

N. J. ENFIELD

# THE UTILITY *of* MEANING

*What Words Mean and Why*



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LINGUISTICS

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N. J. ENFIELD

**OXFORD**  
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*For Nonnika*

Many things are reliably given the same name by the whole community. The spoon is seldom called anything but *spoon*, although it is also a piece of silverware, an artifact, and a particular ill-washed restaurant spoon. The community-wide preference for the word *spoon* corresponds to the community-wide practice of treating spoons as equivalent but different from knives and forks. There are no proper names for individual spoons because their individuality seldom signifies. It is the same way with pineapples, dimes, doors, and taxi cabs. The most common name for each of these categorizes them as they need to be categorized for the community's nonlinguistic purposes. The most common name is at the level of usual utility.

Roger Brown, 1958

### **buckets**

- 'made for people for carrying big amounts of liquid in, of a kind which is not very valuable from a place where one can get a big amount of it to a place where one wants to use it, being able to fill them easily and quickly and to pour it out easily and quickly'
- 'made of something rigid, strong, and light which doesn't break when coming into contact with something hard and which water can't go into or pass through'
- 'have a rounded opening at the top so that one can easily fill them from any side and so that one can easily pour out some of the liquid from any side causing it to go where one wants it to go'
- 'have a flat bottom, so that one can put them down on something else that is flat such as the ground'
- 'can't be too high for people to be able to carry them in one hand with the arm stretching down, because when full of liquid they would be too heavy for a person to carry with the arm bent'
- 'as big as they can be without being too big for a person to be able to carry one full of water, with one hand'

Anna Wierzbicka, 1985

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# *Conventions for Linguistic Examples*

Orthography used for Lao in this book follows Enfield (2007). Orthography used for Kri follows Enfield and Diffloth (2009). Following are the conventions used for interlinear morphemic glossing:

1	1st person
2	2nd person
3	3rd person
ACHV	achievement marker
ANIM	animate
B	bare
CLF	classifier
C.LNK	clause linker
COMP	complementizer
COP	copula
CT	class term
DEM	demonstrative
DIR	directional
DIST	distal
E	elder
F	female
FA	familiar
FAC	factive
GEN	general
IMP	imperative
INAN	inanimate
INDEF	indefinite
INTJ	interjection
IRR	irrealis
KG	kilogram
LOC	locative
M	male
MC	modifier classifier

MO	mother
NEG	negation
NO.HES	without hesitation
NONPROX	non proximal
P	polite
PA	parent
PL	plural
PRF	perfect
PROG	progressive
QPLR	polar question
RDP.A	A-type reduplication
RDP.B	B-type reduplication
REFL	reflexive
SG	singular
T.LNK	topic linker
TPC	topic

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## *Preface*

This book summarizes and synthesizes the results of a long-term project on the semantics and pragmatics of Lao lexicon and grammar. The project has its roots in my years at the Australian National University and the University of Melbourne, with most of the work carried out in the Language and Cognition Department at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, within the collaborative research environment of two major research project groups: ‘Event Representation’ and ‘Categories across Language and Cognition’.

The Lao and Kri data and analyses were collected and carried out during field expeditions in Laos (Vientiane Municipality and Nakai District of Khammouane Province) between 1996 and 2013. Lao is a Southwestern Tai language spoken by some 25 million people in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. Lao speakers are the dominant ethnic group in Laos. Enfield (2007) is a reference description of the grammar, with detailed background information on the language. Kri is a Vietic language of the Austroasiatic family (see Enfield and Diffloth 2009 for a detailed description of the phonology, with notes on morphosyntax and on the Kri speech community).

I would like to thank the following mentors, colleagues, and friends for their help and input and ideas: Sasha Aikhenvald, Felix Ameka, Jürgen Bohnemeyer, Melissa Bowerman†, Penny Brown, Niclas Burenhult, Herb Clark, Tony Diller, Mark Dingemanse, Bob Dixon, Paul Drew, Grant Evans, Nick Evans, Cliff Goddard, Marianne Gullberg, Bill Hanks, John Heritage, Sotaro Kita, Paul Kockelman, Steve Levinson, Asifa Majid, Bhuvana Narasimhan, Gunter Senft, Jack Sidnell, Tanya Stivers, Anna Wierzbicka, David Wilkins, and Chip Zuckerman. I also thank Annelies van Wijngaarden and Maarten van den Heuvel for their expert assistance in preparing the manuscript. I gratefully acknowledge the Max Planck Society, the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (through Steve Levinson’s Language and Cognition Department), and the European Research Council (Starting Grant project 240853, ‘Human Sociality and Systems of Language Use’) for supporting this work. I thank my many friends and consultants in Laos, especially the inhabitants of Doune Ian Village, Vientiane Prefecture, and Mrka Village, Nakai District, Khammouane Province. And once again—this time thanks to Yves Goudineau and Christine Hawinxbrock—the Vientiane office of l’École française d’Extrême-Orient kindly provided the amenities for me to write in peace.

