POSTCOLONIAL SEMANTICS

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1. Introduction

"Postcolonial semantics" is the study of meaning and meaning-making in postcolonial contexts, and at the same time, it is a way of articulating and mediating metasemantic critique. In this paper, my aim is to provide a brief overview of postcolonial semantics as an emerging field and approach, focusing on central concepts and analytical scopes.

The theoretical backdrop for the establishment of postcolonial semantics is partly found in the developments of new fields, such as colonial and postcolonial linguistics, postcolonial pragmatics, and decolonial linguistics (see e.g. Errington 2008; Stolz et al. 2016; Levisen & Sippola 2019; Deumert et al. 2020; Faraclas & Delgado 2021, Perez & Sippola 2021), and partly in the cognitive and cultural renewals of linguistic semantics. The cognitive cultural semantics to which this special issue is devoted is a conceptual kind of semantics, as opposed to a "realist" (or "referential") semantics. It is also a semantics of "understanding" (U-semantics), rather than a semantics of "truth" (T-semantics)—see Levisen, Fernández and Hein, this volume. Synthesizing the overall aims of these movements, we can say that postcolonial semantics is a conceptual and U-semantic approach to the linguacultural complexities that colonial language encounters have brought about, and an approach that combines cultural and critical perspectives. Postcolonial semantics engages critically with the semantic conceptualizations born out of colonial-era linguistic worldviews, especially in the form of a critique of the terminological and conceptual biases that have entered into the frameworks of modern cognitive and social sciences, including Eurocentric and Anglocentric concepts and terminologies that characterize the vocabulary and priorities of modern linguistics (Levisen 2019).

Like the postcolonial pragmatics of Anchimbe and Janney (Anchimbe 2018; Anchimbe & Janney 2011), postcolonial semantics does not confine itself to the themes and theorems of postcolonial and decolonial theories in literary and cultural studies. The decolonization of different academic fields and subfields requires different measures. Therefore, postcolonial semantics has to identify its own key problems and questions, while at the same time conversing with the broader movement in postcolonial linguistics, and with postcolonial/decolonial scholarship in general.

2. Background and key concepts

The meanings of words and constructions are invisible, and all attempts to account for linguistic meaning requires a metalanguage. While the question of metalanguage is central to semantics in general, for the postcolonial semanticist, the question of metalanguage carries additional weight. This is because of the power of English as a global metalanguage in contemporary Anglo–international social and cognitive sciences. Taking categories of English as a default for comparison and theorizing creates an insidious problem for global inquiry (Wierzbicka 2014). The Anglocentrism that follows from taking English categories as the default "meta" in the study of diversity of human languages and linguacultures inevitably creates a distorting effect. Only through "cross-linguistic confrontation" (Leezenberg et al. 2003) that takes seriously the multiple ways of conceptualizing the world can we identify and circumvent the "conceptual colonialism" (Levisen 2016) of modern Anglo English.

Other European languages that played a part in the era of Eurocolonial expansion and world dominance, in particular, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and to a lesser extent Dutch, German, and Danish, are, despite their decreasing metalinguistic status, still locally powerful defaults. The semantic critique of metalanguage is therefore targeting not only "Anglo" defaults but "Eurocolonial" defaults generally. The aim of semantic metalanguage studies is to provide alternatives to these defaults, and to shed new light on the limitations and possibilities for doing comparative, cross-semantic, and trans-semantic analysis. As one of the few well-established theories of semantics that is explicitly anti-Anglocentric, and which has offered a critique of the conceptual colonialism of modern academic discourse, the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach to semantic-conceptual analysis (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014; Goddard 2018) has proven to be an important ally for postcolonial semantics.

Postcolonial semantics is a reflexive type of research that requires active listening. It is a semantics that implies listening to other linguistic worldviews beyond those associated with standardized European languages and, more specifically, to the universe of meaning encapsulated in key concepts of place and people, of ways of feeling, thinking, knowing, and speaking (Levisen, forthcoming). The vast majority of semantic work has been done either on "Anglo Englishes"—the prestigious, standard varieties known as British English, American English, etc.—or on standardized European languages. In fact, little semantic work has been done outside of the Global North. The ultimate goal of postcolonial semantics is to rethink semantics as a global rather than Anglo/European discipline and, in doing so, be willing to unmake the defaults and the theorems that have characterized semantic theorizing and styles of analysis.

