

*Bert Peeters (ed.) 2019: Heart- and Soul-Like Constructs across Languages, Cultures, and Epochs. (Routledge Focus: Routledge Studies in Linguistics.) New York and London: Routledge. viii, 148 pp. ISBN: 978-138-74530-8 (Hb), 978-1-315-18067-0 (E-book).*

**Reviewed by**

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As the reader compares the title of Peeters's edited volume with that of the series in which it appeared (Routledge Focus), they may experience an apparent dissonance: the former suggests a broad coverage across constructs, "languages, cultures, and epochs", the latter narrows down that scope into a focalised core. Yet, the mismatch is only superficial: if the series zooms in onto a manageable focus, the volume follows suit in that it presents the essence of a theoretical, methodological, and descriptive framework, along with a few applications of it, albeit without claims to the comprehensibility of the picture. Indeed, the very idea of a series of this kind is commendable: to present an issue in a relatively short volume but provide more in-depth coverage than one can find, for example, in Oxford Basics. A volume in this Routledge series should provide an overview, synopsis, or introduction that allows one to launch further inquiry or begin one's own research – such is also the design and aim of this book.

The volume has a dual focus: on the theoretical side, it presents the latest developments in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage enterprise. In terms of analysis, it selects, from a plethora of semantic domains that NSM researchers investigate, "heart- and soul-like constructs" in a few languacultures.

The book consists of the Editor's introductory chapter and four analytical inquiries from other authors: Yuko Asano-Cavanagh deals with the Japanese *inochi* (roughly speaking, 'life') and *tamashii* (approx., 'soul'), Deborah Hill with *anoa* 'spirit', *agalo* 'ancestor spirit', and *zabe* 'body and spirit' in Longgu (an Oceanic language of Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands), Chavalin Svetanant with *chai* 'heart' in Thai, and Colin Mackenzie with Old Norse-Icelandic *hugr* 'mind, heart, courage'. The book presents the current state-of-the-art of a consistent body of research and so is a valuable resource both for uninitiated beginners to NSM and for those, like myself, who are not thoroughly up-to-date with the framework's latest developments.

The Editor's control of the volume's content is impressive: apart from the introductory chapter, he provides a postscript to each of the other contributions, noting their idiosyncratic features and the range of possibilities that the NSM framework allows for, such as Deborah Hill's use of Minimal English (and its relationship to the NSM), Chavalin Svetanant's explications in Thai, or Colin Mackenzie's use of cultural scripts apart from standard NSM explications. In-between the lines, Peeters also provides the reader with the "geography" of the NSM research, when on p. 8 he refers to "linguists in Australia and elsewhere". He could have, however, been a little more careful on p. 3, where it is suggested, perhaps inadvertently, that the main person behind the framework is Cliff Goddard. As far as current activity is concerned, this may well be correct but, with all due respect, is erroneous in the historical sense. This "error" is "corrected" on p. 11, where Goddard's proposals are said to be "explicitly based on Wierzbicka's earlier work".

One of the book's major goals is to show the diversity and richness of languacultures and in so doing to combat the hegemony of English.<sup>1</sup> However, in trying to achieve that goal, the Editor seems to inadvertently fall foul of it himself. From the discussion of NSM on p. 8, the reader can deduce that the metalanguage comes primarily in English but is fully translatable into other languages. This is not what the NSM was conceived to be: instead of "other NSMs" that Peeters evokes, Anna Wierzbicka talks about other, "language-specific versions of the same, universal Natural Semantic Metalanguage" (Wierzbicka 1996: 23, emphasis added). Perhaps this is just a matter of wording, and yet, in a publication whose potential readership are not fully familiar with the framework it is of vital importance.

Indeed, Peeters's volume may well inspire the reader to engage in digressions that go beyond mere wording. In what clearly is a continuation of Malinowski's research programme to reconstruct the point of view of an indigenous speaker (i.e., what on p. 7 here is called the "insider perspectives"), one is led to conclude that the preference given to ethnopsychological "con-

<sup>1</sup> This is in fact a common theme of NSM-based publications, cf. Levisen and Waters (2017).

