KEY WORDS, CULTURE AND COGNITION

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1. *Introductory remarks*

How much does language influence how we think? How far are the categories of our language contingent and culture-specific? Few questions are of greater significance to the social sciences. In this paper we attempt to demonstrate that linguistic semantics can address these questions with rigour and precision, by analysing some examples of cultural 'key words' in several languages. We want to argue for two complementary positions: on the one hand, that there are enormous differences in the semantic structuring of different languages and that these linguistic differences greatly influence how people think; but on the other, that all languages share a small set of 'universal concepts' which can provide a solid basis for cross-cultural understanding and for the culture-independent formulation of philosophical problems.

The insight that languages and cultures are deeply interconnected is an old one. For example, in 1690 John Locke (1976: 226) observed that in any language there is a 'great store of words ... which have not any that answer them in another [language]'. Such language-specific words, he said, represent certain 'complex ideas' which have grown out of 'the customs and manner of life' of the people. He further observed that such complex ideas were 'collections made and abstracted by the mind' and were thus contingent, rather than being the product of 'the steady workmanship of nature', which would not vary from culture to culture. This same insight burned bright throughout the German Romantic tradition, lead by Johann Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt. It was eventually carried to America in the person of Franz Boas, who founded cultural

and linguistic anthropology in that country.

Boas and his students could not fail to be impressed by the vast linguistic and cultural differences between Europe and the New World. So great were differences in the area of vocabulary alone that, as Edward Sapir (1949: 27) observed: 'Distinctions which seem inevitable to us may be utterly ignored in languages which reflect an entirely different type of culture, while these in turn insist on distinctions which are all but unintelligible to us'. He also pointed out that such differences go far beyond the names of cultural objects, extending also to the 'mental world', and warned: 'The philosopher needs to understand language if only to protect himself against his own language habits' (1949: 165).

Not only did vocabulary systems differ very widely, in the New World were found languages whose grammatical systems beggared the European imagination. Languages lacking familar categories like tense and case, but rejoicing in a proliferation of exotic distinctions such as: whether an event or action was reiterated in space or in time, whether it took place to the north, south, east or west, whether the speaker knew of it from personal observation, from deduction, or from hearsay, whether a thing is visible or not (and so on) (cf. Boas 1911). Sapir's one-time student, Benjamin Lee Whorf, had such grammatical differences in mind, as well as vocabulary differences, when he popularised the thesis of 'linguistic relativity' — that 'we dissect nature ... [in ways] codified in the patterns of our language' (Whorf 1956: 213).

Cutting across the Humboldt-Sapir-Whorf tradition, however, there are rival trends in linguistics which seek to minimise linguistic and cultural relativity, or even to deny it altogether. There is the 'Objectivist' approach to meaning (cf. Lakoff 1987: 157-218) deriving from philosophical logic, which views meaning as a relationship between a linguistic expression and a (presumed) objective reality. There is the Chomskyan linguistic orthodoxy, which privileges formal syntax over all other aspects of language study. And there is the influence of the allied field of cognitive psychology, which focuses almost exclusively on quantitative data obtained in tightly controlled experimental condition.[1] When these approaches are combined, as in the work of some contemporary American linguists, the result can be virulent denials of any significant link between ways of speaking and ways of thinking.

One particularly striking example of this is provided in Steven Pinker's (1994) best-selling book *The Language Instinct*. Pinker, an

experimental psycholinguist, asserts categorically (p.57-58) that 'there is no scientific evidence that languages dramatically shape their speakers' ways of thinking'. The notion of linguistic relativity is 'wrong, all wrong', even in its so-called 'weak version' which claims that languages merely influence (rather than determine) the characteristic thought patterns of their speakers.

Anyone with an intimate knowledge of two (or more) different languages and cultures will find it hard to take Pinker's hyperbole seriously. It is self-evident to any bilingual that language and patterns of thought are interlinked. On the other hand, it is true that investigations of the relationship between language, culture and cognition have been greatly hindered by conceptual and methodological difficulties, not least of which is the tendency for upholders of linguistic relativity to rely on impressionist 'evidence' and to resort to vague and slippery generalisations.

To overcome these difficulties, what is needed is a rigorous and precise method for analysing conceptual differences between languages. Such methods can be provided, we believe, by developments in linguistic semantics, developments which depend (paradoxically, it might seem) on a theory of semantic universals.

2. *Semantic universals*

Critics of Whorf have often pointed out an apparent contradiction in his thinking. On the one hand, he insisted (or seemed to insist) that we are all of us trapped in the conceptual prison of our own language; yet, on the other, he went out of his way to try to explain the exotic conceptual categories of Hopi and other American Indian languages to an English-speaking audience. In truth, however, Whorf did not believe that all the 'foundational categories of reality' are imposed by one's culture. In some of his writings at least, he recognized the existence of a 'common stock of conceptions', underlying all different languages of the world. This 'common stock of conceptions', he wrote (Whorf 1956: 36) 'seems to be a necessary concomitant of the communicability of ideas by language; it holds the principle of this communicability, and is in a sense the universal language to which the various specific languages give an entrance.' As Whorf here acknowledges, to compare the meanings of words from

different languages requires a common measure, in a sense, a 'universal language' of culture-independent concepts.

To put it another way: if the meanings of all words were culture-specific, then cultural differences could not be explored at all. The hypothesis of 'linguistic relativity' makes sense only if it is combined with a well thought-out hypothesis of 'linguistic universality'. Only well established linguistic and conceptual universals can provide a valid basis for comparing conceptual systems entrenched in different languages and for elucidating the meanings which are encoded in some languages but not in others.

The idea of conceptual universals as a 'common measure' for comparing semantic systems goes back to Leibniz (1903: 430), who wrote of 'an alphabet of human thoughts', meaning by this 'the catalogue of those concepts which can be understood by themselves, and by whose combination all our other ideas are formed'. Similarly, despite his emphasis on the conceptual and grammatical peculiarities of individual languages Humboldt (1903-36, v4: 21-23) acknowledged the existence in grammar and lexicon of a 'midpoint around which all languages revolve'. Other champions of linguistic relativity, such as Boas and Sapir, also defended the idea that there is a universal core of cognition and of language; Boas with his insistence on 'the psychic unity of mankind', and Sapir with his oft-repeated claim that the 'fundamental groundwork' of language is everywhere the same.