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I am grateful for the good fortune to have been able to draw directly on the teachings—in personal communication and in print—of four generous and formidable mentors, each fantastically different from the others, and each equally indispensable: Anna Wierzbicka, Nick Evans, Steve Levinson, and Melissa Bowerman†.

Finally, I thank Na for support and Nyssa for perspective, and I dedicate the book to our second daughter Nonnika. By adding one to our unit she doubles our number of relationships!





# The utility of meaning

Here, in two points, is the thesis this book will defend:

1. Word meanings reflect, and create, a deeply subjective view of the world.
2. This is a necessary consequence of the fact that word meanings are the historical product of their utility as means to people's communicative ends.

With case studies and arguments, the book aims to support this thesis, and to grapple with some of its theoretical and methodological implications. A good portion of the work addresses a prerequisite to any question about the causes and effects of word meanings,<sup>1</sup> namely: What are word meanings like in the first place, and how do we show it?

Here's what happens when we consider this question in causal terms. We are forced to deal with the implications of a gap between private cognitive representations of word meanings, on the one hand, and the public careers of words—both in the flow of social interaction and in the population-level emergence of convention—on the other hand. Then, a paradox comes to light. We see that the cherished principle of semantic invariance is at once a methodological necessity and a theoretical near-impossibility. Yet the system works. It works because of the utility of meaning. I mean this not just in the sense that words are means to ends,<sup>2</sup> but also in the sense that meanings must be good enough to serve their functions, but need not be better than that.

Meaning is often thought of as representation, but at the core of language use is decision-making. There are constant questions. What did she mean by that? Why did she say it that way? How shall I respond? What will she think *I* mean? We need answers on the fly. As in any decision-making process, the heuristics we use for

<sup>1</sup> I say 'word' meanings, but I also mean to include other symbolic structures of language at scales both smaller than, and larger than, the word (see e.g. sections 5.1–5.3, which focus on the meaning and productivity of grammatical constructions).

<sup>2</sup> The idea that words and other parts of language are tools is well worn, from early psycholinguists Zipf (1935; 1949) and Vygotsky (1934) to philosophers Austin (1962) and Grice (1975), linguists Chafe (1980) and Everett (2012), and anthropologists of language Hanks (1990; 2005a), Sidnell (2005; 2010) and Kockelman (2010; 2013), among many others.

coming to solutions will be fast and frugal (Gigerenzer et al. 2011). Pre-1950s psycholinguistics had this idea (Zipf 1935; 1949), and new research on language is exploring it, for example in the population-level diachronic aggregation of conventions (Barr 2004), the microgenetic comprehension of utterances (Ferreira and Patson 2007; Enfield 2009a), and the enchronic flow of action and response in conversation (Sidnell and Enfield 2012, 2014; Enfield 2013a).<sup>3</sup> Each of these temporal-causal frames is a wheel within wheels, making the whole of language look something like a Mayan calendar. Knowing how just one wheel turns will not suffice. Definitive answers to the questions posed in this book—questions of what words mean and why—demand simultaneous attention to processes in all of the relevant frames (Enfield 2014).

Within the scope of this book, we shall focus on the problem of word meaning by thinking not just in synchronic terms but also with due consideration of the dynamic frames of language that account for the creation and maintenance of meaning, and of the rich cultural-historical contexts in which language is used. Chapters 2–6 argue, in turn, that word meanings are *layered*, *multiple*, *anthropocentric*, *cultural*, and *distributed*, thus touching from all angles on the general thesis stated in points 1 and 2 above. The conclusion (Chapter 7) is that meanings are, above all, and necessarily, *useful*. If word meanings were not useful for people they would not exist. The broad goals of the book are thus (1) to put forward a view of what word meanings are like, (2) to see what this view implies for the ways we study word meanings, and (3) to explore the relevance of this view for our understanding of their causal underpinnings.

