COMMON SENSE AND COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

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This paper defends a version of common sense epistemology, influenced by the work of Thomas Reid, according to which appeals to common sense can play a defeasible evidentiary role in philosophical arguments. [1] Such a Reidian common sense epistemology is committed to a version of epistemic conservatism. Commonly epistemic conservatives offer an individualistic epistemology, arguing that if *an individual* believes a proposition the mere fact that the individual believes it provides it with a certain favorable epistemic status for him or her. [2] In contrast, the form of epistemic conservatism defended in this paper is non-individualistic; if *we* are committed to something (for example, a particular ontological position or principle) then this gives my commitment to the thing a favorable epistemic status. [3] The Reidian common

1. In calling the position I wish to defend, *Reidian* common sense epistemology, I am suggesting that the position is inspired by that of Thomas Reid, not that he himself would have endorsed it in full. In particular, the position I am advocating is a non-individualistic common sense philosophy. Although Reid himself is a forefather of non-individualistic epistemology, as I hope to show in the second section of this paper, there are sometimes individualistic passages in his own texts, which often seem to appeal to individual intuitions of self-evidence.

2. So, for example, Richard Foley explains that "epistemic conservatism is the view that a proposition acquires a favorable epistemic status for a person simply by being believed by him" (1983, p. 165) (the references for the articles of this issue can be found below, p. 89). Similarly Hamid Vahid explains that "epistemic conservatism comes in many forms, the most basic of which asserts that the mere possession of a belief confers justification on that belief. So an agent is justified in holding a belief simply in virtue of the fact of holding it" (2004, p. 98).

3. In addition, while most defenders of common sense epistemology place the status of beliefs at the core of their concerns, for the Reidian common sense epistemologist, it makes more sense to talk of common sense commitments rather than beliefs. For we may be implicitly committed to certain principles or to a certain ontology without explicitly having any beliefs about the matter. Our commitments may be implicit in our ways of talking, rather than something anyone actually

sense epistemologist, then, thinks that there exists a shared common-sense metaphysics, including a common-sense metaphysics of mind, and our default position should be to accept the deliveries of this metaphysics. In disputes, the burden of proof lies with the opponent of common sense metaphysics, and unless we have positive reasons to reject the deliverances of common-sense metaphysics, we should endorse them. Thus, what I am calling Reidian Common Sense epistemology can be expressed by the following principle:

Principle of Common Sense: If a commitment is a part of common sense, then it is incumbent upon the opponent of the position to provide positive reasons to reject the commitment. In the absence of a preponderance of positive arguments against a common sense commitment, we should remain committed to it.

For example, I am attracted to process metaphysics. However, I think that substance-property metaphysics is a part of common sense. Therefore, I think that the onus is on the proponent of process metaphysics to provide us with a positive argument to prefer process metaphysics over a substance ontology. Common sense epistemology, then, involves a methodological principle about where the burden of proof lies in philosophical arguments.

Unfortunately, it is not self-evident which commitments and concepts are a part of common sense and which are merely local prejudices. In particular, the fact that something seems obvious to me is not a good reason to judge that it is part of common-sense, for this feeling of self-evidence may just be the result of local prejudice. In contrast, some contemporary epistemic conservatives, who label themselves "dogmatists", argue for the evidentiary value of what they call "epistemic seemings"; if something seems true to me, then this is defeasible evidence for its truth. [4] The version of epistemic conservatism defended in this paper, rejects such forms of dogmatism for being too individualistic and not worried enough about local prejudices. For even though elements of common sense are likely to be the sort of things that seem obvious and self-evident, there are many other ways beliefs can come

believes. Whether such commitments can be cashed out in terms of beliefs is not clear, and is beyond the scope of this paper, so in order to remain neutral on this issue I prefer to talk about common sense commitments rather than common sense beliefs. And I will sometimes talk about commitment to "things" to remain as neutral as possible and avoid belief talk.

4. There have been a slew of papers over the last fifteen years or so defending various forms of "dogmatism" which, as a Kant scholar I don't particularly like as a name, and so prefer "epistemic conservatism". See for example Pryor (2000), Tucker (2010), Huemer (2007). And for recent criticism of this new dogmatism, see White (2006), Wright (2008).

to acquire this property. For example things we have been taught, or beliefs that are widespread in our local community often seem obvious and self-evident, and it is possible that as a result of (philosophical) education there may be beliefs that seem obvious and self-evident to us, but which are inconsistent with common sense. One example of such a belief, Reid suggests, is the belief of those educated philosophically in the Humean tradition that the immediate objects of perception are ideas. Thus, the fact that something seems self-evident to an individual is unlikely to be good evidence that it is part of common sense, as it is quite possible, and I suspect probable, that most of the things that seem self-evident to us are not part of common sense. Thus, for the Reidian epistemic conservative, introspection and reflection are not reliable methods to discover what belongs to common sense. The methodology of common sense should not appeal to individual "intuitions". Reidian common sense epistemology is committed to a form of epistemic externalism, whereas contemporary dogmatists seem to be committed to a form of epistemic internalism.