structs" (EPCs), rather than words and concepts, takes us to the realm of languacultures, rather than languages or a-cultural psychological experiences. But even if (and rightly so) the primary focus is on meaning, not on form, one must not underestimate the role of the latter. Its importance has been noted both from the cognitivist and the poetic-translational perspective. The former includes the voice of Dirk Geeraerts: "Language is not just content: it is also form, and its formal side has an expressivity of its own, which does seem to create lexical configurations that can hardly be explained if we only take into account the conceptual expressivity of language" (Geeraerts 1988: 227). The latter is represented by, e.g., James Underhill: "Form makes the poem more meaningful; the poem hits harder than prose" (2016: 12). Of course, this is not to suggest that Peeters, a prime linguist and translator, as well as a speaker of several languages, relegates form to oblivion – it is more a matter of proportions. Indeed, unsurprisingly, the importance of form surfaces in Svetanant's account of *chai*, which may figure as either the first or the second element of a compound (p. 103): we are entering here the realm of meaningful lexicogrammatical patterns that code the constructs behind them. In this light, it seems somewhat imprecise to say that *word*, *concept*, and *construct* are *interchangeable* (p. 3) – instead, they are sometimes (erroneously) *interchanged*! The very fact that EPCs are deemed a better choice than the other options speaks against their interchangeability.

The book's greatest potential, however, is that it opens the door to inquiries of nature even more fundamental than linguacultural considerations. This is suggested in the short Preface, on p. viii, where the volume's main interest is said to lie in "the topic of personhood" and the way it is built through heart- and soul-like constructs. And so, the most intriguing concept is that of individualism (cf. the chapter by Hill), which means, in a rather straightforward account, that "[a] person is not seen as a separate entity from the rest of the world, but as a complex of relationships interlinked with the world" (Salisbury 2015, n.p.). In the Melanesian context discussed by Hill, humans are relational creatures whose nature links them with the living, the deceased, and land (p. 75). This is reminiscent of the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and land among Aboriginal Australians, which transpires in their use of expressions such as *This land is me/us* (cf. Malcolm 2017: 645; Sharifian 2017: 19). On a broader scale, it is an idea that forces one to also ask questions about European philosophy and theology, where over centuries the Christian understanding of person has undergone a rather major change.<sup>2</sup> For Boethius

<sup>2</sup> NSM researchers do not shy away from tackling religious and theological issues; cf. Wierzbicka 2001 on the message of the Gospel, or Habib 2015 (which Peeters actually references) on God and Allah.

(5th-6th c. A.D.), *persona* was “an individual substance of a rational nature”<sup>3</sup> (in Migne 1878–1890, vol. 64: 1345). As expressed more precisely by Richard of St. Victor (12th c. A.D.), the person exists in themselves alone according to a singular mode of rational existence<sup>4</sup> and is characterised by rationality, “absolute individuality, uniqueness and non-substitutability” (Erk 2011: 239). But in contemporary Christian personalism, the focus is very much relational: “The person is the subject who [...] exists in relation to another person, or to other people” (Gacka 2002: 72).

Is this conceptual affinity between this portion of Melanesian world-view and Western religious worldview a matter of accident or founded upon some more profound conceptual base? Or, are these considerations going too far off the point in the first place? I do not think so. Because we are concerned with languacultures here, it can only be expected that the cultural aspect of the inquiry would touch upon issues that are central to cultures, worldviews, systems of thought, and ideologies (in a broad sense). The NSM framework does have the potential to shed light on such issues, especially as it seeks to realise the Leibnizian ideal of discovering the “alphabet of human thought”. In the search of that alphabet, fundamental notions, such as humanity and personhood, are rightly interrogated.

Apart from those issues, three major questions kept drawing my attention as I was reading Peeter’s volume. I will relate to those by anchoring them in specific analytical contexts.

First, although the Editor claims that the assembly of semantic primes that has been being sought for decades is now almost ready, doubts are unlikely to disappear altogether. For example, when Deborah Hill explicates *someone’s anoā* ‘spirit’ in Longgu, she claims that for expiatory purposes ‘something’ is better than ‘part of someone’ (p. 67). I agree that she does have valid arguments for her choice; yet, ‘something’, even if abstract and non-corporeal, is nevertheless “some-thing”, an instance of reification, which – if I read Hill’s argumentation correctly – is better avoided in this instance. The conundrum may well be apparent but it still makes sense to ask whether there is a way out.

Because of the problematic nature of (some of the) primes, or more generally the impenetrability of the explications that may ensue, NSM practitioners have begun to rely to some extent on semantic molecules (pp. 14ff). The explications that rely solely on primes are incomprehensible and vague: the exact opposite of what they are designed to achieve. Such was the nature of the critique that came from Kalisz (1998) – and although, in all fairness, the NSM framework was not as developed then as it is today, the crux of that author’s argument remains valid. The lesson one could learn from it perhaps

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<sup>3</sup> “Rationalis naturae individua substantia.”

<sup>4</sup> “Existens per se solum juxta singularem quendam rationalis existentiae modum.”

has a more general import: as a scientific procedure, both in physics and semantics, reductionism is laudable and theoretically sound, but humans as cognitive beings do best when they operate at an optimal level of generality (recall the fundamental significance of the basic level of categorization), rather than at the level of indivisible semantic primes. Evidence comes not only from the attractiveness of semantic molecules, but also from recourse that is made to Minimal English (Hill).