It should be obvious that the opposition often drawn between 'relativity' and 'universalism' is spurious (or worse, pernicious). Not only is there no conflict between an interest in linguistic and conceptual universals and an interest in the diversity of language-and-culture systems, but in fact to achieve their purposes these two interests must go hand in hand.

If there are universal concepts, shared between all languages, what are they? How can they be discovered? Here we will outline an empirically-oriented approach to linguistic semantics, known as the 'natural semantic metalanguage' (NSM) approach (cf. Wierzbicka 1972, 1980, 1992, in press*a*; Goddard and Wierzbicka, Eds 1994). This approach begins with two assumptions: first, that in every language there is a finite number of word-meanings ('semantic primes') which are indefinable and in terms of which all the other complex meanings can be analysed; and second, that the sets of such semantic primes coincide across languages.

After a great deal of trial-and-error experimentation in diverse areas

of semantic analysis, and taking into account a number of in-depth cross-linguistic studies (Goddard and Wierzbicka Eds, 1994), nearly sixty such universal semantic primes have been identified.

Table I
Proposed universal semantic primes (Wierzbicka in press*a*)

Substantives: I, YOU, SOMEONE/PERSON, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE
Determiners: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH
Attributes: GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates: THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech: SAY, WORD
Actions, events and movement: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence: THERE IS
Life and death: LIVE/ALIVE, DIE
Logical concepts: NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF, IF ... WOULD
Time: WHEN/TIME, NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A SHORT
    TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space: WHERE/PLACE, HERE, UNDER, ABOVE, ON (CONTACT); FAR,
    NEAR; SIDE, INSIDE
Intensifier, Augmentor: VERY, MORE
Taxonomy, partonomy: KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity: LIKE

The available evidence suggests that these meanings are not the exclusive property of the English language, but have exponents in every human language. That is, the meanings listed above could equally well be presented as a list of words in Yankunytjatjara, Malay, Japanese, Russian, Ewe, or any other language.

Two qualifications should be mentioned, however. First, the equivalents of semantic primes are not always separate 'words', in the literal sense, but may be affixes or fixed phrases (phrasemes). For example, in Yankunytjatjara the primitive BECAUSE is expressed by the ablative suffix -*nguru*; in English the expressions A LONG TIME and A SHORT TIME are phrasemes (though in many languages the same meanings are conveyed by single words, for example, in Malay by *lama* and *sekejap*, respectively). Semantic primitives may also occur as different 'parts of speech'

in different languages without this affecting their semantic equivalance.

Second, polysemy is extremely wide-spread in natural language, and common everyday words — including indefinables — are particularly likely to be involved in it. A semantic primitive cannot be identified, therefore, simply by pointing to an indefinable word. Rather, it must be identified with reference to some illustrative sentences. For example, the English word *move* has at least two meanings, as illustrated in these two sentences: (a) *I couldn't move* (b) *Her words moved me*. Of these two meanings, only that in (a) is proposed as a semantic primitive.

The set of semantic primes is intended to be a complete lexicon for semantic analysis. It should contain only expressions which are indefinable and it should contain all such expressions, making it powerful enough to take on the full range of complex meanings capable of being expressed in any human language. The primitives and their rules of combination constitute a kind of mini-language with the same expressive power as a full natural language; hence the term 'natural semantic meta-language' (NSM). If a meaning analysis is composed purely in terms of universal semantic primes it can be readily 'transposed' without any loss or distortion of meaning, into Russian, Japanese, Yankunytjatjara, Ewe, or any other language.

Of course, to say anything meaningful we need not only words: we need sentences in which words are meaningfully put together. Similarly, to think something we need not just 'concepts': we need meaningful combinations of concepts. For example, the indefinable word WANT makes sense only if it is put in a certain syntactic frame, such as 'I want to do this'. As well as positing the elements listed above as innate and universal conceptual primitives, the NSM theory also posits certain innate and universal rules of syntax, in the sense of universally available combinatorial patterns of primitive concepts. For example, it is posited that a sentence corresponding exactly in meaning to 'I want to do this' can be said in any language, notwithstanding that there may be various language-specific formal features involved.

To illustrate: in Russian the equivalent sentence to 'I want to do this' is *ja xoču èto sdelat'*. *Ja* matches with I, *xoču* (1sg) with WANT, *èto* with THIS, and *sdelat'* with DO; the combination *ja xoču* matches with I WANT, the combination *èto sdelat'* matches with TO DO THIS, and the whole combination *ja xoču èto sdelat'* matches with the whole combination I WANT TO DO THIS. The various formal differences between the English

and Russian sentences (for example, the fact that *xoču* occurs in a specifically 'first-person singular' form) do not detract in the least from their overall semantic equivalence, which is based on the equivalence of the primitives themselves and of the rules for their combination. For a more detailed and technical discussion of the matters raised in the last few paragraphs, the reader is referred to Goddard and Wierzbicka (Eds 1994: Ch 1-2) and Wierzbicka (in press*a*).

The discovery that there is indeed a universal core of linguistically embodied 'common conceptions' (as Leibniz, Boas, Sapir, and Whorf had speculated was the case), means that there are no utterly irreconcilable conceptual differences between languages. Cultural differences between human groups do not reside in the existence of some basic concepts in one cultural group and their absence in another, but rather in the ways in which the shared pool of basic concepts is utilized. From this point of view, it can be said that modern linguistic semantics provides strong empirical evidence in favour of the 'psychic unity of mankind' and against the thesis that there are impenetrable differences between conceptual systems, as argued by Lévy-Bruhl (1926), Hallpike (1979), Grace (1987), and Bain (1992), among others.

On the other hand, the absence of any essential 'qualitative' differences between conceptual systems does not mean that the real differences are insignificant. The 'psychic unity' pertains only to the most fundamental level of conceptual structure, the level of semantic primes. When we turn our attention away from these few score basic concepts to the huge numbers of complex concepts in any language, we immediately encounter large differences between cultural groups.

