Totalitarian (In)Experience in Literary Works and Their Translations

Totalitarian (In)Experience in Literary Works and Their Translations:

Between East and West

By

Bartłomiej Biegajło
Siedlce University, Faculty of Humanities

Totalitarian (In)Experience in Literary Works and Their Translations:
Between East and West

By Bartłomiej Biegajło

This book first published 2018

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2018 by Bartłomiej Biegajło

To my wife Joanna
for her boundless patience

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PREFACE

The hitherto unseen scale of historical developments which the twentieth century is noted to have *experienced* brought massive social changes that were crucially compressed in a relatively short period of time. The previous century is seen to have put to the test the moral integrity of humankind twice, with the two world wars being the most supreme example of the compromised intellectual standards with which the intellectual few of the nineteenth century were so fervently concerned. An unprecedented and ruthless struggle for power made not only the use of the latest technological advancements largely legitimate in war but it is also credited to have triggered all manner of attempts directed at exerting control over the masses. The two post-war periods of the twentieth century can never be called times of social stability and it seems that it was precisely this very instability that paved the way for totalitarianism, albeit redressed in the form of Communism, to have gained such a widespread appeal. It was Communism, credited more often than not for its apparently exotic nature, that made a powerful potential answer to the social and economic struggles of the age, whose intellectual capacities were severely shattered, especially after the Second World War.

It is, however, symptomatic that the spreading influence of Communism which did not stop in Eastern Europe but was seen to also penetrate the Western reaches of the Continent started quite early to be a worry for a host of contemporaneous intellectuals who proceeded to voice their concerns over its true nature. Apart from strictly politically-grounded anti-totalitarian manifestoes, the literature of the last century was noted to be particularly active in engaging itself in outright opposition to what was happening. Because of its evocative value, totalitarian literature, as it started to be called, was better able to provide instructive insights into the condition of the societies ruled by Communist authorities. However, it seems that an interesting propensity regarding the mode of writing about the regime was the order of the day and this is the key assumption adopted in this work. Various twentieth-century accounts on totalitarianism that were produced in a literary form can be curiously divided into those whose authors were genuinely part of the totalitarian society and those whose geographical location, as well as political agenda of the day, were less directly exposed to the influence of totalitarianism. In other words, the

assumption is that the perspective of an Eastern European writer makes him/her fundamentally more prone to apply the mode of presentation that is firmly rooted in the present with strong inclinations to look into the past as a safe haven, a paradise lost, impossible to regain. In the case of a Western European writer, the more distant perspective imbibes him/her to resort to an anti-utopian/dystopian literary presentation. Among other things, this work is therefore an attempt to provide some authentic data that would be able to endorse precisely that claim as legitimate. Hopefully, the choice of the twentieth-century authors that can be safely said to have written anti-totalitarian works is telling and intentionally includes two English and two Polish authors. Aldous Huxley and George Orwell are the two representatives of the English authors whose two works, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* respectively, prove that their Western perspective, which this work translates into their *totalitarian inexperience*, are examples of totalitarian literature that in order to remain credible, resorts to anti-utopian (*Brave New World*) and dystopian (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*) modes of presentation. On the other hand, the Polish perspective, that is the *totalitarian experience*, is secured by two works of two Polish authors: Czesław Miłosz (*Zniewolony umysł*) and Tadeusz Konwicki (*Kompleks polski*) which are noted, as most Eastern European totalitarian literature is, to dismiss utopian measures and opt to describe the reality in question from the point of view of the very *totalitarian experience* shared by all Eastern European countries. The second part of the title of this work is intended to indicate precisely this assumption and the choice of authors does essentially comply with this perspective.

However, the core of the following work entails the question concerning the degree to which the literary works mentioned can be said to faithfully connect with its counterpart audience. In other words, the second intention of this study is to investigate whether the books of the four authors found their way into alien cultural milieus. It seeks to provide answers to how much of Huxley's and Orwell's futuristic visions are credibly salient in the Polish cultural environment and, alternatively, how much of Miłosz's and Konwicki's hands-on perspective of totalitarianism can be said to be faithfully transferred onto the soil of the English language. The second part of the title that this inquiry adopts is meant to centre on translation where these issues are going to be addressed in detail.

