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Reported speech as a pivotal human phenomenon: Commentary on Spronck and Nikitina

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We commend the target paper (henceforth S&N) for bringing reported speech to attention in the typological space, and for making a number of highly pertinent observations. We agree that reported speech deserves to be seen as a *sui generis* domain or topic, well deserving of typological attention and not reducible to an intersection of other phenomena. We would prefer to characterise it as a semantic or functional domain, rather than as a “syntactic” domain, given that key aspects of S&N’s definition hinge on semantic notions, but this is not our main concern in this commentary. Instead, we would like to take issue with the target paper on more important theoretical and methodological matters. The most significant concerns S&N’s reliance on complex, poorly-defined, English-bound terms, including both technical terms such as *semiotic*, ‘*demonstratedness*’, *epistemic*, *modality*, and *representation*, and ordinary, but equally English-bound, words such as *report(ed)*, *message*, *discourse*, and *utterance*. In this commentary we aim to demonstrate, so far as possible in the space available, that the use of such opaque and/or English-bound terminology is unnecessary and to outline an alternate approach to the same phenomena.

The first step, in Section 1, is to show that the most explicit and unambiguous mode of reported speech (corresponding closely to the traditional idea of “direct speech”) can be described in simple, cross-translatable words. This, we argue, is a universal of human languages and provides a universal prototype or conceptual anchor for “reported speech” broadly. In Section 2, we outline a strategy for characterising the various modes of “non direct speech”, such as, *inter alia*, quotative particles, prosodic cueing, and subordinate constructions. Rather than trying to bring everything that may be counted as “reported speech” under a single, extremely abstract characterisation, we favour an approach that analyses these diverse constructions one at a time, so to speak, linking them all

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to the prototypical direct speech construction in a family resemblance fashion. To make this more concrete, we briefly analyse the Yankunytjatjara quotative particle *kunyu* and the English *say that ...* construction.

In Section 3 we have two broader points to make. First, we want to insist, with Bahktin/Vološinov (1929/1973)¹ that understanding modes of reported speech is not just a linguistic concern but has profound implications for understanding the speech cultures and discursive practices of societies around the world. More broadly still, we call for typologists to take seriously the need to de-Anglicise our terminology and to seek ways of describing people's speech practices in terms which are accessible to the people concerned (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014b).

1 Establishing a universal semantic prototype for “direct speech”

Our response is predicated on a decades-long research program in Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) semantic analysis (cf. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002; Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014a; Ye 2017). Though often construed as primarily about lexical semantics, the NSM approach also addresses linguistic typology and language documentation, using a theoretical vocabulary grounded in universal or near-universal lexical meanings. In this section, we show how core aspects of the traditional notion of “direct speech” can be teased apart and represented in simple, cross-translatable words (cf. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2018).

To begin with, a single, famous, example. At the beginning of the Bible, in the book of Genesis, we read: And God said: Let there be light; and there was light. (Gen 1: 3) There are two speakers here, the narrator, who says “God said”, and God, who says: “Let there be light”. Readers understand that God wasn't speaking in English, but they also understand that at some moment God spoke and said something that in English can be rendered as “Let there be light”. This sentence from Genesis has been translated into thousands of languages.

The claim embodied in Generalisation [A] below is that all languages have such a “direct speech” construction, in the sense that: (i) all languages have words like ‘say’ and ‘speak’, (ii) these words can be used in expressions like ‘this someone said’ accompanied by some other words, (iii) which retain the original speaker's ‘I’, (iv) and are said, prototypically, with the intention of allowing the

¹ The authorship of this book is debated and scholars are fiercely divided on the question. For what it is worth, we side with the traditional view in Russian scholarship that Bahktin is indeed the author.

addressee to know both what the original speaker said and how they said it. Generalisation [A] closely matches many insightful characterisations by linguists, e.g. Evans' (2013) description of "canonical direct speech", but it is framed in fully cross-translatable words and grammar, without any linguistic jargon and without other English-specific words, such as *reporter* or *narrator*.

