



COGNITIVE CULTURAL SEMANTICS: A NORDIC GUIDE TO NATURAL SEMANTIC METALANGUAGE (NSM)

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1. Introduction*

As human beings, we live profoundly meaning-centred lives. But the words and meanings we live by, and the discourse rituals of our daily interactions, most often escape our conscious awareness. This is why the role of linguistic analysis is to “light up the thick darkness of language”, as Benjamin Lee Whorf put it (1956:73), and “thereby much of the thought, the culture, and the outlook upon life of a given community” (ibid). In one of her early visionary works on linguistic semantics, Anna Wierzbicka (1980:22) stated: “this is what semantics is very largely about: the exploration of the depths of our consciousness”. The study of semantics brings together what we have all too often compartmentalized as “language and culture” and “lexicon and grammar”. United by the holistic attempt to understand and illuminate meaning, semanticists have a question space that stands out. Unlike the political scientist who might ask “what is democracy?”, or the biologist who might ask “what is an animal?”, semanticists frame their questions differently: “what does *democracy*

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mean?”, and “what does *animal* mean?”. Semantic studies centre on what words mean to speakers in a given community, and successful semantic analyses capture “emic” perspectives: insider construals of meaning, rather than the views, definitions, and registers of experts and outside observers.

The contributors to this special issue all share the idea that the meaning of words intersects with habitual ways of thinking and knowing (roughly, the “cognitive” aspect), and more broadly with ways of living (roughly, the “cultural” aspect), and the approach to semantics that we seek to advance can therefore be called “cognitive cultural semantics”. We also share an approach and a methodology, namely, the “natural semantic metalanguage”, or NSM approach for short, and its method of paraphrase. The NSM approach grew out of Australian–international semantic scholarship—and has from its onset been a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic approach to meaning analysis, with key publications by Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard (Wierzbicka 1996, 1997, 2014; Goddard 2011, 2018a; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014), Bert Peeters (2015, 2019), and Zhengdao Ye (2017). The NSM approach has increasingly found inroads in Nordic scholarship, and the aim of this special issue is to open up the insights of this approach to the Nordic audience. In the Nordic countries, scholars have taken part in this global research community in various ways and contributed to the research over the past decades. As the first of its kind, the current special issue seeks to bring together these insights and provide a ‘state of the art’ of this line of research. We are doing this by reviewing the terminologies and key concepts of the NSM approach, through surveying the literature and undertaking new studies within this framework. In this special issue, the introduction is followed by a series of short papers that all emphasize the Nordic tonality of NSM research—and then by full research papers that showcase a variety of topics.

Nordic engagement in this kind of cognitive cultural semantics has at least three characteristics that have crystalized from the interaction with global NSM-based research. Firstly, the Nordic community of NSM scholarship is not exclusively engaged with the study of languages traditionally associated with *Norden* “the North”, such as Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, etc., but has taken an explicit interest in “Southern” concerns, especially in the study of Global South Englishes and Spanishes, as well as in creole studies. Certainly, the languages associated with the North are a priority, given

the importance of these languages in Nordic social realities, but Nordic NSM stands out by its tendency to emphasize “intercultural” semantics, the emergent communicative cultures of language learners, and of meaning-making in linguacultural contact zones. Perhaps one could say that Nordic NSM research has tended to work from the premise of a “semantics of people”, rather than simply a “semantics of languages”. Thus, a special focus on the social lives of words and on the cultural keywords and constructions that matter in people’s lives has taken precedence over achieving fully-fledged descriptions of “languages and varieties”.

Closely related to this emphasis, the second characteristic of the Nordic NSM take on cognitive cultural semantics is to abandon the sharp divisions between “linguistics vs. applied linguistics” and “semantics vs. applied semantics”. In traditional accounts, the semantics of, say, language teaching or translation studies is likely to be classified as “applied semantics”, whereas studies into the semantics of grammar are likely to be thought of as “semantics”. These boundaries make little sense to us, as both deal with the “semantics of people”: their words, their worlds, and the social life of words. The traditions in linguistics that seal off “the language system” from the rest of the social world often operate on implicit hierarchies that grant more prestige to so-called “pure” or “proper” semantics than to studies captured under the label of applied semantics. To us, a reorientation towards the “semantics of people” allows us to think less rigidly about this old disciplinary division, as well as to rethink the status of semantics within the broader landscape of linguistics.

A third characteristic of the Nordic NSM community is an openness towards cooperation and collaboration with many kinds of scholarship. This openness is a global tendency of NSM research, but it has Nordic crystallizations that are worth mentioning. For instance, interactions between the cognitive cultural semantics of NSM research with language teaching and language learning (e.g. Fernández 2016a, 2016b, 2021; Sadow & Fernández, this volume), intercultural communication (e.g. Caviglia et al. 2017; Fernández 2020b), linguistic anthropology (e.g. Levisen 2019a, 2021), postcolonial language studies (e.g. Levisen forthcoming; Mašková 2022), historical and literary linguistics (e.g. Levisen 2016b; Hamann & Levisen 2017), reading and writing studies (e.g. Arle 2018; Vanhatalo & Lindholm 2020), psycholinguistics (e.g. Gladkova et al. 2016) and psychometrics (e.g. Goddard et al. 2021); public communication (e.g.

Vanhatalo & Torkki 2017) and “easy language” research (e.g. Lindholm & Vanhatalo 2021, Leskelä & Vanhatalo 2021), interactional linguistics (e.g. Karlsson 2020), and discourse studies (e.g. Levisen & Waters 2017), could be mentioned as examples of fruitful arenas.

The NSM approach is optimized for deep and detailed semantic studies and interpretative analysis of linguacultures, but also for meta-studies and meta-analytics. This makes NSM a possible accompanying approach in many interdisciplinary research projects, as it can help sharpening and clarifying the analysis, anchoring the interpretations in ways that are accessible to specialists from different disciplines. At the same time, the approach provides tools for self-reflection, critical language awareness, and most importantly: for critical metalanguage awareness.

2. The NSM approach: A Nordic and global history

The natural semantic metalanguage is, as its name says, a “semantic metalanguage”: that is, a language used in the service of describing and representing meaning. The special feature of this semantic metalanguage is that it is carved out of “natural language” (hence a “natural” semantic metalanguage). This means that the semantic metalanguage relies on “non-technical” words from ordinary language, on simple word meanings such as ‘I’ and ‘you’, ‘big’ and ‘small’, ‘think’ and ‘feel’, ‘see’ and ‘hear’—word meanings that are maximally simple, and maximally translatable. By contrast, most competing metalanguages are technonymical by nature—they rely either on formal symbols (such as $P \vee \neg P \equiv T$), technical descriptive vocabulary (such as “1P.SG”, “2P.SG”, “PL”), or conceptual technonyms (such as “collective intentionality”, “performativity”, and “the Anthropocene”).