Point 1 of the thesis will already be familiar to readers. Many authors have championed the idea that the concepts conveyed by language are fundamentally subjective in character, and that language is not a means for *reflecting* how things are, but rather a means for *portraying* it in certain ways, depending on a speaker's communicative goal.<sup>4</sup> Few would deny that language is inherently subjective in nature. But this does not detract from the point's importance, nor from the need to make it. While the subjectivity of language is widely acknowledged, its implications—both theoretical and methodological—are not always appreciated.

Point 2 of the thesis concerns questions that usually fall outside the scope of synchronic semantics. But it is essential to deal with these questions. Any version of semantics must be compatible with a natural, causal theory of language (cf. Millikan 2005; Enfield 2014). A complete account must explicate not only the meanings of interest, but also the causes, conditions, and consequences of those meanings.

<sup>3</sup> For the terms 'microgenetic' and 'enchronic', see below; also Enfield (2013a; 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Sources for this idea range from Boas (1911) to Sapir (1921; 1949), Malinowski (1923), Mead (1934), Zipf (1949), Whorf (1956), Brown (1958a), Jakobson (1960), Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Silverstein (1976; 1979), Clark and Clark (1979), Levinson (1983; 2000), Langacker (1987), Lakoff (1987), Hanks (1990), Dixon (1991), H. Clark (1992; 1996a; 1996b), Wilkins (1996), E. Clark (1999), Croft and Cruse (2004), Evans (2010), Everett (2012), and esp. Wierzbicka (1985; 1988; 1989; 1996), whose indelible influence should be clear throughout the chapters of this book.

Many semanticists aim only to describe meanings within a synchronic perspective, specifying the contents of coded meanings, and relations between those meanings in a system. Others complement this with a diachronic perspective, investigating principles of meaning change, sometimes stating them descriptively, and sometimes positing specific causal accounts—thus invoking not just diachrony but other causal-temporal scales such as enchrony and microgeny—for example drawing on the role of pragmatic inference in conversation (Traugott 1989; Sweetser 1990; Wilkins 1996; Traugott and Dasher 2002; Evans 2003).

These lines of work need to be better linked to disciplines that also have a stake in semantics, and thus have a stake in getting semantics right. I am thinking here, for example, of Millikan's (2005) insistence that meanings have their causal basis in natural population-level processes of cultural evolution (see also Schelling 1978), and Brandom's (1979; 1994; 2000; 2008; 2014) insistence that logical relations are grounded in public commitments and social normativity (see also Sacks 1992; Heritage 1984).

## 1.1 What this book aims to show

In this book we ask what the meanings of words are like, using the Lao language as a main source for case studies. Our investigations will support the following conclusions:

### 1.1.1 *Word meanings have an effectively invariant core*

Whenever a word is used, that word will dependably invoke a definable core idea in the minds of people who hear the word being used (Wierzbicka 1996: 24 and *passim*; Goddard 2011). A speaker will be accountable for having intended to convey this core meaning, which is to say that the speaker will be unable to plausibly deny that they had wanted to invoke this understanding in the other. And a listener will be accountable for having understood the word with that meaning, as long as they claim, explicitly or implicitly, to have understood the utterance in which the word was used.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This may sound odd, but here's how it works. Imagine that John says to Mary *There's a dead cat in the driveway*, and she replies *Really?* as she heads out to take a look. If in fact the dead thing in the driveway turns out to be a dog, John will be accountable for having lied, mis-spoken, or been mistaken. He won't be able to defend his earlier assertion, a fact that is explained with reference to the core meaning of the English word *cat*. Something similar applies to Mary. If the dead thing turns out to be a Manx, she can later assert that she hadn't expected this (John didn't say it was a Manx). But she can't later assert that she hadn't expected e.g. that the dead thing would be an animal (even though John didn't say it was an animal either). More accurately: If she were to assert that she hadn't expected it to be a cat, or an animal, she would be accountable for the inconsistency between this and her explicit signal of understanding in the response she gave to John (*Really?*). In other words, if she acts now like she knows what he means, she can't say later that she didn't know.

By saying that these meanings are *effectively* invariant, I am explicitly allowing that word meanings can vary in their *actual* representation from person to person, but crucially they do this in such a way that any differences are undetectable to users of the language. This is a recurrent theme in this book. The invariance is methodologically necessary, but theoretically near-impossible.

A few points of clarification are needed, to avoid misunderstandings of what this means.

