of NSM scholars are working on testing the viability and usefulness of this approach in language education. There are also ongoing initiatives to train language teachers to apply the NSM methodology in their classroom practice. In this paper, we present the state of the art regarding pedagogical applications of NSM in four different strands: ethnopragmatics, vocabulary building, lexicographical projects, and "minimal languages".

2. Ethnopragmatics

Much research on the application of NSM in language teaching contexts focuses on using ethnopragmatics to describe cultural values or interactional norms through so-called cultural scripts. Cultural scripts are the articulation of a cultural norm, value, or social practice in the simple words and syntax of NSM. Goddard and Wierzbicka (2004) explain that one of the most practical uses for cultural scripts, in addition to their descriptive purpose, is to convey cultural values to cultural outsiders. Similarly, Goddard (2004) advocates for the pedagogical advantage of cultural scripts over more ethnocentric and abstract concepts such as "(im)politeness" or "directness/indirectness" that are so commonly used to explain speech acts in L2 learning. He argues that cultural scripts provide more holistic representations of discourse practices because of their focus on the underlying system of cultural values in the languaculture in question (p. 147).

Following these two papers, a number of authors proposed further ways to use cultural scripts in language classrooms. Yoon (2008) proposed using NSM—and specifically cultural scripts—in conjunction with the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett 1993; Bennett et al. 2003) to illuminate the emic thinking behind interactional norms such as *wh*-imperatives. She suggested using scripts from both the students' first and target language to compare scenarios and ways of thinking. Taking Goddard and Wierzbicka's lead regarding the teaching of culture and pragmatics, Peeters (2009) presented five different ways in which NSM ethnolinguistics can be useful to promoting cultural learning in the L2 classroom: ethnolexicology, ethnophraseology, ethnosyntax, ethnopragmatics, and ethnoaxiology, each with their focus on a specific linguacultural aspect.

In 2010, the concept of the "pedagogical script" was proposed by Goddard (p. 115). This is a version of a cultural script that has been specifically adapted for pedagogical purposes. Pedagogical scripts might contain simplified NSM formulations for increased readability or the addition of references to the target language being taught. Goddard recommended a number of possible ways of adapting cultural scripts into pedagogical scripts, such as making specific reference to a country where the script applied, switching the perspective from first to second person, simplifying the metalanguage to use "he" and "she" more than "someone", and adding information to the script to explicitly address contrasts between a speaker's L1 and L2. Scripts [A] and [B] below illustrate how he applied these adaptations to a cultural script for making requests (adaptations in bold).

[A] Anglo English cultural script for making an "interrogative request" (Goddard 2010:110)

> Many people think like this:
> At many times when I want someone to do something, it can be good if I
>   say something like this:
> "I want you to do something".
> Maybe after I say this you will do it, maybe you will not do it, I don't know.

[B] A pedagogical script for how to make a "request" in English (Goddard 2010: 115)

> **In America/Britain/Australia,** when **you** want someone to do something
>   good for **you**, at many times it will be good if **you** say something like this
>   to **him/her**:
> "I want you to do something good for me."
> Maybe after I say this you will do it, maybe you will not do it, I don't know.
> You say it like this if you know him/her well, or you say it like this if you
>   don't know him/her well
> You say it like this if he/she is someone below you, or you say it like this if
>   he/she is someone above you

From this point forward, authors began to consider not only that NSM *could* be used in teaching concepts in language classrooms but *how* to use it, including its benefits, challenges, and barriers.

Sadow (2014) proposed that L2 teachers could use NSM to facilitate explanations of cultural concepts. By conducting a small-

scale trial using cultural scripts in L2 English classrooms in Australia, she found that it was important to give room for actual language practice alongside the presentation of cultural scripts and also that the scripts should be accompanied by real-life examples. Further trials and feedback received from some participating students led her to propose, in addition to Goddard's already mentioned adaptations for pedagogical scripts, three different versions of cultural scripts focusing on "intention", "interaction", and "interpretation", respectively (Sadow 2018). An example of a script with its three adaptations is below. The original script [C] is first adapted to "intention" in [C1], "when I want to say something like this to someone"; then "interpretation" in [C2] "when someone says something like this to me"; and finally "interaction" in [C3], which illustrates how the thoughts and speech in the script fit into turn-taking conventions Script [C3] can be used as text for a role play.