Secondly, the effectiveness of semantic primes can also be thwarted by their greatest asset: basicness. While defining the Japanese *inochi*, Yuko Asano-Cavanagh proposes as part of the explication: “if something very bad happens to someone’s body, this something cannot be a part of this someone’s body anymore” (p. 38). However, without insight from Asano-Cavanagh’s general discussion in her chapter, one is left uncertain as to whether “very bad” is used here in the quantitative sense (bad enough for the body to die) or in the qualitative sense (something very bad of a certain sort) – and it happens to be the former. Do we, again, need molecules in this kind of context or would there be another solution?

Thirdly, EPCs are *ethnopsychological constructs* – but what does this mean exactly? On p. 3 Peeters classifies the heart as a non-physical part of person, which appears to be somewhat one-sided, given that, after all, the heart is a body organ. The dual nature of the heart, both corporeal and non-corporeal, surfaces rather clearly in Svetanant’s analysis of the Thai *chai*, when it is said to be “linked to the body, but nowhere to be seen” (p. 109). At the same time, *chai* has unambiguously material properties, such as shape, size, colour, or temperature. Does this point to the inadequacy of the Western dualism of body vs. non-body, where the non-bodily aspects of personhood are located in the mind, soul, or heart? Certainly – and in fact Peeters’s volume, as well as indeed the whole of the NSM enterprise, is a very clear voice to beware of easy claims to universality one might be tempted to make based on Western philosophical tradition.

There is certainly a need to ask questions relating to universality, but one must ask them well. Peeters et al. may have perhaps aimed at a somewhat higher level of precision in this regard. For example, on p. 46 Asano-Cavanagh claims that no one has proved or disproved the reality of *tamashii*. Reality is a loaded notion – what does the Author mean here? A potentially open-ended ocean of philosophical considerations awaits those who dare venture into the ontological status of that which is real, actual, or virtual, notions that in some configurations need not be mutually exclusive. In a more straightforward understanding, not only *tamashii*, but in fact all ethnopsychological constructs are culturally, symbolically, psychologically, and socially real by the very fact of being EPCs. Unsurprisingly, on p. 48 Asano-Cavanagh notes a lack of consensus on *tamashii*, whose very essence (as an EPC) must

be sought not in what it *is*, but in what people *believe it is*, including that very lack of consensus. In short, the fundamental assumption that we focus on ethnopsychological constructs means that we are not defining real-life objects whose existence or ontological status can be established beyond human cultural groups.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it is the cultural groups themselves that, in a way, call these entities into being, to various degrees of entrenchment, and so figure in explications such as that of “someone’s *tamashii*”: “many, not all, people think like this: people have this part” (p. 52). Consider also Peeters’s discussion of reification and Anglocentrism (p. 5), where the Editor evokes what I would classify as “bad” questions about the mind, such as whether anyone has ever seen or touched it. They are “bad” in the sense that they assume things *must* be seen or touched to count as real. But there are also “good” questions that go beyond the mind’s alleged physicality and relate not only to the dilemma whether it exists in “all human babies and all newborn chimpanzees” (p. 5) but whether it exists *at all* (even if the title of the famous journal *Mind* suggests that it does).

In the course of reading the book, one may also come across a few (very) minor problems or questions of clarity or editorial nature. For example, when at the very beginning the Editor reports on his personal experience, he leaves the reader confused by referring first to Flemish (p. 1) and then to Dutch (p. 2). Next, when he notes on pp. 4-5 that Levisen “prefers the noun *personhood* to the adjective *ethnopsychological*”, one wonders in what sense this is a real choice: the two terms can hardly be used interchangeably. Or, the typesetter may have been a little more careful on p. 68 and introduced clearer spaces in heading [D] of the explication of “someone’s *anoa* ‘spirit’”. But these are minutiae, without any serious negative impact on the volume’s quality.

And the quality of the volume is high, which I would like to express without hesitation, despite the critical comments that I have offered above. Or rather, I have had a chance to offer these remarks and engage in some philosophizing precisely because Peeters’s book has provided the inspiration for doing so. The book is intended for various audiences, especially for doctoral students or researchers in language and culture who are not well acquainted with the NSM framework, but also for readers like myself, who need to be made familiar with the recent developments in this area. I am sure both sections of readership will find the book appealing.

<sup>5</sup> In an essentially parallel fashion, the linguistic worldview programme known as cognitive ethnolinguistics focuses on how “the mental object, the concept or a cultural artefact” is entrenched in the language spoken by a given community (Bartmiński 2009: 216).

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