3. Examples and explications

In this section, I will briefly discuss some recent studies that can serve as models for postcolonial semantic work. These are recent, original studies on specific words in specific contexts, and they all provide both cultural and critical takes on the analysis. The examples revolve around meaning-making in a domain that is of particular importance for postcolonial semantics, namely the conceptualization of "place" and the related theme of "people in places". Needless to say, many other domains are of importance too, such as social categories (Levisen & Priestley 2017), emotions (Levisen 2016; Hein 2020a), language ideologies (Levisen 2017; Hein 2020a), personhood constructs (Levisen & Jogie 2015) and concepts of visuality (Levisen et al. 2016), to mention just a few.

The semantic study of place, and of people in places, includes a variety of domains and directions, such as the semantics of landscape (Bromhead 2018), cityscapes and urban structures (Braga 2017), popular geopolitics (Fernández 2021; Levisen and Fernández 2021), and the Europeanization of place (Hein 2020b).

In a highly insightful semantic portrait of *country*, *land*, and *nation* as keywords of Anglo English, Goddard aims "to semantically deconstruct European words and concepts … and thus help to denaturalise them" (2020:9). He also points to the close link between Anglo semantics and Anglo–international discourse (2020:10):

> *The importance of the words country, land and nation,*
> *and their derivatives, in Anglophone public and political*

> *discourses is obvious. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration*
> *to say that, without the support of words like these,*
> *discourses of nationalism, patriotism, immigration,*
> *international affairs, land rights, anti-colonialism and*
> *postcolonialism would be literally impossible.*

Goddard provides lexicographic portraits of *country*, *land*, and *nation*. For *country,* he provides several different explications, including the concept of *countries* in the modern global sense used in national discourses and international relations. The semantic explication of *countries* (in this sense) has been replicated below.

[A] An explication for *countries* (Goddard 2020:12)

    a.   many places of one kind
            people can know what these places are called
            all these places are parts of the earth
            people can know where on earth these places are
    b.   people can think about the earth like this:
            "all places on earth where people can live are parts of one place of this
              kind"
            people can think about a place of this kind like this: "many many people
             live in this place"
    c.   in a place of this kind it is like this: people in this place cannot do some
             things,
            at the same time they can't not do some other things
            it can be like this because someone (or: some people) above other people
             in this place says so
    d.   at the same time people can think about a place of this kind like this:
            "people in this place are people of one kind"

Although this sense of *country* is now considered a default in political and international discourse and cognition, Goddard's analysis highlights the culture-specific and era-specific nature of the concept. Consider for instance, the "external viewpoint" that reflects a map-based view of "the earth", and the vision of the earth in which all people by necessity have to live in countries, and where the aspect of "law" (c), and an imagined community (d) are highlighted. Compared to, say, the view of place as it is conceptualized in the linguacultures of indigenous Australians, where place tends to be conceptualized as something like "a living entity", with an emphasis on water and natural riches (Goddard 2020:23), the concept of *countries* stands out

as a particular conceptualization of place, one which emerged in the era of European identity nationalism, and which was central to Eurocolonial discourses of place.

The importance of *country* for conceptual elaboration is not only found in the semantic domain of place, or in Anglo English. The next example is from Porteño Spanish, the kind of Spanish associated with Argentina's capital Buenos Aires. Porteño Spanish is itself a postcolonial variety (cf. Pérez and Sippola 2021), a way of speaking that is not only influenced by, but created through colonial encounters. In European linguacultures, postcolonial semantic analysis focuses on the parts of the lexicon that are either influenced by colonial encounters, or which have influenced global keywords and discourses. In postcolonial varieties, most parts of the lexicon are of potential interest for postcolonial-semantic analysis. Consider, Hein's analysis of *viveza criolla*, a concept in Porteño Spanish that can be roughly translated as "creole cunning" or "artful cheating" (2020a). It is a category of sociality, of how people do things with other people. This concept plays an important role in Argentine discourse, but similar themes have been described in related South-American linguacultures. Hein (2020a:101) says:

> *Argentines lay claim to viveza criolla, but rightly so do Venezuelans, in whose country the same word with a similar meaning has wide currency. In Brazil, viveza's counterpart takes the form of* jeitinho *(roughly, "little way/knack"), in Peru, of* criollada *(roughly, "creole action"), and, in Colombia, of* malicia indígena *(roughly, "indigenous malice")*

Hein provides the following semantic analysis for "viveza criolla" (in the frame of a concrete instance of *viveza criolla*).

a. something of one kind
    in Argentina many people can do things of this kind, not like in other
     countries
b. when someone does something of this kind, this someone thinks like this:
    "if I do this in this way, something can happen because of it, it will be good
     for me"
    people can think about it like this:
    "it can be bad for other people if someone does something like this"
c. at the same time, they often think about it like this:
    "this someone did something very well, not everyone can do something
     like this,

in Argentina we often do things like this"
when they think like this, they can feel something good because of this

From the viewpoint of the concept, this type of sociality is portrayed as specific to Argentina. It typifies recurrent scenarios of a "self-centered plan … [that] does not necessarily contemplate its bad consequences for other people, even if this may be evident to other people" (pp. 108–09). At the same time, these skills are celebrated and admired. The ambivalence encoded into *viveza* and other Porteño keywords, according to Hein's analysis, were formed by "inequities and social tensions" engendered by a nineteenth-century political project in Argentina that sought to conceptually Europeanize the people and the place.