[C] Original script: Softening disagreement with partial agreement (Wierzbicka 2006:94)

[in Australia, many people think like this:]
when I want to say to another person about something:
  "I know what you think about it, I don't think the same"
it is good to say something like this at the same time:
  "I know what you think about it,
  I think the same about some of these things
  I don't think the same about all these things"

[C1] Intention

When I want to say something like this to someone:
  "I know what you think about it
  I don't think about it like you"
It can be bad if I say it like this:
  "I don't think the same"
It can be good if I say it like this:
  "I think about some of these things like you,
  I don't think about all these things like you"

[C2] Interpretation

When someone says something like this to me:
  "I think about some of these things like you,
  I don't think about all these things like you"

I can know that it is like this:
  They want to say something like this:
    "I don't think about it like you"
They say it like this because they don't want me to feel something bad

[C3] Interaction

Taylor and Jamie know each other.
Taylor says:	"I think about it like this"
[Jamie thinks:	"I don't think about it like Taylor"]
Jamie says:	"I think about some of these things like you,
	I don't think about all these things like you"

Further work (Sadow 2018, 2020b) illustrates that while both students and teachers are enthusiastic about NSM's potential in language teaching, a number of barriers exist—especially for the teachers. For example, NSM training materials are rare. Even more so are classroom exercises that enable teachers to incorporate NSM into their teaching. While some stand-alone professional development workshops have been run in Australia,[2] L2 teachers would benefit from in-depth training programs to develop skills and confidence in using the NSM approach in their teaching.

  Fernández (2016a, 2016b) focuses on NSM's potential contribution to the language classroom through its attention to the cross section between semantics and pragmatics in the form of cultural keywords and their related cultural scripts. She advocates for the use of ethnopragmatics in language teaching contexts as a way to overcome both the lack of focus on pragmatics in L2 classrooms, and the specific challenges of language teaching. In particular, she highlights the advantage of the method using relatively few and simple linguistic resources, as linguistic resources can be scarce in L2 classrooms, particularly for initial stages. She makes the point that if students are taught NSM concepts early in their language education, they can use the paraphrasing strategy as they progress through their language learning. In these papers, she also showcases work from students in an intercultural communication program and their use of NSM to reflect on their own cultural biases and attitudes, demonstrating that even relatively untrained students can still use the

---

[2] Run by Lauren Sadow, see www.translatableenglish.com.

NSM approach for effective introspection and development of intercultural communicative competence.

3. Vocabulary building

While ethnopragmatics has clear applications to L2 teaching, the NSM approach is more commonly used in semantics. This aspect of NSM, and the power of reductive paraphrase has not been ignored in studies discussing L2 learning and NSM.

Goddard and Wierzbicka (2007) suggested that semantic primes, if taught early in beginner L2 classrooms, could constitute a mini vocabulary that would support the introduction and comprehension of other, more complex words. Another advantage is that the semantic primes already exist in the learners' L1 (native language) lexicon, which should make them relatively easy to learn. This idea has been more recently raised both by Fernández (2016a, 2016b) and Goddard (2018). This same idea underpins Bullock's *Learn these words first* dictionary (2014, discussed below; see also Bullock 2011). These more recent publications focus on the idea of "minimal languages" (see the section on minimal languages below for a definition of the concept), where the initial (or early) vocabulary should also include semantic primes as building blocks of meaning for language learners.

Also in connection to the importance of semantic primes in language classroom contexts, other researchers have explored different ways of using NSM and minimal languages to enhance language teaching practices. For example, Tully (2016) focused on the ability of "paraphrasing" as a crucial aspect of strategic competence in L2 learning and explored the contributions of NSM and minimal English to the use of paraphrase in the L2 classroom. In another study, Arnawa (2017) tested the use of NSM paraphrasing with young Balinese schoolchildren with positive results for vocabulary learning.

4. Lexicographical projects

One barrier to using NSM in language classrooms for both language teachers and students is that scant resources are available. There are currently two online NSM-based dictionary projects targeted specifically at language learners and teachers respectively: Bullock's *Learn these words first* (LTWF) dictionary (www.learnthesewordsfirst.com, 2014), and Sadow's *Australian dictionary of invisible culture for teachers* (AusDICT) (http://ausdict.translatableenglish.com, 2021).

In LTWF, Bullock takes Goddard and Wierzbicka's (2007) idea to use semantic primes as a basic vocabulary to build a non-circular dictionary for English language learners. He first describes the NSM primes using pictures and direct translations into other languages, and then uses the NSM semantic primes to build definitions for 300 semantic molecules.[3] These primes and molecules are then used to define each of the 2,000 words in the controlled defining vocabulary of the *Longman dictionary of contemporary English* in several "layers" of complexity. In the near decade that this dictionary has been available, many learners have attested to the usefulness of the simple stratification and levelling of concepts (Bullock 2021).

