

The ethnopragmatics and semantics of "active" metaphors

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1. Introduction

1.1 'Ethnopragsmatics' and cross-cultural semantics

I use the term 'ethnopragsmatics' to refer to explanations of speech practices which begin with culture-internal ideas, i.e. with the shared values, norms, priorities, and assumptions of the speakers, rather than with any presumed universals of pragmatics. Ethnopragsmatics (sometimes called cross-cultural pragmatics¹) is characterised by a concern with cultural particularity, and typically produces highly specific and fine-grained descriptions (cf. Wierzbicka 1991, 2002; Goddard 1992, 2000, in press). In this paper I argue that active metaphor, far from being a universal and natural feature of human language, is a culture-specific phenomenon which can only be properly understood in an ethnopragsmatic perspective.

Of particular importance to sound ethnopragsmatic methodology is the need to avoid terminological ethnocentrism in the metalanguage of description and analysis, and this means, among other things, that the term 'metaphor' itself cannot be taken for granted. As an artefact of a particular cultural tradition with its origins in classical Greek rhetoric, this word encapsulates a complex meaning which lacks precise equivalents in many, probably most, of the world's languages. It would be ethnocentric to uncritically adopt such a category as a starting point for cross-cultural comparison. This point is not necessarily affected by the fact that the term 'metaphor' can be given various technical or theory-internal meanings. What really matters is whether our theoretical starting points can be freed of the interpretive 'spin' which comes from their being grounded in culture-specific categories, or, to put it another way, whether we understand what we are talking about well enough to translate it into terms which are transposable across linguistic and cultural boundaries, i.e. into simple and maximally culture neutral terms.

Consistent with this goal, this paper employs as an analytical tool the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) originated by Anna Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka 1972, 1991, 1996a; Goddard 1998a, 1998b; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002). This consists of a set of some sixty semantic primes (and their associated grammar) which research suggests are embodied as word-meanings in most, if not all, languages; for example, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, SAY, DO, WANT, THINK, BECAUSE, NOT (the full list is given in the

Appendix). Numerous studies have shown that the mini-lexicon of semantic primes, despite its relatively small size, can be used to paraphrase the meanings of complex culture-specific words and grammatical constructions (as semantic explications) and to spell out culture-specific norms and assumptions (as cultural scripts)².

In this paper I will demonstrate how the NSM metalanguage can be used as a basis for discussing metaphor and related speech practices in a clear and non-circular fashion and in terms which can be readily transposed between languages. I will use it both to articulate the “ethnopragmatic script” which underlies the use of active metaphors in English generally, and to specify the semantic content of some individual active metaphors.

1.2 Identifying “active” metaphors

Commenting on the many different kinds of phenomena which have been called metaphor, Samuel Levin could already remark in 1977 that: “This problem of definition and hence of scope is one that has troubled and embarrassed theorists and rhetoricians for over two millennia” (Levin 1977: 80). In the contemporary literature, the ‘meta-category’ of metaphor now includes, inter alia, conventional or fixed metaphors (e.g. *broken-hearted*), systems of polysemes (e.g. *She demolished my argument*), and ‘active metaphors’, including what I will call expository metaphors (e.g. *Unemployment is a contagious disease*) and poetic metaphors (e.g. *The fog comes on little cat feet*).

In this paper I am concerned exclusively with what have been called ‘active metaphors’ (my preferred term, taken from Goatly (1997)), ‘live metaphors’ or ‘deliberate metaphors’ (cf. Black 1993; Levin 1993; Cameron in press). As a first pass at characterising the phenomenon, a survey of the literature turns up the following four main criteria, which have been used either separately or together.

- (a) dissonance or deviance between sentence meaning (literal meaning, etc.) and the speaker’s intended or inferred meaning³
- (b) an implied statement of likeness (similarity, analogy, or comparison)
- (c) recognisability by the listener, linked with a ‘colourful effect’
- (d) “freshness” or novelty

These criteria do not always align. In particular, there are conventionalised expressions (so-called ‘metaphorical clichés’, such as *food for thought* or *the tip of the iceberg*) which are not fresh or novel but which meet the other criteria.

Discounting novelty, the remaining criteria can be linked by one more general factor, which at a first approximation we can call ‘metalinguistic awareness’. Using or interpreting an active metaphor requires that one is aware, at some level, that there is a difference between what the words say, as it were, and what the speaker actually means. The term ‘metalinguistic awareness’ is not ideal, however, for the property which I have in

mind. To see this, consider this quotation from Winner and Gardner's (1993: 426) paper on metaphor and irony.

[F]ull comprehension of nonliteral utterances entails not only constructing the speaker's meaning, but also keeping in mind the literal sentence meaning and hearing the contrast between what is said and what is meant... Only with metalinguistic awareness does the listener recognise and appreciate the metaphoricity or irony of the nonliteral utterance. Only at this level do nonliteral utterances *feel* different (and hence function differently) from literal ones.

Winner and Gardner add that they do not mean that the speaker's meaning is necessarily PROCESSED any differently than with a literal utterance. It is a matter, rather, of grasping or hearing the utterance as different from just 'plain talk'.

