

“Global English, Minimal English: Towards better intercultural communication”

This is a Position Statement prepared by Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka for the Symposium “Global English, Minimal English: Towards better intercultural communication”, to be held at Australian National University, Canberra, 2-3 July 2015. [This version: November 11, 2014]

Global English needs “Minimal English”

There may be many conferences these days, in many countries, devoted partly or wholly to the topic of “Global English”. This symposium, however, is unique in linking the theme of Global English with that of Minimal English as a tool for achieving better intercultural understanding. The organisers of this symposium are linguists, as are most of the presenters, but we don’t see it as a meeting of linguists talking to linguists. Rather, we see it as an occasion for interdisciplinary dialogue, and we are delighted to have among our speakers representatives of the fields of diplomacy, politics, international relations, law, education, anthropology, history and literary studies, as well as linguistics.

As well as supporting an interdisciplinary dialogue, we see this symposium as an exercise in outreach: the global spread of English is now something that concerns millions of people, in fact, mega-millions, and it creates challenges that, we believe, cross-linguistic semantics has something useful to say about. We want to bring the experience of cross-linguistic semantics into the public arena and to discuss ways in which it can be helpful in fostering better intercultural communication. Underlying this symposium is the idea that Global English is not an unmixed blessing as far as intercultural understanding is concerned. Yes, it facilitates international and intercultural communication – but it can also create an impression that effective intercultural understanding is occurring when in fact it is not. The purpose of this symposium is to explore ways in which the use of Minimal English can improve intercultural communication and cross-linguistic understanding in the era of Global English.

What is Minimal English?

Minimal English is an English version of the common core of all (or nearly all) languages which has come to light through a decades-long program of cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic investigations undertaken in the NSM approach to language and culture. It is a version of English cut to the bone, so that the only words and constructions left are those that match in meaning words and constructions in most, if not all, other languages. For example,

there are no words like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in Minimal English (words which have no semantic equivalents in most languages of the world), but the words ‘good’ and ‘bad’, which do have semantic equivalents in other languages, are part of the lexicon of Minimal English (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 2002, 2004, 2014; Goddard 2008, 2011; Wierzbicka 1996, 2006, 2014; Gladkova 2010; Levisen 2012; Peeters 2006; Wong 2014; Ye, In press; Yoon 2006; Goddard and Ye, 2014).

Minimal English, in its ‘pure’ or “basic” form, includes not much more than a hundred words: fewer than seventy semantic primes, which can be regarded as “hardwired” in the human mind (such as ‘someone’ and ‘something’, ‘do’ and ‘happen’, and ‘good’ and ‘bad’), and, on present estimates, no more than thirty universal semantic molecules (such as ‘man’, ‘woman’, and ‘child’, ‘mother’ and ‘father’, ‘hands’, ‘water’, and ‘fire’). All these words have been located through extensive cross-linguistic investigations.

For some purposes, it may be useful to use extended or augmented versions of Minimal English. As well as the “basic” form, it may be useful to recognise an “intermediate” version augmented with another hundred or so words, which are borrowings from (Global) English and which have become important international words. Such “intermediate” words may include, for example, *country*, *money*, *number*, *paper*, *school*, *The Earth*, and *God*. The question of what the optimal number of such “intermediate words” is remains to be fully explored and will no doubt be discussed at the Symposium. In any case, it would be important to keep track of them and to have them explained, as necessary, through the words of the basic version of Minimal English.

What Minimal English is not

The notion of Minimal English is contrastive. It presupposes a distinction between several forms of English: Global English, which is anchored in Anglo English, as opposed to Minimal English. The first has been shaped by the history and culture of one particular part of the world, and still bears the imprints its origins. The second is derived from the first, but being radically reduced, it can match the shared core of all languages. It has been built not only by systematic reduction of English, but also by decades of empirical cross-linguistic investigations, aimed at identifying that common core.

Accordingly, Minimal English is not another simplified version of English analogous to Ogden’s 1930 “Basic English” or Jean-Paul Nerrière’s “Globish” (2004), both pruned for practical purposes but not reduced to the bare essentials. Building a mini-language that matches the common denominator of all languages is an entirely different undertaking.

Essentially, Minimal English is the English version of “Basic Human,” with its minimal vocabulary including the full repertoire of shared human concepts. Neither Ogden nor Nerrière aimed at identifying a minimal set of words with counterparts in many (let alone all) languages, and in fact they were not looking at English from a cross-linguistic perspective at all.

Given such a skeletal lexicon, Minimal English cannot of course be an all-purpose practical global means of communication. It can be, however, a global minimal lingua franca for the elucidation of ideas and explanation of meanings—and not only in scholarship but also in international relations, politics, business, law, ethics, education, and indeed in any context where it is important to explain precisely what one means.