Sadow's AusDICT (2021b) presents a range of explications, scripts and other texts using "Standard Translatable English" (a language-learning-focused version of minimal English, see Sadow 2021a). This dictionary focuses on Australian English, but rather than including only slang and regionalisms, it instead aims to elaborate the cultural values and attitudes that underpin language use in Australia. This project is unique because unlike regular dictionaries that rely heavily, or only, on semantic explications or definitions, it contains cultural scripts. Proffering the term "cultural dictionary", Sadow argues that all dictionaries should contain more "cultural" content that instructs how the language might be used and interpreted by "native speakers" (2021c). Thus far no similar projects exist in languages other than English. Alongside the dictionary, the website (www.translatableenglish.com) hosts worksheets that illustrate how teachers might use the dictionary content in classrooms.

5. Minimal languages

Semantic molecules have played a part in the NSM approach since at least the early 2000s (e.g. Goddard 2001). Since 2015, their role has expanded as part of the "minimal languages" approach. "Minimal languages" are extensions of the NSM approach, including a larger vocabulary that incorporates universal and near universal molecules, as well as being adaptable to different scenarios and audiences (see e.g. Goddard 2018, 2021). As with NSM primes, minimal languages can be developed for all human languages, although expanded vocabulary and grammatical structures can reduce the cross-translatability of these texts. It is worth noting that the aim is still to

---

[3] A semantic molecule is a non-primitive meaning which functions alongside semantic primes as ready-made "chunks" of meaning (Goddard 2018:Ch.5).

maximize cross-translatability, while also maximizing comprehensibility. While texts in NSM fall easily into the categories of cultural scripts and explications, texts in minimal languages can fulfil a wide range of purposes and are referred to with different labels, depending on their purpose, such as "composition" (Sadow 2020a), "texts", "scripts", and "explanation" (Goddard 2021).

In the volume *Studies in ethnopragmatics, cultural semantics, and intercultural communication: Minimal English (and beyond)* (Sadow et al. 2020), several authors discuss specific ways in which NSM and the minimal languages approach can be applied to language learners to teach both vocabulary and pragmatic competence. In her chapter, Fernández (2020) argues that cultural scripts and explications can be used to fill the gap in language textbooks' pragmatic instruction. Based on a survey of her university students, she also calls for more research and trials on training students to use NSM.

Wong (2020) identified several challenges faced by his students in his English for Academic Purposes courses and discusses how he used minimal languages to identify and correct these misunderstandings. His approach stands out because his students provided explications and texts in minimal languages to demonstrate their understanding.

Sadow (2020b) builds on her previous work on the AusDICT (Sadow 2019) and discusses the design of a potential adaptation of the AusDICT but targeted at language learners rather than teachers. Using information gathered from both language learners and teachers, she identifies the broad topics, some specific information, different use cases, and discusses presentation methods.

In the 2021 volume *Minimal languages in action* (Goddard ed.), the applications of minimal languages are further extended and explored. Of those who focus on applications to language teaching, Peeters (2021) reprises the idea of "pedagogical scripts" and demonstrates how scripts for the same scenario in three languages can be adapted to different language learning contexts and still retain their accuracy, highlighting the benefit of minimal languages in conveying non-native ideas in a language, and their contrastive ability, even in languages other than English. Peeters made several adjustments to Goddard's (2010) list of pedagogical adaptations. Namely, extending the use of 'you' not just in place of 'I' but in place of the generic 'someone', using more standard expressions such as *it is good to +*

infinitive, instead of *it is good if* + finite clause and 'differently' instead of 'not like this', and using a subordinate clause (not usually permitted in NSM syntax) instead of direct speech. Scripts [D] and [E] below illustrate these changes (in bold).

[D] An Anglo cultural script connected with epistemic reserve and openness

> when someone says about something "I think about it like this",
> it is good if this someone says at the same time:
>> "I don't say: I know this
>> I know that someone else can think not like this".

[E] An Anglo pedagogical script connected with epistemic reserve and openness

> in Britain, when **you** say about something: "I think about it like this", **it is good to say** at the same time:
>> "I don't say **that** I know this
>> I know that someone else can think **differently** (from me)."

Fernández (2021) illustrates, with her NSM-based analysis of the term "Latin America", how NSM and minimal languages can be used to understand the impact of the cultural content of textbooks on Spanish learners in a Scandinavian context.