In my view, what Winner and Gardner (1993) are saying makes a lot of sense. Notice, however, that they are using the expression 'metalinguistic awareness' in a deliberately broad way—to designate an awareness of a contrast between what is said and what is meant. This is because they want to encompass both irony and metaphor under the same metalinguistic umbrella. Equally, however, the authors stress that we need to DISTINGUISH metaphor from irony. How can this be done? Essentially, the difference hinges on the difference between what is said (the content) and the words in which something is said (lexical form). Speaking ironically, one says something which one does not mean, intending the listener to realise this. Producing an active metaphor, however, one says certain words outside their usual uses, in a way which draws attention to the words themselves. The dissonance is a mismatch, or potential mismatch, between the form of what is said and the speaker's intended or inferred meaning. For this particular kind of metalinguistic awareness, a more specialised term is needed: 'metalexical awareness'. Aside from active metaphor, other phenomena which involve metalexical awareness are proverbs, aphorism, riddles, quotations, slogans, verse, song, and punning: all phenomena which involve the preservation of "the very words" (cf. Olson and Hildyard 1983).

The idea of 'metalexical awareness' links in very well with a linguistic test (or partial test) for active metaphors which has been proposed by Andrzej Bogusławski (1994). The proposed test relies on the existence of expressions like the following, in which the speaker directly comments on his or her choice of words: *so to speak, as it were, if you like, speaking metaphorically*. When expressions like these occur (as they do fairly frequently in conversation, oral narrative and journalism; cf. Moon (1998: 305-6)), they can be taken as overt evidence of the speaker's metalexical awareness. They directly index a speaker's awareness of the unusual nature of the word usage. Bogusławski's proposal is that the POTENTIAL to co-occur with such phrases can be used as test for identifying active metaphors⁴. I will refer to this as the 'metalexical tag test'. This test would identify

the expressions in (1) as active metaphors, while disallowing those in (2). Intuitively this seems the correct result, if we allow that active metaphors need not be particularly novel, as previously discussed.

- (1) *Language is, so to speak, the mirror of the mind.*
Unemployment is a contagious disease, as it were.
The past is, metaphorically speaking, a foreign country.
He was, if you like, in the semi-finals of his life.
It was the tip of the iceberg, so to speak.

- (2) **Prices fell, so to speak.*
**She attacked my argument, as it were.*
**We fell in love, metaphorically speaking.*
**He has high standards, if you like.*
**It was a waste of time, so to speak.*

It goes without saying that adding a metalexical tag degrades the stylistic effect of the metaphors in (1), but this is not pertinent to the proposed test.

1.3 *Developing an ethnopragmatic script for active metaphorising*

To characterise different varieties of figurative language within the NSM metalanguage one must draw, above all, on the semantic primes SAY and WORDS, and on their associated grammar⁵. Consider the sentences in (3a)-(3c) below. These, it is claimed, represent three grammatical possibilities (valency options) of the semantic prime SAY. The meanings expressed by these sentences, according to the NSM hypothesis, should be sayable in any language. That is, once we locate the lexical equivalent of SAY in a language, one should be able to use this element (or a variant) to specify an addressee and also a locutionary topic, as in (3b) and (3c), respectively.

- (3) a. someone says something
b. someone says something to someone [addressee]
c. someone says something about something [locutionary topic]

Additional syntactic frames like those in (4a) and (4b) link the primes SAY and WORDS. Notice that the element WORDS is not necessarily identical to any technical linguistic notion of ‘wordhood’. From the linguist’s point of view, there is no doubt a certain looseness or vagueness in the referential range of the prime WORDS, but that does not make it unsuitable as a semantic prime. It appears that universal syntax may sanction a third kind of combination of the primes SAY and WORDS, namely that shown in (4c), in

which a phrase based on WORDS appears in the ‘subject’ slot of SAY. At first blush, one might think that this kind of combination is highly idiosyncratic and language-specific, even that it represents a kind of metaphor itself, but initial indications suggest that it is possible in a wide range of languages⁶ (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002).

- (4) a. someone says some words
- b. someone says something with some words (or: with other words)
- c. these words say something else

With this background, consider now the script in (5) below, which is phrased entirely in terms which one can reasonably expect to be expressible in any language. This script is intended to represent a chunk of ethnopragmatic ‘common knowledge’ of English; that is to say, knowledge about a certain valued speech practice which speakers of English and other European languages share in virtue of having been socialised into a particular linguistic culture. Ethnopragmatic scripts are a specialised kind of cultural script (in the sense of Wierzbicka 1996b, 1998, 2002; Goddard 1992, 1997, 2000; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1997) – specialised in that they concern culture-specific “ways with words” rather than other aspects of speaking or thinking.

- (5) *Anglo (Western) ethnopragmatic script for active metaphorising*
everyone knows:
sometimes when a person wants to say something about something
this person says it with some words, not other words, because this person thinks:
 I know these words can say something else
 I want to say it with these words
 because if I say it like this, people will have to think about it
 I want this
people think it is good if a person can do this well

In case it needs saying, I hasten to add that this script is not intended to constitute a complete account of metaphor or metaphorising, including its sociological, culture-historical or psycholinguistic processing aspects. It is not intended as an “outsider’s” description at all, but as a way of depicting a certain interpretative frame which (it is claimed) is intersubjectively shared by speakers of English.

Script (5) very plainly reflects and depends on metalexical awareness, i.e. a recognition of the twin aspects of saying something (content) with some words (lexical form). Essentially, it depicts the knowledge held by Anglo cultural “insiders”, that speakers sometimes knowingly use certain words which could express a meaning different to their intended meaning because they wish to make the listener think about what is being said; or

to put it in more abstract terms, because they want to secure some kind of cognitive engagement from the listener⁶. This is the kind of metaphors Aristotle was talking about when he wrote in his *Rhetoric*:

It follows then, that for style and reasoning alike, that in order to be lively they must give us rapid information. Consequently we are not gratified by enthymemes [metaphors – CG] that are obvious—and ‘obvious’ means absolutely plain to everyone, not demanding a bit of mental inquiry—nor by those which, when stated, we do not understand. (*Rhetoric* 1401b14 – 25; Engl. Tr. P 207; cited Eco 1984: 102).