3. *Concepts as artefacts of cultural history*

Consider the domain of food. It is clearly not an accident that, for example, Polish has special words for cabbage stew *bigos*, beetroot soup *barszcz* and plum jam *powidła,* which English does not; or that Japanese has a word *sake* for a strong alcoholic drink made from rice; or that the nomadic Pitjantjatjara have a word *tjirpika* for a bed of leafy sprigs to put cuts of meat on after a hunted animal has been butchered. Few people find examples of this kind surprising.

It is also widely known that there are customs and social institutions

which have specific names in one language but not in others, and no-one considers this accidental either. Consider, for example, the German noun *Brüderschaft*, which *Harrap's German and English Dictionary* glosses laboriously as '(to drink) the pledge of 'brotherhood' with someone (subsequently addressing each other as *du)*'. Clearly, the absence of a word meaning *Brüderschaft* in English has something to do with the fact that English no longer makes a distinction between an intimate/familiar 'thou' and a more distant 'you'; and that English-speaking societies do not have a common ritual of pledging friendship through drinking. Similarly, it is no accident that English doesn't have a word corresponding to Japanese *miai*, referring to a formal occasion when the prospective bride and her family meet for the first time the prospective bridegroom and his family; or a word corresponding to Pitjantjatjara *alpiri*, referring to the style of public speaking practised in the early morning as people are waking up around their campfires.

What is less widely appreciated is that what applies to material culture, and to social rituals and institutions, applies also to people's ideas about human nature and to their values and ideals about life. In this section we illustrate the claim that culture-specific concepts differ significantly in their content, and also the point of Sapir's (1949) assertion that 'linguistics is of strategic importance to the social science', with an examination of two areas of lexical variation in abstract vocabulary: ethnopsychological concepts and 'ethno-ethical concepts'.

3.1 *Ethnopsychology: English* mind *and* soul *vs. Russian* duša

There can hardly be a better place to start than with an English concept which looms large in philosophical vocabulary (figuring, for examples, in the titles of countless books and scholarly articles) — namely, *mind*. So well-entrenched is this concept that it may seem almost impertinent to argue that it is nothing more (and nothing less) than a 'folk concept' of the English language and that it certainly does not represent an objective and universally valid category of human thought. But consider the existence of other culture-specific concepts, concepts which are (in their own cultures) highly salient and 'common sense' terms used to discuss and describe intangible aspects of human nature: concepts such as those represented by the Japanese words *kokoro* or *ki* (Lock 1984), the Samoan word *loto* (Gerber 1985) or the Ilongot word *riniwa* (Rosaldo 1980). If

a Japanese, Samoan or Ilongot thinker were to construct (or to assume) a universal theory of human nature which hinged around these notions, we would have no difficulty in recognising ethnocentricity. It would seem strange and incongruous to have 'our' mental processes described and analysed in terms of alien constructs.

It is even more surprising to realise that *mind* cannot even be rightly described as a 'Western' category, but is specifically and narrowly a category of ENGLISH. This point can be illustrated by reference to the work of Descartes and Freud, both of whom are commonly referred to (in English) as having concerned themselves, in part, with the *mind*. But when Descartes argued for 'mind-body' dualism, in fact he was opposing the word *corps* 'body' to *âme*, a word with a significantly richer meaning than modern English *mind*. Similarly, Freud's primary concept was *die Seele* (roughly, 'soul'), and, as argued by Bettelheim (1983: 70), to translate *Seele* as *mind* is significantly to distort Freud's thinking. To take one further example: the Russian language opposes *telo* 'body' not to a word like *mind*, but to the far richer and characteristically Russian concept *duša* (see below).

In reality, neither French, nor German, nor Russian, has a precise equivalent for *mind*. The fact that the French word *esprit* and the German *Geist* translate both *mind* and *spirit* shows that they are not exact equivalents to either of these words. The closest Russian counterparts of *mind* are the related words *um* and *razum*, but like English *intellect* and *reason* in this respect, *um* and *razum* are viewed as mental faculties, rather than as 'entities' or pseudo-entities like *mind* and *soul*. (For example, babies have neither *um* nor *razum*, just as they don't have *intellect* and *reason*, but they do have a *mind*.)

Clearly, what is needed is to analyse language-specific concepts such as *mind, Seele* and *duša* in terms of simpler, universally translatable notions. Arguably, the modern English concept of *mind* can be analysed as below (cf. Wierzbicka 1992). This explication reflects, firstly, the bifurcation of the person into two parts, this one being the invisible and immaterial part, and secondly, the fact that *mind* is focused on thinking and knowing, not on feeling, wanting, or any other non-bodily processes; to say that someone has *a good mind* suggests that a person can *think* well, rather than that he or she has any other good qualities (such as the emotional and moral qualities suggested by the phrase *a good heart*).

mind
one of two parts of a person
people cannot see it; people cannot touch it
because of this part, a person can think
because of this part, a person can know things

It is not difficult to see how a concept like this reflects the supreme value placed in modern Anglo-Saxon culture on rationality, and it is revealing in this respect to observe that in an older stage of the English language, as reflected, for example, in Shakespeare's plays, the word *mind* was much less prominent than it is in modern English. In this older stratum of English, the dominant 'immaterial' aspect of a person was the *soul,* where *soul* here had a meaning somewhat different to that of the modern word. For example, when Hamlet's mother implored him 'O Hamlet, speak no more; Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul; And there I see such black and grained spots, as will not leave their tinct' (Hamlet, III, 4), the *soul* she spoke of was open to introspection. It had a phenomenological (psychological) dimension, as well as a religious-moral one, and it constituted a kind of 'inner theatre' in which events (sometimes unpredictable ones) took place with deep significance for the person. At that earlier time, the word *mind* also had a rather different meaning from what *mind* means in present-day English. It didn't focus on the intellectual and the rational, and it was linked with emotions and with values, as can be seen from phrases such as *a happy mind, a fiery mind, a noble mind,* and *a generous mind,* all of which sound a little strange and archaic to the modern ear. In many ways, this older usage was more comparable to present-day *spirit* than to present-day *mind.*

In short, one can see the recent history of English folk theory of the person as reflecting a progressive 'compartmentalisation'. In Shakespeare's time the human being was seen as composed of a body and a single unified soul with moral, emotional and transcendental aspects. Since then, moral choices have become restricted to the *character* or *conscience,* emotions have been relegated to the *heart,* and any other-worldly concerns have been confined to the new, narrowly religious sense of the word *soul.* At the same time, *mind* has shed its spiritual connotations, lost its links with values and emotions, and become a concept focused more or less exclusively on the intellect.