Bullock (2021) builds on his previous work (Bullock 2011, 2014, discussed above) to propose further applications of his initial dictionary project to other languages and other audiences.

Lee (2021) uses minimal language compositions to demonstrate how even extraordinarily complex (to English speakers) systems of honorifics can be unpacked to provide guidance for learners of Korean. Lee partners linguistic explanations with cultural and attitudinal justifications for the use of the different honorifics, illustrating how the semantic and the pragmatic aspects together can function far better than complex English descriptions.

Sadow (2021a) discusses the necessary adaptations of NSM for language learning contexts. Based on research with English language teachers, she proposes standard translatable English as a minimal English designed for language learning, which can be used as a

framework for language teachers to balance the dual needs for cross-translatable language, and for linguistic development in their classrooms.

Minimal languages are, so far, a promising avenue for investigation. Their expanded vocabulary has created a higher interest from language learners and teachers alike, but further development of resources and training is needed before larger-scale trials can take place in classrooms. The two abovementioned edited volumes (Sadow et al. 2020; Goddard 2021) also illustrate the flexibility of the minimal languages approach, with some authors choosing to retain more NSM-like structures and layouts of compositions, while others staying closer to standard varieties of language.

6. Final remarks

We have shown in this paper that many researchers worldwide have advocated for the usefulness of the NSM and minimal languages approaches in the context of L2 learning and teaching. While most researchers have focused on developing "pedagogical scripts" as a significant tool in language teaching classrooms, it is clear that the NSM approach and minimal languages can be used for more than just interactional purposes. Several small-scale tests have rendered promising results, which calls for further exploration. One key barrier to applying this approach in languages other than English is a general imbalance in the amount of NSM work produced for other languages, especially in terms of cultural scripts. We need to continue developing pedagogically adapted scripts and explications to test their usefulness in L2 teaching contexts, including learning materials production. Finally, in-depth training programs for L2 teachers would empower them to bring more cultural and intercultural content to their classroom practice via the methodological tools provided by NSM, ethnopragmatics, and minimal languages.

References

Arnawa, Nengah. 2017. The implementation of natural semantic metalanguage and semantic field in language teaching: A case study. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 8(3), 507–15. https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0803.08

Bennett, Milton J. (1993). Towards ethnorelativism: A developmental model of intercultural sensitivity. In R. Michael Paige (ed.), *Education for the intercultural experience*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Bennett, Janet M., Milton J. Bennett, and Wendy Allen. 2003. Developing Intercultural Competence in the Language Classroom. In Dale L. Lange and R. Michael Paige (eds.) *Culture as the Core: Perspectives on culture in second language learning,* 245–270. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

Bullock, David. 2011. NSM + LDOCE: A non-circular dictionary of English. *International Journal of Lexicography* 24(2), 226–40. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijl/ecq035

Bullock, David. 2014. *Learn these words first: Multi-layer dictionary for second-language learners of English.* Retrieved from: http://learnthesewordsfirst.com

Bullock, David. 2021. Using minimal English (minimal Spanish, etc.) for non-circular learners' dictionaries. In Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Minimal languages in action*, 111–37. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4_5

Fernández, Susana S. 2016a. Possible contributions of ethnopragmatics to second language learning and teaching. In Sten Vikner, Henrik Jørgensen and Elly van Gelderen (eds.), *Let us have articles betwixt us: Papers in historical and comparative linguistics in honour of Johanna L. Wood*, 185–206. Aarhus: Aarhus University.

Fernández, Susana S. 2016b. Etnopragmatik og interkulturel competence: Didaktiske nytænkninger i fremmedsprogsundervisningen. *Ny forskning i grammatik*, 23, 38–54. https://doi.org/10.7146/nfg.v24i23.24643

Fernández, Susana S. 2020. Using NSM and "minimal" language for intercultural learning. In Lauren Sadow, Bert Peeters, and Kerry Mullan (eds.), *Studies in ethnopragmatics, cultural semantics, and intercultural communication: Minimal English (and beyond)*, 191–212. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9979-5_2

Fernández, Susana S. 2021. The conceptual semantics of "Latin America": Popular geopolitics and Spanish language teaching in Denmark. *Journal of Postcolonial Linguistics*, 5(2021), 31–54.

