Carsten Levisen and Sophia Waters (eds.) 2017:
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It would perhaps be somewhat pretentious to say that Levisen and Waters'
volume strikes just the right balance between considerations of language,
culture, and cognition, but it certainly is a major and a very successful step
in that direction. It is a coherent collection of analyses that reveal how peo-
ple, as cognitive and cultural beings, construct and express their lives in and
through discourses. As the editors say on p. 241, the book is an attempt to
shed light on what Whorf called "the thick darkness of language".[1]

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1   For Whorf, linguistics is "essentially the quest for meaning" that illuminates "the thick
darkness of language, and thereby of much of the thought, the culture, and the outlook upon

The volume is consistently couched within Anna Wierzbicka's framework of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, but relates to and builds bridges between several fields: cultural values (more precisely, the relationship between words and cultural values), cultural scripts and cultural models, identity, linguistic worldview, or the emic perspective of the cultural insider.[2] In its preoccupation with the latter, it continues Malinowski's tradition of seeking to "grasp the native's point of view" (1961 /1922/: 25). Also, like Malinowski, the editors recognise the importance of personal exposure to cultural diversity and transcultural contexts, which all contributors to the volume have experienced (p. 238). It is only through appreciation of cultural differences that one can propose reliable descriptions of linguistic semantics: in the present volume, the linguistic and cultural diversity embraces Australian English (two chapters: Chapter 2 by Sophia Waters on *nice* and Chapter 3 by Roslyn Rowen on *bogan*[3]), two Melanesian languages Tok Pisin and Bislama (Chapter 4 by Carsten Levisen and Carol Priestley on *kastom* 'traditional culture' and *tumbuna* 'ancestors'), Mexican Spanish (Chapter 6 by Karime Aragón on *rosa mexicano* as a symbol of Mexican identity), Brazilian Portuguese (Chapter 7 by Ana Paula Braga Mattos on *subúrbio* and *suburbanos*), Hong Kong Cantonese (Chapter 8 by Helen Hue Lam Leung on *mong4* 'busy'), Japanese (Chapter 9 by Yuko Asano-Cavanagh on *kawaii* 'cute'), and, in a historical excursus, 19th-c. Danish (Chapter 5 by Magnus Hamann and Carsten Levisen on *Livet* 'life'). Chapters 1 and 10, both by the editors, present the "philosophy" of the volume in general terms and tie the volume conceptually. The ambition of the editors and the chapter authors is to counter "the two vices of current global discourse — chronocentrism and Anglocentrism" (Hamann & Levisen, p. 125).

In their quest, the editors follow the trail blazed by the two authors they consider directly inspirational: Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014; Wierzbicka 2014). Of special importance is the former's book *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words* (1997) — cultural keywords are defined here as "culturally laden words around which whole discourses are organised", which "govern the shared cognitive outlook of speakers and encode certain culture-specific logics" (Levisen & Waters, p.

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life of a given community" (1956: 70). Levisen and Waters' volume is linguistics in precisely this sense.

2   The terms *etic* and *emic* were coined by Kenneth L. Pike (1954), who utilised for the purpose the last parts of the words *phonetic* and *phonemic*, respectively. In anthropology and anthropological linguistics they came to designate "the level of universals, or the level of things which may be observed by an 'objective' observer" [*etic*] and "the level of meaningful contrasts within a particular language or culture" [*emic*] (Barnard 2000: 114).

3   The pool of research on the semantics of Australian English has been steadily growing over the recent years, with such contributions as Sharifian's comparison of Anglo-Australian English with Aboriginal English (cf. e.g. the relevant sections in Sharifian 2017), or the work of Peeters (2004) on "tall poppy" that Rowen actually references (see also Peeters 2015).

3). This shows a special role that is ascribed to lexis in ethnolinguistic analyses:[4] the focus here is on "words" and "people in places", instead of the allegedly less reliable notions of "language" and "culture" (Levisen & Waters, p. 13). (This philosophy transpires throughout the volume — cf. e.g. Levisen & Priestly (Chapter 4, pp. 89–90) on identity-forming discourse connected to a place.) Words are very finely defined as "drops of meaning", "condensed configurations of thought that are linguistically construed, socially enacted and historically transmitted" (Levisen & Waters, p. 4). Yet, it is not totally clear why linking words with "people in places" is more reliable than focusing on language and culture[5] and so the editors' divagations on the nature of the latter present a somewhat mixed picture. On the one hand, they acknowledge what they call "a comeback" of "culture" into semantics and pragmatics (with several references); on the other hand, they omit to explain how this relates to the dubious status of the very term culture, which, as noted by Atkinson (2015), is either omitted or in dire need of redefinition. As to the allegedly problematic status of "language", it is not clear if Levisen and Waters in fact mean *language* or a *language* — in fact, it is the latter that seems to be the case when they place the term "languages" in quotes on p. 13. Does the volume as a whole not confirm the validity of both *language* (through its focus on the NSM) and *languages* (through individual analyses)?