One central feature of common sense commitments is their universality; everyone of sound mind is committed to them. And, following Thomas Reid, I will argue that the best evidence that a commitment has the universality required for it to be part of our common-sense metaphysics is that it is to be found in all languages. This is the best evidence we have that a judgment has the right sort of universality that common sense requires. Thus, common-sense epistemology cannot be based on *a priori* armchair reflection but requires empirical investigation into which aspects of our conceptual scheme are genuinely universal. Such empirical research cannot justify particular claims, but can help establish where the burden of proof lies in particular arguments. Such a methodology is at the heart of Thomas Reid's own common sense philosophy.

Common sense philosophy and epistemic conservatism are often thought to be conducive to political conservatism. [5] And indeed, in 19th century Anglophone philosophy there was a tendency for members of the common sense tradition to be political conservatives opposed to the political radicalism of Bentham and Mill and their followers. And I suspect that the dogmatic appeal to individual intuitions about the self-evidence of particular beliefs is likely to be congenial to political conservatives, for such intuitions are often the expression of local prejudice. The version of epistemic conservatism defended in this paper, in contrast, does not have such political consequences, as it is centrally

5. See, for example, Nyíri (2016).

concerned with drawing the line between judgments of common sense and expressions of local prejudice, and offers a methodology for undermining local prejudice.

After briefly motivating and providing evidence that Reid himself argues for such a position I will, in the second half of this paper, compare Reidian epistemic conservatism to a more radical position according to which translatability into all other natural languages is a criterion for the validity of philosophical arguments. Now, I do think there is something attractive about such a position. There are often times, for example, when a perfectly good seeming argument in English is just not translatable into another language, and such problems with translation often give us pause for thought. Sometimes the reason is easy to understand, and the attempt to translate can make us aware of problems in arguments. For example, at the start of chapter four of *Utilitarianism*, Mill argues that,

> The only proof capable of being given that an object is *visible*, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is *audible*, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is *desirable*, is that people do actually desire it. (2003, p. 210 – emphasis added)

Now, in English this argument has a certain force because of the syntactic similarity of "visible", "audible" and "desirable". But syntactic form can be deceptive. "Visible" and "audible" mean "can be seen" and "can be heard", but "desirable" does not mean "can be desired". But if we translate it into, say, German it is clear that the surface plausibility of the argument rests on a contingent fact about English. In German, visible is *sichtbar*, and audible is *hörbar* whereas the natural translation of desirable in this context is *wünschenswert* – which could be translated as "worth desiring". Now, in this case, translating into a foreign language may make a problem in a particular argument transparent. But such translation is not necessary to realize the weakness in the argument as many contemporary critics of Mill noticed the problem with his argument without having to go through the trouble of translating it, so we do not need to engage in translation to recognize such problems, although it is clear that translating can sometimes help up attend to such problems. And so I think that the lack of translatability of an argument into another language should give us reasons to question the validity of an argument.

While translation can draw our attention to problems in arguments and appeals to what is universal in language can play a justificatory role in philosophical arguments, providing evidence for where the burden of proof lies, translatability should not be given a stronger role. In

particular, I will reject a more radical position, defended by Anna Wierzbicka and other proponents of natural language meta-semantics, which argues that we should only trust arguments that are, at least in principle, translatable into all other natural languages. I will argue, then, that while appeals to empirical facts about comparative linguists can have an *epistemological* role in determining where the burden of proof lies in particular philosophical arguments, they should not be given a *semantic* role in determining whether or not particular claims should be counted as meaningful. The reason I reject the semantic role of appeals to common sense is that, unlike Wierzbika, I reject the claim that apart from innate primitive concepts, all other concepts have a compositional definitional structure. But, I think that if one is sympathetic to the idea that all concepts are either innate or compositional, then one should be sympathetic to a position like Wierzbika's. I take this, however, to be a *reductio* argument against such a compositional semantics. One person's *modus ponens* is another's *modus tollens*.

An example of mistaking local prejudice for common sense.

