

# Correspondence

Dear Editor,

Anna Wierzbicka (AW) purports to explain ‘Why there are no “colour universals” in language and thought’ via the observation that many languages ‘have no word for “colour” ’ (2008: 407). She claims that if a language has no word for ‘colour’, it cannot *ipso facto* ‘have a concept of colour’ (2008: 408, original emphasis), and, since many languages consequently have no concept of colour, they cannot *a fortiori* contain words that participate in alleged colour universals. We take the meaning of ‘concept’ to be conventionally ‘something formed in the mind, a thought or notion’. But what AW means by the expression ‘have a concept of’ is obscure. One might suppose she means that a language cannot have any concept for which it has no word. For example, no word for colour implies no colour words. It would then follow that a language that lacks a word for, say, ‘size’ has no concept of size and one that lacks a word for ‘taste’ has no concept of taste, whether or not the language has words for ‘big’ and ‘small’ or ‘sweet’ and ‘sour’. But such is evidently not AW’s intention, as she writes elsewhere, in answer to a direct question: ‘Yes, I think people may have the concepts of “big” and “small” (lexical universals) without having a concept of “size” ... They may also have concepts like “hot” and “cold” without having a concept of temperature’ (pers. comm., 13 May 2008). But if a language can have words for ‘ “big” and “small” (lexical universals) without having a concept of “size” ’ (in AW’s sense of ‘have a concept of’, whatever that may be), why can a language not have words for ‘white’, ‘red’, and so on, without having a concept of ‘colour’? And if a language has words for

‘white’, ‘red’, and so on, then of course it can have universal constraints on the meanings of those words. (This is not to say that it *does* have such constraints; that is a separate question, although one we think has been answered affirmatively elsewhere. See, e.g., Griffin 2006; Kay & Regier 2003; Kuehni 2007; Lindsey & Brown 2006; Regier, Kay & Cook 2005; Webster & Kay 2007.)

AW acknowledges that ‘[t]he Warlpiri people do of course see what we call “colours” and can be very sensitive to differences that we would think of as differences in colour’ (2008: 420). Given that they supposedly have no concept of colour and no colour terms, one is entitled to an account of how these facts could have become known. It is evident that if one took the apparent colour words to be real colour words and observed how these words were used by Warlpiri-speakers in the presence of coloured objects, one could arrive at such a conclusion. But if one takes the apparent colour words not to be about colour at all – say about texture, or temperature, or some property or properties unknown to us – it is hard to imagine how one could come to observe that Warlpiri-speakers ‘can be very sensitive to differences ... in colour’. They might show sensitivity to differences in objects that we see as different in colour, but how could we ever know *they* were attending to the colour differences? If Warlpiri-speakers see colours, are sensitive to differences in colours, (apparently) name what we call colours, and yet lack any concept of colour, then the term *concept* is being used in an unusual way. Of course, AW has every right to use terms however she wishes, but the reader inclined to accept AW’s argument that lack of a word for ‘colour’ entails that apparent colour terms are not really

colour terms should be aware that the argument depends on an idiosyncratic version of the notion of having a concept.

AW is not interested in arguing whether the research that takes apparent colour words to be real colour words has gotten the colour meanings of those words wrong; she wishes to argue that those words do not have colour meanings at all – that there are simply no colour words in any language that lacks a word for ‘colour’. AW does not explain the difference between the colour domain and other domains, such as size, temperature, or taste, according to which absence of a word naming the domain permits (potential) hyponyms to name domain properties in non-colour domains (e.g., ‘big’, ‘hot’, ‘sour’ ...) but prevents true domain meanings like ‘white’, ‘red’, and ‘green’ in the domain of colour. It appears that in order to develop her claim that languages lacking a word for ‘colour’ *ipso facto* lack colour words, AW has been forced to adopt an incoherent notion of ‘having a concept’, one that applies in an arbitrary, unexplained, and unconventional fashion.

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Dear Editor,

As the philosopher Charles Taylor says in his monumental *Sources of the self*, ‘[T]he human agent exists in a space of questions’ (1989: 29). Some of these questions are universal and some are language- and culture-bound. For example, evidence suggests that in any language people can ask questions such as ‘is it big?’, ‘is it good?’, ‘is it true?’, and ‘what is it like?’, because all languages have words meaning ‘big’, ‘good’, ‘true’, and ‘like’. They cannot always ask, however, ‘what size is it?’, ‘what is the evidence?’, or ‘is it fair?’, because many languages do not have words meaning ‘size’, ‘evidence’, or ‘fair’.

Similarly, in all languages people can ask questions such as ‘what did you see?’, ‘what did you hear?’, or ‘what was it like?’, but not ‘what colour was it?’ or ‘what sound was that?’, because all languages have words meaning ‘see’ and ‘hear’ but not all have words meaning ‘colour’ or ‘sound’. For example, in Warlpiri one can ask ‘what is it like?’ but not ‘what colour is it?’, because Warlpiri has a word meaning ‘like’, but not a word meaning ‘colour’.

Kay and Kuehni (henceforth K&K) dismiss such facts and claim that if a language does not have a word for ‘colour’ it can still have a ‘concept of colour’, because the absence of a word does not prove the absence of a concept. By this logic, one could also claim that traditional Warlpiri culture had concepts like ‘perestroika’, ‘jihad’, ‘kamikaze’, ‘nirvana’, ‘computer’, or ‘electron’: there are no such words in Warlpiri, but according to K&K, the absence of a word does not prove the absence of a concept.

