CHAPTER 18

From basic to cultural semantics

Postcolonial futures for a cognitive creolistics

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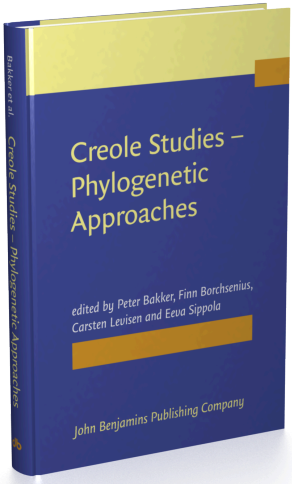

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In this section, I would like to sum up the main insights and achievements of the semantics section of the book (Chapters 13–15) and give suggestions for future work. I would also like to critically reflect on the limits, problems and obstacles for utilizing phylogenetic analysis, and at the same time highlight some of the promises, and potentials for integrating lexical and semantic evidence in the study of postcolonial linguistic communities.

Unlike animal species with legs, wings, trunks, and claws, the semantics of natural languages, has no visible structures. As Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince says: *L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux*. Meanings, perhaps the single most important aspect of language – at least seen from the perspective of speakers – are invisible. They are coined to serve as a conceptual currency in a community, but only the labels of words, not the meaning of words, are directly observable. The fact that meanings are invisible does not make them less real to speakers than directly observable lexical labels, but the tools with which we approach the invisible, namely our metalanguage, is bound to play a much more important role for our analysis.

The distinction between labels and meanings is vital for a cognitive creolistics. Creoles tend to be hyper-polysemous, and as a consequence, the same lexical labels can have relatively many related meanings. Many words have gone through "earthquake lexicalizations", resulting in a high false-friend rate across creoles, and in lexifier/creole relations. For many years, creolists have asked the question: "what is the lexifier?" We now know that another question is even more important: "what is the semantifier?" – or how is semantics constituted by speakers in postcolonial communities. To answer this question, we need in-depth analyses based on semantic fieldwork. Also, we need a metalanguage which is capable of representing meanings with a fine-grained resolution. It is important for future research to resist the temptation of doing data collection without a strong theory base. If we don't have such a foundation, we easily end up comparing apples and oranges, or even worse: we end up finding apples and oranges in ethnolinguistic

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communities which have no interest in fruit. APiCS, for instance, does not get its semantics section entirely right, when it asks whether 'green' and 'blue' are the same in language X, Y, Z. (Huber and the APiCS Consortium, 2013). The concepts of 'blue' and 'green' are not self-evident or "natural", but categories of visual semantics in certain European languages, which for historical reasons have found these discrete visual categories useful. To ask if speakers of other languages also distinguish *blue* and *green*, is essentially to ask: Does your semantic categorization mirror that of ours? A Russian creolistics team might have asked if language X, Y, Z distinguish *goluboj* roughly 'light blue' and *sinij*, roughly 'dark blue', because this distinction is important in Russian semantics. A research team from Melanesia would have proposed many visual descriptors unknown to Westerners' semantics: for instance, they might have asked if the visual qualities of pigs can be described via the visual appearance of certain sea shells. In this part of the world, this is a very relevant visual-semantic feature (for recent account on the semantics of color and visuality in creoles, see Levisen, Sippola & Aragón 2016).

So, what should we do to make progress in the study of phylosemantics in a postcolonial linguistic framework? Firstly, I believe we should deliberately move slowly, and try to avoid making quick data collections based on semantically ill-formed questions, and/or European-tinged semantic categories. We should acknowledge the problem of terminological ethnocentrism, a problem which is closely linked with the metalanguage question. Two of the "quick" roads, which must be avoided, are to uncritically incorporate dictionary data, or to succumb to a version of naïve referentialism in our data collection. The aim of a traditional bilingual dictionary is to translate word Y in language X into the closest category of a European colonial language Y, and as such dictionaries are, to a very large extent, tied up with European metalanguages. Depending on whether the dictionary is French-based or English-based, the "results" will often differ, simply because English and French words differ in semantics – and word Y in language X is likely to mean something different than the English or the French word.

The other danger is to ignore the advances in cognitive semantics and cultural semantics, and return to a referentialist agenda in semantics, which seems to lend itself more easily to quick-and-dirty-data collection. It does not help to ask "what is your word for 'brother', 'arm', 'color', 'love', 'anger', 'river', etc.?", given that many languages do not operate with these conceptual constructs (cf. Wierzbicka 2013). Using semiotic tools in the form of videos or pictures, does not solve the problem either, if the underlying non-linguistic representational agenda is still to mirror the same Anglo/English semantic categories i.e. 'brother', 'arm', 'color', etc. If we impose categories on a creole or any other postcolonial lect or language, because this category is relevant in European semantics, then, at best we close our eyes to semantic diversity, but at worst we also exercise conceptual colonialism on other

speakers' semantics. This is precisely why insights from cross-linguistic cognitive and cultural semantics need to be considered carefully, and incorporated into the design features of future phylosemantic studies, and this is also why we need to do "slow research" in this area.

The semantics chapters in this book (13–15) all took their point of departure in lexical units rather than whole lexemes, following a semantics tradition from Cruse (1996: 77–78). We have primarily worked with simple meanings (semantic primes), such as 'I', 'you', 'something', 'someone', 'good', 'bad', 'big', 'small', and relatively low-complexity meanings (semantic molecules), such as 'men', 'women', 'children', 'day', 'night', 'head', 'eyes', etc., all solidly researched concepts in cross-linguistic semantics. In Chapter 13, Levisen and Bøegh laid the groundwork for doing basic conceptual semantics in creoles and lexifiers, without assigning any a priory primacy to the lexifier label, but treating the lexical semantics of all lects and languages in our sample as constitutive. This work could be strengthened further by adding to their sample various relevant dialectal, ethnolectal and substratal exponents of the same primes. In Chapter 14, Levisen & Aragón took a first step into a slightly more complex area of semantics (semantic molecules), showing that domain factors can be important for phylosemantics. The chapter also revealed some of the problems of comparing meanings across creoles and lexifiers: What if only 3 out of 4 semantic components of a word meaning match between two languages, as for instance in the case of *head* in Anglo English, and *hed* in traditional Melanesian pidgins/creoles. On the other hand, the *head-hed* problem might open up new avenues for phylosemantics, helping us to move into a higher-resolution semantics, where components of semantic units, rather than whole semantic units, can be used as features in comparative research. In Chapter 15, Levisen et al questioned current dogmas in creolistics and sociolinguistics, showing how phylogenetic networks can raise awareness of classificational practices, and help us deconstruct powerful, but non-universal ideas, such as 'language', 'creole', 'English', 'dialect' and 'variety', and take a fresh look at the issues. Now that we have carefully surveyed the basics of lexical semantics, it is time to expand our horizons, and capture the more areal and culture-specific aspects of meaning, such as cultural keywords, areal concepts, polysemy patterns, and other culture-dependent configurations (see Levisen & Jogie 2015; Levisen 2016).

In this book, we have seen how traditional structural-typological features can be paired with lexical-semantic features – and how historical and contemporary features can be brought together. It is important to continue to develop multi-dimensional creolistics, because, as we have seen, different areas of linguistic evidence – grammatical, lexical, semantic, pragmatic features – may point in different directions, and even different kinds and types of semantics point in different directions. All natural language perspectives are equally important if we want to

understand what constitutes the verbal practices in postcolonial communities. It is important for phylogenetic research to keep refining the "feature concept". We need to test a variety of ways in which featurization can be used as a technique to help us answer our research questions, and help us to form new questions for creolistics research, and more generally for a postcolonial linguistics.

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