What finally underlies this work in terms of its theoretical framework is Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) as devised and developed by a Polish linguist working at Canberra's Australian National University, Anna Wierzbicka. Although a detailed account of Wierzbicka's extensive research is provided in the first chapter of this work, for the purpose of

clarity it is crucial to briefly mention that NSM's is to explain complex concepts with the use of NSM that posits the existence of a list of so-called indefinables, that is semantically most primitive concepts that all world languages are said to possess. Wierzbicka's admirably rigorous methodology applied to the study of language is the reason why NSM has been chosen to talk about the translation of the works that have already been introduced. My book is aimed at testing Wierzbicka's theory in four case studies where four different concepts are designated as keywords for the works of the respective authors.

Thus, the second chapter investigates Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) where the relationships between the characters are noted to be severely damaged, therefore the concept chosen to represent that condition is the highly ethnic English concept of *friend*. With the help of NSM, it seems interesting to ask how much of the meaning of this concept has been retained in the Polish translation of the book.

Similarly, the same scenario is adopted in the case of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) to whom the whole third chapter is devoted. As the main protagonist of Orwell's novel struggles to retain the last pieces of his morality intact in the face of brutal totalitarian reality, it is the English concept of *courage* to which most attention is given. It stands to reason to ask if *courage* means the same as its Polish dictionary equivalent, *odwaga*, this being the question pursued in the third chapter.

With the fourth chapter the attention changes and is devoted to the first Polish author, Czesław Miłosz and his work *Zniewolony umysł* (1953). This part focuses primarily on Miłosz's application of the concept of *umysł* which has been chosen for investigation because Miłosz's work was essentially meant to be an attempt to warn largely unaware Western intellectuals about the dangers inherently present in Communism and thus the pair *umysł* vs. *mind* seems a sensible keyword combination in this case.

The final case study concerns Tadeusz Konwicki's *Kompleks polski* (1977) which is a vivid description of a totalitarian reality intersected with nostalgic references to the Polish January Uprising of 1863. The mixture of the past, where *wolność* was on the lips of all insurgents, with the present, marked by inertia and a widespread feeling of defeat, is what makes the Polish concept of *wolność* the keyword in the case of Konwicki's novel. The fifth chapter investigates the meaning of the Polish concept and tries to comment on the choices made by the American translator of the book with strong reference to the Polish word *wolność*.

Last but not least, all of the four case studies are preceded by biographical details of the authors that are intended to be reflections of the very reasons for which each of the books was written. A special, rather

subjective, emphasis is put on the key points of the respective biographies that appear to justify the choice of the very concepts subjected to the NSM analysis.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTORY PRELIMINARIES

> Perception is not the same
> thing as *attention*.
> —Anna Wierzbicka[1]

In a somewhat challenging manner, which a section of translation scholars might find hard to come to terms with, a Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, wrote in 1937 that there "are some causes that produce the phenomenon of *flou* [blur, haziness] in a visual image and in linguistic expression. Translation is the permanent literary *flou*, and since what we usually call nonsense is, on the other hand, but the *flou* of thoughts, we shouldn't be surprised that a translated author always seems somewhat foolish to us" (2000: 52). The question of fidelity in translation, which over the centuries has been picked up by a whole host of translation scholars, can be said to boil down to the problem which Anna Wierzbicka alternatively framed in terms of the concept of 'inculturation' with its opposite number being, according to the Polish linguist, that of 'outculturation' which a given text can be optionally imbibed with. Wierzbicka intentionally decided to introduce these notions in one of her illuminative works, *What Did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermons on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (2001), as a precondition for understanding the core problem with which any translation of the Bible is invariably impacted: "He [that is Jesus] used a particular natural language with all its culture-specific richness, and certainly his thinking *was* heavily embedded in the culture of the time and place to which he belonged. This does not mean, however, that no aspect of Jesus' teaching can be separated from its Jewish context" (Wierzbicka 2001: 9). It is the idea of the 'separation of Jesus' teachings from its Jewish context' that underlies what remains a bone of contention among contemporary scholars who are at odds at deciding whether it is better to first 'outculturate' the translated text and give priority to 'inculturation', or

---

[1] Anna Wierzbicka (2014: 3).

else adopt a different solution that contemporary Translation Studies, after Friedrich Schleiermacher (1813), often discuss in terms of sending 'the reader abroad' with all the costly losses in the realm of meaning.

By addressing the issue of translatability in a mildly agitated manner, Gasset was, in fact, echoing a traditional issue with which Translation Studies has been haunted for decades. Drawing heavily on Schleiermacher, its most succinct and simple-termed definition was proposed by Lawrence Venuti who popularised the dispute with the introduction of a domesticating strategy and its most natural counterpart method – that of foreignising the source text. According to Venuti, the latter method would amount to an attempt "to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (1995: 20). However, the permanent 'flou' which Gasset believed every translation is equally vulnerable to, hints at other strata of the problem in question which made the Spanish philosopher go as far as to claim that 'a translated author always seems somewhat foolish to us'.