The great bulk of active metaphors in everyday talk, political speeches, journalism, and science writing, are probably of this kind, i.e. broadly speaking, expository in function and cognitive in orientation (cf. Goatly 1997). They seek to engage us in some small mental effort by, as it were, posing a little puzzle or riddle whose solution enables us to discover for ourselves an often fairly complex meaning packaged in a succinct expression. I will return to this matter in section 3, where I will argue that active metaphors usually have specific, storable interpretations.

Before this, however, I want to highlight and dramatise my proposition that active metaphors, as characterised so far, is a culture-specific speech practice and that it needs to be understood within an ethnopragmatic perspective. For readers with a knowledge of the wide variation in culturally based speech practices, this claim may seem unremarkable, but it is worth reminding ourselves that metaphors have often been considered, in Jerry Morgan’s (1993: 132) words, a “natural function of the mind”. Even today one commonly reads studies which discuss production and interpretation of metaphors in English (or other European languages) entirely without reference to cultural context.

2. Two ethnopragmatic case studies

To underline the culture-specificity of English active metaphors, I will give partial ethnopragmatic sketches of two non-Western cultures: Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjara and Malay. In traditional Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjara culture active metaphors was virtually nonexistent, despite a proliferation of other speech practices involving metalinguistic awareness. In traditional Malay culture there was an abundant use of imagistic language which might seem at first to be metaphorical in nature, but on closer examination turns out to be radically different in character.

2.1. The marginality of active metaphor in Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjara

Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjara (henceforth P/Y) are closely related dialects of the Western Desert Language, still spoken as a first language in the arid and sparsely

populated central and western interior of Australia (Goddard 1985, 1996; Eckert and Hudson 1988). The traditional culture is replete with symbolism (totemism) and religious myth. There are hundreds of Dreaming stories, songs, and ceremonies. There is a large body of traditional folktales for children. There is a hortatory rhetoric (*alpiri*), elaborate verbal indirectness practised with certain categories of kin, well-developed practices of insult and abuse, and prescribed ‘joking relationships’ (Goddard 1992). There is an auxiliary language (a special vocabulary, *anitji*) used during ceremonial times.

Despite this abundance of verbal art, active metaphor apparently played only a marginal role in traditional P/Y culture. I have yet been unable to identify a single clear instance of an active, original metaphor in my corpus of traditional P/Y texts—which include Dreaming stories, narratives of personal experience, folktales, and hortatory rhetoric⁸. The traditional rhetoric (*alpiri*) makes extensive use of parallelism and of appeals to personal experience and traditional models of behaviour—but I have found no evidence of active metaphorising. Paul Eckert, another linguist with extensive experience with Pitjantjatjara (cf. Eckert and Hudson 1988), agrees: “Like you I have not found very much active metaphor in my corpus of traditional texts or even in general conversation” (p.c. June 1999). Incidentally, also absent from traditional P/Y verbal culture are proverbs, another speech practice involving metalexical awareness.

Significantly, one can find a limited number of examples of active metaphors (or more precisely, active similes) in certain NON-TRADITIONAL discursive domains such as the discourses of Christianity, community politics, health and education. The similes ‘like a rock’, ‘like a tree’ and ‘like a key’, for example, are all well-established in contemporary P/Y, perhaps approaching cliché status. For example, ‘traditional culture was like a rock’ (i.e. solid and reliable); ‘this school is like a tree’ (i.e. in time it will grow and bear good fruit); ‘English is the key’ (i.e. if we can learn English properly, we will be able to do things ourselves).

Two more novel examples of active simile follow⁹. Example (6) comes from a publication celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the achievement of Pitjantjatjara Land Rights. The speaker has been reminding people of the progress toward community self-management which has been achieved in this ten years, and urges them to continue. Example (7) comes from a speech about how the government has undermined traditional land rights, by dividing up administration and control of the tribal lands between three different States (Western Australia, South Australia, Northern Territory), each with its capital city far away.

- (6) *Nyanganguru pulkara arkala kutjupaku. Football player rule nintiringkunyjaku purunypa.*

From now you can practise other things. Like a football player learning the rules.

- (7) *Tjana walytjangku walytjangku palyanu mumuya string purinypa kanyini. Nyaranguru string kutjupa kanyini corner kutjupangka palu corner kutjupangka ka corner kutjupangka kanyini ka corner kutjupangka kanyini kala uwankara ngururpa nyinanyi.*

They divided it up and hold onto it as if with strings. There's one string from over there going to one corner, another to another corner, another to another corner, and we (i.e. Aboriginal people) are all in the middle.

I believe that active metaphorising in contemporary P/Y is a result of culture contact. Part of the influence is non-linguistic in nature. The encroaching Europeans have brought about substantial changes in lifestyle and economy and introduced a host of new institutions and alien concepts which call for explication and exposition—functions for which metaphor and simile can be extremely valuable. But there has also been, from almost the earliest days of sustained culture contact, a continuous training in metaphorical interpretation provided by missionary efforts to convey the Bible message in Pitjantjatjara. Translation of the New Testament began with the founding of the Ernabella Mission in the early 1940s, and continues to this day. Church services (including hymns and sermons) and community preaching have been carried out in Pitjantjatjara, by both European missionaries and Pitjantjatjara people themselves, for over 50 years (cf. Goddard 1990). Many of the current Pitjantjatjara elders have attended numerous Bible study workshops.