[A] SEMANTIC CHARACTERISATION OF PROTOTYPICAL "DIRECT SPEECH" CONSTRUCTION

- a. In all parts of the earth something like this often happens:
- b. Someone says something to someone else.
 After some time, this someone else wants some other people to know what this someone said.
 At the same time this someone else wants these other people to know how this someone said it.
- c. Because of this, this someone else says two things at the same time.
 - one of them is "this someone said"
 - the other one is the same thing as this someone said
- d. When this someone else says it, they want to say it in the same way (as this someone said it before), with the same words.
 If one of these words is "I", this someone else says the same thing with the word "I".
 If this someone said it with words like "now", "here", "this", this someone else says it with the same words.

We now draw attention to several aspects of the import and phrasing of [A]. Line (a) expresses the claim that prototypical direct speech occurs in all societies. Section (b) sets out the social-interactional purpose behind it, which is, so to speak, to bring the "what" and the "how" of a previous speech event into the current interaction. As set out in section (c), in prototypical direct speech the reporting speaker approaches the task by saying two things at the same time, one of them using a speech verb ("this someone said") and other one being 'the same thing as this someone said before'. This two-part structure corresponds to S&N's observation that reported speech constructions "reflect a binary but neither subordinating nor coordinating semantic structure". Note that (c) does not require that the two sub-utterances occur in any specific order, or even that they are necessarily fully separate from one another, as noted also by S&N.

The introductory line of section (d) says that the reporting speaker 'wants to say it in the same way, with the same words' (as the original speaker), not that they actually say it in the same way, with the same words. As widely noted, one

does not necessarily expect the manner and words of a reporting speaker to be exactly the same as those of the original speaker; however, it seems reasonable to say that the reporter's intention appears to be to use the same manner and the same words.

The remainder of (d) elaborates on what is required in relation to intending to say it 'in the same way, with the same words'. Firstly: 'If one of these words is "I", this someone else says it with the word "I"'. This component insists on preserving or repeating the 'I' of the original speaker, without replacing it with words like 'he', 'she', or 'this someone'. To convey the idea that "other deictically sensitive expressions", as Evans (2013) put it, are also preserved, the final line states that if words like 'now', 'here', and 'this' were used by the original speaker, the reporting speaker uses these words too. The specific phrasing ('words like "now", "here", "this"') allows for other deictic expressions aside from the key exemplars provided. In short, the final two lines correspond to what linguists call "preserving the first speaker's perspective".

In case it needs to be re-emphasised, [A] is intended to characterise what we take to be the prototypical "direct speech" construction.² We believe that this construction, characterised in semantic terms, is available in all languages, notwithstanding grammatical differences (including logophoric constructions (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2018)), and notwithstanding that explicit direct speech is much less common in some languages, and in some genres, than in others (cf. Güldemann 2008, and other references cited in the target paper).

As S&N point out, the existence of such explicit constructions is crucial to our understanding of ways of reproducing others' speech which lack overt "framing" clauses, such as 'he/she said', as in S&N's "defenestrated" example (8) from Nyulnyul. As they put it,

the optionality of M [the framing clause – CG/AW] in these instances is not semantic absence: if the situation requires it, a language could always add an M, and to correctly interpret a defenestrated clause ... the semantic value of M ... has to be interpretable.³

² Goddard and Wierzbicka (2018) also provide for a second "direct speech" construction, more suited to reporting lengthy utterances. This uses the formula 'this someone said/spoke like this', rather than 'this someone said'.