By way of comparison, it is instructive to examine the Russian

concept *duša* (roughly 'soul'), which is one of the leitmotifs of Russian literature and Russian conversation (cf. Wierzbicka 1992). Its frequency is so high and its range of use so broad as to pose special difficulties for translators. *Duša* is broader in scope than French *âme* and German *Seele*, and very much broader than English *soul*. Some examples[2]:

a. *Mučitel'no tjaželo na duše. Znaju, čto èto k dobru duše, no tjaželo.*
    'My heart [*duša*] is heavy. I know that it is good for my soul [*duša*] but it is hard.'
b. *... on povtoril to že uže ot vsej duši.*
    '... he repeated the words from the bottom of his heart [lit. from his whole *duša*].'
c. *Mne stalo legče na duše.*
    'I actually [lit. on (the) *duša*] felt relieved.
d. *... ot ètogo na duše na veselej, a užas oxvatyvaet.*
    '... rather than feeling happier [lit. on (the) *duša*] I am seized with horror.'
e. *Jura v duše podivilsja političeskoj oborotlivosti Vadima.*
    'In his heart [*duša*], Jura was startled by Vadim's political ability (but he didn't show it).'
f. *Za čto pridralis' k mal'čiku? Ved' on čestno skal, a oni emu lamajut dušu.*
    'Why do they victimise that boy? He said honestly what he thought and they are trying to break his spirit [*duša*].'

Like *mind* in English, *duša* is seen in Russian as one of two parts of a person — the invisible part, the person minus the body. But whereas *mind* is linked with 'rational' functions, *duša* is linked, above all, with feelings, be they good or bad. Not just any feelings, however. Feelings felt *na duša* 'in one's soul' have a certain profundity or spiritual quality (one could have feelings toward a dog in one's *serdce* (roughly 'heart'), but scarcely in one's *duša),* as well as being inscrutable to outside observers (unlike more superficial feelings which can have observable bodily symptoms).

  Like the *soul* of Shakespeare's time, it is the *duša* which endows a person with moral capabilities. And again like this earlier English *soul*, the *duša* is viewed as a kind of internal spiritual theatre, as a place where events happen of a kind which could never happen in the world of inani-

mate things. These events are in principle unknowable to outsiders; as the proverb says, *cužaja duša potemki* 'another person's *duša* is unfathomable'. On the other hand, the readiness to open and to 'pour out' one's *duša* is seen in Russian culture as something good.

Although the Russian *duša* is seen above all as the moral and emotional core of a person, this does not totally exclude the exercise of cognitive functions. One can know things or say things *v duše* 'in one's heart', so long as these things are linked somehow with values and feelings. The human will, too, is included in the domain of *duša,* as can be seen in the expression *duševnaja sila,* translatable as 'spiritual strength' or, in less pretentious sounding terms 'strength of character'.

All these considerations (and many others, which space does not permit us to canvass here) suggest that the semantic structure of *duša* is very much richer than that of either English *mind* or *soul.*

> *duša*
> one of two parts of a person
> people cannot see it; people cannot touch it
> because of this part, things can happen inside a person that cannot
>   happen in anything other than a person
> these things can be good; these things can be bad
> because of this part, a person can feel things that nothing other than
>   a person can feel
> other people can't know what these things are if the person doesn't
>   say it
> it is good if a person wants someone else to know what these things
>   are
> because of this part, a person can be a good person

Summing up, one can say that the ethnotheory of the person embodied in the English language opposes the body to an (imaginary) entity centred around thinking and knowing. It clearly reflects, therefore, the much discussed rationalistic, intellectual and scientific orientation of mainstream Western culture. The ethnotheory embodied in the Russian language opposes the body to an (imaginary) entity of a rather different kind: subjective, unpredictable, emotional, spiritual and moral, at once personal and (in its expressive aspect) interpersonal. Of course, the English lexicon also allows speakers to view the human person as an

emotional, communicative, moral and spiritual being, by supplying words (and concepts) such as *heart, spirit, conscience, character,* and *personality.* But the basic dualistic model embodied in the English lexicon focuses on the intellectual and the rational aspects, whereas the basic dualistic model embodied in the Russian lexicon focuses on the emotional, the spontaneous, and the moral.

3.2 *'Ethno-ethics': Latin* libertas, *English* freedom, *Russian* svoboda

Though ethnopsychology may not yet have made a great impression upon mainstream psychology, it does at least exist as a recognised sub-discipline; and a number of valuable scholarly works have been produced in its name (e.g. Lutz 1985, 1988; White and Kirkpatrick Eds 1985). The same cannot be said of the comparable field of 'ethno-ethics', which would consist in the comparative study of ethical concepts and practices among the world's cultures. Often, philosophical and political debates proceed on the assumption that concepts like those designated by English terms such as *freedom, equality, justice,* and *truth* are natural and absolute. Linguists, too, sometimes make such assumptions. For example, Pinker (1994: 82) in *The Language Instinct* writes: '... since mental life goes on independently of particular languages, concepts of freedom and equality will be thinkable even if they are nameless.' But in fact the concept of *freedom* is not independent of particular languages, but has been shaped by the culture and history of the English-speaking speech community, and differs significantly from comparable notions such Latin *libertas* and Russian *svoboda.*

As pointed out by Wirszubski (1950: 1) and many others, the Latin *libertas* 'primarily denotes the status of a *liber,* i.e. a person who is not a slave'; and it implies 'the negation of the limitations imposed by slavery'. As a first approximation, then, the concept encoded in *libertas* can be explicated along the lines suggested by Cicero:

> *Quid est enim libertas? Potestas vivendi ut velis* (Paradoxa Stoicorum; quoted in Lewis and Short 1962)
> 'Because what is *libertas*? It is the ability to live as you want to.'

Obviously, nobody can live entirely 'as they want', or do all the things that they want to do, because of the manifold limitations on human life.