Many English-speaking philosophers take contingent features of English as features of languages in general, and then illegitimately use this fact as evidence to support particular philosophical positions. So, for example, in English and as far as I know all Indo-European languages (apart, perhaps, from Sanskrit), we distinguish between propositional attitudes, which are normally expressed by a verb followed by a "that" clause and objectual attitudes expressed by a verb followed by a noun phrase. This linguistic fact is one motivation for drawing a sharp metaphysical distinction between *recognizing* a particular individual or thing and *seeing-that* something is the case, with recognition being objectual and seeing-that being a propositional attitude with sentence like content. Central to this way of thinking is the distinction between term-like entities and sentence-like entities, and the commitment to the idea that the contents of so-called propositional attitudes are sentence-like rather than term-like. Often the evidence provided for this distinction, and exactly where to draw the line between the two quite distinct types of attitude is given by the way English grammar works.

Thus, for example, Mathew McGrath explains that,

The term "proposition" has a broad use in contemporary philosophy. It is used to refer to some or all of the following: the primary bearers of truth-value, the objects of belief and other "propositional attitudes" (i.e., what is believed, doubted, etc.), the referents of that-clauses, and the meanings of sentences. (2007)

And he adds a bit later, "one might doubt whether that-clauses could really refer, if reference is understood on the model of proper names. For, that-clauses are not proper names, nor are they noun phrases". Here McGrath is clearly citing a contingent fact about English grammar as *prima facie* evidence for a particular position on the metaphysics of mind, and in particular on the nature of so-called propositional attitudes. Such appeals to English grammar, and what seems natural or unnatural to native English speakers are extremely common in contemporary work on the metaphysics of mind.

From the perspective of Reidian common sense epistemology, if this fact about English grammar were universal then it could be used as defeasible evidence for the claim that when I see that the cat is on the mat, then I have a mental attitude with sentence-like content, and the onus would be on the critic of such a position to provide positive arguments to reject the claim. However, it turns out that those who appeal to such linguistic facts as evidence have been seduced by contingent facts about Indo-European grammar. For this fact is just a contingent fact about English and other Indo-European languages. For example, in contrast to English, in Turkish the (grammatical) objects of what in English are standardly thought of as propositional attitude verbs are noun-phrases, not that-clauses. Thus, in Turkish one takes what is the main verb of the equivalent English that-clause and turns it into a noun (something like an English gerund), and this verbal noun can be tensed. The rest of the information in the corresponding English that-clause then modifies this verbal noun. In Turkish "propositional attitude" verbs such as "think" [*düşünmek*] or "believe" [*inanmak*] are transitive verbs requiring a noun phrase in the accusative, and they tend to work grammatically in the same way as perceptual verbs such as "see" [*görmek*]. Thus, for example, in Turkish the translation of "I know that the cat is sitting on the mat" is "*Kedinin paspasın üzerinde oturduğunu biliyorum.*" In this Turkish sentence, the main verb is *biliyorum*, which means "I know". The direct object of this verb is *otur-duğ-u(n)-u* which is a nominalized verb which could be translated into English as "its sitting": "*otur*" is the stem of the verb *oturmak*, "to sit"; the "*duğ*" acts as a nominalizer forming a noun from the verb stem; the *u(n)* is the possessive; and the final "*u*" is the accusative case ending making the word the grammatical object of the verb "I know". The Turkish sentence, then, could be re-translated back into English as "I know [the cat's on the mat] its-sitting". [6]

6. Similarly, one would translate the English sentence "I know that the cat that was sitting on the mat will not come to dinner." as "*Paspasın üzerinde oturan kedinin akşam yemeğine gel-me(y)-eceğ-i(n)-i biliyorum*". The object of the verb to

The important fact here is that Turkish grammar does not, standardly, use that-clauses to express what in English are called propositional attitude verbs. Anything that can be expressed in English in a sentence is transformed into such a noun-phrase if it is to be made the object of one of these "propositional attitude verbs".[7] So our linguistic intuitions about what sounds odd should not be decisive. In this case, I suggest that the linguistic intuitions of speakers of Indo-European languages about where to draw the line between when a mental content is term-like or sentence-like should be given no evidentiary weight in philosophical arguments. Now, the point of appealing to Turkish grammar here is not to provide positive evidence for a particular position, but rather to merely provide a defeater of a defeater. The fact that certain things sound unnatural to speakers of European languages is often taken to be evidence against a particular philosophical position. Now, if it were the case that a certain way of speaking were to be found in all languages, this would have some evidentiary value, and the onus would be on the person rejecting the way of speaking to provide reasons for rejecting "common sense" here. But contingent facts about particular languages or language groups should be given no evidentiary weight, as they all too regularly are in far too much contemporary Anglophone philosophy, which often reads like the "Philosophy of English".