The intellectual history of the NSM approach has already been accounted for in various publications, and so are the more biographical aspects of the works of Anna Wierzbicka (Windle & Besemeres 2020) and Cliff Goddard (Peeters 2020). The purpose of this section is not to cover this history once more, but rather to provide a specific angle on NSM research history, namely a Nordic–global lens. The original impetus of Wierzbicka’s studies, and what later came to be known as the NSM approach, was (i) an empirical search for shared human concepts, along with (ii) an empirical quest for understanding culture-specific and culture-motivated concepts and

discourses. This combination of what could be called a “maximalist approach to linguaculture” and a “minimalist approach to universalism” is a signature of the NSM approach and the nexus that drives the analytical practice (see also Section 4, below). The conceptual analysis of the NSM approach aims to utilize shared, basic concepts, to shed light on more complex, culturally specific concepts by the process of semantic explication, and to provide analysis of culture-specific configurations of meaning based on the building blocks of “basic human” concepts.

3. Key concepts in the NSM approach

This section introduces the NSM approach to linguacultural analysis, focusing on the terms “semantic primes”, “semantic molecules”, “semantic explication”, “semantic templates”, and “(cultural) scripts”.

In NSM theory, **semantic primes** are simple, cross-translatable concepts. They are ultimately simple meanings in the sense that they cannot be decomposed into simpler units of meanings. According to NSM research, there are 65 semantic primes (see the full list below), and these are believed to have exponents across all languages (Goddard 2018a). The primes have been identified through several decades of empirical research, and expanded to their current inventory, from a first conservative estimate of 14 primes in the inaugural publication by Wierzbicka (1972) (on the history of prime identification, see also Goddard 2008b, 2018b:ch2). When we talk about semantic primes, we never talk about “the Danish primes”, “the Finnish primes”, or “the English primes”, but always about Danish, Finnish and English **exponents** of the semantic primes. *Jeg* is a Danish exponent of the same prime that in English is realized as *I*, and in Finnish as *minä*. *Du* is a Danish exponent of the same prime that in English is realized as *you*, and in Finnish as *sinä*, etc. The semantic primes are considered to be “the intersection of all languages” (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014:13), an expression of the minimal universalism that characterizes human language.

In the following, we will present tables of exponents of primes, firstly, in two global languages, English and Spanish, followed by three languages associated with the North: Danish, Swedish and Finnish.

I~ME, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY, KIND, PART

THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE~ANOTHER

ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW
GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
SAY, WORDS, TRUE
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
(IS) MINE
LIVE, DIE
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, VERY, MORE, LIKE

Table 1 Semantic primes, exponents of primes in Anglo English (based on Goddard 2018a)

YO, TÚ~USTED, ALGUIEN, ALGO~COSA, GENTE, TIPO (DE), PARTE
(DE)
ESTO~ESO, MISMO, OTRO
UNO, DOS, ALGUNOS, TODO, MUCHO, POCO
BUENO, MALO, GRANDE, PEQUEÑO
SABER, PENSAR, QUERER, NO QUERER, SENTIR, VER, OÍR
DECIR, PALABRAS, VERDAD
HACER, PASAR, MOVERSE
ESTAR (EN UN SITIO), HAY, SER (ALGO/ALGUIEN)
(ES) MÍO
VIVIR, MORIR
CUÁNDO~CUANDO~TIEMPO, AHORA, ANTES, DESPUÉS, MUCHO TIEMPO, POCO TIEMPO, POR
UN TIEMPO, MOMENTO
DÓNDE~DONDE~SITIO, AQUÍ, ARRIBA (DE), DEBAJO (DE), LEJOS (DE), CERCA (DE), A (UN)
LADO, DENTRO (DE), TOCAR
NO, TAL VEZ, PODER, PORQUE~POR, SI, MUY, MÁS, COMO

Table 2 Semantic primes, exponents of primes in Spanish (based on Fernández 2020a, Fernández & Goddard 2020)

In Tables 1 and 2, the list of English and Spanish exponents of primes are presented. In the literature, there are different graphical traditions for presenting the primes. For the sake of overview, we have opted for a simple table graphic that present exponents of all primes, including the most important combinatorial variants of the exponents, known in NSM as **allolexes**. These are marked with the notation ~. For example, there are two exponents in Danish, DU and DIG, for which English needs only a single exponent: YOU. DIG is viewed as an allolex of DU, as there is no paraphrasable semantic difference between these two words.

JEG-MIG, DU-DIG, NOGEN, NOGET~TING, FOLK~MENNESKER, KROP, SLAGS, DELE
 DEN HER, DEN SAMME, EN ANDEN
 EN, TO, NOGET, ALLE, MEGET~MANGE, LIDT ~FÅ
 GOD, DÅRLIG, STOR, LILLE~SMÅ
 VED, TÆNKER, VIL HA', VIL IKKE HA', HØRER, SER, FØLER
 SIGER, ORD, DET PASSER
 GØR, SKER, BEVÆGER SIG
 ER (ET STED), DER ER, ER (NOGEN/NOGET)
 (ER) MIN
 LEVER, DØR
 TID~NÅR~DA, NU, FØR, EFTER, LÆNGE, KORT TID, NOGET TID, ET ØJEBLIK
 STED~HVOR, HER, OVER, UNDER, LANGT VÆK, TÆT PÅ, SIDE, INDENI, RØRER
 IKKE, MÅSKE, KAN, FORDI~PÅ GRUND AF, HVIS, MEGET, MERE, SOM

Table 3 Semantic primes, exponents in Danish (based on Levisen 2012, 2021)

JAG-MIG, DU-DIG, NÅGON, NÅGONTING~TING, FOLK~MÄNNISKOR, KROPP, SLAGS, DELAR
 DEN HÄR, SAMMA, ANNAN
 EN, TVÅ, NÅGRA, ALLA, MYCKET~MÅNGA, LITE ~FÅ
 BRA, DÅLIG, STOR, LITEN~SMÅ
 VET, TÄNKER, VILL, VILL INTE, HÖR, SER, KÄNNER
 SÄGER, ORD, ÄR SANT
 GÖR, HÄNDER, RÖR SIG

ÄR (NÄGONSTANS), DET FINNS, ÄR (NÄGON/NÄGONTING),
(ÄR) MIN
LEVER, DÖR
TID~NÄR~DÅ, NU, INNAN, EFTER, LÄNGE, EN KORT STUND, EN STUND, ETT ÖGONBLICK
PLATS~VAR, HÄR, ÖVER, UNDER, LÅNGT BORTA, NÄRA, SIDA, INUTI, RÖR (VID)
INTE, KANSKE, KAN, EFTERSOM~PÅ GRUND AV, OM, MYCKET, MER, SOM

Table 4 Semantic primes, exponents in Swedish (based on Goddard & Karlsson 2008; Löfstrand 2013; Levisen et al. 2017; Arle 2018; Arle p.c.)