On the most general level, the goal of the volume is to look at how words do things with people (such is the title of Chapter 1), a subversive play on words on Austin's seminal 1962 book. Another play on words, to produce a similar effect, comes on p. 236 (the final chapter by the editors): "It must be shown that people in a specific community truly *live* by this concept [i.e., by a keyword, A.G.]; that is, it 'it does things with people'" — this is an obvious allusion to Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. Levisen and Waters, as well as the authors they have invited, counter in this way "the Anglo pragmatics paradigm, invented by Austin, Grice, Searle and their followers" (p. 1), in which rational speakers consciously perform speech acts that they keep fully under control. Instead, the onus here is on how speakers are guided by words "in everyday meaning-making" (p. 2). Therefore, to talk about the speaker as "language user" is a misnomer in that it assigns too much power and control to the speaker — instead, according to Levisen and Waters, "discourses are formulaic and ritualistic" and "many linguistic and communicative events are already scripted before they take place" (p. 2). The present volume's ambition is to decompose and explicate some of the keywords that such scripted discourse are built around.

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4   In the approach known as *cognitive ethnolinguistics*, the privileged position of lexis is acknowledged openly (Bartmiński 2009: 17).
5   Or on Agar's (1994) *languaculture*, a notion and name that the volume omits to mention.

This is what the editors (and implicitly, the other contributors) promise — but do they deliver? On the whole, they do. Take, for example, Waters' study of *nice* (Chapter 2), a word that "has attracted very little academic attention but a great deal of native speaker disdain" (p. 25). No wonder: hardly any other word is considered more vague, semantically bleached out, and a catch-all substitute for anything positive that one wants to say. But it is precisely its vagueness that is misleading and Waters convincingly shows that it "does not make it meaningless" (p. 49). She builds up her explications piecemeal so that we are offered accounts of *nice*'s various senses and constructions in which it is used, with its impressive semantic richness that defies native speaker intuition. No rational "language user" is in full control of the word's semantics; rather, *nice* is a vague cultural keyword, very capacious of meaning, and guiding its speakers along conceptual and cultural scripts. Another example is Mattos' study of Brazilian Portuguese *subúrbio* and *suburbanos* (Chapter 7), which the author shows to be different not only from the English *suburb* but also inadequately represented with regard to their cultural semantics in Portuguese dictionaries. Again, it takes a closer consideration of discourse to realise what the words do to their speakers.

However, one can also see cracks, albeit not very serious ones, in this carefully drafted picture. One such case is Levisen and Priestley's study of Bislama *kastom* 'traditional culture' and Tok Pisin *pasin belong tumbuna* 'the ways of the ancestors' (Chapter 4). On the one hand, one must give credit to the authors for a very important observation on the lexical structure of these languages: although they are based on English lexical forms in 80-90%, this does not mean their lexical semantics is the same as that of English because we must not "underestimat[e] the power of cultural and linguistic creolization and overestimate[e] the significance of form over meaning" (p. 85).[6] On the other hand, Levisen and Priestley do seem to empower the speakers of these languages with a degree of agency that the latter are denied in the introductory chapter (see above): "In this chapter [i.e., ch. 4, A.G.], we study neo-Melanesian discourse, or, the way in which speakers of 'neo-Melanesian' *construe their worlds with words*" (p. 83, emphasis A.G.). An insignificant slip of the pen, perhaps, and yet a disturbing one.