To be able to live as one wants to means to be in control of one's own life — as a *liber* was, and as a slave was not. But this 'ability to live as you want' was not understood as any 'freedom from restraints', or 'the unqualified power to do whatever one likes' (Wirszubski 1950: 7). It was seen as consistent with restraint, and it was often contrasted by Roman authors with *licentia*, the first being presented as moderate and restrained, the latter as immoderate and unconstrained. For example (from Wirszubski 1950: 6):

> *Licentia plebis sine modo libertatem exercensis. (Livy, XXIII, 2, 1)*
> 'The licence of the common people, exercising their *libertas* without any restraint.'

In fact, the same Cicero who in one context defined *libertas* as *potestas vivere ut velis* ('being able to live as you want') in another stated that *libertas* consists in laws *(libertas in legibus consistit,* De Legibus, quoted in Wirszubski 1950:87).

Consider also the following sentence (from one of Cicero's letters, quoted in the Oxford Latin Dictionary):

> *..sibi libertatem censent Graeci datam, ut Graeci inter se disceptent suis legibus.* (Cicero, Epistulae ad Atticum)
> '... the *libertas* given to the Greeks, to decide things among themselves by their own laws.'

There is no question here of there being no restrictions on the Greeks' actions; what they want is to govern themselves. Interestingly, *libertas* of this kind can be GIVEN to them (as it could be given to a slave), so that they could become their own masters. The concept of *libertas* doesn't imply a total absence of constraints on what a person can do, but only the ability to shape one's life, as far as possible, according to one's own wishes (that is, to be ruled by oneself rather than by somebody else).

The idea reflected in the Latin concept of *libertas* appears therefore to be close to what Isaiah Berlin (1969:131) calls 'the notion of positive freedom' — 'the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will.' Taylor (1982: 213) describes this same concept as

'the exercising of control over one's life'. If one doesn't live as one wants to, it is because one lives as a slave — a slave of somebody else or, metaphorically speaking, a slave of circumstances.

> *Quae sit libertas? Nulli rei servire, nulli necessitati, nullis casibus, fortunam in acquum deducere.* (Seneca, Epistulae ad Lucilium; quoted in Stevenson 1958: 723)
> 'What is *libertas*? It means not being a slave to any circumstance, to any constraint, to any chance; it means compelling Fortune to enter the lists on equal terms.'

In accordance with this discussion and illustrations, we could try to explicate the concept of *libertas* as follows:

> *libertas*(X has *libertas*)
> (a) someone (X) can think something like this:
> (b)   when I do something I do it because I want to do it
> (c)   not because someone else says to me:
>   'you have to do it because I want you to do it'
> (d) this is good for X

Components (b) and (c) refer to control which is actually exercised by someone who is, roughly speaking, his or her own master, and not a person under someone else's control. Component (d) is needed to account for the positive connotations of the word, clear from nearly all the quotes adduced in large Latin dictionaries, such as, for example, Lewis and Short (1962). The presence of such positive connotations is also clear from common collocations such as *libertatem dare* 'to give freedom', *libertatem promittere* 'to promise freedom', *se in libertatem vindicare* 'to liberate oneself', *favor libertatis* 'the gift of freedom', and so on.

   At first sight, the concept encoded in the English word *freedom* may seem to be identical, but on closer inspection certain interesting differences emerge. In fact, in several of the sentences with *libertas* quoted here, *freedom* could not be used, or would alter the meaning. For example, one could not **exercise freedom,* as one could *exercere* ('exercise') *libertatem,* as in the quote from Livy. Conversely one cannot always translate *freedom* as *libertas*. In particular, phrases such as *freedom from persecution* or *freedom from tyranny* (discussed in more detail below) could not

be rendered as *libertas ab insectatione* or *libertas a dominatione*, because *libertas* didn't take negative ('privative') complements of this kind.

The main difference between the two concepts relates to what might be called, loosely, a more 'negative' orientation of *freedom*. This 'negative' orientation can be interpreted in two different senses. First, it has to do with being able NOT TO DO things that one doesn't want to do; and second, with being able to do things that one wants to do WITHOUT INTERFERENCE from other people. This second aspect is highlighted in Isaiah Berlin's (1969: 122-3) discussion of what he calls 'the notion of 'negative' freedom' — 'to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity ... If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree'. According to Berlin, the classical English political philosophers understood the notion of *freedom* precisely in that sense. Berlin (1969: 126-127) quotes in this connection Hobbes' statement: 'A free man is he that ... is not hindered to do what he hath the will to do', and he attributes the same conception to Bentham, Locke, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill. Taylor (1982: 213) explains negative freedom as an 'opportunity-concept, where being free is a matter of what we can do, of what it is open to us to do, whether or not we do anything to exercise these options'.

One could explicate the meaning of this concept as follows:

freedom (X has *freedom*)
(a) someone (X) can think something like this:
(b)   if I want to do something I can do it
(c)   no one else can say to me:
              'you can't do it because I don't want this'
(d)   if I don't want to do something I don't have to do it
(e)   no one else can say to me:
              'you have to do it because I want this'
(f) this is good for X
(g) it is bad if someone cannot think this

In further support of this explication of *freedom* one can adduce a syntactic fact. In English one can speak not only of *freedom OF* or *freedom TO* (something desirable, e.g., *freedom of action, freedom of trade, freedom to emigrate,* and so on) but also of *freedom FROM* (something unde-

sirable). The combination of *freedom* with the preposition *from* has been possible in English for centuries, but in modern English the range of nouns which can occur in this phrase has changed. For example, Shakespeare could say: 'Though age from folly could not give me freedom, It does from childishnesse' (Antony and Cleopatra, iii.3), but in contemporary English one would not speak of **freedom from folly* or **from childishness*, any more than one would speak of **freedom from losses, from evils, from illness, from death, from stupidity, from injustice,* or *from neglect* (all phrases which were possible in earlier stages of the English language). On the other hand, one may very well speak of *freedom from persecution, from harassment, from oppression, from tyranny, from coercion, from external control,* or *from interruption.* The generalisation appears to be this: *freedom from* X is felicitous if X refers to situations when other people do something to us, thus preventing us from doing what we want to do and what we think we have the right to do[4].