As one would expect, the Danish and Swedish tables of exponents are similar, with only a few exceptions in basic lexicalization. Most notably, the prime ‘feel’, is lexicalized in Danish as FØLER, and in Swedish as KÄNNER. Some exponents in Danish exist in Swedish as near-synonyms or stylistic variants and vice versa. For instance, the prime ‘happen’ is lexicalized in Danish as SKER, and in Swedish as HÄNDER, but *händer* is a stylistic variant of Danish SKER, and Swedish *sker* of HÄNDER. When including the Finnish list of primes, the first language in our sample outside of the Indo-European language family, the exponents of prime, of course, differ in their formal structure.

MINÄ, SINÄ, JOKU~IHMINEN~HÄN, JOKIN~ASIA, IHMISET, RUUMIS~KEHO, -LAINEN~
LÄINEN~LAJI, OSA
TÄMÄ~SE, SAMA, TOINEN~MUU
YKSI~ERÄS, KAKSI, JOKIN~JOKU~MUUTAMA, KAIKKI, PALJON~MONI, VÄHÄN~HARVA
HYVÄ, PAHA, ISO~SUURI, PIENI
TIETÄÄ, AJATELLA, TAHTOA, EI TAHTOA, TUNTUA, NÄHDÄ, KUULLA
SANOA, SANAT, TOSI~TOTTA
TEHDÄ, TAPAHTUA, LIIKKUA
OLLA (JOSSAIN), OLLA (OLEMASSA), OLLA (JOKU/JOKIN),
(SE ON) MINUN
ELÄÄ, KUOLLA
MILLOIN~JOLLOIN~SILLOIN~AIKA~KUN, NYT, ENNEN~AIKAA SITTEN~AIKAISEMMIN,
JÄLKEEN~AJAN KULUTTUA, KAUAN (AIKAA)~PITKÄN AJAN, VÄHÄN AIKAA ~LYHYEN
AJAN, JONKIN AIKAA, HETKI

MISSÄ~JOSSA~PAIKKA~SSA, TÄSSÄ~TÄÄLLÄ, PÄÄLLÄ~YLÄPUOLELLA,
ALLA~ALAPUOLELLA, KAUKANA, LÄHELLÄ, PUOLI, SISÄ-, KOSKEA

EI~OLLA...MATTA, EHKÄ, VOIDA, KOSKA~VUOKSI~TAKIA, JOS, HYVIN~ERITTÄIN,
ENEMMÄN~LISÄÄ (~ENÄÄ), NÄIN~KUIN~KUTEN~TÄLLÄ TAVALLA

Table 5 Semantic primes, Finnish exponents (based on Vanhatalo et al. 2014; Vanhatalo & Tissari 2017; Vanhatalo, p.c.)

The identification of exponents in a particular language is a research-intensive and time-consuming effort. It is often relatively easy to come up with a first rough list of exponents but testing the viability of the proposed exponents of primes, discussing their possible alternatives, and accounting for their allolexy patterns and grammatical combinatorics requires extensive collaborative research over several years. For the same reason, there are major differences in the progress of prime exponency research in Nordic linguacultures. Danish, Finnish, and Swedish are well-researched; initial work on Norwegian (Bokmål and Nynorsk) has been carried out (Haugen 2016). There is also very initial work on Jutlandic (West Danish regional dialects) (Levisen et al. 2017), and historical literary varieties (Golden Age Danish) (Hamann & Levisen 2017). To our knowledge, there is no work on prime identification in Icelandic and Faroese, nor on any of the Nordic sign languages. Likewise, there is no published work on Kalaallisut,¹ or Saami, or on linguacultures related to Nordic colonialism, except for initial work on Virgin Island Dutch Creole (Levisen & Bøegh 2017), a historical contact language once spoken in the former Danish West India. There is well-established work on Arabic (Habib 2011) and Farsi (Arab 2021), both important minority languages in the Nordic context, but no work on, say, other important migrant languages in the Nordic region such as Somali, Tigrinya, or Tamil. In the current context of migration, we also note that basic work on Ukrainian is yet to be carried out.²

NSM analysis is based on **paraphrase**—more specifically, on paraphrase grounded in combinations of semantic primes. The key

¹ But several NSM-based student projects on Kalaallisut were carried out in 2019–2021 at the Ilisimatusarfik. Likewise, the Wierzbicka-inspired work of Trondhjem (2017) on emotions in Kalaallisut serves as an inspiration for further cognitive-cultural semantic studies.

² Russian, by contrast, is among the most well-studied languages in terms of semantic primes and the NSM approach.

idea is to let simple meanings (primes) illuminate complex meanings, and shared human concepts light up culturally specific concepts. Semantically complex words, phrases, and grammatical constructions in any linguaculture can be analyzed through semantic primes in any version. For practical reasons and purposes, complex Finnish word meanings will most likely be analyzed through Finnish NSM and/or English NSM, but in principle, Finnish word meanings could be equally analyzed via the Arabic or Spanish version of NSM—or any other existing version of NSM. When the paraphrase method is used to capture the meaning of lexicalized units (words, phrases, and grammatical constructions), we talk about **semantic explications**. When the paraphrase method is used to study linguacultures more broadly, we talk about **scripts**, or **cultural scripts**—“shared understandings (of a given community of discourse), especially evaluative and prescriptive or proscriptive ones, articulated in universal human concepts” (Wierzbicka 2006:35). All semantic explications and articulations of cultural scripts are hypotheses—that is, they are testable and debatable attempts to capture meanings. While explications and scripts are often first formed on the basis of careful reflections, observations, and intuitions of researchers, they can be substantiated via different empirical types of studies, such as corpus studies, discourse studies, psycholinguistic experiments, linguistic-ethnographic fieldwork and semantic consultations with speakers.

When writing semantic explications of words and constructions, or articulating cultural scripts of shared understandings, NSM researchers not only adhere to a paraphrase of simple words in a simple combination, but also observe that words come in kinds and that groups of words share a basic semantic architecture. The semantic architecture looks different for, say, cognitive verbs (such as Danish *synes* and *tro*), colour terms (such as Danish *rød* and *rosa*), and emotion adjectives (such as Danish *vred* and *sur*). In explications, each of these groups of words follow the same **semantic template**.

To illustrate, we will now explicate two Danish emotion adjectives *vred* and *sur* in the construction “someone X *er vred/sur på* someone else Y”, (person X *er vred/sur på* person Y), both of which follow the same semantic template. *Vred* is usually translated into English as “angry”—*sur* is a more complex and harder-to-translate adjective with a range of semi-equivalents including “grumpy”, “peevish”, “surly”, “mad”, and sometimes also “angry”.

Our goal is to illustrate how particular Danish emotion adjectives in a particular construction can be explicated via semantic primes—and in the semantic template that is shared by emotion adjectives. To contextualize, we have inserted person names instead of X, and Y in the construction. In the first paraphrase, we are using English NSM—followed by the same analysis in Danish NSM.