A very good illustration of the issue comes from the work of a previous turn-of-the-century French philosopher, Lucien Levy-Bruhl, who, in his evocative book *Primitive Mentality* (1923), accounted for the observations of the Iroquois in the eastern parts of early-twentieth-century North America made by the Jesuit missionaries who jointly agreed that "primitives[2] manifest a decided distaste for reasoning, for what logicians call the 'discursive operations of thought'; at the same time they [have] remarked that this distaste did not arise out of any radical incapability or

---

[2] Of course, seen from the contemporary perspective, the application of the word 'primitive' in the English translation of Levi-Bruhl's work which was used to refer to the indigenous people of the North American continent leaves little room for defence but this is, much in the vein of this discussion, a testimony to the changing character of the English language which, at the time, was only beginning to be seriously used in an empirical scholarly exploration of distant native lands. Its terminologically academic scope was noted to freely intermingle with the everyday, rather caustic perception that the whites held about such peoples. However, Levi-Bruhl, as others of his kind, were usually far from adopting any misplaced intentions towards the natives and it is the limitations of the contemporaneous language that conditioned the use of such shortsighted expressions rather than any genuine desire to do any harm. Levi-Bruhl's true intentions were given shape in the introductory part of his book, *Primitive Mentality*, where he admitted that "among the differences which distinguish the mentality of primitive communities from our own, there is one which has attracted the attention of many of those who have observed such peoples under the most favourable conditions – that is, before their ideas have been modified by prolonged association with white races" (1923: 21).

any inherent defect in their understanding, but rather to be accounted for by their general methods of thought" (1923: 21). Gasset's idea of a 'translated author being somewhat always foolish to us' gains a formidable perspective when confronted with Levi-Bruhl's account of the Jesuits' attempts at spreading the Gospel among the Iroquois: "the truths of the Gospel would not have seemed admissible to them had they been founded on reason and good sense alone. Since these people are wanting in culture and breeding, something plainer and more tangible was required to make an impression on their minds" (ibid.). What they seem to have needed is a conscious 'outculturation' of Jesus' teachings followed subsequently by what Wierzbicka called the 'inculturation' of the Christian message: "because the Gospel message is so heavily embedded in the culture of first-century Palestine and so heavily influenced by the centuries of predominantly European reading, it cannot be adequately transferred to other cultures without first being extracted from its own cultural context. For this message to be clothed in new garments, it has first to be stripped of its old ones" (Wierzbicka 2001: 12). Wiezbicka noted, at the same time apparently explaining the reasons for the frustration experienced by the Jesuit missionaries from Levi-Bruhl's record, that it was barely "at the end of the second Christian millennium [that] 'inculturation', not 'outculturation', is the order of the day (e.g. drawing on African traditions in presenting Christ's teaching in Africa). Increasingly, commentators stress the need for cultural diversity within Christianity, arguing that faith must 'take flesh' in particular cultures" (ibid.).

Drawing on these few observations, we may be tempted to dwell a little longer on the profound truth, however controversial it appears to sound to the ear of many contemporary cognitive scientists, reflected in the opening citation from Wierzbicka's latest book, *Imprisoned in English. The Hazards of English as a Default Language* (2014), where the idea of 'perception' has been strongly dissociated from the idea of 'attention'. As these two notions seem to underlie Wierzbicka's research within Natural Semantic Metalanguage which forms the very methodological core of my work, the subsequent sections of this chapter address precisely this issue with more attention.

1.1 Why 'attention' matters?

The underlying question, slightly rephrased, is why 'attention' seems such an important notion to Wierzbicka who proclaimed that "most words in any one language are language-specific and do not have exact semantic equivalents in other languages" (2001: 7)? A telling illustration may come