³ The characterisation in [A] hinges of course on the universal availability of a word with the meaning SAY, which has sometimes been disputed, as noted by S&N. We believe such claims are due to a failure to recognise commonly attested patterns of polysemy, such as SAY/THINK polysemy and SAY/DO polysemy (Wierzbicka 1994a). For an instructive example of rival analyses, see Knight (2008) and McGregor (2014), which address Australian languages from the Kimberley region in which both patterns co-occur in the same language. McGregor (2014) upholds the monosemy analysis, undertaking to refute Knight's arguments in favour of

2 The variable semantics of “non direct speech”

Alongside the explicit and cross-linguistically stable “direct speech” construction (described above), there are a great many variants of other ways for reporting speech, variously termed modes of indirect speech, semi-direct speech, or quotatives; and involving, *inter alia*, particles, prosody, modals and/or epistemic verbs, and specialised grammatical constructions. In our view, it is not a productive strategy to try to capture all these possible variations under a single definition, as attempted by S&N, because to do so necessarily makes such a definition opaque, imprecise and dependent on English-bound terminology. Our preferred strategy is to describe the semantics of such devices one at a time, and rely on shared semantic components – in particular, ‘someone said’ – to link with the universal, maximally explicit construction. To make this more concrete, we here consider two examples: “quotative” particles in Australian languages, and the English *say that* ... construction.

“Quotative” particles. (1)–(3) are examples of the Yankunytjatjara quotative particle *kunyu*. Goddard (1985) states that the free-particle *kunyu* “attributes a statement or position to someone other than the speaker. It is frequently found in Dreaming stories ... in other contexts where for various reasons the speaker wishes not to be held personally responsible for a statement ... to relay orders or suggestions ... and to report children’s ‘pretend’ games.”

- (1) *kaa kunyu tali-nguru ngara-la nyaku-la nyangu*
 CONTR QUOT sandhill-from stand-SERIAL see-SERIAL saw
 ‘According to the story, they had been watching from the sandhills and finally saw something.’ (Goddard 1985: 391, original glosses)
- (2) *paka-la kunyu!*
 get up-IMP QUOT
 ‘Someone says get up!’
- (3) *nyanytju kunyu*
 horse(NOM) QUOT
 ‘It’s a horse according to him’ (said of a boy playing ‘horsies’ with a dog).

We are happy to regard *kunyu* as a device for framing reported speech, but for us the question remains: How does *kunyu* work semantically? i.e. What does

polysemy. McGregor does not cite or refer to Knight (2008), however, but paraphrases (rather selectively, as it seems to us) an earlier, unpublished study by the same author.

it mean?; and in particular, What does it mean to speakers of Yankunyjtjatjara? For us, a threshold test for whether a putative semantic analysis can authentically represent the meaning as it is for speakers themselves, is whether the analysis can be given in words that have equivalents in the speakers' own language, i.e. in the case of *kunyu*, in words which have equivalents in Yankunyjtjatjara itself. Here we will note again that the word *report* does not meet this test, since it is highly English-specific (and the same applies, even more so, to expressions such as *quotative index*, and the like).

Fortunately it appears there is a plausible, cross-translatable paraphrase which could fit all these Yankunyjtjatjara examples, namely: 'someone says this, not me'. It may well be that this paraphrase, or a variant, would be suitable for similar particles in other languages as well.⁴ Certainly, a meaning like 'someone says this, not me' would be a very valuable expressive "package" and could serve a variety of different rhetorical and discursive purposes (such as lightening the responsibility of the actual speaker, occluding the identity of the original speaker(s), among others).

The English *say that* construction. For an example of a very different kind, both semantically and grammatically, we turn to the English *say that* ... construction (and its analogues in other European languages). This is the *locus classicus* of the traditional notion of "indirect speech". Aside from its "main clause-complement clause" structure, its most striking property is its focus on the "content" expressed by the original speaker and concurrent lack of attention to the original speaker's manner and words – even to the point that pronouns (and, often, other deictic expressions) in the complement clause reflect the perspective of the reporting speaker, not the original speaker.

Consider the two examples in [C]. Example (a) is taken more or less at random from the WordBanks corpus. Example (b) is from Matthew's Gospel (Mt 16: 14, KJB): Jesus has asked his disciples who people say he is and this is their reply.