[A1] Emma var *vred på* Louise (Emma was *vred på* Louise)

- a. Emma thought like this at that time about Louise:
“she did something very bad before
I don’t want this
I want to do something now because of it”
- b. when she thought like this, she felt something bad because of it

[B1] Emma var *sur på* Louise (Emma was *sur på* Louise)

- a. Emma thought like this at that time about Louise:
“she did something before
I don’t want her to do things like this, she knows it
because of what she did, things are not as they were before”
because of this, it was like this for some time:
when Emma was with Louise, she did not do things with her
as she did things with her before
she did not say things to her as she said things to her before
- b. when she thought like this, she felt something bad for some time
because of it

In explications A and B, the semantic template consists of two sections: (a) which represents the prototypical cognitive scenario of the feeling, and (b) which represents the valence of the feeling. In the explications presented above, both constructions are represented as “negative feelings”—that is, via the primes “feeling something bad”—but in the explication of *sur*, “for some time” is added to account for a different temporality associated with *sur*. However, the main difference is modelled in the prototypical cognitive scenario, where *vred (på)*, prototypically is understood as a person being “wronged” (i.e. the other person did something very bad), unlike in *sur (på)*, where the other person (B) in this model is simply doing something that the person (A) does not want. In the model presented above, there are two rather different emphases. In *vred*, what is modelled is the emotive experiencer’s urge to “do something”. In *sur*, the mental state

of the other person is modelled (cf. “she knows this”) and a more passive expressivity (cf. “because of what she did, things are not as they were before”), and an additional descriptive scenario of a temporary change in the relationship is modelled—including changes in actions and verballity that are commonly associated with the state of being *sur*.

Now, we can test these explications further, and refine them, but what the illustration seeks to accomplish is showing how NSM explications can be used to hypothesize complex meaning, by the use of a combination of simple meanings (semantic primes), and also that such hypothesis-making allows for a high-definition analysis that is not simply a “plus and minus” feature game, but a flexible and expressive metalanguage that accounts for prototypical meanings in a way that can model what speakers mean. To continue the illustration, the same meanings can be replicated in Danish NSM (or any other NSM), as below:

[A2] Emma var vred på Louise

- a. Emma tænkte sådan på det tidspunkt om Louise:
“hun gjorde noget meget dårligt før
jeg vil ikke have det
jeg vil gøre noget nu på grund af det”
- b. da hun tænkte sådan, følte hun noget dårligt på grund af det

[B2] Emma var sur på Louise

- a. Emma tænkte sådan på det tidspunkt om Louise:
“hun gjorde noget før
jeg vil ikke have at hun gør sådan nogle ting, hun ved det
på grund af det hun gjorde, er tingene ikke som de var før”
derfor var det sådan et stykke tid:
når Emma var sammen med Louise,
gjorde hun ikke ting sammen med hende sådan som hun
gjorde ting før
hun sagde ikke ting til hende som hun sagde ting til hende før
- b. da hun tænkte sådan, følte hun noget dårligt et stykke tid på grund af det

In a similar fashion, we could model a cultural script for the emotive domain, for example a script against showing negative emotions in

public—a putative “Scandinavian” ideal. While this particular ideal has been described and discussed in cultural research (see e.g. the work of Åke Daun 1984), cultural scripts have linguistic and discursive footprints. They are the tacit guiding principles for the local linguacultures of communication. While the linguistic and discursive evidence might be distributed in slightly different ways in Scandinavian languages/varieties, we can exemplify the footprints of the script in, say, the Danish aversion towards *dårlig stemning* ‘bad atmosphere, bad social tuning’ (see Levisen 2012:97), in the reflexive verb *styre sig* ‘to steer/control oneself’, which can be used critically against individuals who do not conform to the script; in the hyperbolic emotive descriptor *gå amok* ‘run amok, throw a tantrum’, and so on. For lack of space, we cannot present here all the linguistic/discursive evidence in Scandinavian languages that support the script below, but we can model our first hypothesis in the form of a cultural script as follows:

[C1] A Scandinavian script against displays of negative feelings in public

many people here think like this:

“if one person feels something very bad in a place where there are many people, it is bad if this person wants all these other people to know how this person feels

it is bad if this person says many things because this person wants other people here to know it, it is bad if this person does many things because this person wants other people here to know it”

[C2] A Scandinavian script against displays of negative feelings in public

mange mennesker her tænker sådan:

hvis en person føler noget meget dårligt på et sted hvor der er mange mennesker, er det dårligt hvis den her person vil have at alle de andre mennesker her ved hvad den her person føler,

det er dårligt hvis den her person siger mange ting fordi den her person vil have at andre mennesker her ved det, det er dårligt hvis den her person gør mange ting fordi den her person vil have at andre mennesker her ved det

The script spells out a particular “prescription”—an idea about how not to express oneself when being with many other people. Obviously,

this script is not a globally valid script, as overt emotive expressiveness, both negative and positive, is actively encouraged in some linguacultural settings. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that cultural scripts are cognitive representations rather than “rules for life” or descriptions of how the world “really is”. Neither are they absolutes or essences: they are recognizable cultural orientations—recognizable because they are linguistically supported, and discursively endorsed. Often, in the intercultural memoirs of language migrants, some of these scripts will be described, as they can appear as particularly salient to those who cross linguistic and cultural borders (see Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2008).

So far, we have paraphrased using semantic primes only. But another key concept in NSM analysis that we need to acquaint ourselves with is **semantic molecules** (see e.g. Goddard 2018a:ch5). Semantic molecules are needed in the explications for many words, and in the cultural scripts for many discursive practices. Molecules are, unlike semantic primes, not ultimately simple, and neither are they all translatable. Some molecules are believed to be universal or near-universal, and others are culturally specific. Consider, for example, the molecule “children” (Danish *børn*, Swedish *barn*), presumably one of the universal human molecules. This molecule is needed in the semantic explication of several words, such as the Danish words *legetøj* ‘toys’, *skole* ‘school’, *opdragelse* ‘child-raising’, as well as in concepts with a more lexically explicit reliance on *børn*, such as *børnehave* ‘kindergarten’ and *børnesange* ‘children’s songs’.

While some molecules are highly productive and common, others are extremely local and rare. But all molecules, regardless of their status, are “chunks of meaning” and, as such, they are ultimately decomposable into semantic primes. They function as building blocks of meaning in the semantic configuration of many words. ‘Children’ is what we can call a productive molecule, as it occurs in the semantic explications of numerous words. But some molecules can be extremely local, and rare. Consider for instance *hyben* [m] ‘hip rose’, a molecule needed in order to account for a prank associated with the word *kløpulver* ‘itching powder’ in coastal Jutland, where children extract the inner substance of the hip rose flower to throw it down the shirts of their mates, causing a mild rash on the mates’ backs. In order to account for the cultural scripts of the *kløpulver* prank, *hyben* [m] is a necessary semantic molecule, along with several others, including:

‘children’ (Danish *børn*), ‘play’ (Danish *lege*), *take* (Danish *tage*), ‘put’ (Danish *putte*), ‘skin’ (Danish *hud*), ‘back’ (Danish *ryg*), and ‘laugh’ (Danish *grine*). This cultural script exemplifies a highly local practice, associated with coastal Jutland, and its eco-zone of *hybenbuske* ‘hip rose bushes’.