In his introduction to a volume entitled *Universals of Human Thought*, philosopher Ernest Gellner (1981) wrote: “Unconvertible currencies are not suitable for trade.” A key characteristic of Minimal English is that (unlike Ogden’s Basic English or any other reduced form of English) it is fully convertible.

There is no escape from using a metalanguage

Opponents of Minimal English as an auxiliary lingua franca in the humanities and in sciences say sometimes, “I don’t believe in a metalanguage”. Like Molière’s Mr Jourdain, who didn’t know that he was speaking prose all his life, they don’t realize that they themselves are using a metalanguage in all their English-language publications and conference presentations. The metalanguage they use is Global English anchored in Anglo English. The organisers of this symposium are not trying to oppose Global English. Rather, they are suggesting that at times – particularly in the context of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural education – some elements of Global English need to be deconstructed through, or even replaced with, some elements of Minimal English.

To illustrate, some key concepts of Anglo English which are now spreading with Global English, are *mind*, *communication* and *relations*. These concepts are usually taken for granted by speakers of English, even though they do not have their equivalents outside the Anglosphere. When these concepts press themselves, through the internet, travel, and the study of English, upon, say, speakers of Russian, they compete with key Russian concepts such as *dusha*, *obshchenie* and *otnosheniya*. For both mutual understanding and self-understanding of people from these different conceptual worlds, all these concepts – the Russian and the English ones – need to be comprehended through their shared conceptual ingredients, such as KNOW, THINK, FEEL, SAY, DO WITH, and FEEL TOWARDS (in Russian,

ZNAT', DUMAT', CHUVSTVOVAT', SKAZAT', DELAT' (CHTO-TO) S (KEM-TO), CHUVSTVOVAT' (CHTO-TO) K (KOMU-TO).

“Nothing is neutral, there are no neutral words ...”

There is a widespread view among Western intellectuals, including many writers in the humanities, that “nothing is neutral”, that every word we use is deeply touched by culture. Many adherents of this view dismiss the very idea of empirically-evidenced conceptual universals, such as, for example, GOOD and BAD, KNOW and THINK, DO and HAPPEN, or SOMEONE and SOMETHING – and go on to rely in their own thinking and writing, instead, on English concepts dripping with history and culture, such as ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘mind’, ‘agency’, ‘reality’, and ‘cooperation’ (cf. Wierzbicka 2006, 2014; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014).

By contrasting Global English with Minimal English, the organisers of this symposium are not aiming at attaining some theoretical conceptual purity but at putting into practical use empirical findings about concepts that, evidence suggests, recur in a verifiable lexical form, in languages from all the continents of our planet. They aim at human understanding that can be shared globally, through simple words of intelligible, ordinary English. Needless to say, Minimal English has no privileged status as a conceptual mini-language of human understanding. From a conceptual point of view, Minimal Spanish, Minimal Chinese, or Minimal Arabic would of course do just as well. Whether we like it or not, however, from a practical point of view, Minimal English can be a particularly useful tool in the 21st century’s globalising world.

Language diversity and Minimal English

In linguistics and anthropology, there is at the moment a great deal of emphasis on the diversity of languages. We are deeply in sympathy with this emphasis and we are particularly interested in conceptual diversity. We also share the distrust of false language universals. Paradoxically, however, languages very different from English are often described using a conceptual language, a theoretical vocabulary, that is tied to, and dependent on, Anglo English (cf. Wierzbicka 2012). In this mode of description, culture-specific English words (whether ‘ordinary’ or technical) are largely taken for granted, while the meanings shared by speakers of other languages are re-formulated in terms of English words that embed English-specific concepts and perspectives. As a result, the conceptual diversity of the world’s languages is underestimated – “glossed over” with English words. In short, as we see it,

studies into language diversity needs to seriously confront the challenges of Anglocentrism, including the unintentional Anglocentrism that is often implicit our own practices and discourses.

The organisers of this symposium are not, of course, proposing that a ban should be placed on all Anglo English concepts in scholarship and in education. What they do propose is that – in some contexts – it would be useful to problematise and de-naturalise such English concepts, and to try to think “outside English”. When this needs to be done, Minimal English is a valuable tool.

It can also be expected that “small cultures” will find ways to use Minimal English for purposes of their own, and equally that there will be other applications that we are not yet able to foresee.

The aims of this symposium

This symposium aims at exploring the space between Anglo English and Minimal English, in the era of Global English. It aims at better recognising and engaging with the conceptual diversity of the languages of the world, highlighting the dangers of conceptual Anglocentrism associated with the global spread of English, and at exploring the potential of Minimal English as a conceptual lingua franca and as a tool for improved intercultural communication.

As we see it, the use of this minimal version of English can help us to build bridges between different conceptual worlds linked with the world’s different languages, using English words and sentences but with a minimum of conceptual “spin” from Anglo history and culture. Or such is the guiding idea which we hope can provide a background, if not a common ground, for the discussions and conversations of this symposium.

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