The semantics of *freedom* corresponds, then, to the ideal of 'non-imposition' which is one of the major cultural themes in the Anglo world. It is not the ability to do whatever one wants that is a key Anglo ideal, because the supreme goal of individual rights is linked in this culture with a general recognition of other people's individual rights. It is 'non-imposition' which is the key idea: 'Maybe I can't do some things that I'd like to do but at least no one else is going to prevent me from doing what I want and what I have the right to do.' It is crucial to this conception that what applies to me applies also to everyone else: *freedom* is not just a privilege that some people may enjoy ('it is good for this person') but a universal right ('it is bad if someone can't think this'). The emergence of the concept of *freedom* in the English language reflects the rise of this modern ideal.

At first glance the Russian concept of *svoboda* might seem to correspond exactly to the English concept of *freedom,* especially in view of the fact that, unlike *libertas*, it can sometimes take a 'negative' complement corresponding, roughly, to the English *from*-phrase. For example:

> Soveršenno novoe dlja nego čuvstvo svobody ot prošedšego oxvaty-valo ego. (L. Tolstoy, Cossacks; quoted in AN SRJ)
> 'He was overcome by a completely new feeling of liberation [*svoboda*] from the past.'

But despite this superficial similarity, *svoboda* doesn't mean the same as *freedom*, and it embodies a different perspective on human life. The fact that even in the sentence adduced above *svoboda* could not be rendered in English as *freedom* provides one piece of evidence for this. Conversely, *freedom* often cannot be translated as *svoboda*. For example, English expressions such as *freedom from interruption, freedom from interference,* or *freedom from harassment* could hardly be translated into Russian as **svoboda ot vmešatel'stva* or the like.

As a further example of a sentence where *svoboda* could not be rendered felicitiously in English as *freedom*, consider the following:

> *Svoboda poezji v tom, čtoby ne stesnjat' svoego darovanija proizvol'nymi pretenzijami i pisat' o tom, k čemu ležit duša.*
> (Černyševskij; quoted in AN SRJ)
> 'The "freedom" [*svoboda*] of poetry consists in not restricting one's talent by arbitrary pretensions and in writing what one's heart desires.'

In this sentence, *svoboda* refers to the absence of self-imposed restrictions and pressures that limit the poet's spontaneity and ability to relax and to follow one's inspiration and desires. It is interesting to note in this connection that *svoboda* can also be used in a somewhat different, though related, sense, in which it suggests something like 'ease' or 'relaxation'. It is also suggestive in this respect that all Russian dictionaries define *svoboda* partly with reference to the concept of *stesnjat'* or *stesnenie,* from *tesno* 'tight', as if *svoboda* was, essentially, a 'loosening' of some sort of material or psychological strait-jacket. In the examples adduced in dictionaries, too, the words *stesnjat'* ('to constrain, to hamper') and *stesnenie* (noun) very frequently co-occur with *svoboda,* as if the two concepts were closely related. For example:

> *Nikto ne stesnjal moej svobody. Ja delal, čto xotel, osobenno s tex por, kogda rasstalsja s poslednim moim guvernerom-francuzom.*
> (Turgenev; quoted in AN SRJ)
> 'Nobody restricted [*stesnjal*] my freedom [*svoboda*]. I did whatever I wanted, especially after the departure of my last French tutor.'

One can't help thinking in this context of the much-discussed ques-

tion of the importance of the traditional swaddling clothes in Russian culture. Some students of Russia have gone so far as to see in the centuries of almost universal use of swaddling clothes in Russian society a key to the understanding of the 'Russian soul'. For example, Erikson (1963: 388) asks: 'Is the Russian soul a swaddled soul?' To which he replies: 'Some of the leading students of Russian character definitely think so' (cf. Mead and Métraux 1953). Given these speculations, it is interesting to note that the Russian concept of *svoboda* fits remarkably well the image of a child unwrapped from its swaddling clothes and experiencing the pleasure of being able to move its limbs without any restrictions.

Unlike *libertas* or *freedom*, *svoboda* suggests a feeling of well-being, caused by the perceived absence of some pressure, some 'squeezing', some tight, constraining bonds. As the following comment by the brilliant nineteenth century lexicographer Vladimir Dal' (1955[1882]) described it:

> *Svoboda* — one's own will, boundless space (expanse), the possibility to act as one wants to; an absence of restrictions (*stesnenie*), slavery, subordination to someone else's will. *Svoboda* is a relative concept; it can refer to some particular, limited space, relevant to a given situation, or to different degrees of space, or, finally, to full, unbridled, arbitrary self-will.'

These considerations bring us to the following explication:

svoboda (X has *svoboda*)
(a) someone (X) can think something like this:
(b)   if I want to do something, I can do it
(c)   when I do something, I don't have to think:
(d)   I can't do it as I want to do it
            because other people say/do something
(e) X feels something very good because of this

Component (c) accounts for the experiencer's sense that there are no constraints on what he or she can do, that there is no oppressive 'straitjacket'; and component (e) spells out the resulting sense of exhilarating well-being. It is interesting to compare component (c) of *svoboda* with the

corresponding component of *libertas:* 'when I do something, I do it because I want to do it, not because someone says to me: you have to do it because I want you to do it'. Clearly, the Latin concept focuses on not having a master (not being a slave), whereas the Russian one focuses on not sensing any external constraints. The corresponding English concept *freedom* focuses, as we have seen, on options, and on the absence of interference from other people.

The cultural ideal enshrined in the Russian concept of *svoboda* corresponds remarkably well to another well-known stereotype, namely that of the so-called *širokaja russkaja nature,* the 'broad Russian nature', as described, for example, by Fedotov (1981). This stereotype suggests the image of a person who loathes restrictions, constraints, bonds of any kind, who feels the need to 'spread out', to 'overflow' any bounds like a flooding river. In fact, the elements, for example wind, storm, or raging sea, provide another common image for *svoboda,* as in the following passage:

> *Voda v gavani volnuetsja, šumit, budto serditsja na to, čto ee ogoro-dili krugom granitnymi kamnjami, lišiv svobody i prostora.*
> (Novikov-Priboj; quoted in AN SRJ)
> 'The water in the port is breaking tumultuously and noisily as if it were angry at having been enclosed by granite stones and thus deprived of *svoboda* and space.'