A cultural script for the “kløpulver” (“itching powder”) prank in coastal Jutland

people here know:

sometimes children [m] do things when they are with other children [m],
they do things like this because they want to play [m]

it is like this:

inside *hyben* [m], there is something, if this something touches the skin [m] of
people, these people can feel something bad in the skin [m] for a short time
children can take [m] this something inside *hyben* [m], after this they can
put [m] some of it on the back [m] of other children [m],
because of this, the skin [m] at the back [m] of these other children [m] can
feel something bad for a short time
at the same time, when these children do this, they can laugh [m]

Writing semantic explications and articulating cultural scripts are both very versatile applications of the paraphrase method, which can be combined. NSM studies typically come in three types: (i) semantically oriented studies that make use of explications, (ii) pragmatically oriented studies that articulate cultural scripts, and (iii) studies that make use of both explications and scripts. Typically, an NSM study, given its emphasis on detailed representation, does not account for, say, all the emotion adjectives of a language (unless it is a monograph or other book-length treatment), or all the constructions in which a word can occur. Often, an NSM paper can be devoted to a single word, a handful of words, or a small number of related scripts. The impetus is to go deep, and to work from exemplary knowledge, rather than to provide comprehensive accounts of all possibilities (a goal which, from the perspective of the “semantics of people”, in any case would be illusory).

4. NSM analysis

In this section, we will review some of the research topics and agendas which we believe to be “signatures” of Nordic NSM. The topics include work on (i) “**minimal languages**”, on radically simplified language(s) applied in the context of public

communication, on NSM-based, and NSM-inspired work partaking in citizen concerns and societal problems; (ii) “**pedagogical pragmatics**”, on the application of the NSM approach (and/or the minimal language approach) to the contexts of language learning and teaching; (iii) “**postcolonial semantics**”, an approach to meaning-making in contact zones and postcolonial contexts based on the paraphrase methods of the NSM approach; and (iv) “**environmental semantics**”, the application of NSM methods in the field of environmental humanities. As we consider these four areas to be key areas for the future of the Nordic NSM community, we will introduce these four themes separately in a handbook-like manner, immediately following this introduction.

Apart from these four themes, there are other subfields and special interests that deserve to be mentioned as well. One of these areas is “**cultural keyword studies**”, the study of words around which whole cultural domains are organized (Wierzbicka 1997; Levisen & Waters 2017). In all linguacultures, some words rise to “keyness” in particular decades or eras and fall into oblivion in the next. In this way, keywords index both historical and linguacultural ways of evaluating, profiling, and prioritizing meaning. **Keywords** with a wide scope over a particular linguaculture are called **cultural keywords**. In Danish, NSM-based studies of cultural keywords include studies on *hygge*, *lykke*, *tryghed*, *janteloven* (Levisen 2012); *trivsel* (Horn 2014); *livet* (Hamann & Levisen 2017); *tolerance* and *frisind* (Haugaard 2021), and *sundhed* (Thiemke 2020). Likewise, the Nordic–global NSM community has produced numerous studies of cultural keywords outside of the North, including studies of, for example, *rosa mexicano* in Mexican Spanish (Aragón 2017), *subúrbio* and *suburbanos* in Brazilian Portuguese (Mattos 2017), and *kastom* in Bislama (Vanuatu) (Levisen & Priestley 2017). Keywords can also be domain-internal, and with a narrower scope than cultural keywords. For instance, we could talk about keywords of ecology in Swedish, or keywords of emotion in Faroese. Given that “keyness” is a matter of degree, there is no absolute or technical way of measuring whether a word qualifies for keyword status. The status of a word as a keyword (either in the linguaculture-at-large, or in a specific semantic domain) must be argued for, and there are several criteria to consider. “Frequency” is one criterion. Often, a word’s keyness will in part be revealed through frequent usage. But frequency is not the only, nor the most important,

criterion,³ as words can be frequent without having culture-specific meanings, let alone cultural significance. “Salience”, perhaps, is the most important criterion—the question here is whether the word turns up in important places, such as in book titles, song titles, signs in the streetscape, and in metapragmatic discourse. “Productivity” is a third criterion, as cultural keywords have a tendency to expand the lexicon of a language, and leave a trace of compounds, phrasemes, and idiomatic constructions. Keywords might also have a presence across word-classes, such as the noun *hygge*, the light reflexive verb *hygge sig*, and the adjective *hyggelig*.⁴ Finally, keywords often have pragmatic productivity: that is, they are built into communicative rituals such as greetings and partings (*du må hygge dig!*), and similar pragmemes. A fourth criteria is “untranslatability”. Cultural keywords are often translation-resistant. This criterion should not be understood too rigidly, as there could be similar words, or even semantically identical words in, say, neighbouring linguacultures. In saying that cultural keywords are “untranslatable” (cf. Levisen 2019d), we simply mean that they stand for a non-universal construct that does not have readily available translational equivalents that match the word meaning in (most) other languages. “Culture-specificity” is not necessarily locked into a single language, as we do find cultural keywords specific to, say, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian—that is, they are Scandinavian-specific. Other keywords might be, for example, European-specific, or more locally defined.

Finally, as a fifth criterion, cultural keywords are value-indexing words—they point to specific words as axiomatic for specific linguacultures or linguistic worldviews, and they tend to include in their very semantic architecture a component of valuation, based on, say, “good” and bad”.⁵

³ Sometimes cultural keywords are not as frequent in linguistic corpora as one might expect. One explanation for this is that keywords have scope over several other words, and these other words might be more frequent than the keyword itself. In some other instances, there are elements of tabooization at play, which lead to an avoidance of the keyword.

⁴ Note that lexical similarity does not equal semantic identity. For instance, the noun *hygge* and the light reflexive verb *hygge sig* are semantically dissimilar, the latter being closer to English “having a good time”, for detailed studies, on *hygge* and *hygge sig*, see Levisen 2012:ch3.

⁵ Words that directly index cultural values are words that in their very semantic configuration make use of “good” and “bad”. Words that indirectly index cultural

While keyword research focuses on cognitive cultural semantics in the lexical expression of meaning, work on the grammatical expression of meaning has also been an important part of NSM research from its onset. New NSM-based research on “**cultural construction grammar**” (Levisen 2018b, 2021) follows up from Wierzbicka’s seminal work “ethnosyntax” (1979, 2002). Embracing the view that “grammar is thick with cultural meaning” (Enfield 2002:3), cultural construction grammar interacts with the family of approaches called “construction grammar”, which seeks to account for the meaning not only of single words and fixed expressions, but the “constructicon” at large (Lyngfelt et al. 2018). Treating most of what is traditionally called “grammar” as an inventory of meaning, similar to the lexicon, the cultural construction grammar holistically works from two premises: “lexicogrammar” and “linguaculture”: There is no sharp ontological distinction between lexicon and grammar, just as there is no sharp distinction between “language and culture”.