This is also a form of argument that Thomas Reid repeatedly makes and is at the heart of his "common sense" philosophy. Although Reid was influential on 20th century ordinary language philosophy, Reid himself is not a proponent of ordinary language philosophy. Instead, as we shall see, he is best thought of as a proponent of something like "common language philosophy". For he thinks that the best evidence that something is part of common sense is that it is common to *all* languages. And he repeatedly argues that the primary evidence that something is a part of

know here is *gel-me(y)-eceğ-i(n)-i*. Here, "*gel*" is the stem of the verb "*gelmek*", to come; the "*me(y)*" is negation suffix; the "*eceğ*" functions to nominalize the verb stem and to mark futurity; the "*i(n)*" is the possessive, and the final "*I*" is the accusative suffix, making this word the direct object of the verb to know (*biliyorum*). So this could be translated back into English as "I know its-[(the) cat sitting on the mat]-not-will-be-coming to diner".

7. There is a construction that is sometimes used in contemporary Turkish using "*ki*", which functions like "that" in English. But this is a fairly recent import from Persian, which is also an Indo-European language. Indeed "*ki*" is etymologically related to the similarly pronounced French "*que*". "The particle *ki*… is of Persian origin and behaves very much like the French *que* or the English 'that' in introducing subordinate clauses that have ordinary main clause verbs." (Göksel and Kerslake, 2011, p. 265.)

common sense is provided by cross-cultural linguistic evidence: distinctions and structures found in all languages express the "common sense of mankind", and the onus is on the opponent of common sense to provide reasons for rejecting common sense. And so a Reidian common sense philosopher will think that empirical facts about comparative linguistics have an important evidential role to play in philosophical arguments in determining where the burden of proof lies in particular philosophical arguments. In the following section of the paper I will provide textual evidence for the importance of comparative linguistics for Reid's methodology.

Thomas Reid on Common Sense and Comparative Linguistics

For Reid, the fact that grammatical features or lexical distinctions are found in all languages is philosophically significant and should be taken as providing defeasible evidence for real differences in the world. Although Reid is often seen as a forerunner of ordinary language philosophy it is more plausible to regard him as a universal language philosopher, for what has philosophical significance for Reid is the agreement of *all* languages on a certain point, not the contingent features of a particular language. Common sense involves judgments that are, in a sense, universal. And the best evidence that a judgment is universal is that it is "common in the structure of all languages, ancient and modern, polished and barbarous" (2002, p. 45). Thus, for example, Reid argues that the fact that all languages have verbs that require agents and objects implies that it is part of commonsense ontology that agents, actions and objects exist. Thus, talking of active transitive verbs, which he believes exist in all languages, Reid claims that:

we know, that, in all languages, such verbs require a thing or a person which is the agent, and a noun following in an oblique case, which is the object. Whence it is evident, that all mankind, both those who have contrived language, and those who use it with understanding, have distinguished these three things as different, to wit, the operations of the mind, which are expressed by active verbs, the mind itself, which is the nominative to those verbs, and the object, which is, in the oblique case, governed by them. (2002, p. 26)

Reid makes it clear that he regards such evidence as defeasible arguing that:

A philosopher is, no doubt, entitled to examine even those distinctions that are to be found in the structure of all languages; and, if he is able to shew that there is not foundation for them in the nature of the things distinguished – if he can point out some prejudice common to mankind which has led them to

distinguish things that are not really different – in that case, such a distinction may be imputed to a vulgar error, which ought to be corrected in philosophy. But when in his first setting out, he takes it for granted without proof, that the distinctions found in the structure of all languages, have no foundation in nature, this, surely, is too fastidious a way of treating the common sense of mankind. When we come to be instructed by philosophers, we must bring the old light of common sense along with us, and by it judge of the new light which the philosopher communicates to us. […] There may be distinctions that have a real foundation and which may be necessary in philosophy, which are not made in common language, because not necessary in the common business of life. But I believe no instance will be found of a distinction made in all languages, which has not a just foundation in nature. (2002, p. 26-27)

Similarly Reid believes that the fact that all languages have plurals implies that all men have notions not only of individual things, but also of attributes common to many. Thus Reid argues that "all languages have a plural number in many of their nouns; from which we may infer, that all men have notions, not of individual things only, but of attributes, or things which are common to many individuals; for no individual can have a plural number" (2002, p. 57)

Similarly, he argues that, if all languages make certain lexical distinctions, this provides us with evidence for the existence of a real objective distinction. Thus Reid argues that, "to perceive, to remember, to be conscious and to conceive or imagine, are words common to philosophers, and to the vulgar. They signify different operations of the mind, which are distinguished in all languages, and by all men that think. […] and I think they are hardly capable of strict definition." (2002, p. 22) Similar appeals to structures or lexical items found in all languages are to be found throughout all of Reid's writings.