In English, the notion of *freedom* is not similarly linked with the elements, with boundless space, with wild behaviour, with unconstrained breathing, with intoxicating freedom of movement. Rather, it is linked with individual rights, with private space, with being 'left alone', with privacy and personal independence.

While the 'swaddling clothes' image helps to clarify the concept of *svoboda* we would not join those who maintain that traditional child-rearing practices explain the emergence of the concept. It is much more plausible to link the semantic profile of *svoboda* with Russia's political history: with the despotism of the tsars, the absence of democratic structures and of an effective legal system applying equally to everyone, with the importance of arbitrary power and the desirability of escape from that power, and so on (cf. Wittfogel 1963; Fedotov 1981; Solov'ev 1966-7).

4. *Key words, cognition, and culture*

No doubt there are many vocabulary differences between languages which cannot be linked, in any straightforward way, to 'culture'. For example: the fact that the Russian word *ruka* covers both hand and arm whereas they are identified by different words in English; the fact that the English *hit* cannot be matched up with a single word in Yankunytjatjara because one has to use different words in that language depending on whether the action is done with a rock *(atuni)*, with a stick *(rungkani)*, or with one's hand *(punganyi)*. It would be possible to argue that differences of this kind do nonetheless 'matter' to the cognitive patterns of language users. It could also be argued that, taken together, all the small and apparently insignificant lexical details of a given language indeed amount to a distinctive aspect of the 'linguistic culture' of the speech community.

In this paper, however, we have concentrated on highly salient and deeply culture-laden words (like English *mind* and Russian *duša*) which can be regarded as cultural 'key words' (cf. Williams 1976, Wierzbicka in press*b*). How can one justify the claim that a particular word is one of a culture's key words? To begin with, one may want to establish that the word in question is a common word, on the assumption that frequency can correlate with cultural salience. One may also want to establish that the word in question (whatever its overall frequency) is very frequently used in one particular semantic domain, for example, in the domain of emotions, or in the domain of moral judgments. One may want to show that this word is at the centre of a whole phraseological cluster, that it occurs frequently in proverbs, in sayings, in popular songs, in book titles, and so on. But ultimately the question is not how to 'prove' whether or not a particular word is one of the culture's key words, but rather to be able to say something significant and revealing about that culture by undertaking an in-depth study of some of them.

Key words can be studied as focal points around which whole cultural domains are organized. By exploring these focal points in depth we may be able to show the general organizing principles which lend structure and coherence to a cultural domain as a whole, and which often have an explanatory power extending across a number of domains.

To take another example from Russian, a key word such as *sud'ba* (roughly, 'fate') is like one loose end which we have managed to find in a tangled ball of wool: by pulling it, we may be able to unravel a whole

tangled 'ball' of attitudes, values, and expectations, embodied not only in words, but also in common collocations, in set phrases, in grammatical constructions, in proverbs, and so on. For example, *sud'ba* leads us to other 'fate-related' words such as *suždeno, smirenie, učast, žrebij*, and *rok*, to collocations such as *udary sud'by* (roughly, 'blows of fate') or to set phrases such as *ničego ne podelaeš'* ('you can't do anything'), to grammatical constructions[5] such as the whole plethora of impersonal dative-cum-infinitive constructions, highly characteristic of Russian syntax, to numerous proverbs, and so on (Wierzbicka 1992).

What of the role of key words in cognition? It is often debated whether words encapsulating culture-specific conceptual categories 're-flect' or 'shape' ways of thinking. But the debate seems misconceived: clearly, they do both. Culture-specific words are conceptual tools which reflect a society's past experience of doing, and thinking about things in certain ways; and they help to perpetuate these ways. As a society chan-ges, these tools, too, may be gradually modified and discarded. In that sense the outlook of a society is never wholly 'determined' by its stock of conceptual tools, but it is clearly influenced by them. Similarly, the outlook of an individual is never fully 'determined' by the conceptual tools provided by his or her native language, because there are always alternative ways of expressing oneself, but one's conceptual perspective on life is clearly influenced by his or her native language.

Inye vešči na inom jazyke ne mysljatsja 'there are some things which cannot be thought in another language', wrote the poet Marina Tsvetaeva (1972: 151). In a theoretical sense, this statement may be somewhat of an exaggeration, if, as the NSM theory contends, any culture-specific concept can be decomposed into a translatable configuration of semantic primes. We have ourselves tried to illustrate this contention by explicat-ing unfamiliar concepts, such as Latin *libertas* and Russian *svoboda,* in an English version of the universal semantic metalanguage, and thus rendering these concepts accessible and intelligible to English-speaking readers.

But in an important sense, Tsvetaeva's statement remains true, be-cause in practice it is impossible to formulate and manipulate thoughts of any sophistication without resort to the kind of conceptual 'chunking' enabled by the use of complex lexical items. Thoughts related to *duša,* for example, can be formulated in English only with great difficulty and at the cost of cognitive fluency, whereas in Russian they can be formu-

lated more or less effortlessly.

This is not an issue whose relevance is confined to those involved in cross-cultural encounters. It affects everyone interested in studying or in understanding human nature and society, whether in sociology, psychology, anthropology, or in philosophy.

Consider, for example, the following question: how do patterns of friendship differ across cultures? One standard approach to this question is to use broad sociological surveys based on questionnaires, in which respondents are asked, for example: How many friends do you have? How many of them are male and how many female? How often, on average, do you see your friends? and so on (cf. Shlapentokh 1989; Atsumi 1989). The procedure seems straightforward — except for one small point: if the question is asked in Russian, or in Japanese, what word will be used for *friend?* The assumption behind such questionnaires, or behind comparative studies based on them, is that, for example, Russian, Japanese, and English words for *friend* can be matched. This assumption is linguistically naive and the results based on it are bound to present a distorted picture of reality.

Or consider the efforts being made by psychologists to understand human emotions. The dominant school of thought (e.g. Ekman 1992, 1993) holds that there is a small roster of in-built universal emotions (such as happiness, anger, fear, sadness, and disgust) which fortuitously correspond with salient lexical categories of the English language. Extensive studies have been done which appear to show that these emotions are associated, pan-culturally, with certain in-built facial expressions. But again, there is a problem. Invariably the researchers in this paradigm underestimate the difficulty of matching emotion 'labels' across languages, with vitiating consequences for their research (cf. Wierzbicka 1986, 1995; Ortony and Turner 1990; Russell 1991; Goddard 1995).