While the studies in cultural keywords and cultural construction grammar speak into grand narratives of linguistic relativity and linguistic worldviews, Nordic NSM scholars have also focused on small and at first sight insignificant elements such as **interjections and discourse particles**. In Wierzbicka’s seminal work on cross-cultural pragmatics (1991), the Danish/Swedish *fy!* was explicated in comparison with other European interjections (pp. 307–08). Consider also Pedersen’s study on Swedish *tack!* (Pedersen 2010), Levisen and Waters study of *lige* (2015), and studies in laughter interjections, such as *høhø*, and *hæhæ* (Levisen 2019a). Studies in “humour and laughing” have been another theme of cultural pragmatics (or ethnopr pragmatics). This research has focused on key concepts in conversational humour, including *syg* “sick” humour (Collin 2016), *sort* “black” humour (Levisen 2017), and untranslatables in the discourse of laughing (Levisen 2019d). “Cognitive verbs” have been another arena of research, beginning with the work of Goddard and Karlsson (2008) on Swedish words for “thinking”, which fed into an NSM account of thinking, and led to further studies (Levisen 2012 on “thinking” verbs in Danish in comparison with English and Russian).

values, do not necessarily include “good” or “bad” in their semantic configuration, but will, through the cultural scripts they are guided by, and the discourse practices they are a part of, reveal an axiological orientation.

NSM contributions to colour and emotions, two important research areas in linguistic relativity, have also found Nordic expressions: “colour studies”, and studies in visual semantics, have included fieldwork on the cultural meanings of colour words (Aragón 2016, 2017), on the interface of colour and “brightness” (Levisen 2019c), as well as “social” colour, in the racialized colour words (Levisen forthcoming). Contributions to “emotion studies” include comparative work on Danish and English emotion words by Fabricius (née Dineen) (1990), who focused on “shame”-related meanings; Levisen (2012, 2016a), whose work has focused on “happiness and joy”-related meanings; and Fernández and Mattos (this volume) on *esperanza/esperança* (“hope”).

5. NSM’s contribution and place in the research landscape

The NSM approach to meaning and meaning-making stands out in some ways from other cognitive and cultural approaches to language, especially in its emphasis on the importance of a non-technical metalanguage, in its methods of simple-language paraphrase, and its insistence on the metasemantic adequacy of all languages—that is, that all languages are capable of representing meanings (cf. Goddard 2008b). Perhaps also worth mentioning is the rather large scope of NSM research, its global outlook, and its diverse interdisciplinary engagements. NSM research has been a unifying interpretative force in areas of research that are not always conversant with each other. For instance, in current disciplinary discourses, the words “cognitive” and “cultural” are commonly portrayed as each other’s counterparts (see Jensen 2011, for a detailed, book-length treatment), where “cognitive” co-occurs with words such as “the human mind”, “universals”, “psychology”, and “evolution”; and “cultural” co-occurs with “society”, “relativity”, “anthropology”, and “history”. The “cognitive cultural” synthesis of NSM refuses to contribute to the division here, working instead towards a semantics of understanding that does not segregate, but unites the “speaking-thinking-living” complex. Early seminal works by Anna Wierzbicka (1992, 1997, 1999) emphasized exactly this complex as the unity in which any “universe of meaning” needs to be studied. (Similar unifying tendencies can be found in other approaches, such as in cultural linguistics (Palmer 1996; Sharifian 2017) or linguistic worldview studies (Bartminski 2012 [2009]; Underhill 2011; Głaz 2022)). Wierzbicka’s original work in “shared” human semantics was most often undertaken as a search for “universals”, but in recent work she

has also included the term “basic human”. Her work on culturally specific meaning spans different fields, but with semantics and pragmatics as the most significant ones. Wierzbicka was among the early cognitive linguists who worked on (i) conceptual semantics based on the principle of (ii) a “semantics of understanding” from (iii) a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective.

Let us discuss and compare these three important points. First, the emphasis on “conceptual semantics” stands in contrast to the traditions of “referential semantics”: Words do not refer to things in the world—words refer to concepts. Like other cognitive approaches, the NSM approach views meaning as conceptualization, and like other cultural approaches, the NSM approach views meanings as cultural constructs. In other words, the world is not just “as it is”; it is spoken into being by different linguacultures. To illustrate this, consider the work of Helen Bromhead (2017, 2018) on landscape terms in Australia. Bromhead’s work demonstrates how “the same” ecological reality is conceptualized differently via different semantic categories in Australian English and the first nation language Yankunytjatjara. Meaning in language is anthropocentric and is characterized by diversity and multiple logics. But there is also something “basic human” to language, something shared, and, to explore the semantics of understanding, we need to account for both the shared and culture-specific aspects of meaning-making.

The cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective on meaning is an important aspect of the NSM approach. While it is perfectly fine to study, say, the semantics of Norwegian words for landscape terms, or the pragmatics of Icelandic speech practices, it is equally important to circumvent the analytical isolationism that threatens such research. In highly focused semantic research, it is important to have a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural grounding, and to be in a dialogue with cross-linguistic semantics and pragmatics. This will prevent at least two common errors of analysis: firstly, the naturalization of semantic concepts that is common when researchers work in their own linguistic ecology. To paraphrase a proverb, the problem is that we often cannot see the forest because of all the trees. In a cross-linguistic light, it turns out that many words and discourse practices that appear universal and normal from an insider’s perspective might in fact be highly culturally specific and semantically complex. Secondly, the potential biases of any researcher’s metalinguistic habitus should also be carefully monitored. As researchers, we are likely to transport

categories from the languages we speak into our system of metasemantics, and to do so without carefully having considered the potential biases of such practices. By being grounded in a principled, metasemantic system, such as the NSM, we can avoid such common errors and biases.

At the end of this section on the position of NSM in the landscape of research, we would like to very shortly discuss some common questions about the relations between NSM and other approaches and to point to literature that addresses these relations. This includes work on “linguistic relativity”, “conceptual metaphor”, “universal pragmatics”, and “critical language studies”.