4. On the Nordic relevance of postcolonial semantics

Colonialism has not featured prominently as a research topic in Nordic language studies. Until recently, it has hardly featured at all. The "colonial amnesia" that has characterized Nordic academia and public life is in many ways also an amnesia of language and linguistics. Nordic language studies, like European language studies in general, is a story of the silencing of certain kinds of semantics, and a naturalization of the semantic configurations of standard written national varieties.

On this background, at least five questions can be identified as central to the study of postcolonial semantics in Nordic contexts:

(i)   The semantics of keywords in the discourse of colonialism. What do the words *koloni* and *kolonialisering* mean? Intuitively, these words are prototypically "Southern"-focused, and configured around "tropical" ideas, which in turn erase, or marginalize the Atlantic High North, the Arctic areas, and Sápmi from the context of European/Nordic colonization.
(ii)   The politics of metalinguistic practice in semantic description and theorizing. Through what metalanguage is knowledge about the world presented? What metalanguages have dominated Nordic language studies, and Nordic studies in general?
(iii)   The semantics of particular words and constructions in contemporary and historical Nordic linguacultures that encode and afford colonial themes. What words have colonial baggage,

and how is this baggage shaped and configured? (See e.g. Levisen 2020.)

(iv)   The semantics of postcolonial language varieties that have emerged through language encounters and contact in the Nordic region. What kinds of hybrids and semantic innovations have been coined in these varieties, and what kinds of linguistic worldviews are associated with these varieties or linguacultures?

(v)   The semantics of words and constructions in the linguacultures of colonized peoples. How are coloniality, neocoloniality, and anticolonial struggles configured semantically and represented in the discourse of these people—or in world areas with Nordic colonial presence?

The list above is by no means exhaustive, and it is currently not possible to outline an entire research program for postcolonial semantics in the North. The way forward at this very early stage is to take one word at a time. And I will end this short presentation by proposing a semantic explication that has yet not been published. It exemplifies, in the drop of a single word, how words can capture experienced reality, and the analytical power and scope of postcolonial semantics. The case in point is *flyfrisk* 'plane fresh', a word from Arctic Danish, or Danish as it is spoken in Nuuk, the capital of Kalaallit Nunaat. It is a mock-concept, when used in the construction "person X is *flyfrisk*". The word was originally coined to describe the type of food in supermarkets that is imported from Denmark, including vegetables and other kinds of food that have "freshly" arrived from Denmark by plane. The construction in question, *flyfrisk*, has been extended to conceptualize Danish professionals, who are flown in to Kalaallit Nunaat to cover expertise in areas, such as teaching and administration, and whose engagement is highly transient. My first attempt at capturing the semantics of *flyfrisk* in this construction goes as follows:

Someone X is *flyfrisk*

a.   I say: this person is someone of one kind
    people of this kind are from Denmark

b.   everyone here knows: they are here for a short time
    after this short time, they will not be here anymore,
    after this, other people of the same kind will be here for a short time

c.   people of this kind know many things, not like people here know things
    because of this a person like this can think like this:

> "it is very good for people here that I am here now"
> d.   when people here say something about people of this kind in this way,
>   they can laugh

In this first attempt at explicating *flyfrisk*, I propose four sections. In (a) and (b), a typified and prototypical social situation is represented in which yet another person from Denmark arrives in Kalaallit Nunaat. The deictic 'here' is a marker of local belonging. In (c) the alleged expert status of these people from Denmark is modelled, but a semantic hook in the phrase 'it is very good for people here that I am here now' allows for a discourse on the neocolonial saviour syndrome in this type of Dane. In (d) the jocular nature of the word is modelled. I have not accounted for the figurative nature of the term, as I am not sure whether this is an obligatory part of the synchronic semantic profile. However, an additional component along the lines of "like when planes fly from Denmark to here with goods" could be added to account for this link.

Apart from the trends and ideas sketched in this overview paper, postcolonial semantics offers different inroads for collaborative and comparative research, and for an unmaking of the linguistics of "language families" and the study of "whole languages". It envisions a linguistic study of worldviews and conceptualizations – and of the sociality of meaning-making in postcolonial contexts.

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