[C] Semantic explications for two sample 'say that ...' sentences

- a. *The surgeon said that I might need a back support and maybe surgery.*
The surgeon said this about me: I might need a back support and maybe surgery.
- b. *Some say that thou art John the Baptist*
Some people say this about you: you are John the Baptist

⁴ It seems likely that this formula could fit the Quechua and Wintu suffixes *-do* (Quotative) and *-ke* (Hearsay) discussed in Wierzbicka (1994b), where slightly more elaborate explications were proposed.

According to the explications in [C], the *say that* ... construction represents the reported speech in terms of two elements only: the topic and what was said about it. In proposing this interpretation, we are following Bakhtin/Vološinov's (1929/1973: 129) insight crystallised in the statement: "Analysis is the heart and soul of indirect discourse". The "analysis" here consists of extracting these two elements from the original utterance and disregarding the "how". This account is consistent with the fact that English *said that* ... cannot be used to report questions, commands, or exclamations. It is only used to report statements, i.e. for when someone 'says something about something'.

Not all languages have sentence structures with exactly the same meanings as the Yankunytjatjara *kunyu* or the English *say that* construction. As emphasised by S&N, and abundantly supported by their cited references, different languages of the world enable a great variety of ways in which other people's utterances can be reported, modified, and incorporated into the ongoing talk of the moment. In this section, we have tried to give a sense of how such diversity can be approached using a "prototype and variations" approach based on rigorous, language-neutral semantic tools.

3 Broader horizons

We have two final points to make. First, we want to re-emphasise Bakhtin/Vološinov's (1929/1973) point that reported speech in all its complexity is "pivotal" to human society. As he saw it, the human environment is constituted largely by other people's speech, and by other people's voices. As the authors put it in an earlier publication:

[W]e ... live, to a very large extent, among other people's utterances: they are the stuff of our daily life, our dreams, memories, thoughts, and stories, the fabric of our mental, emotional and social lives. The languages of the world have developed various ways of dealing with this material, and these ways are largely culture-dependent: they depend on literacy, technology, education, literature, and all types of cultural transmission. (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2018)

In an evolutionary perspective, furthermore, it is impossible to imagine collective human sociality emerging without reported speech. We cannot pursue this thought here, but it seems to us that this is an element which is missing from many otherwise insightful treatises on the evolution of modern human cognition (e.g. Tomasello 2014; Christian 2018). It is not just talk, but talk about talk, that binds groups and communities together.

Finally, in this era in which many people (and not only in linguistics) are rightly mindful of diversity, we want to emphasise how important it is not to lose sight of our commonalities: commonalities in human concerns and needs (such as the need to “report” on others’ utterances, to bring them into discourse, to integrate other voices with our own), and commonalities in human concept formation. The beauty and challenge of linguistic typology is the quest to combine and integrate perspectives which honour both human diversity and our common humanity. In our view, to meet this challenge means taking seriously the need to ground the theoretical vocabulary of language description in shared human concepts.

We understand that for many working linguists, it may sound unrealistic, even utopian, to imagine that conventional linguistic terms and concepts can be re-worked into simple, cross-translatable words, but, as we hope to have shown in this short commentary, it is possible. For other, extended treatments, see Wierzbicka (1994b, 2003, 2009) on “evidentials”, “causatives”, and “reciprocal” constructions, respectively.⁵ Not only do we achieve more accessible and cognitively authentic descriptions in this way, we also achieve greater precision and a more fine-grained differentiation between meanings within any one language and across the diverse languages of the world.

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⁵ For examples of NSM being used in fieldwork practice, see Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014b), section 3.2, also Priestley (2016). The languages concerned are Arrernte (Australia), East Cree (Canada), and Koromu (Papua New Guinea). For another case study of the value of accessible language in language documentation, see Furbee (2010).

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