5.1 NSM and linguistic relativity

So far, we have talked about NSM’s alignment with the concepts of “linguaculture”, “linguistic worldviews”, and “linguistic relativity”. But as John Leavitt’s (2011) research shows, there are many conceptions of linguistic relativity, and it is worth spending a little time qualifying the relationship between NSM research and linguistic relativity, especially if we think of linguistic relativity as the principle and process that leads to different linguistic worldviews (cf. Głaz 2022). Sapir’s idea that language lays down “thought grooves”, and that “no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” (1958:69) is highly compatible with the view of Wierzbicka and colleagues. When it comes to the works of Whorf, the picture is slightly less clear. In a brilliant comparative piece, “Whorf meets Wierzbicka”, Goddard (2003) shows that there is a lot of affinity between the works and views of Whorf and Wierzbicka, but also that some of Wierzbicka’s work might in fact be thought of as “counter-Whorfian”. The minimal universalism of Wierzbicka, and the idea of a small set of semantic primes that exist as an “intersection of all languages”, runs counter to the views and claims of Whorf. While Whorf also believed in human universals, these were of a non-linguistic and perceptual kind, rather than linguistic and conceptual, as in Wierzbicka’s view on universals. And while both scholars have underlined the importance of semantics and of the semantic differences between languages, their work differs in terms of their approach to metalanguage. Whorf never developed any standard procedures for cross-semantic comparison, whereas NSM, conceived by Wierzbicka, and further developed in collaboration with colleagues, is precisely that: a standardized

metalanguage for describing, representing, and comparing meaning in and across linguacultures.

5.2 NSM and conceptual metaphor

In cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor theory, in both its original (Lakoff & Johnson 1999) and expanded versions (see e.g. Kövceses 2021) is perhaps globally the most successful theory in terms of prevalence. One of the most insidious problems in conceptual metaphor theory is that “metaphor” is theorized as a human universal, a claim that runs counter to works in linguistic anthropology and the linguacultures that do not operate with the conceptual bifurcation of “literal vs. metaphorical” language and cognition. At the theoretical level, there are insurmountable differences in the views on the language–culture–cognition nexus in the metaphor-driven and prime-driven accounts of human universals. But analytically, “metaphor”, and especially the distinction between “fresh” and “conventionalized” metaphor, is clearly a relevant semantic and pragmatic category of Nordic linguacultures, where it is common to distinguish between literal and metaphorical (figurative) meanings. In practical terms, and to the degree it is relevant and meaningful for a research project, we see no problems in using conceptual metaphor analysis (and other cognitive–semantic styles of analysis), as a supplement to semantic explications and cultural scripts (see e.g. Fernández & Mattos, this volume). But especially in the analysis of so-called “conventional” metaphors—for example, the pig-based conventionalized metaphors in the Danish language of critique and abuse (“dit *svin!*”, “din *gris!*”)—the analysis of the metaphor-driven study on meaning conventionalization cannot stand alone. A conceptual semantic analysis is needed of the difference between two “literal” Danish words (*svin* and *gris*), as well as a fine-grained analysis of two conventional meanings: *svin*-1 (animal) and *svin*-2 (human). (On porcine semantics in Danish linguaculture, see Levisen 2013.) When it comes to fresh metaphors, cultural scripts are needed to account for the mechanism of “active metaphorizing” (Goddard 2004), such as in media discourse, political discourse, creative writing, etc.

5.3. NSM and universal pragmatics

Universal pragmatics in the tradition of Searle, Austin, and Grice has until recently led an unchallenged and undisputed life at Nordic universities. With the advent of cross-cultural pragmatics, postcolonial pragmatics, linguistic ethnography, and culturally sensitive interactional pragmatics, we have seen a substantial critique of the

basic claims of universal pragmatics, and a destabilization of their basic premises—including the idea of “four maxims” that can be flouted, and, also more basically, the whole conception of the speech act theory and its model of interaction where individual, rational speakers are free to “do things with words” (for critiques of universal pragmatics, see Wierzbicka 1991; Goddard 2006; Levisen & Waters 2017). On a closer cross-cultural scrutiny, the maxims have been shown to be anything but culture-free (see e.g. Leezenberg 2010), and universal pragmatics, in a global comparison, reveals itself as nothing more than universalized Anglocentric metapragmatic beliefs.

If we liberate metapragmatics from its universalist straitjacket, we can begin to model and fine-tune a **cultural metapragmatics**; that is, the culturally defined premises of speech that various linguacultural settings endorse. In some ways, we can perhaps say that NSM-based cultural scripts are a relativization of the idea of maxims. In other words, there are no longer just four maxims that can account for speech everywhere, as people live by multiple scripts, some with a broad scope (like the traditional maxims), and others with a more particular scope. But all scripts are local products of culture and couched in local linguistic rituals. After the era of universal pragmatics, we can begin to explore the principles of cultural metapragmatics, and these principles can be accounted for in simple and universal semantic primes.

5.4. NSM and critical language studies

As the final engagement, we would like to converse with the “critical” aspect of language and discourse studies. To what degree can NSM help verbalize a critique of language? As most descriptive traditions in linguistics, the NSM approach is not a normative, let alone a politically involved approach, and the impetus is therefore not to critique either languages or speakers of languages. Yet, there is a critical potential of the NSM approach that we would like to point to, and that potential is closely linked with NSM as a tool for self-reflection, critical language awareness, and, importantly, “critical metalanguage awareness”. In discourse studies, NSM can aid in the conceptual–semantic analysis of highly ideologized words, providing a deep semantic analysis of concepts, including dubious words in the language of, for example, discrimination, chauvinism, and racism (see e.g. the work of Karen Stollznow 2008). In terms of critical metalanguage awareness, the NSM approach also offers researchers a way of explicating the keywords around which their own research

fields are discursively constructed. Most academic disciplines, including linguistics and its sub-disciplines, were born in “the West”, or, in today’s term “the Global North”, and Anglocentric and Eurocolonial biases abound in the keywords of disciplinary discourses (for a critique on Anglocentrism see Wierzbicka 2014; Levisen 2019b; and on conceptual colonialism Wierzbicka 2021; Levisen forthcoming).

6. This volume

This special issue of NSM in the Nordic countries consists of nine full-size papers, where thirteen authors present original NSM-based semantic and pragmatic analysis on a range of issues, as well as four short papers introducing some of the most recent focus areas in NSM studies. These four overview papers on “minimal languages”, “pedagogical pragmatics”, “postcolonial semantics”, and “environmental semantics” will be presented before the full-size papers.

The selection of original studies starts with a cultural and historical perspective. In her study “The meaning of ‘manners’ in Australian English”, Sophia Waters articulates the meaning of this concept in contemporary Australian discourse. The article begins by looking at the historical evolution of *manners*: it emerged as a reflection of social class but, over time, became the guarantor of smooth interpersonal interaction. Next, Waters explores the discursive and semantic profile of contemporary *manners*, her main dataset consisting of discussion forums in Australian webpages. The results, articulated in a semantic explication of *manners*, reveals that the concept designates a set of “rules” that dictate how people should interact with one another, with a shared theme of showing consideration for others. Importantly, *manners* are an expression of the broader cultural values of personal autonomy and egalitarianism, and of a cultural norm of not telling other people what to do. Also reflecting these values, and echoing the “cultural scripts” technique, Waters introduces a set of Anglo-Australian “*manners* scripts” representing ways of thinking about a particular “behaviour”. These scripts are “saying *hello*”, “saying *please*”, “saying *thank you*”, “saying *excuse me*”, and “saying *sorry*”.