All these activities involve explicit training in the interpretation of metaphor, simile and parable because, as everyone knows, the Bible is full of figurative language (God the Father, God as a shepherd¹⁰, the Kingdom of God, turn the other cheek, enter through the narrow gate, etc.). In particular, many of the key sayings of Jesus are framed in figurative language, making it almost impossible to speak the 'language of Christianity' without employing culturally unfamiliar metaphors. For example, in a Pitjantjatjara sermon recorded by Paul Eckert in 1978, the following metaphors were used: 'John the Baptist came to make straight the roads'; 'John said: God will winnow, separating the grain from the chaff'; 'John the Baptist was a voice in the wilderness'; 'John said: God has a scythe (axe) with which he will cut everybody down'. In each case, some explanation accompanied the metaphorical expression. Sometimes it was only a sentence or two, as in (8), at other times a quite extensive explanation with much restatement and repetition, as in (9).

- (8) *John-nga papatjatjanya paluru nganmanypa pitjangu, iwarankunyjikitja, anangu tjuangka tjukurpa palya tjakultjunkunyjikitja, tjana kulira piiwiyaringkula kampa kutjuparira papatjaitjirinytjaku.*

John the Baptist had come before, to make the road (path), to tell people the good news, so that they would repent (think and feel shame), change their ways, and be baptised.

- (9) *Ka wira ngarinyi ilkaringka kanintjaku. Iriti wira kanilpai tjana kanyiningi. Mumuya mai tjuta tjunkupai, munu mai panya nyaa tjuta, mirintja tjuta mauntalpa tjunangi, munu mai uninypa tjuta mauntalpa tjunanyi, nyaratja rungkantjikitjangku, ngalkunytjikitjangku. Ka palupurunypa Kaataku ngura ilkaringka wira ngarinyi. Kaatalu anangu uwankara kanilku. Munu paluru tjaralku ilyinypa tjuta, nganananya kuratjara. Anangu palya tjuta uninypa, mai panya tjuta tjunanyi, uninypa tjuta.*

There's a wira (winnowing dish) in heaven for winnowing. In the past they (Aboriginal people) used to have winnowing dishes. They'd get out the seed, and they'd separate the other stuff, the chaff. They'd keep the seed separate for grinding up to eat. Just the same God has a winnowing dish in heaven. God will winnow all the people. And he'll divide the chaff, those of us who are sinners. The good people are the seeds, what he'll keep, the seeds.

Of course, even if the discourse of Christianity was the initial and major catalyst for the increase in metaphorising, there must have been other sources also, such as participation in the Western health and education systems.

From the P/Y situation we can draw the following two lessons, which both highlight the culture-specificity of active metaphorising. First, a culture can be at once a highly 'verbal culture' and yet still accord only a marginal role to active metaphorising, and, second, active metaphorising, like other cultural practices, can be transferred in the process of culture contact and adaptation.

2.2 *The 'imagery of allusion' in Malay*

We find an equally instructive situation with Malay (Bahasa Melayu), the national language of Malaysia. At first blush, everyday usage in old style or traditional Malay seems to be overflowing with exuberant and poetic metaphors, but closer inspection shows that the situation is quite different.

One of the classic colonial commentaries on traditional Malay society, Henri Fauconnier's (1990[1931]) *The Soul of Malaya*, contains the following passage.

Imagine, for example the following dialogue between two young Malays. The subject is a green coconut. What can they have to say on such a matter? Listen:

Osman, with downcast eyes, but with assurance: “Where do the leeches come from?” And he sighs.

Mat shakes his head reflectively: “The hook is broken.”

Osman protests: “Would a lamp be lit?”

And Mat answers with a cruel laugh: “The sugar cane on the opposite bank is very sweet...” (Fauconnier 1990[1931]: 124)

It certainly sounds poetic and metaphorical, does it not? In a sense it is, but in a very different way to metaphor in English. Explaining Osman and Mat’s exchange, Fauconnier tells us that the green coconut represents a beautiful girl. Osman is confessing to his friend that he has a crush on this girl (“Where do the leeches come from?”). Mat’s response is not encouraging: you have no chance, he tells his friend (“The hook is broken”). But she’s been making eyes at me, Osman protests (“Would a lamp be lit?”). That kind of thing can’t be trusted, Mat answers him (“The sugar cane on the opposite bank is very sweet”).

Where does all this come from? The answer depends on the existence of a shared large corpus of short traditional Malay verses (*pantuns*), along with a large number of other proverbial sayings and maxims (*peribahasa*).

In the Malay dialogue ... all is allusion. It would be incomprehensible if one did not know the pantun of the leeches that come from the marshes into the rice fields; the pantun in which the sugar-cane of the other bank symbolises illusion or treachery; the pantuns of the hook and of the lamp.... (Fauconnier 1990[1931]: 126)

At least three of the pantuns to which Fauconnier refers are still well-known today— see below. Pantuns consist of a four-line verse in two parts, with an *abab* rhyme scheme. The first couplet (the *pembayang* ‘foreshadower’) generally depicts a concrete scene or event, often from nature. The second couplet expresses a clearer message (the *maksud* ‘meaning’) usually from the internal world of thoughts, values and feelings. Reading them, one can see at once how Osman and Mat’s references to leeches, the lamp, and the sugar cane work.

Pantun of the leeches (Sim 1982: 56-7):

Dari mana datangnya lintah?

Dari sawah turun ke kali,

Dari mana datangnya cinta?