from a very heartfelt admission she made in her "Acknowledgement" section to the book *Imprisoned in English*, where she admitted that "my husband John has helped me, as usual, by editing my writing and at times softening my polemical tone, which after forty years of living in Australia still tends to follow Polish rather than mainstream Anglo cultural scripts of self-expression and engagement with others" (2014: xi). Wierzbicka implied here that while her academic life is led in an English-speaking environment governed by a specific set of cognitive tools for interpreting the reality, her formative and therefore linguistically decisive years were spent being exposed essentially to the influence of the Polish language and culture. This fact, but also an assertion made elsewhere that "as human beings, we cannot place ourselves outside all cultures" (Wierzbicka 1992: 26) has left her to assume that her initial cultural 'upbringing' conditions her means of expression which even after living in an Anglo culture for so many years, she is unable to abandon. Another passage from Wierzbicka's most recent work only strengthens such an overview of things: "I wholeheartedly agree that every language is a repository of unique ways of thinking about human existence and a unique 'take' on human existence, and in particular, on human values" (2014: 61) which takes us directly to the notion of 'attention'. To give it a further explanatory note, 'attention' is simply the degree of importance that a given culture and the associated language characteristically gives to a given set of concepts which are intuitively felt to be the keys allowing access to a given culture.

It would be a truism to state that all human beings are equipped with a set of senses that crucially help us to perceive the reality as we are able to see it. Notwithstanding the fact that the manner of perception is more or less similar and is likely to have no profound connection to one's cultural background (that is physically, the majority of human beings do possess eyes, ears, a sense of touch, etc.), Wierzbicka contended that "as speakers of different languages we see them [things] differently because every language equips its speakers with a particular set of cognitive tools for seeing and interpreting the world" (ibid.: 3). Furthermore, according to the Polish scholar, "for the speakers of a particular language, their words 'fit the world' as they see it – but how they see it depends, to some extent, on what they want to see and what they pay attention to" (ibid.: 6) which, apparently, is not a conclusion uniformly shared[3]. It appears safe to

---

[3] Wierzbicka is famous for strongly opposing the uniformly universalist approach to the study of cognitive phenomena where little regard is given to the importance of linguistic relativity. Among others, an American cognitive scientist, Steven Pinker (1994: 82), has oftentimes been cited in Wierzbicka's works as a representative of such a scientific orientation: "Pinker writes: 'since mental life

assume that for Wierzbicka 'interpretation' is not a second best notion that gives way to 'attention', but rather tends to be treated on a par with 'attention' and the importance of both concepts seems to be rooted in her firm belief that "culture-specific words are conceptual tools that reflect a society's past *experience* of doing and thinking about things in certain ways; and they help to perpetuate these ways" (1997: 5, emphasis added). Thus, it is *experience* that defines a given mode of 'interpreting' the reality which connects it directly to a given mode of 'attention' that the speakers of a given language tend to largely unconsciously adopt due to the language they happen to speak.

Many philosophers as well as practising translators (e.g. Gasset, Berman, Venuti) show their personal *experience* within the field to be essentially related to Wierzbicka's deliberations on 'inculturation' vs. 'outculturation'. Lawrence Venuti seems to be particularly vocal about these points: "the complex of meanings, values, and functions that the source text comes to support in its originary culture insures that any translation will at once fall short of and exceed whatever correspondence a translator hopes to establish by supporting different meanings, values, and functions for its receptors" (2013: 193). In other words, a translator can never be free from a nagging awareness that no matter what decision s/he makes, s/he is not able to establish a contextual correspondence between the languages s/he works in to the effect that would satisfy an otherwise intuitively felt notion of faithfulness, which, as far as Translation Studies are concerned, can take a multitude of frames of reference (depending very much and, in fact, first and foremost on the motives which give a particular translation the means to appear in a target culture).

In fact, it is not only translation practitioners or translation scholars that seem to be positively inclined towards the idea of linguistic relativism; it is a testimony any bilingual person can make. Anyone who happened to live in two distinct cultures is inadvertently forced to face the ultimately differing values that any two cultures will eventually make us witnesses to. We have been instructed to think precisely so by Wierzbicka's earlier declaration, but she was also keen to supply a further example, in a sense, intended as a non-academic report on linguistic relativism offered by a Polish professor of English and American

---

goes on independently of particular languages, concepts of *freedom* and equality will be thinkable even if they are nameless' " (Wierzbicka 1997: 7 emphasis added). As Chapter Five of my work is clearly concerned with the concept of *freedom* and its Polish dictionary equivalent *wolność*, it also shows that, in general, the English notion is highly culture-specific with no exact equivalents in other European languages, let alone in more distant linguistic environments.

literature, Eva Hoffman. Wierzbicka is seen to consider Hoffman's work called *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989) as a continual source of inspiration that helps to balance her strongly academic aspect of research with a more 'human' element:

> Eva Hoffman's cross-linguistic autobiography *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989) was a groundbreaking publication in the history of inquiry into the relations between language and thought. It broadened the basis of that inquiry from philosophical and scholarly speculations to an examination of one's own lived experience and introduced a personal and human dimension to a field increasingly threatened by the dehumanizing influence of a narrowly conceived cognitive science.
>
> (Wierzbicka 2014: 236)

For Wierzbicka, "Hoffman's book about 'translating' her life from Polish into English compellingly shows how language-bound a person's life normally is" (ibid.: 239) and, it is worth adding, what a great deal of effort, living in two distinct cultures, Polish and English, it normally involves. The very title of the book (*Imprisoned in English*) from which the above quotes appear suggests the perspective adopted in Wierzbicka's study where English, "like any other language, has its own in-built culture-specific 'forms of attention' – and native speakers of English are often blind to them because of their very familiarity" (ibid.: 4). A further corresponding example showing that no world language is immune to the influence of its defining 'forms of attention' can be found in the same book by Hoffman quoted in Wierzbicka where the author evocatively portrayed her struggle to communicate with her mother with the use of a relatively simple and straight-forward English word 'control':

> Once, when my mother was very miserable, I told her, full of my newly acquired American wisdom, that she should try to control her feelings. "What do you mean?" she asked, as if this was an idea proffered by a member of a computer species. "How can I do that? They are my feelings …." As for me, I've become a more self-controlled person over the years – more "English", as my mother told me years ago. .… I've learned how to use the mechanisms of my will, how to look for symptom and root cause before sadness or happiness overwhelm me. I've gained some control, and control is something I need more than my mother did.
>
> (Hoffman 1989: 269)

Hoffman, unlike Wierzbicka who switched to living and eventually thinking and expressing herself in English in her adult years, moved to America when she was only thirteen years old. Such an early age creates

the necessary conditions for a much more intensive reception of the foreign culture to the result that Hoffman was able to develop a far more intimate relationship with English cultural scripts. The above citation becomes even more compelling if one takes into consideration the fact that Hoffman's parents managed to survive the Holocaust to which their daughter was never directly exposed (Eva Hoffman was born in 1945). Above all, it is a testimony to different *experience* that profoundly separates the two characters of the story which seems paramount in defining the range of 'attention' that Hoffman and her mother have been equipped with for life.

Exactly the same process occurs when one attempts to translate any piece of work, since it is the language in which it was composed which introduces the conceptual and the resulting interpretative boundaries. Wierzbicka made no excuses about the role that translators are supposed to play, stating that "all translators know to their cost, every language has words which have no semantic equivalents in other languages, and every language draws semantic distinctions which other languages do not" (1996: 15). It is the type of 'attention' given to certain concepts in a given culture that intensifies the role of a particular notion within that culture. As a translator, one is simply devoid of the required tools to make an approximately faithful 'copy' of the modes of expression that a source text deploys to meet its own ends; in other words, "language is an instrument for conveying meaning. The structure of this instrument reflects its function, and it can only be properly understood in terms of its function" (ibid.: 3). This function cannot be comprehended otherwise than through *experience* within which a language thrives and develops its own ways of accounting for different cultural phenomena existing in a given cultural frame. Respecting one's *experience* leaves plenty of room for a clearer transfer of meaning between a source and a target text.

The problem of 'attention' seems to have already been addressed in the past centuries, although obviously not explicitly framed in such vocabulary. Works of a whole host of influential thinkers do verify that a great deal of importance has been ascribed to the idea of linguistic relativism and, in this respect, John Locke's evocative observations are no different:

> A moderate skill in different languages will easily satisfy one of the truth of this, it being so obvious to observe a great store of words in one language which have not any that answer them in another. Which plainly shows that those of one country, by their customs and manner of life, have found occasion to make several complex ideas, and given names to them, which others never collected into specific ideas. This could not have

happened if these species were the steady workmanship of nature, and not collections made and abstracted by the mind, in order to naming [sic], and for the convenience of communication. The terms of our law, which are not empty sounds, will hardly find words that answer them in the Spanish or Italian, no scanty languages; much less, I think, could any one translate them into the Caribbee or Westoe tongues; and the versura of the Romans, or corban of the Jews, have no words in other languages to answer them; the reason whereof is plain, from what has been said. Nay, if we look a little more nearly into this matter, and exactly compare different languages, we shall find out, though they have words which in translations and dictionaries are supposed to answer one another, yet there is scarce one often amongst the names of complex ideas... that stands for the same precise idea which the word does that in dictionaries it is rendered by. ... These are too sensible proofs to be doubted; and we shall find this much more so in the names of more abstract and compounded ideas, such as are the greatest part of those which make up moral discourses; whose names, when men come curiously to compare with those they are translated into, in other languages, they will find very few of them exactly to correspond in the whole extent of their significations.