In her paper “Explicating a virtue: On the 18th century concept of ‘chastity’”, Heli Tissari explores the importance of the concept of ‘chastity’ in Early Modern English through the NSM-based analysis

of the words *chastity/chaste/chastely* as they appear in a corpus of literary texts dated 1700–1799. She bases her analysis on previous NSM studies of emotion terms and moral concepts/virtues, as she finds that virtues and emotions have some overlapping semantic components. Before settling on an NSM explication of the word, Tissari meticulously explores the semantic components of ‘chastity’ and finds nine defining characteristics that are later “distilled” into her NSM explication. Among the most salient features emerging from the analysis is the idea of chastity as a virtue, particularly relevant for women, related to purity and virginity (or marital love), with a religious overtone. Chastity appears as a highly valuable commodity that needs to be defended, as it can be under attack. As virtues were central in eighteenth-century discourse, Tissari suggests the need for further virtue studies on the period.

The next two articles have a geographical area in common: Latin America. In his paper “What is Porteño Spanish *lunfardo*?”, Jan Hein uses live TV conversation as a case study to propose a semantic explication of *lunfardo* ‘Buenos Aires slang’. The explication aims to account for the logics that guide “everyday” Porteños (people of Buenos Aires) in their construal of their own linguistic world. Some important features of the explication can be summarized as follows. *Lunfardo* is construed as a vast, rich collection of words used in Buenos Aires. *Lunfardo* also contains a historical narrative about its origins through language contact resulting from the great European immigration to Argentina. The explication also captures Porteños’ construal of *lunfardo* words as being characteristic of, and preserved in, *tango* music. Altogether, Hein concludes, these elements contribute to the perception that *lunfardo* is the relic of a bygone era, and that, like Porteños themselves, *lunfardo* purportedly has a European lineage.

In “‘A gale of hope for Latin America’—the concept of *esperanza/esperança* as a cultural keyword”, Fernández & Mattos set out to analyze the emotion term *esperanza/esperança* (hope), in Spanish and Portuguese, respectively, in the context of Latin America, and propose that the term has the characteristics of a cultural keyword in the region: high frequency, phraseological productivity, and centrality in discourse. Based on a Twitter corpus from Argentina and Brazil, the authors discover that *esperanza/esperança* represents a highly valued collective feeling related to political action, democracy, and activism. This feeling arises in a context where bad things

happen/have happened in the countries in question, but where a situation of change (a new government, a new year, etc.) triggers the feeling that things can get better. This feeling is presented as an utter necessity for the people in these countries and, therefore, the loss of *esperanza/esperança* is evaluated very negatively.

Moving to a different location, three articles by Fenyvesi, Mašková, and Fenyvesi, Bick and Geyer, respectively, focus on concepts of “the North”. Fenyvesi’s article, “The semantics of grammaticalization—A case study on the Danish verb *prøve* ‘try’” represents a novel application of the NSM approach to the study of grammaticalization: in this case, the development of the Danish verb *prøve* (try) into a mere marker of friendly request when used in the construction *prøv at* (try to) + imperative. In this grammaticalized use, the verb loses its original semantic component of “using one’s best ability to do something” or “making an attempt”. The author relates the emergent meaning of the grammaticalized *prøve* to the Danish universe of meaning and finds it fits into a Danish communication value related to the idea of making the interlocutor feel good.

In “A semantic analysis of snow-related words in Danish and Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic)”, Stephanie Mašková uses NSM explications to unfold and compare the emic logics condensed within Kalaallisut *aputit* ‘snow’ and *nittaappoq* ‘it is snowing’ and Danish *sne* ‘snow’ and *det sneer* ‘it is snowing’. The analysis is based on semantic consultations with Kalaallisut and Danish speakers and text examples from Sketch Engine and KorpusDK. Mašková also incorporates English *it is snowing* into her contrastive analysis. She shows that all three verbs follow the same semantic template, and that all the words contain the semantic molecules *cold*, *white*, and *ground*. In line with previous NSM research of concepts based in the physical world (Bromhead 2017:182; Bromhead 2018:9–20), Mašková concludes that the analyzed snow-related words are likewise rooted in anthropocentric perspective, reflecting differences in the conceptualizations of categories such as size and temperature. An important discovery is that *aputit* is dependent on the semantic molecule *Greenland*, and closely connected to activities and emotions, including fear and cultural pride. These components reveal how central this concept is to Greenlandic linguaculture.

Katalin Fenyvesi, Eckhard Bick, and Klaus Geyer connect Danish and German “sadness”-related terms and combine a systematic

quantitative corpus study with qualitative informant consultations in order to frame their NSM explications of the terms under scrutiny. The authors emphasize the novelty of this approach and the advantages it gives over introspection and over more informal corpus data and consultations. Their aim is to discover conceptual, lexical, and/or grammatical similarities and differences between sadness expressions in two typologically close Germanic languages. The article provides NSM explications of two Danish adjectives, *ked af det* and *trist*, and one German adjective, *traurig*. While German *traurig* is a general sadness term that can be used with different headwords (denoting people, things, semiotic artefacts, etc.) and can be used predicatively with a subordinate clause, Danish does not seem to have such an all-encompassing word (as the frequent *ked af det*, a multiword term, is limited to people and can only be used predicatively). The authors hypothesize that the lack of a Danish word for “sad” can be due to the important Danish cultural value that people should be able to feel good because good things are happening, and that they should not have to think about bad things (related to Danish keywords such as *hygge*).

The last two articles of the collection are devoted to new developments in NSM and minimal language research, focusing on language education and health communication, respectively. The article “NSM-based cultural dictionaries: For language learners and beyond” presents Lauren Sadow’s pioneering work within learner lexicography and introduces the reader to the concept of an NSM-based “cultural dictionary”. A cultural dictionary contains culturally important words and ways of speaking, as well as speaker attitudes and intentions, in simple terms that the language learner can understand. In her article, Sadow presents in great detail the process of designing the *Australian Dictionary of Invisible Culture for Teachers* (AusDICT), including challenges encountered along the way and solutions applied. She argues for the usefulness of such dictionaries for both learners and other users, as the cultural information contained in them can contribute to creating more empathetic and competent language users, and for the need for other projects within this line of lexicography that can help advance the field.

The closing article is “Conceptual semantics and public messaging: ‘Risk–benefit’ discourse around COVID-19 vaccination” by Ida Stevia Diget and Cliff Goddard. The article explores the conceptual semantics of risk–benefit, which is central to discourse

about COVID-19 vaccination and the implications for public health messaging. The study proposes a semantic explication of the English word *risk* in one of its most frequently used grammatical frames in COVID-19 vaccine discourse (i.e. *the risk of ...*), as well as an “advice script” for the complex task of “weighing the risks and benefits” of a vaccination decision. Drawing on COVID-19 vaccination campaigns in Australia and Denmark, the study stresses the difficulties of communicating public health messages using conceptually complex and culture-specific words such as *risk*. Although the issues are complex, it is argued that adopting a minimal languages approach may provide a way forward, by enabling the creation of texts that are both more accessible and more easily translated.

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