Now, the main focus of this rest of this paper will be to examine the limits of appeals to comparative linguistics in philosophy. But before doing so, I will briefly mention two arguments that could be given to support the form of common sense epistemology defended in this paper. There is a large recent literature on epistemic conservatism and dogmatism, and a number of the arguments given to support individualistic internalist epistemic conservatism can be modified to support the non-individualistic externalist form of Reidian common sense epistemology defended in this paper. Firstly, there is what, following Lawrence Sklar, may be called a "transcendental" argument in favor of epistemic conservatism. [8] Sklar argues that:

8. The conservative principle Sklar examines in (1975) is the following: "If you believe some proposition, on the basis of whatever positive warrant may accrue to it from the evidence, *a priori* plausibility, and so forth, it is unreasonable to cease to believe the proposition to be true merely because of the existence of, or knowl-

If the only place conservatism played a role was as a principle of "last resort" in a limited number of cases of radical or transient underdetermination, then the position looks plausible which advocates that we drop the conservative principle and remain skeptical, or that we take any of the alternative decisions open to us as permitted and hence rational, or that we accept the recommendation of the conservative principle but consider our decision to be one of accepting but not believing the hypothesis it favors. But if all our beliefs, even those founded most directly on the immediate data and those inferred from it by our most sacred canons of deductive and inductive inference, rest implicitly upon acceptance of conservatism as a principle for belief, then, I think, we would be far more reluctant to look upon conservatism as at best an easily dispensed-with canon of belief. Do we really wish to remain in skeptical indecision about all our best-supported scientific beliefs? Or take them as, at best, one among many "permitted" hypotheses? Or take it that we never really have the right to believe any scientific hypotheses, but at most have the right to "accept" them? (1975, p. 399)

One interesting thing to note is that although Sklar's argument starts off by offering a defense of individualist conservatism, by the end of the argument he is not talking about individual beliefs but about "our" best-supported scientific beliefs and about what "we" should believe. And I think the rhetorical force of this passage rests on its appeal to our shared commitments rather than to individual, and perhaps idiosyncratic, intuitions and beliefs. So I suggest that such arguments offer better support for a non-individualistic form of epistemic conservatism.

Secondly, there is a form of argument popularized by Harman, which has been called the "'lost justification' argument". [9] According to the individualistic version of the argument, we do not keep track of the justification relations between beliefs, so we possess many beliefs that were initially accepted for good reasons, but we no longer remember the sources of justification. A similar thing may be said for collective commitments, for we may think of language as containing the congealed wisdom of many generations. Now, it is not clear why such a form of argument would favor commitments common to all languages, rather than any commitments to our local community. However, one may combine such a "lost justification" argument with a third form of argument, which we may name the "argument from convergence". Such an argument is analogous to a certain form of argument for scientific realism: structures and distinctions that are found in all languages are likely to be truth apt because this is the best explanation why distinct cultures, without interaction, have arrived at a similar model of the

edge of the existence of, alternative incompatible hypotheses whose positive warrant is no greater than that of the proposition already believed" (p. 378).

9. This is the name given to this form of argument by Vahid (2004, p. 108). See also Gilbert Harman (1986).

world expressed in the structure of their languages. This can be combined with the previous form of argument, for the thought is that languages developed the way they did for (good) reasons, but we are not necessarily aware of these reasons.

Anna Wierzbicka and Natural Semantic Meta-language

In the final two sections of the paper I will contrast the Reidian position I wish to defend with a more radical proposal advocated by proponents of the Natural Semantic Meta-language (NSM) approach to cognitive semantics. This approach has some affinities to Reid's common sense philosophy as it proposes the existence of a universal core "mini language" shared by all of humankind, and suggests that the criterion of translatability into this core language can be used to avoid language specific prejudice. Although I am unaware of proponents of NSM referencing the Reidian tradition, one can think of this project as an attempt to capture the "common sense" set of concepts and structures. However, rather than giving appeals to commons sense an epistemic role, showing where the burden of proof may lie in certain arguments, the defenders of the NSM approach give common sense a semantic role, arguing that philosophical claims (and claims in the social sciences and psychology) are only meaningful if in principle understandable by all, regardless of their natural language. Such claims, to avoid prejudice, should be translatable into all natural languages. This is a much more radical position than Reid's, having some affinities with the radical anti-metaphysical stance of the early logical positivists. But, I shall argue, it rests on the implausible premise that apart from innate primitive concepts, all other concepts have a compositional definitional structure. It is this rejection of the possibility of any real conceptual novelty and creativity that pushes us from a plausible epistemic conservatism to an implausible semantic radicalism.