(Locke 1959: 48, qtd after Wierzbicka 1997: 4)

Although Wierzbicka is seen to be often inclined to quote from Locke, her spectre is far wider than that. Among others, a German philosopher, Wilhelm von Humboldt, is also typically referred to in her works as one of the proponents of linguistic relativity:

[E]ach language … contains a characteristic worldview. As individual sound mediates between object and person, so the whole of language mediates between human beings and the internal and external nature that affects them … The same act which enables him [man] to spin language out of himself enables him to spin himself into language, and each language draws a circle around the people to whom it adheres which it is possible for the individual to escape only by stepping into a different one.

(Humboldt 1903-36: 60, qtd after Wierzbicka 1992: 3)

Yet 'stepping into a different language' is not an easy matter because a given language challenges us with a very specific type of 'attention' (which Humboldt preferred to discuss in terms of language as a carrier of a characteristic worldview) that is heir to a specific and culturally-bound *experience*. Similar suggestions were put forward by Edward Sapir in whose writings it is possible to detect a direct influence exerted on Wierzbicka's approach to the study of meaning:

Language is a guide to 'social reality'. Though language is not ordinarily thought of as essential interest to students of social science, it powerfully conditions all our thinking about social problems and processes. Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

(Sapir 1949: 162, qtd after Wierzbicka 1992: 4)

Sapir's deliberations on language were emulated by those of Benjamin Lee Whorf and both scholars made history in linguistics with their ideas being customarily referred to as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis:

[Language] is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. … We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.

(Whorf 1956: 213, qtd after Wierzbicka 1992: 4)

These few passages are a nutshell representation of what came to be known as linguistic relativism, a hypothesis that has often been denied on the grounds of being explicitly too utopian to be granted any serious consideration. However, the data which Wierzbicka has provided over her forty-year-research appear to corroborate the outlined views on the role language plays in the construction and the maintenance of *experience* vel reality. It goes without saying that the very relationship between language

and unique cultural *experience* is a double-edge relationship; one influences the other and vice versa which is what makes the claim for linguistic relativity stand to reason.

1.2 The importance of linguistic universalism

Although strongly in favour of relativity that underpins the majority of vocabulary in all languages of the world, Wierzbicka's research is seen to be far from dismissing linguistic universalism. In fact, it is the very idea of linguistic universalism that crucially defines the basic tenets of Natural Semantic Metalanguage for which the Polish linguist is famous. What NSM appears to be essentially positing is therefore the following: while it is true that all languages are noted to contain rich vocabulary of which the majority of the words are highly specific (Wierzbicka oftentimes prefers to call this quality by the name of 'ethnicity'), it is nonetheless equally true, and that is the pivotal assumption behind the NSM framework, that all languages are noted to possess a set of culture-independent concepts, called indefinables[4]; words that are said to be simple enough to identify them as a common core for all world languages. In this connection, Wierzbicka revealingly claimed the following:

> Within a particular language, every element belongs to a unique network of elements, and occupies a particular place in a unique network of relationships. When we compare two, or more, languages we cannot expect to find identical networks of relationships. We can, none the less, expect to find corresponding sets of indefinables.
>
> (Wierzbicka 1996: 15)

In essence then, Natural Semantic Metalanguage is constructed on the assumption that accepts linguistic relativism but, simultaneously, disregards the idea that because of that, 'there is no exit from language'. In her 1997 book, *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words*, Wierzbicka argued compellingly that "the idea that 'there is no exit from language' is not a twentieth-century invention, but it is certainly one which has been put forward with ever greater insistence in the last few decades (and also, with an ever greater range of interpretations)" (1997: 23). Discussing this aspect of her research, Wierzbicka is seen to have

---

[4] Wierzbicka interchangeably uses such notions as indefinables, primitive concepts, canonical concepts, semantic primes, semantic universals, to name just a few, to describe the words which, according to NSM, are culturally-independent concepts found across all languages of the world.

acknowledged that "in a sense, this statement is true, in so far as everything we say we say in some language, so that even if we 'translate' our thoughts from one language into another, we remain within the confines of a language" (ibid.) but hastened to inform that "in another sense, however, this idea is not true, for the existence of conceptual and linguistic universals does offer us an exit of sorts" (ibid.: 24). Additionally, Wierzbicka's firm belief is that the conceptual and linguistic universals which define Natural Semantic Metalanguage are an innate common stock shared by all human beings and are therefore language-independent because they have exact semantic equivalents across all languages: "for although this common core can only be identified, and understood, via language, it is, in an important sense, language-independent: it is determined by an innate conceptual system, and it is independent of everything idiosyncratic in the structure of all individual languages" (ibid.).