From whence come the leeches?

From the swamp to the ricefields.

From whence comes this love?

Dari mata turun ke hati?

From the eyes down to the heart.

Pantun of the lamp (Daille 1988: 44; Hamilton 1941: 22; Sim (1982: 49):

Apa guna pasang pelita

What's the use of lighting a lamp

Jika tidak dengan sumbunya?

if the wick's not in it?

Apa guna bermain mata

What's the use of making eyes

Kalau tidak dengan sungguhnya?

If you don't mean it?

Pantun of the sugar cane (Daille 1988: 156; Hamilton 1941: 60; Sim 1982: 54):

Manis sungguh tebu seberang

How sweet the cane on the other bank

Dari akar sampai ke pucuk,

Sweet from root to tip.

Manis sungguh mulut orang,

How sweet a person's words can be

Kena tipu di dalam pujuk.

As they dupe one with their coaxing.

Malay commentators have suggested that the pantun can be seen as a prototype or “a microcosm of Malay social communication” (Asmah 1995). Among its special qualities are compactness and imagery, its reliance on “terse, tight, yet graceful and intelligent pictures” (Muhammad Haji Salleh 1991: 39). Sometimes the link between the two couplets is tantalisingly vague (“merely an association of ideas, or of feeling”¹¹ (Sim 1982: 36)), but the *pembayang* can also draw on a large stock of images with conventionalised meanings or suggestions of meaning. For example, *bunga* (flower) a girl; *karam di laut* (wrecked at sea, a ship wreck) a broken love or marriage; *bunga kiambang* (hyacinth) a love which cannot take root; *tupai* (squirrel) the village seducer; *galah jolok* (fruit-getting pole) someone reaching for something he can't get; *buah rumbia* (sago fruit) something which is second best. Some of these images are fairly transparent even to the cultural outsider, but others assume more detailed local knowledge; for example, that the *bunga kiambang* is a floating water flower, which lacks roots. In short, as Sim (1982: 13) says: “[T]o enjoy the pantun one must learn something of its special symbols, just as one has to learn the meaning of many gestures to be able to understand the language of mime in classical ballet”.

So when commentators such as Asmah (1995) say that the pantun can be seen as “a microcosm of Malay social communication”, what is meant is that the culture at large favours subtlety and refinement of expression, the choice of a few well-chosen words which imply a great deal more than they express directly. To a great extent, this preference for subtle, indirect expression is motivated by the cultural importance attached to anticipating the feelings of other people and avoiding anything which could impinge on another person's feelings of dignity and self-esteem (cf. Goddard 1997, 2000). Verbal etiquette plays a big role in this. There are always choices to be made about appropriate terms for address and self-reference and about appropriate verbal locutions for sensitive

topics. In short, there is an elaborate culture of how to speak appropriately, much of it hinging on control of conventionally allusive language.

Aside from pantuns, other sources of allusive language are the huge inventory of traditional sayings and maxims (*peribahasa*). The few examples in (14) illustrate *peribahasa*. To reinforce my claims about the importance of verbal caution (*jaga mulut* ‘guarding one’s mouth’) I have chosen sayings which directly concern this issue. Notice that aside from the ‘altruistic’ aspect of not wanting to offend, there is also an aspect of self-interest involved: if someone gets offended they may well not show it at the time but retaliate later.

(10a) *Berkata peliharakan lidah.*
Speak minding one’s tongue.

(10b) *Cakap siang pandang-pandang; cakap malam dengar-dengar.*
If you speak in the daytime, keep your eyes open; if you speak at night, keep your ears open.

(10c) *Rosak badan kerana mulut.*
The body suffers because of the mouth.

A final source of allusive language is metonymic association. For example, a special kind of rice dish (*nasi minyak* ‘rice cooked in ghee’) is served at weddings. To inquire of a friend whether she is planning to get married in the near future, one could therefore say something like (11).

(11) *Dengar khabar tak lama lagi nak makan nasi minyak.*
(I) heard that soon we’ll be eating nasi minyak.

As Asmah (1995: 54) says, a person would be embarrassed to be asked “straight in his face”, i.e. using ‘plain words’, whether it is true that he or she is getting married. The thing to do is therefore to use an ostensibly ‘round about’ expression. On the other hand, the meaning of the acceptable expression is perfectly clear in context.

We are now in a position to sum up the portfolio of Malay assumptions and values which underlie and motivate the use of allusive language, including apparently poetic and imagistic language.

(12) *Malay ethnopragmatic script for avoiding sensitive words in favour of conventionally allusive terms*

everyone knows:

often when a person wants to say something

this person says it with some words, not other words, because this person thinks:

I don't want to say the words for some things

because if I say these words, someone might feel something bad

I don't have to say these words

if I say words for some other things, people will know what I want to say

it is good if a person does this

It should be abundantly clear that the traditional Malay speech culture was full of metalexical awareness—but a metalexical awareness which was turned to very different purposes to that of Anglo culture. The goals were not expressiveness or expository clarity, but rather a concern for appropriate word use in the interests of sensitivity and propriety. Even when apparently poetic or imagistic words were used, the culture-internal rationale and effect were very different to what one would expect on Anglo (or Western) assumptions.

3. Explicating the meanings of English active metaphors

I now want to return to English active metaphors of the expository kind, i.e. the kind with the ethnopragmatic motivation set out in script (5). My main proposition in this section is that such metaphors have specific and determinable meanings—and usually only a single meaning at that¹², cf. Wierzbicka (1999). In other words, I would like to claim that ordinary expository metaphors such as *Unemployment is a contagious disease*, *Language is the best mirror of the mind*, and *The past is a foreign country* are not open to multiple interpretations, as many theorists have claimed, but have identifiable meanings which can be stated as semantic explications framed in the metalanguage of semantic primes.