In this section I will focus on the work of the comparative linguist Anna Wierzbicka, one of the main proponents of the NSM approach, which is concerned with the discovery of what she takes to be linguistic and conceptual universals. Her project is inspired by Leibniz's search for a *lingua naturae*, which he took to be an "alphabet of human thought". Thus, Wierzbicka quotes a number of key passages from Leibniz to motivate her position. For example, Leibniz claims that "the alphabet of human thoughts is the catalogue of primitive concepts, that

is those concepts which cannot be made clearer by means of any defini-
tions". [10] Similarly, he argues that "the alphabet of human thoughts is
the catalogue of those concepts which can be understood by themselves,
and from whose combinations our other ideas arise". [11] And Wierzbicka
summarizes his position in the following terms:

> people can understand an infinite number of ideas because they possess a
> small number of innate simple concepts that are understandable by themselves.
> Different combinations of these simple concepts can generate an infinite
> number of complex ones. (2015, p. 383)

Unfortunately, Leibniz himself was unable to get very far with pro-
ducing a list of these simple innate concepts, but he himself suggested
that "languages are the best mirror of the human mind" (1981, p. 330).
And Wierzbicka and her colleagues argue that the best way to discover
this putative list of semantic primitives is through extensive cross-
linguistic research. Thus, the NSM project is to find a set of "linguistic
primes" that are shared by all languages. These linguistic primes seem
to correspond to the common sense concepts shared by the whole of
humanity, and she argues that all other meaningful concepts should be
definable in terms of these primes. Thus, Wierzbicka explains,

> inside all languages we can find a small shared lexicon and a small shared
> grammar. Together, this panhuman lexicon and the panhuman grammar linked
> with it represent a mini-language, apparently shared by the whole of human-
> kind. On the one hand, this mini-language is an intersection of all the langua-
> ges of the world. On the other hand, it is, as we see it, the innate language
> of human thoughts, corresponding to what Leibniz called "*lingua naturae*."
> Obviously, this language has no sound system, but it can be incarnated in the
> sound system of any language. (2015, p. 385-386)

And she provides a list of the English language version of these terms,
which she thinks empirical research shows can be found in all natural
languages. So, for example, Wierzbicka argues that equivalents to the
English words "I", "you", "someone", "people" and "body" are found in all
languages. In contrast, many languages lack an equivalent for the English
"object". [12] Now, because of the fact that it is not found in all language,

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10. Couturat (1903, p. 435), translated by Anna Wierzbicka.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 430, translated by Anna Wierzbicka.
12. Table 14.1 (2015, p. 385)
Semantic primes (English exponents), grouped into related categories:
I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY substantives
KIND, PART relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE determiners
ONE, TWO, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW, SOME, ALL quantifiers
GOOD, BAD evaluators
BIG, SMALL descriptors

Wierzbicka is skeptical about the central use of this term in developmental psychology and philosophy, arguing that "the abstract words *entity* and *object* used in philosophical and semi-philosophical language have no counterparts in most natural languages" (2015, p. 391). She suggests that the best translation of the ordinary meaning of the English word *object* into the NSM metalanguage is something like the following:

> An *object* is,
> One something
> Someone can see this something
> Someone can touch this something with the hands on all sides
> This something is not something living

This is not, however, how most philosophers and cognitive scientists use this word. And thus, she argues that:

> From the perspective of cross-cultural semantics, the most likely conceptual tool that infants may have for analyzing perceptual input is not OBJECT but SOMETHING, and the neonate's responsiveness to human faces suggests that, from the outset, in the infant's mind SOMETHING has its counterpart in SOMEONE, and that the two are not subsumed by the infant under one general category such as OBJECT. (2015, p. 391)

And she assumes that this purported fact about infant cognition also carries over to adults. And so, we should be skeptical of any philosophical account of cognition that gives a central role to the notion of an *object*, as being based on a particular contingent linguistic framework.

Now, the motivation behind this project is recognizably Reidian, as it is motivated by an appeal to common sense and a desire to avoid appealing to contingent features of particular natural languages. Thus, she claims,

> NSM […] provides us with a neutral tool for describing all languages. The point is that if the meanings encoded in one language are described through the categories of another language, for example, Russian or Japanese meanings

KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH actions, events, movement, contact
THERE IS, BE (SOMEWHERE), BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING) existence, location, specification
MINE possession
LIVE, DIE life and death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE space
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF logical concepts
VERY, MORE intensifier
LIKE~AS~WAY similarity

through English words, these meanings often get distorted, and an Anglo slant is imposed on them. If, on the other hand, we describe such meanings through the universal mini-language NSM, even in its English version, we can avoid such distortion. (2015, p. 386) [13]