What these assumptions seem to suggest is that, firstly, there is an identifiable set of vocabulary that matches in meaning in all languages of the world, secondly, because of this apparent cross-cultural semantic equivalence, it is possible to use the indefinables to investigate more complex concepts that do not match in meaning and, thirdly, such an investigation is able to assume a language-independent perspective and can thus be potentially a source of an extremely objective description of the quasi-equivalent concepts in any one language pair.

The idea of an innate stock of universal human concepts is not a new invention in linguistic research but it is Wierzbicka who is credited with designing a rigorous methodology for the study of meaning. Among others, Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz was one of the first thinkers to have advocated the notion that there must exist some sort of a combination of 'simple ideas' that is universal and crucially allows for the communication to happen. Wierzbicka quotes Leibniz as one of her prime inspirations for developing Natural Semantic Metalanguage:

> In particular, Leibniz believed that every human being is born with a set of innate ideas which become activated and developed by experience but which latently exists in our minds from the beginning. These innate ideas are so clear to us that no explanation can make them any clearer. On the contrary, we interpret all our *experience* through them.
>
> (Wierzbicka 1992: 8, emphasis added)

Leibniz is noted to have famously invented the phrase 'the alphabet of human thought' to reflect the nature of the 'innate ideas' he was referring to: "Leibniz called those ideas with which, he believed, every human

being was born 'the alphabet of human thoughts'. All complex thoughts –
all meanings – arise through different combinations of simple ideas, just as
written sentences and written words arise through different combinations
of letters from the alphabet" (ibid.) and, as might be already inferred,
Wierzbicka felt that "the task of discovering the ultimate simples (the
'atoms of human thought') was seen by Leibniz as difficult and time-
consuming, but by no means impossible" (ibid.: 9). However, as much as
the German philosopher is seen to have greatly influenced the type of
research Wierzbicka has been already pursuing for more than forty years,
the Polish linguist appears to be profoundly indebted to another renowned
Polish linguist, Andrzej Bogusławski, whom Wierzbicka continues to
quote as her most crucial inspiration: "my own interest in the pursuit of
non-arbitrary semantic primitives was triggered by a lecture on this subject
given at Warsaw University by the Polish linguist Andrzej Bogusławski in
1965" (1996: 13). In a book, titled *Semantic Primes and Universals*, which
was meant to lay down the basic assumptions behind NSM in the possibly
clearest and most rigid way, Wierzbicka adduced the following:

> The "golden dream" of the seventeenth-century thinkers, which couldn't be
> realized within the framework of philosophy and which was therefore
> generally abandoned as a utopia, could be realized, Bogusławski
> maintained, if it was approached from a linguistic rather than from a purely
> philosophical point of view.
>
> (Wierzbicka 1996: 13)

One last critical confession which Wierzbicka made to account for the
emergence of Natural Semantic Metalanguage comes from her 1992 book,
*Semantics, Culture, and Cognition. Universal Human Concepts in
Culture-Specific Configurations*. There the Polish scholar divulged what
follows:

> A program similar to Leibniz's was proposed in the 1960s by Andrzej
> Bogusławski (1966; 1970), who saw in it a possible basis for linguistic
> semantics. I adopted this program in my own work, and in 1972, on the
> basis of empirical investigation of several semantic domains in a few
> European languages, I proposed in my book *Semantic Primitives* a first
> hypothetical list of such elementary human concepts. It included fourteen
> elements: *I*, *you*, *someone*, *something*, *this*, *want*, *don't want*, *think*,
> *imagine*, *feel*, *part*, *world*, *say*, and *become*.
>
> (Wierzbicka 1992: 9)

As of today, out of the initial fourteen universal human concepts, Natural
Semantic Metalanguage is said to have developed into 65 primitive

concepts that are used to interpret more complex concepts across a variety of world languages.

