

Applying Natural Semantic Metalanguage beyond lexical semantics

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Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) was developed by Anna Wierzbicka in the early 1970s. The approach is based on the understanding that all languages share a small core of basic, universal meanings, known as semantic primes. While the central idea of NSM as a theory has remained the same, recent developments—such as the concept of Minimal Languages—have expanded its scope. Whereas the original NSM framework is mainly of interest to professional linguists, Minimal Languages can also serve as a tool for non-linguists to explain complex concepts.

My talk will present five cases where NSM has been applied to tasks beyond lexical semantics: assessing the emotional connection between mother and child in child psychiatry; simplifying questions in depression screening to improve interpreter-mediated health care; enabling Easy Language specialists to explain discrimination; using NSM to solve problems—or simply for fun—in laypeople's workshops; supporting the creation of children's books that aim for the easiest level of Easy Language.

NSM primes and semantic molecules have shown potential in addressing various comprehension challenges and in facilitating negotiations of meaning. Although still incomplete and, at times, controversial, the NSM approach merits further development and wider dissemination.