The volume also addresses several issues of a more general import; let me mention four of them. In Chapter 4 (Levisen & Priestly), the reader finds in-between-the-lines comments on the relationship between concepts and

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6   This brings to mind Geeraerts'(1988: 227) observation:"Language is not just content, it is also form". Yes, it is *also* form, but as Levisen and Priestly show, one must beware of overestimating its importance. Consider also Underhill's (2016: 145) preference of the notion of *signifying* as a process that continually takes place in language, over the apparently misleading view of "the sign that divides every object of understanding into signifier and signified". Admittedly, Underhill focuses on poetry, rather than on language in general, but his comments in this regard do have general import.

words, a problem that has preoccupied philosophers of language since time immemorial and has especially troubled contemporary cognitive linguists. The chapter authors describe the Bislama *kastom* as a "collection of perspectives encoded in words and embedded in discourses that reflect emerging worldviews" (p. 98) — three *kastom* concepts are claimed to be expressed with that word. An even cursory survey of how that position sits with other positions would require a monograph-length discussion, let us merely note that what Levisen and Priestley appear to be proposing is a view of words as perspectivised activators of cultural meanings that obtain their cultural-conceptual-semantic fullness in and through the dynamicity of discourse — at least that is how it is understood by the author of this review.

Second, the volume touches upon the relationship between cultural models and worldview, e.g. in Hamann and Levisen's Chapter 5, where, with the help of the NSM, they "explore the linguistic worldview of the Danish Golden Age by developing three cultural models associated with the discourses related to *Livet*" (p. 108). The models form a hierarchical configuration: the master model is based on *Gud* 'God', the other two are based on *Kjærlighed* 'passionate love' and *Illusion* 'illusion' — together, they "form a more extensive linguistic worldview that is established and maintained via *Livet*" (p. 124). Again, without engaging in extensive theoretical divagations on the nature of cultural models,[7] Hamann and Levisen present an interesting stance that offers much food for thought for a cultural linguist and a linguistic worldview researcher.

Third, the same authors seem to oscillate (whether this is intentional or not is hard to say) between the notion of *linguistic worldview* (e.g. on p. 124) and an "era-specific *cultural worldview*" (p. 125, emphasis A.G.).[8] Are those the same thing merely bearing alternative labels? Or is there a qualitative difference between them, unspecified here due to limitations of space? Against this backdrop, it is instructive to note that in Polish ethnolinguistics it has recently become customary to talk about a *linguacultural worldview*.[9]

Fourth, in her study of *rosa mexicano*, Karime Aragón (Chapter 6) mentions two prototypes of Mexican Spanish *rojo*: *sangre* 'blood' and *fuego* 'fire' (p. 135). On the one hand, this speaks directly to Anna Wierzbicka's idea of colour and other vision-based terms being grounded in aspects of the natural environment; on the other hand, it seems to play well, at least as a first approximation, with Robert MacLaury's (1997, 2013) identification of colour categories with dual foci (such as cool categories focused in green and blue

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7   From a myriad of relevant publications, cf. some of the crucial ones: Holland & Quinn 1987; D'Andrade & Strauss 1995; Strauss & Quinn 1995; Quinn 2011; Shore 2012; Bennardo & de Munck 2014; Blount 2014; Kronenfeld 2018.

8   In the whole volume, *linguistic worldview* decidedly predominates.

9   See e.g. the several contributions to English version of volume 29 of the journal *Etnolingwsityka/Ethnolinguistics* at https://journals.umcs.pl/et.

or *warm* categories focused in yellow and red), captured in the formalism of his Vantage Theory. Perhaps, then, a degree of reconciliation of these views is possible, given the fact that MacLaury's opinion of Wierzbicka's framework was rather critical, even if appreciative at the same time (cf. e.g. MacLaury 1997: 38–39).

Naturally, the volume is not without its flaws. Those are not very serious and in fact can prove inspirational. As examples, let us consider two problems that can be identified in the otherwise very fine study by Sophia Waters on Australian English *nice* (Chapter 2, also see above). First, Waters compares *nice* with "its nearest equivalents in French" because the latter language "offers an interesting comparative perspective on the Australian keyword" and because "French and Australian English words often seem to reflect different cultural discourses and value orientations" (p. 26). True as it certainly is, this justification is unconvincing: the same can probably be said about any two languages. In fact, binary opposition as such must be approached with caution; cf. James Underhill on that issue:

> Oppositions in language tend to condition meanings. But when it comes to comparing languages, of course, the oppositions turn out to be structurally different. And the division of reality into spheres of experience covered by individual synonyms and related terms is therefore different in nature in any two languages. French will translate [the Polish] *wolność* 'freedom' into *liberté*. But in English, two terms exist, *freedom* and *liberty*, and while their meanings are largely synonymous, they do not cover the same spheres of reality: freedom is related more to movement and personal choice, liberty is more intellectual, political and potentially radical. (Underhill 2013: 343)

The problem, thus, is not only why French has been chosen for comparison with *nice*, but where any binary comparison of this kind may take us.