I will illustrate this contention by examples. Going back to Aristotle, many writers have identified two broad categories of metaphor: (a) those which depend on a 'similarity relationship' between the terms of the metaphor – Aristotle's 'genus for genus' category, Sapir's (1977) 'internal metaphor', Winner's (1988) 'sensory similarity', Fernandez' (1986) 'textual' metaphor; and (b) those which depend on a more complex 'analogical' alignment of the respective domains – Sapir's (1977) 'external metaphor', Winner's (1988) 'relational similarity', Fernandez' (1986) 'structural metaphor'. Although the contrast between 'similarity' and 'analogy' is not sufficient in itself to establish a categorical difference (because, as pointed out to me by Gerard Steen, one can always re-analyse similarity metaphors into analogical structures), I have the sense that the distinction has some validity in terms of the complexity of the inferencing which is

required to establish the grounds of comparison. In any case, for expository purposes it will be useful to examine a couple of examples of each type.

In the first category, the predication is often made “on the basis of a similarity in FEELING TONE—‘glowering’ clouds, a ‘brooding’ landscape, a ‘Dyseptic’ bureaucracy” (Fernandez 1986: 38; emphasis added). For example, consider the use of the words *soft* and *graceful* in the following exchange from a dinner party conversation about wine (Lehrer 1983: 3):

(13) Speaker A: *This [wine] is soft and sensuous ...*

Speaker B: *Yes, it's soft, but I would say that it's graceful rather than sensuous.*

As Wierzbicka (1996: 248-9) points out, the words *soft* and *graceful*, in this context, are being used to express the speaker's assessment of the kind of “pleasurable experience” brought about by the taste of this particular wine. They achieve this by a kind of implicit simile, whose effect can be made explicit in semantic explications:

(14) a *soft* wine =

when this wine is in a person's mouth,
this person can feel something because of this
like a person feels when a person touches something soft

(15) a *graceful* wine =

when this wine is in a person's mouth,
this person can feel something because of this
like a person feels when a person sees someone moving gracefully

The overall interpretation depends both on the quasi-simile centered on ‘feeling’ and on the literal meanings of the adjectival words *soft* and *graceful*. A great range of other words could, of course, be substituted—other tactile words such as *smooth*, *silky*, *rough* or *sharp*, other movement words such as *elegant* or *awkward*, as well as words from various other semantic domains. Notice that it is not necessary to ‘crack the meanings’ of the adjectival words in order to understand metaphors of this type (except to the extent that the nature of the adjectival word ‘cues’ which sensory dimension is relevant to the grounds of comparison, e.g. *soft* invokes a comparison based on ‘touching’, *graceful* invokes a comparison based on ‘seeing’).

The next examples belong to the second traditional category – analogic or proportional metaphor. Because the basis for the analogy has to be inferred by the listener (making it, in Eco's (1984: 100) words, “a tool of cognition”), many writers on analogic metaphor have stressed that the possibilities for interpretation are open-ended. I disagree. Although

the grounds of comparison are left inexplicit, the speaker nonetheless intends some specific relationship to be inferred by the listener (and this is assumed by listeners also). An expository metaphor is therefore a bit like a riddle: there is a right answer which one either understands or does not. And one cannot understand the riddle (or the metaphor) until one has figured out the grounds. Of course, it is possible for there to be more than one interpretation (just as some riddles have more than one answer) and many poetic metaphors are no doubt like this, but expository metaphors generally only have one solution.

The explications below are intended to model the speaker's intended meaning, which (all going well) would correspond to the listener's final interpretation of what the speaker said. In Gibbs' (1993) terms, they are intended to model the product, not the process. In Cameron's (1999) terms, my account is at the 'theory' rather than the 'processing' level. I would also like to acknowledge Cameron's (1999: 16) point that there are dangers in using "isolated, nominal, clause-length metaphors as typical exemplars", given the evidence that verbal metaphors may be more common than nominal metaphors in many kinds of discourse.

Unemployment is a contagious disease. This is a statement made by Neil Kinnock at a time when he was leader of the British Labor Party. What exactly did he mean? What I think he meant can be stated in fairly simple, non-metaphoric terms, as in (16) below. The idea seems to be that if some people cannot get jobs something happens (presumably, a general reduction in productive economic activity) which has a snowballing effect, so that other people would not be able get jobs either¹³. (In a more detailed explication, the complex word 'jobs' would obviously have to be further explicated.)

The explication has a three-part structure. It begins with a piece of background knowledge related to the topic of the metaphor, then follows what might be called the metaphorical dictum, then finally comes the comparison¹⁴. To highlight this structure I have used small caps for the framing elements: EVERYONE KNOWS, I SAY, and THIS IS LIKE. I am not sure about the general applicability of this schema, but it seems to work with all the nominal, clause-length metaphors I have considered.

(16) *Unemployment is a contagious disease* =

EVERYONE KNOWS:

sometimes some people in a place don't have jobs,
because they cannot have jobs, not because they don't want to have jobs

I SAY:

when this happens, something bad happens in this place
because of this, many other people in this place can't have jobs

THIS IS LIKE:

when something bad happens to some people in a place
because something bad happens in these people's bodies
(and) because of this, the same bad thing happens to many other people in the same
place

Language is a mirror of the mind. This famously durable metaphor goes back at least to Leibniz. To begin with, we have to decide what Leibniz meant by 'language' here: was it 'language in general' or was he referring to individual languages? The metaphor would make sense either way. I believe that Leibniz was speaking of language in general, and that as a first approximation we can explicate this as, more or less, the particular ways in which people say things. The message of the metaphor is, essentially, that there is a systematic correspondence between how people say things and how people think.