1a. ‘Effective semantic invariance’ does not mean that multiple meanings are not possible. In fact, it is rare for a word not to be polysemous. But for each distinct meaning that a word has, *that* meaning is effectively invariant. Instead of saying that a word has an effectively invariant meaning, it will often be more accurate to say that a word has effectively invariant *meanings*.

1b. ‘Effective semantic invariance’ does not mean that words cannot be taken to convey different things in different contexts. In fact, it is rare for a word not to be given a context-particular understanding—via various forms of inference—that is more specific than the word’s invariant core meaning. When a word is used in a context, many more things than just the word’s meaning are available for the hearer to use in constructing an interpretation of what the speaker wanted to say. While a word’s invariant core meaning (or at least, one of them; see (1a)) is always conveyed, many further things may be conveyed in addition, depending on the context.

1c. ‘Effective semantic invariance’ does not mean that word meanings cannot change; in fact they change in numerous ways, and in numerous causal-temporal scales, all the time. But it is important to note that the different kinds of extension of meaning implied by such change are based in logically distinct causal mechanisms, and these different kinds of extension should not be confused with one another.

The points just made are treated in Chapters 2 and 3: from the problems of defining the invariant meanings of words, to teasing these apart from the contextual effects of those words when used in context (semantics vs. pragmatics; see section 2.1), to establishing and distinguishing between the multiple meanings of a single word (polysemy, sections 2.2 and 3.2, and monosemy, section 3.4), to different kinds of thing we mean by extension (sections 2.3, 3.1, and 3.2), to a more specific sense of extension across syntactic categories (heterosemy, section 3.3).

#### 1.1.2 *Word meanings are deeply subjective—both anthropocentric and culture-centric—in content*

The contents of word meanings, as well as the context-situated enriched meanings of words, are highly subjective in that they reflect especially human concerns (Wierzbicka 1985; 1989; Simpson 2002; Evans 2003). This may seem like an uncontroversial or commonsense claim, but in fact, with increasingly widespread adoption of onomasiological approaches to studying word meaning (good examples being

Geeraerts 1997; 2010; Levinson and Meira 2003; Majid et al. 2007; Majid et al. 2008; Hellwig 2006a; 2006b; Majid et al. 2011a; 2011b; Levinson and Wilkins 2006; Evans et al. 2011), it is important to acknowledge a potential danger of prioritizing extensional facts in semantic analysis. If your application of referent-first methods leads you to conclude that the objective properties of a word's referents are equal to the meanings of that word, then you're doing it wrong.

Words can denote things in the world, but words' core meanings are not grounded in objective properties of the things they denote. Instead, word meanings embody a human perspective. This is true in more than one sense. One is that humans have a special propensity for attributing psychological motives behind actions and behaviour. We see this, for example, in the meanings of words for simple controlled behaviours such as cutting and breaking (sections 4.1 and 4.2). Another is that even in referential domains that do not denote human agents, actions, or their products—such as the domain of landscape features—a deeply anthropocentric perspective is still encoded, especially on account of the intrinsically subjective nature of affordances (sections 4.3–4.5). Yet another is that cultural expectations can guide the interpretation and selection of words in grammatical contexts, showing us how cultural perspectives are manifest both on the syntagmatic axis (sections 5.1–5.3) and the paradigmatic axis (5.4 and 5.5).

#### 1.1.3 *Word meanings are primarily conceptual, not primarily perceptual*

If purely perceptual features of referents play any role in determining or shaping word meaning, it is not a direct result of the fact that some feature of the referent is perceptually salient. Rather, it is because this perceptual salience is a useful tool for people to use in solving a referential coordination game in communication. Perceptual salience of a referent is a means to an end, that end being successful coordination of reference (sections 4.4, 4.5, 6.1, 6.2). If we discover that a word's meaning denotes a perceptually salient distinction, this does not explain why the word exists. For that we must ask: What is the social-communicative goal of the coordination of reference that the word enables?

#### 1.1.4 *Word meanings are distributed, in dialogues and in populations*

While a cognitive approach to word meaning must situate word meanings in people's heads (i.e. in their mental representations, including their meta-representations), meanings are publicly distributed, in two ways.

First, a word's meaning cannot be calculated without access to a person's *response* that *reveals* this meaning (Peirce 1955; Kockelman 2005; 2013a; see Enfield 2013a: ch. 4 for explication of this point within a broader semiotic framework). This establishes a dialogic basis for meaning—which is to say that meaning is distributed across the contributions of two people in a communicative interaction (sections 6.1 and 6.2).