Second, the reader is somewhat baffled by Waters' claim as to the status of *nice* as an *Australian* English keyword. On the one hand, there is no reason to doubt it, especially as her analysis is convincing, yet one cannot help remembering that *nice* is simply an *English* word. Indeed, Waters herself quotes Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (p. 27), reports on Robin Lakoff's (2005) study of "Niceness" in American political discourse (p. 28), or refers to George Mikes's (1946) "humorous looks at the English" (p. 49). What is it, thus, that makes *nice* uniquely Australian?

On the editorial side, the book is a pleasure to read, as can be expected from a respectable publisher such as John Benjamins. The pleasure is somewhat spoiled by editorial errors, which, however, by this reviewer's count, number only just over a dozen. A few examples include: no distinction between symbols * and ? (which both mean "grammatically or semantically unacceptable"; p. ix); a superfluous article (which one?) in "the a emerging

discipline" (p. 101); confusing sentence structure in "fake designer jewellery and frequently who is seen to be smoking cigarettes" (footnote on p. 63); a repetition of structure in "to have to have played a crucial role" (p. 120). There are also a few problems with punctuation, such as the unclosed parentheses in fn. 7 on p. 88; a superfluous comma in "but frequency alone, is not a good indicator" (p. 236); or a missing comma in "This contrasts sharply with *nice* which has" (p. 30) — the last two categories of error also occur in a few other places. On the whole, however, both the number and the gravity of these errors are low and do hardly more harm than raise an occasional eyebrow.

Finally, in a synthetic bird's eye view, let me mention four features of the volume that build and contribute to its coherence, a characteristic not always to be found in edited collections. The first one concerns the amounts of work that the editors, Carsten Levisen and Sophia Waters, have invested in the volume's final shape: they have co-authored not only the first and the last "conceptual" chapters but have also contributed to three analytical chapters (Levisen to Chapter 4 with Carol Priestly and Chapter 5 with Magnus Hamann, Waters is the sole author of Chapter 2). One almost feels "one has had enough of them" and yet, this is not a drawback — on the contrary, the volume hangs together, among others, thanks to a consistently applied analytical style. Indeed, and this is the second of the four features, the consistency of the application of the NSM throughout the volume is impressive and is augmented in passages by Leung (Chapter 8), who provides very detailed explanations of her NSM explications (cf. e.g. p. 204) or the discussion from Asano-Cavanagh (Chapter 9), who correlates her explications with discourse. The next feature surfaces on p. 238, where the editors list three ways of studying the semantics of keywords with NSM, i.e. semantic, pragmatic, and mixed: the reader is then able to go back and recall details of the specific analyses and correlate those with the tripartite division. Finally, of crucial importance to the volume are the so-called Keyword Canons: keywords (i) come from discourse, (ii) reflect cultural values, (iii) create discursive contexts, (iv) maintain discursive fixities,[10] (v) reveal the scripted lives of people, and (vi) are constitutive of a deep emic logic. They are first introduced in Chapter 1 (pp. 5–8) and are revisited in Chapter 10 (pp. 239–241), thanks to which the reader can better see not only the individual trees but also the keyword research forest.

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10   Another mildly criticial comment is in order here. On p. 7, the editors explain that the notion of *fixity* comes from Pennycook's (2010) "fixity–fluidity" discussion. The approach here is that keywords "represent important fixities of meaning that are stable enough to be explored and explained" (Levisen & Priestly, p. 84). According to Levisen and Waters, this is a more appropriate view than the notion of "language change", which (erroneously) suggest the existence of a stable "language system" subject to an occasional dynamic "change" (besides, *change* itself is a claimed to be a "cultural keyword of Anglo English"). On the whole, the reader is left with the feeling that the fixity–fluidity idea is important (or even crucial) to the whole volume but somewhat underdeveloped in the theoretical sense (or else, they are implicitly expected to consult Pennycook 2010 and other publications by that author).

In a nutshell, despite the minor drawbacks of the volume, both the chapter authors and (especially) the editors must be congratulated on a solid contribution to cultural linguistics/ethnolinguistics, especially to Anna Wierzbicka's highly original, unique NSM framework. Given the fact that both Levisen and Waters have many years of scholarly career ahead of them, the future of the field looks promising.

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