Goddard, Cliff. 2001. Lexico-semantic universals: A critical overview. *Linguistic Typology, 5*(1), 1-65. https://doi.org/10.1515/lity.5.1.1

Goddard, Cliff. 2004. "Cultural scripts": A new medium for ethnopragmatic instruction. In Michel Achard and Susanne Niemeier (eds.), *Cognitive linguistics, second language acquisition, and foreign language teaching*, 143–63. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110199857.143

Goddard, Cliff. 2010. Cultural scripts: Applications to language teaching and intercultural communication. *Studies in Pragmatics (Journal of the China Pragmatics Association)* 3, 105–19.

Goddard, Cliff. 2018. *Ten lectures on natural semantic metalanguage: Exploring language, thought and culture using simple, translatable words*. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004357723.

Goddard, Cliff (ed.). 2021. *Minimal languages in action*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4

Goddard, Cliff, and Anna Wierzbicka. 2004. Cultural scripts: What are they and what are they good for? *Intercultural Pragmatics* 1(2), 153–66. https://doi.org/10.1515/iprg.2004.1.2.153

Goddard, Cliff, and Anna Wierzbicka. 2007. Semantic primes and cultural scripts in language learning and intercultural communication. In Farzad Sharifian and Gary B. Palmer (eds.), *Applied cultural linguistics: Implications for second language learning and intercultural communication*, 105–24. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/celcr.7.08god

Harkins, Jean. 1986. Semantics and the language learner: Warlpiri particles. *Journal of Pragmatics* 10(5), 559–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(86)90014-7

Lee, Jeong-Ae. 2021. Using minimal language to help foreign learners understand Korean honorifics. In Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Minimal languages in action*, 195–221. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4_8

Peeters, Bert. 2009. Language and cultural values: The ethnolinguistic pathways model. *FULGOR: Flinders University Languages Group Online Review* 4(1), 59–73.

Peeters, Bert. 2021. From cultural to pedagogical scripts: Speaking out in English, French, and Russian. In Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Minimal languages in action*, 171–93. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4_7

Sadow, Lauren. 2014. Cultural scripts in practice: An investigation into applying cultural scripts as a pedagogical tool in ESL classrooms. Master's thesis, University of New England.

Sadow, Lauren. 2018. Can cultural scripts be used for teaching interactional norms? *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 41(1), 91–116. https://doi.org/10.1075/aral.17030.sad

Sadow, Lauren. 2019. An NSM-based cultural dictionary of Australian English: From theory to practice. PhD thesis, The Australian National University. https://doi.org/10.25911/5d514809475cb

Sadow, Lauren. 2020a. Minimal English: Taking NSM "out of the lab" in Lauren Sadow, Bert Peeters, and Kerry Mullan (eds.), *Studies in ethnopragmatics, cultural semantics and intercultural communication: Minimal English (and beyond)*, 1–11. Amsterdam: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9979-5_1

Sadow, Lauren. 2020b. Principles and prototypes of a cultural dictionary of Australian English for learners. In Lauren Sadow, Bert Peeters, and Kerry Mullan (eds.), *Studies in ethnopragmatics, cultural semantics, and intercultural communication: Minimal English (and beyond)*, 165–90.

Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9979-5_9

Sadow, Lauren. 2021a. Standard translatable English: A minimal English for teaching and learning invisible culture in language classrooms. In Cliff Goddard (ed.), *Minimal languages in action*, 139–69. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-64077-4_6

Sadow, Lauren. 2021b. *The Australian dictionary of invisible culture for teachers.* Retrieved from: http://ausdict.translatableenglish.com

Sadow, Lauren. 2021c. Where does invisible culture belong in dictionaries? Paper presented at the EURALEX XIX Conference, 9 September 2021, Thessaloniki, Greece.

Sadow, Lauren, Bert Peeters, and Kerry Mullan (eds.). 2021. *Studies in ethnopragmatics, cultural semantics, and intercultural communication: Minimal English (and beyond)*. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9979-5

Tully, Alex. 2016. Applications of NSM and minimal English in second language teaching. Master's thesis, The Australian National University.

Wierzbicka, Anna. 2006. *English: Meaning and culture*. New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195174748.001.0001

Wong, Jock. 2020. Semantic challenges in understanding global English: *Hypothesis*, *theory*, and *proof* in Singapore English. In Lauren Sadow, Bert Peeters, and Kerry Mullan (eds.), *Studies in ethnopragmatics, cultural semantics, and intercultural communication: Minimal English (and beyond),* 191–212. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-32-9979-5_7

Yoon, Kyung-Joo. 2008. An alternative model for the development of pragmatic competence. 언어연구 *[The Journal of Studies in Language]* 24(1), 125–48. https://doi.org/10.18627/jslg.24.1.200805.125