Are you a ‘reasonable’ person? Do you know the difference between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’? Are these things that might reasonably be expected of any and all humans? If your answers to these questions are ‘yes’, then you are part of what this book terms ‘Anglo English’ culture, and you are hauling around a set of unexamined cultural prejudices masquerading as universals of human nature. You consider ‘reasonable’ to be a central concept in law, and a touchstone of common-sense thinking about the world, but you are incorrect. ‘Reasonable’ is found only in British-derived common law, and the difficulties of defining it, and translating it into other languages, have long exercised legal experts. ‘Right’ and ‘wrong’ are similarly regarded by most English speakers as fundamental concepts, and we assume that people from other cultures must share them. A claim of this book, however, is that they too are culturally specific to English, being distinctively, and complexly, moralized takes on the more widespread concepts, ‘good’, and ‘bad’.

There is a huge literature on the relation between language and our perception of the world, including well-known myths involving words for snow, but a feature of much previous work in this area has been a focus on an exotic (to Anglophone readers) language whose strange structures appear to remake the world. The shock of this book is that the exotic language under consideration is English, and the world which is remade may very well be your own. Anna Wierzbicka was educated in Poland, and now lives in Australia, and her cross-cultural experience has made the strangeness of English evident to her.

Consider, for example, the child’s complaint, ‘It’s not fair!’ Although the English are used to thinking of themselves as having given notions of ‘fair play’ to the world, their instinct is likely to be that the concept of ‘fairness’ itself is innate, something found in all languages and cultures. Indeed, it is often included in lists of hypothetical human universals, along with categories such as ‘one’, ‘two’, ‘the same’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Wierzbicka however, gives evidence to suggest that ‘fair’ is culturally specific to English. She holds the term to be untranslatable in other languages – the closest they can get is the equivalent of ‘just’ – not, she claims, the same thing at all - and further cites the borrowing of it into even culturally close languages like German. Not only that, but that it is a relatively recent arrival in English, unknown in its current meaning before the eighteenth century.

This replicates in miniature the major argument of the book: many of the most central features of Anglo English discourse, features which users of English consider most ‘natural’, are relatively recent arrivals into the language, and turn out to be unique to English when it is compared to other languages. Wierzbicka identifies the Enlightenment, and the work of Locke in particular, as the point at which modern Anglo English discourse patterns came into being. Along with the new scientific reasoning
came an expanded and much more frequent set of linguistic tools for expressing the speaker’s relation to the truth of what they were saying: ‘I think...’ (far more common in English than its equivalents in Swedish, Dutch and German); ‘I suppose...’, ‘probably’. Hedging, qualifying, specifying the relative strengths of assertions, became characteristic markers of English speech and writing – the epistemic adverb was king: ‘possibly’, ‘clearly’, ‘obviously’, ‘presumably’, ‘evidently’, ‘apparently’, ‘supposedly’, ‘conceivably’, ‘undoubtedly’, ‘allegedly’, ‘reportedly’. Wierzbicka here draws on historical linguistic work on the notion of ‘subjectivisation’ which hypothesises that semantic shifts involving such words follow a predictable pattern. This involves a move from objective, real-world reference (if something is obvious, it is physically present before me), to expressing the subjective opinion of the speaker about the truth-value of a claim or opinion.

Accompanying the epistemic adverbs are a host of more concrete terms which are held to shift their meaning with Locke: ‘facts’ (not used in the plural in Shakespeare); ‘accurate’, ‘accuracy’, ‘precision’ (again, not used in Shakespeare, though when he needs to, he draws on gunnery metaphors to express similar ideas); ‘pressure’ – a whole range of scientific terms brought in by Bacon, Newton, Locke and Hume, which point to a new concern for the exact. Perhaps most significant, is her observation that the new concern for accuracy means being specific about the extent of your ignorance: suddenly the resources of English shift, and speakers and writers seek out new ways of expressing the degree of confidence they have in what they say. As Wierzbicka points out, the phrase ‘I believe...’ emerges as a frequent tag in English in the age of reason, not the age of faith.

This is a striking contribution to the history of English, and the history of ideas, but the book is weakened by a clumsily defensive first chapter recapping Wierzbicka’s theory of universal semantic primes, and the ‘cultural scripts’ she derives from the theory. Neither of these is necessary for what follows, and a second chapter on differences between Arabic and Anglo discourse patterns, while interesting enough in itself, looks similarly dispensable. Readers of the rest of the book are likely to raise other objections too. Although it is a key concept in the book, the notion of ‘Anglo English’ is never fully defined, and significantly its quotation marks are sometimes present, sometimes absent, sometimes single, sometimes double. It is related to Braj Kachru’s notion of ‘inner circle’ EngliShes, which distinguishes British and American Englishes from Indian Englishes, for example, but the vagueness surrounding it seems to imply that Wierzbicka assumes her readers will ‘just know’ what she means – a strange assumption in a book dedicated to unpicking unexamined cultural concepts. The notion of ‘untranslatability’ is central to many of the claims here, but does this constitute a testable claim? Given that Wierzbicka is the author of a theory which holds that all possible meanings can be represented by a recombination of about 60 universal semantic primes, what is ‘untranslatability’? Within the history of English, does the appearance of a new word, or word meaning, necessarily imply that that meaning was not realised by other means previously? I am sure Wierzbicka would not assert that it does, yet her argument frequently implies it. What of Wierzbicka’s datings of the entry of words, and specific
meanings, into English? Her account of the rise of epistemic adverbs appears to ignore evidence that subjectivisation was common well before Locke.

Before Wierzbicka’s claims are accepted, we will need some more detailed work on the precise chronologies of the words she identifies, and their possible semantic precursors. The rapid recent development of computer corpora of English has now made such studies possible.

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