1.3 NSM explications

To all intents and purposes, the core six dozen indefinables are a fixed number of universal concepts that are used to explain complex, culturally-dependent concepts by way of what the NSM terminology refers to as explications. A typical NSM explication would take the form of something like this:

> *violence* (Modern English)
> a. it can be like this:
> b. something happens in a place for some time because some people do some bad things to some other people in this place at that time
> c. these people do these things at that time because they feel something very bad at that time
> d. they can know that something very bad can happen to these other people's bodies because of this
> e. it is very bad when it is like this.
>
> <div align="right">(Wierzbicka 2014: 57)</div>

This explication of the complex ethnic English concept of *violence* is noted to adopt the NSM 'vocabulary' to explain the core meaning of the word in question. The NSM explications, as they are framed by Wierzbicka, are usually found to be divided into what is called different components that define characteristic parts of the meaning that a given concept is said to possess. It is reported that the 'minilanguage' by which NSM is oftentimes referred to underwent series of changes but its contemporary representation includes the following list of universal human concepts:

> Substantives: I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE BODY
> Determiners: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~**ELSE**
> Quantifiers: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, **LITTLE~FEW**
> **Evaluators:** GOOD, BAD
>
> Mental predicates: KNOW, THINK, WANT, **DON'T WANT**, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
> Speech: SAY, WORDS, TRUE

Actions, events, movement, **contact**: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, **TOUCH**

**Location, existence, specification: BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS,
BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)**
Life and death: LIVE, DIE
Logical concepts: NOT, MAYBE CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Time: WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A
SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, **MOMENT**
Space: WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, **BELOW**, FAR, NEAR, SIDE,
INSIDE
Intensifier, augmentor: VERY, MORE
Relational substantives: KIND, PART
Similarity: LIKE~**AS~WAY**
Descriptors: BIG, SMALL
Possession: BELONG TO~BE (SOMEONE'S).

<div align="right">(Wierzbicka 2013: 3, emphasis added)</div>

The highlighted parts of the list imply the very changes to which the
contemporary version of NSM was subjected, as opposed to the 1997
version which is primarily used in my case studies in the ensuing chapters:

Substantives: I, YOU, SOMONE/**PERSON**, SOEMTHING/THING,
PEOPLE, BODY
Determiners: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH
Attributes: GOOD, BAD, **BIG, SMALL**
Mental predicates: THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech: SAY, WORD, TRUE
Actions, events, and movement: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence: (alienable) POSSESSION: THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death: LIVE/**ALIVE**, DIE
Logical concepts: NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, **IF … WOULD
(counterfactual)**
Time: WHEN/TIME, NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A
SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space: WHERE/PLACE, HERE, **UNDER**, ABOVE, FAR, NEAR, SIDE,
INSIDE
Intensifier, augmentor: VERY, MORE
Taxonomy, patronomy: KIND **OF**, PART **OF**
Similarity: LIKE.

<div align="right">(Wierzbicka 1997: 26, emphasis added)</div>

In the case of the concepts that are discussed with reference to the four
authors in the following four chapters, these revisions have no direct
influence on the nucleus of the explications in question but have to be

accounted for to demonstrate the mutations that NSM is noted to naturally yield to. The subsequent sections of this work lean heavily on Wierzbicka's explications as an extremely useful tool facilitating the understanding of such ethnic concepts as *friend*, *courage*, *umysł* and *wolność* with their Polish and English dictionary equivalents.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONCEPT OF *FRIEND*
IN ALDOUS HUXLEY'S *BRAVE NEW WORLD*

> Bernard started and looked horrified. What would the Controller think? To be labelled as the friend of a man who said that he didn't like civilization – said it openly and, of all people, to the Controller – it was terrible. 'But, John,' he began. A look from Mustapha Mond reduced him to an abject silence.
>
> —Aldous Huxley[5]

Aldous Huxley was one of the leading English novelists of the twentieth century. His literary career shows that he was an extremely prolific writer; Huxley's oeuvre includes poetry, novels, a huge collection of essays and occasional attempts at film scripts, after he made California his permanent home later in life. However, his name tends to be associated mostly with one novel published under the title *Brave New World* – a futuristic vision of a totalitarian society which is seen to be radiant on the surface but gloomy underneath. The novel is an example of an anti-utopia where science takes hold of people's lives with the result that the society's very existence is dependent solely on the outcomes of scientific research. As the opening quote indicates, this invariable addiction is what is called civilisation; a notion to which Huxley is noted to have developed mixed attitudes throughout his life. Therefore, *Brave New World* depicts science as a luxury which is achieved at the expense of something far more important, and the reader is led to assume that the English author was particularly sensitive about the questionable impact civilisation is likely to

---

[5] Aldous Huxley (2004a: 192).