K&K’s assumption that Warlpiri-speakers can have the concept of ‘colour’ (even though they have no word for ‘colour’) is part of a larger phenomenon: the tendency of Anglophone scholars to assume that concepts named in English and fundamental to their own thinking must also be present in the thinking of the speakers of other languages. They simply cannot imagine that it could be otherwise. The reification and absolutization of English concepts is widespread in the literature in English on emotions, values, human cognition, ‘personality traits’, and so on (Wierzbicka 2006; in press).

Thoughts are not directly observable and neither are concepts. We know how people think by observing how they speak. English words such as *fairness*, *commonsense*, *democracy*, *teenager*, *measure*, and *colour* constitute evidence for the presence of the corresponding concepts in the shared conceptual universe of speakers of

English. There are no such words in Warlpiri, and thus there is no evidence of the presence of such concepts in Warlpiri culture.

The most remarkable feature of the Anglocentric fallacy inherent in K&K's approach is the double standard: it is not assumed that speakers of English have concepts lexicalized in Warlpiri but not in English (such as, for example, 'kuruwarri-kuruwarri'), but it is readily assumed that speakers of Warlpiri have concepts lexicalized in English but not in Warlpiri – such as, for example, 'colour' (or 'red', 'blue', etc.).

K&K ask: '[I]f a language can have words for "big" and "small" ... without having a concept of "size" ... , why can a language not have words for "white", "red", and so on, without having a concept of "colour"?' But linguistic evidence shows that Warlpiri (like any other language) has words that mean exactly the same as the English words *big* and *small* but does not have words that mean exactly the same as the English words *white* and *red*. If K&K want to say, loosely, that, for example, the Warlpiri word *yalyu-yalyu* 'blood-blood' 'is the Warlpiri word for "red" ', thus looking at Warlpiri through the prism of the English word *red*, they are of course free to do so. Such a move does not establish, however, that the Warlpiri word *means* the same as its closest denotational counterpart in English (*red*).

To K&K, Warlpiri visual descriptors are semantically 'colour terms', because they *want* them to be, semantically, 'colour terms' (in accordance with the Berlin and Kay [1969] hypothesis). To Warlpiri-speakers, however, they are not colour terms because Warlpiri people do not (did not) think about the visual world in terms of 'colours'.

'Size' is not a semantic component of 'big' and 'small'; on the contrary, 'big' and 'small' are both semantic components of 'size' (just as 'mother' and 'father' are semantic components of 'parent', rather than the other way round). 'Colour', on the other hand, is indeed a semantic component of the English word *blue*. It is not, however, a component of Warlpiri words like *kunjuru-kunjuru* 'smoke-smoke' or *yukuri-yukuri* 'grass-grass', which refer to visual appearance in general rather than to 'colour' as such.

Semantic hypotheses cannot be validated unless and until they are framed in coherent and intelligible definitions (paraphrases). I have proposed such definitions for English words such as *blue* and *green* (including in them the word *colour*), and also for Warlpiri words such as *kunjuru-kunjuru* 'smoke-smoke' and *yukuri-yukuri* 'grass-grass' (without the word *colour*), and I have shown that these definitions can be

rendered in Warlpiri itself (as well as in English). By doing so, I have sought to capture the Warlpiri insider's perspective, instead of imposing on Warlpiri a conceptual grid derived from English. K&K see no value in this, and seek to dismiss my approach as based on a bizarre and idiosyncratic use of the word *concept*.

In fact, nothing I say hinges on my (fairly standard) use of the term *concept* and I do not particularly care about how it should be used. What I do care about is that we seek to understand 'the native's point of view', that is, that we try to reveal the conceptualizations encoded in the meaning of Warlpiri words, and make them intelligible to speakers of other languages. This can only be done, in my view, through intelligible and cross-translatable paraphrases of indigenous meanings, formulated in words which have semantic equivalents in all languages.

English is not a culturally neutral language allowing Anglophone scholars to understand other people's thoughts better than those people could possibly understand these thoughts themselves. The fact that English has a long association with science, and that it is now the global language, and, in particular, the global language of science, makes it not less but more imperative to recognize the cultural underpinnings of English and to seek a new foundation for the understanding of human cognition, emotion, perception, and values. As colleagues and I have sought to demonstrate in numerous publications (e.g. Goddard 1998; 2008; Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002; Wierzbicka 1996), such a foundation can be found in the repertoire of universal human concepts, lexicalized, the evidence suggests, in all human languages and in all probability 'hard-wired'.

From the outset, the emphasis of the Berlin and Kay approach was on 'naming' and on neurophysiological constraints on 'naming'. 'Naming' implies that there are things 'out there' ready to be named, and the phrase 'neurophysiological constraints' refer to the human body. What was missing from that approach was the level of construal: how speakers of different languages *construe* (habitually think about) the physical world that presents itself to their eyes and their brains. Yet it is that middle level, that cognitive bridge between the human body and the 'reality' outside the human body, which should be the central concern of cognitive anthropology and anthropological linguistics. To study this middle level (the level of construal), anthropology needs a metalanguage. English (full-blown) English

cannot be that metalanguage, because like with any other natural language it embodies its own, culture-specific construals.

'NSM English', that is, a mini-English isomorphic with the shared core of all natural languages, is culture-independent, and so it can be an effective metalanguage by means of which we can seek to understand the whole range of culture-specific construals across languages and cultures, as well as to identify genuine universals of language and thought.

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