(17) *Language is a mirror of the mind* =

EVERYONE KNOWS:

people say things in some ways, not in other ways

I SAY:

people say things in some ways, not in other ways
because they think in some ways, not in other ways
because of this, if someone knows many things about how people say things
this person can know many things about how people think

THIS IS LIKE:

a person in a place can see some things, not other things, in a mirror
because there are some things, not other things, in this place

The past is a foreign country. The basic idea behind this metaphor is that we lack an experiential base to understand the thinking of people in distant times, just as we lack such an experiential base in relation to life in a country in which we do not live.

(18) *The past is a foreign country* =

EVERYONE KNOWS:

a long time before now people did not do things in the same way as people do things
now

people do things in some ways, not in other ways, because they think about things in
some ways, not in other ways

I SAY:

one can't know why people did things in some ways, not other ways, a long time
before now

because one can't know how people thought about things a long time before now

THIS IS LIKE:

if one does not live in a country, one can't know why people do things in some
ways, not other ways, in that country

because if one does not live in a country, one can't know how people in that country
think about things

Food for thought. This is an example of a metaphor which is fully conventional but still quite active. That is, it still evokes metalexic awareness (as evidenced by the fact that it can be tagged with metalexic comments such as 'so to speak') and it still involves a comparison or analogy.

(19) *Food for thought* =

EVERYONE KNOWS:

if a person eats some things it is good for this person

I SAY:

someone said some things now

if a person thinks about these things for some time, this person can know some
things because of this

I think that if a person knows these things it will be good for this person

THIS IS LIKE:

when a person eats some things

after some time, something happens in this person's body because of this

this is good for this person

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have argued for three more or less divergent positions on aspects of metaphor. First, I have argued that it is possible to distinguish rather sharply between 'active metaphors' and other metaphorical phenomena. The key distinguishing feature of active metaphor (more important than the parameter of originality) is its dependence on

‘metalexical awareness’ which can be detected by linguistic tests, as well as by intuition. Second, I have argued that cultures vary greatly in the extent to which active metaphorising exists as a valued speech practice. In some cultures it plays a minor role, overshadowed by rhetorical or conversational practices which reflect different cultural assumptions and norms to those which underpin active metaphorising in the Western tradition. An adequate treatment of active metaphorising calls for an ethnopragmatic perspective which treats it in the same fashion as other culturally-shaped speech practices such as indirectness, irony, proverbs, and so on. Third, in relation to English active metaphors, I have argued that any coherent expository metaphor has a determinable meaning (or set of meanings), which can be stated in the form of an extended reductive paraphrase.

Overarching these specific claims is the contention that to spell out ethnopragmatic scripts for active metaphorising and related speech practices, and equally, to specify the semantic content of particular metaphors, we must have a way of talking about meanings which is cross-linguistically neutral, i.e. a method of semantic representation which is not tied to the idiosyncracies of any particular language. The natural semantic metalanguage therefore opens new possibilities for metaphor research.

APPENDIX: PROPOSED SEMANTIC PRIMES (after Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002)

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE(PERSON), SOMETHING(THING), PEOPLE, BODY
Relational substantives:	KIND OF, PART OF
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER(ELSE)
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, ALL, MANY/MUCH, SOME
Attributes:	BIG, SMALL, GOOD, BAD
Intensifier:	VERY
Mental predicates:	WANT, FEEL, THINK, KNOW, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, events, movement:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence and possession:	THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Time:	WHEN(TIME), NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space:	WHERE(PLACE), HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, NEAR, FAR, INSIDE, SIDE, TOUCHING(CONTACT)
Augmentor:	MORE
Similarity:	LIKE (HOW, AS)

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ENDNOTES

¹ There is an extensive corpus of NSM research on the descriptive semantics of a wide variety of languages, including many non-European languages. Aside from Anna Wierzbicka, other writers who have published in the NSM framework include Felix Ameka, Robert Bugenhagen, Hilary Chappell, Nick Enfield, Cliff Goddard, Jean Harkins, Rie Hasada, Catherine Travis, Bert Peeters, Zhengdao Ye, David Wilkins, and others. For references, consult the NSM Homepage: www.une.edu.au/arts/LCL/disciplines/linguistics/nsmpage.htm.

² ‘Ethnopragmatics’ is a preferable term, in my view, first, because it puts the emphasis on the ‘ethno’ aspect, i.e. on the cultural, and second, because ‘cross-cultural pragmatics’ suggests an emphasis on cross-cultural communication, whereas ethnopragmatics can equally well be done on a single language, including the home language of the researcher.

³ In many cases, the speaker or author’s real intended meaning may never be known with absolute certainty, so strictly speaking one ought to refer to the speaker’s meaning as reconstructed or inferred by the listener or the analyst.