Now, while it might be helpful to have a common meta-language to clear up inter-linguistic misunderstandings, Wierzbicka seems to think that translatability into this Natural Semantic Metalanguage also has philosophical significance with terms not translatable in these terms being suspect. In this regard, Wierzbicka's project seems to have some affinities with the anti-metaphysical project of a number of early analytic philosophers. We now tend to remember the positivists stress on ideal logical languages and tend to forget that many of them were also strong advocates of forms of common or universal natural languages. Thus, a number of early analytic philosophers were interested in the idea of creating a simplified "universal" natural language. For example, Charles Ogdon, the author of *The Meaning of Meaning* and editor of Wittgenstein, invented "basic English", which is a condensed version of standard English with a reduced vocabulary of 850 words, which was supposed to be a "transparent medium for expressing empirical concepts". Carnap learnt Esperanto when he was 14 and was a lifelong proponent of what were known as "International Auxiliary Languages". And Neurath was a strong proponent of Esperanto, and tried to develop what he called a *universal* visual language, which he named Isotype (which stand for "International System of Typographic Pictorial Education") which he called a "pictorial Esperanto". [14] Thus, the NSM project, in addition to its relationship to Reidian common sense philosophy, also has affinities with the early analytic (anti-metaphysical) project.

13. Similarly, she argues that "what NSM researchers see as particularly important is that NSM offers a unified framework for the study of communication and cognition, of adult and child language, and of humans and nonhuman primates and early hominins […] a framework that is independent of particular languages and cultures and free of the Anglocentrism and "scientism" that plague most contemporary debates in human sciences. It may seem more scientific to rely in our analyses on Latinate terms such as object, intention, agency, and perceive rather than on terms like something, want, do, and see. The fact is, however, that those simpler and more naïve-sounding ones are both cross-translatable and attested in children's speech. These simpler words are experience-near and therefore (in the area of human thinking) evidence-near. […] Thus, English exponents of universally attested concepts like DO and SEE (used in preference to AGENCY and PERCEIVE) can free our analysis from Anglocentrism and scientism at the same time" (2015, p. 389).

14. For a good discussion of this attraction to a universal natural language in early analytic philosophy, see Aray (2014) and (2019).

What are we to make of all this?

Now, it seems to me that such a position is far too strong. And in this I agree with Reid, who, in a passage quoted earlier argues that "There may be distinctions that have a real foundation and which may be necessary in philosophy, which are not made in common language, because not necessary in the common business of life." (2002, p. 27.) Thus, Reid is happy to admit that philosophical terminology can go beyond the vocabulary of everyday life. But the question Wierzbicka will ask is whether this vocabulary, if it is to be meaningful, must be translatable into our common sense vocabulary. And her Leibnizian answer seems to be yes. I think this is a mistake and denies the possibility of the creation of genuinely novel concepts.

Now, I think the key mistake of NSM is that it is committed to the position that apart from innate primitive concepts, all other concepts have a compositional definitional structure. This claim seems obviously wrong to me. But similar basic ideas have been quite common in linguistics and cognitive science in general. And I think that if this claim is correct, then the NSM position becomes much more plausible. For example, Jackendoff has argued that:

The only reasonable way anyone has been able to conceive of a word meaning within a cognitive theory is in terms of states of a combinatorial system. […] The full class of humanly possible concepts (or conceptual structures) is determined by the combinatorial principles of the Conceptual Well Formedness Rules. That is, the Conceptual Well-Formedness Rules characterize the space of possible conceptual states – the resources available in the brain for forming concepts. The set of concepts attained by any particular person will be some subset of these. (1992, p. 53-54)

And many cognitive scientists (for example Fodor and those committed to Bayesian models) are committed to the view that all learning is to be understood as hypothesis testing, which also denies the possibility of the creation of novel concepts in learning, as the hypotheses to be tested have to be representable before the learning process begins. Analogous views are to be found expressed by many cognitive scientists and linguists. So her form of compositional semantics, however implausible, is not a fringe position.

Now, the problem is that there seem to be a huge number of perfectly good concepts that are not translatable into all known language. For example the Mundurukú and Pirahã peoples of Brazil do not have full counting systems. Thus, the Mundurukú only possess a few number words, going up to about 5, and do not count using these numbers (Dehaene, 1997, p. 261). Now, it would seem that there is no way to

translate the twin prime hypothesis into the language of the Pirahã or Mundurukú, but this gives us no reason to question its meaningfulness. There seems to be no way to define the concept of prime number in terms of their own vocabulary. This does not mean that they are unable to learn such concepts, but this learning cannot be in terms of learning a new definition. Instead, to learn such new concepts requires being immersed in a set of embodied practices. As Stanislas Dehaene has convincingly argued, "progress on the conceptual scale of arithmetic depends on the mastery of a toolkit of mathematical inventions" (*ibid.*, p. 263). To learn arithmetical concepts one has to learn how to count, which in part involves memorizing an arbitrary ordered sequence of symbols. Without mastering this practice one cannot learn arithmetical concepts. The concept of "prime number" cannot be defined compositionally in terms of the concepts of an infant who has not yet learnt to count.