⁴ Goatly (1997) also draws attention to comments of this kind, under the heading of ‘co-textual markers’ of metaphor. However, neither Goatly (1997) nor Moon (1998) distinguish very carefully between specifically metalexical markers such as ‘so to speak’ and ‘as it were’, on the one hand, and other kinds of metalinguistic comments. Other proposed indicators for active metaphor which can be found in the literature include: (a) the observation that ‘mixing’ active metaphors leads to genuine semantic anomaly, whereas mixing fixed or dead metaphors usually results in little more than stylistic inelegance (often not even noticed by speaker and hearer); and (b) the observation that it doesn’t usually make sense to respond to an active metaphor with a true-or-false evaluation, but rather with comments like ‘that makes sense’ or ‘that’s a stupid thing to say’. These indicators are valuable but they do not bear such a transparent relation to any definitional property of active metaphor as does the metalexical tag test.

⁵ While SAY is one of the oldest and best established semantic primes, WORDS is a relative newcomer. It was proposed in Wierzbicka (1996: 107-8) on the grounds that (i) there is an irreducible difference between saying something and saying some words; for example, between two sentences like ‘X said something bad to Y’ and ‘X said some bad words to Y’; (ii) the notion of WORDS seems essential to explicating concepts such as names, counting, speech formulas, and magical formulas; (iii) it appears that an equivalent for WORDS is found in a wide variety of languages, including non-written languages, and polysynthetic languages.

⁶ In some languages, an allolex of SAY, often glossable as ‘express’, may be more natural in this context than the primary exponent of SAY itself.

⁷ As noted by one reviewer, script (5) would encompass other modes of figurative language aside from metaphor, such as metonymic or synecdochic language, if these are employed for reasons of “cognitive engagement”. It is not clear, however, whether it is appropriate, for the purpose of spelling out the relevant ethnopragmatic knowledge, to specify this script further so that it would apply to metaphor alone, e.g. by building in the idea of similarity or analogy. Such further refinement would, of course, be necessary to explicate the lexical semantics of the word *metaphor*.

⁸ I am not denying that P/Y has plenty of fixed figurative expressions. For example, there are fixed animal metaphors such as *liru* (snake) ‘a malicious person’, *tjirilya* (echidna) ‘a slowpoke’, *papa* (dog) ‘a promiscuous person’, *kaangka* (crow) ‘a thief’. There are body-part expressions like *mara paku* (lit. tired hand) ‘lazy’, *ngalya ala* (lit. open forehead) ‘person with consideration for others, having powers of spiritual perception’, and *liri utju* (lit. narrow throat) ‘lacking appetite’. Elements of the natural world figure in expressions such as *wati nyalpi* (lit. leaf man) ‘a man who keeps changing his opinion depending on the situation (like a leaf that blows in the wind)’, *wati apu* (lit. rock man) ‘man who is unyielding’, and *anangu wari* (lit. cool person) ‘someone not given to anger or hurtful speech’. There are sundry fixed verbal metaphors, including: *untuni* ‘push’, ‘urge, pressure, keep up support’, *ngalkuni* ‘eat’, ‘have sex’, *katani* ‘cut’, ‘interrupt (someone)’, *ngakani* ‘choke on’, ‘feel confined/stressed’. These are all fixed, lexicalised expressions (Goddard 1996). The existence of these fixed expressions challenges the standard assumption that fixed metaphors arise from conventionalisation of active metaphors. It seems more likely that they originate in similes rather than metaphors.

⁹ The speakers and sources for examples (6)-(7) are Peter Nyangu (Pitjantjara Council n.d.: 6) and Mantatjara (Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council 1990: 39-40).

¹⁰ On a historical note, it appears that the metaphor of the Good Shepherd played a special role in the introduction of Biblical metaphors. In the traditional P/Y lifestyle there were, of course, no sheep and no shepherds, but shepherding was the earliest of the new occupations, having been introduced by pastoralists even before founding of Ernabella mission. As such, it provided a foundation stone on which the missionaries could build in their efforts to convey the concept of God. "As shepherds themselves, they [i.e. P/Y people – CG] were aware of the risk of dingos attacking their flocks, and they yarded the sheep to protect them at night. They knew of sheep wandering away and getting lost. The concept of a Good Shepherd was not strange to them, they could well comprehend such stories which were within their own experience" (Hilliard 1968: 185).

¹¹ As well as these special symbols, there is "almost a code of rhyming words and corresponding meanings" which operates between the *pembayang* and the *maksud*. For example, *selasih* 'basil' goes with *kasih* 'love', and *dalam* 'deep' with *dendam* 'longing for revenge'; so that if one hears *selasih* 'basil' in the first couplet, one expects to hear *kasih* 'love' in the second.

¹² There is another breed of active metaphor in English which does not yield so easily to this approach, namely 'poetic metaphors'. Though an adequate treatment of poetic metaphor is beyond the scope of this paper, it is obvious that the current Anglo (Western) concept of 'poetry' is highly culture-specific. In Malay, for example, there is no cover term which would unite *pantuns* and *syair* (roughly, narrative poems) in a single category; and in Pitjantjatjara there is no term remotely answering to the concept of 'poetry'. Regarding the role of metaphor in poetry, it is worthwhile to recall that despite its importance metaphor is not necessary to achieve a poetic effect. Some poems use very plain language. Further, since the time of the Romantics, poets in the English language have had the freedom to do just about anything with words. Many poems employ verbal manipulations which do not fall comfortably under the banner of metaphor in any clear sense; for example, T.S. Eliot's *I will show you fear in a handful of dust*.

¹³ There are certain parallels between the following analyses and analyses which could be advanced in the Lakoff-Johnson tradition of conceptual metaphor. For example, the analysis of *Unemployment is a contagious disease* would, in that tradition, involve the conceptual metaphor A Social Organisation is the Human Body. However the explications

I am proposing are much more specific and detailed, in that they spell out precisely the metaphorical dictum and the exact nature of the comparison or analogy.

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