A similar story may be told about, say, the computational theory of mind. Understanding what it is for something to be "computational" requires the mastery of formal logic, and perhaps an experience of modern computers. It seems implausible to claim that for the computational theory of mind to make sense it should be translatable into the language of Descartes and should be in principle understandable by Descartes without him having to learn a whole slew of new techniques and practices. And I doubt whether Descartes himself could have properly understood the hardware/software distinction. Once again, this, in itself, should not automatically lead us to question this distinction.

In this, I am in sympathy with Susan Carey who argues convincingly for the existence of such novel concepts, which she argues can be learnt through a process of what she calls "Quinean Boot-strapping". [15] So, if Carey is right, even if we assume that Wierzbicka is right that there is a universally shared set of innate concepts, and that the best way to discover them is through cross-cultural linguistic analysis, this does not imply that we should be suspicious of any claims that are not translatable into this basic vocabulary. [16] So let me finish the paper by discussing Carey's arguments for the possibility of novel concepts, that are not definable in terms of innate concepts. Thus Carey argues that:

15. As many have pointed out, Carey herself is not particularly clear about what she means by "quinean boot-strapping". Central to the idea is the claim that the child is able to acquire novel concepts through the use of placeholders, such as when children memorize a count list on their way to acquiring natural number concepts. For a good discussion see Beck (2017).

16. And I should add that I am skeptical of Wierzbicka's apparent assumption that the fact that certain words are found in all languages is evidence that the concepts they express are innate, because they may be learnt by all individuals because the life circumstances they find themselves in are similar.

With respect to developmental change, contrary to continuity theorists such as Fodor, Pinker, and others, there are major discontinuities over the course of conceptual development. By "discontinuity" I mean qualitative changes in representational structure, in which the later emerging system of representation cannot be expressed in terms of the conceptual resources available at the earlier time. Conceptual development consists of episodes of qualitative change, resulting in systems of representation with more expressive power than, and sometimes incommensurable with, those from which they are built. (2015, p. 417)

And she compares her position with that of those (like Wierzbicka) who think that all new concepts must be defined by starting off with a base of semantic primes, arguing that:

A kind of logical constructivism is at the heart of Fodor's, Rey's, and, at least implicitly, Rips and colleagues' dialectic. These writers, like many others, take expressive power to be a function of innate primitives and of what can — in principle if not in fact — be built from them using the resources of the logic available to the learner. Expressive power is a logical and semantic notion. As long as the characterization of learning mechanisms is exhausted by specifying the set of innate primitives and the logical resources through which one builds new representations from those primitives, clearly one cannot increase expressive power by learning. My response to this picture of learning and conceptual development is to argue that learning mechanisms can create new primitives, new primitives that cannot be constructed from antecedently existent primitives by logical combination, and thus increase the expressive power of the conceptual system. In addition, my concern is with how new primitives actually come into being; if there are processes that yield new primitives, then the question is whether such processes actually underlie the emergence of any given representation. (2015, p. 416)

Carey argues that there are two ways of acquiring new primitives: (1) Innate learning mechanisms (for learning new natural kind terms, for example) and (2) what she calls "Quinean Bootstrapping", which she argues is at the basis of the learning of new arithmetical concepts. Thus she argues that:

One example is learning the natural number system, which requires learning an arbitrary ordered list. I have argued here that the numeral list representation of number is a representational resource with power that transcends any single representational system available to prelinguistic infants. When the child, at around age 3 ½, has mastered how the count sequence represents number, he or she can in principle precisely represent any positive integer. Before that, he or she has only the quantificational resources of natural languages, parallel individuation representations that implicitly represent small numbers, and analog magnitude representations that provide approximate representations of the cardinal values of sets. (2015, p. 328)

Carey seems right to me in her account of how a child is able to learn adult numerical concepts. And if she is right, the Leibnizian

compositional semantics on which Wierzbicka bases her arguments is false. However, even if her commitment to compositional semantics is mistaken, I do not think this renders NSM philosophically uninteresting, for translatability into all languages does seem to have some philosophical significance and to be a touch-stone of something. However, rather than regarding such translatability as a semantic criterion for meaningfulness, one should regard such translatability as an epistemic criterion, as a mark that certain concepts or distinctions are a part of common sense. And the value that such a criterion can play is showing where the burden of proof lies in philosophical arguments. [17]

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