Most work on speech act theory, whether undertaken by linguistic philosophers or by linguists (e.g. Searle 1969, 1975; Grice 1975; Bach and Harnish 1979) is also deeply flawed by Anglocentric assumptions (cf. Wierzbicka 1987, 1991).

Examples of this kind could be multiplied indefinitely, but the point should be clear enough. To formulate any question for conceptual or empirical investigation we need to weigh our words carefully and try to anchor them in linguistic and conceptual universals.

5. *Postscript: The 'culture' concept*

Finally, something should be said about our use throughout this paper of the notion of 'culture', a term (and a concept) which has been conspicuously under challenge in recent years (e.g. Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford 1988; Rosaldo 1989). In a recent Forum in the journal *Current Anthropology* one influential writer, Eric Wolf (1994: 5-7), refers to culture itself as a 'perilous idea'. In this context he praises Franz Boas as someone who appreciated, ahead of his time, 'the heterogeneity and the historically changing interconnectedness of cultures' and who argued 'against the common pre-supposition that each culture constituted a distinctive and separate monad sui generis'. Apparently forgetting that Boas himself was a major link in the historical tradition leading from Herder and Humboldt to Sapir and Whorf, Wolf presents Boas as opposing the German-style emphasis on *Volksgeist*: the 'major tradition of intellectual thought and work — extending from Wilhelm von Humboldt ... to Ruth Benedict — [which] has employed the guiding notion of an ideational holism at the root of culture.'

There can, of course, be no quarrel with the statement that cultures are heterogeneous, historically changing, and interconnected. But this should not lead us automatically to repudiate the whole 'major tradition of intellectual thought and work, extending from Wilhelm von Humboldt (...) to Ruth Benedict'. To do this would be a spectacular example of throwing the baby out with the bath water. There is a difference between rejecting 'static culturologies' and embracing the view that cultures have no content at all, as Immanuel Wallerstein (1994) seems to do in his commentary on Wolf's paper:

> ... races, cultures, and peoples are not essences. They have no
> fixed contours. They have no self-evident content. Thus, we are
> all members of multiple, indeed myriad, 'groups' — crosscut-
> ting, overlapping, and ever-evolving.

Of course, the term 'culture' is used by different writers in different senses and before anything is affirmed about 'cultures' it is good to clarify in what sense one is using this term. We find particularly fruitful Clifford Geertz's (1973, 1979) notion that culture is a semiotic system, and that cultural analysis is therefore an interpretative pursuit; as he puts

it, 'in search of meaning' (Geertz 1973).

> The culture concept to which I adhere denotes a historically trans-
> mitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of in-
> herited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which
> people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about
> and attitudes toward life. (Geertz 1979: 89).

Language — and in particular, vocabulary — is the best evidence of the
reality of 'culture', in the sense of a historically transmitted system of
'conceptions' and 'attitudes'. Of course, culture is, in principle, hetero-
geneous and changeable, just as language is. But one can agree that
cultures are not 'essences' and that their 'content' is not 'self-evident',
without denying the reality of that 'content' altogether and reducing us
all, as cultural beings, to members of myriad cross-cutting 'groups'. To
do this would be to overlook a central reality of the human experience,
a reality experienced by any bilingual who lives his or her life in two
languages and two cultures. Similarly, to reject the concept of 'one
language' (for example, French, or Russian, or Japanese) as a total
fiction on the grounds that languages, too, are cross-cutting, overlapping,
and ever-evolving, would be carrying theoretical extremism to the point
of absurdity.

Furthermore, to say that 'culture has no describable content' is to
imply that cultures cannot be studied and cannot be understood (let alone
taught) in any rigorous fashion. This may seem an appealingly liberal (or
postmodern) position, but the advocacy of this position hampers the
possibility of cross-cultural understanding. Progress in cross-cultural
communication cannot come from denying the reality of different cultural
norms and patterns. It requires a basis in well-founded studies of different
cultural norms and historically transmitted patterns of meaning (cf.
Wierzbicka 1994a, 1994b, 1994c; Goddard and Wierzbicka in press;
Harkins 1994; Hasada in press).

In concluding their review of various recent approaches to the study
of culture, Wuthnow *et al.* (1984: 257) ask 'whether it is possible to
construct cultural analysis on a basis capable of producing verifiable
social scientific knowledge at all, or whether the study of culture neces-
sarily remains a speculative venture'. In this paper we have put the case
that linguistic semantics, rooted in empirically established linguistic and

conceptual universals, provides the necessary basis for studying cultural norms and patterns of meanings in a verifiable and non-speculative way.

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NOTES

1. Notable exceptions to this generalisation include Lucy (1992), and the work of Stephen Levinson and associates at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, e.g. Levinson (1992).
2. These quotations come from Tolstoy (1985, v.22: 284), Tolstoy (1953: 733), Grossman (1980: 49), Grossman (1980: 53), Rybakov (1987, pt. 2: 138), and Rybakov (1987, pt.1: 10), respectively.
3. Unfortunately, in Berlin's discussion the English words *freedom* and *liberty* are used interchangeably. This is confusing, because these two words do not mean the same and in fact what Berlin calls 'the notion of "negative" freedom' has become largely incorporated in the word *freedom*, whereas the word *liberty* in its earlier meaning was much closer to the Latin *libertas,* and in its current meaning reflects a different concept, which is a product of the Anglo-Saxon culture. The polarization of the two concepts, *freedom* and *liberty*, is in itself culturally revealing — a point which is lost if the two words are used interchangeably (cf. Wierzbicka in press*b*).
4. By a kind of rhetorical extension, *freedom from X* can also be used in situations when some condition prevents us from doing what we want to do and what we have the right to do, as in the case of *freedom from hunger* or *freedom from poverty.* Expressions of this kind constitute a kind of political statement: 'Everyone has the right to do what they want to do and not to be prevented from it by X (hunger, poverty, etc.).' The implication is that hunger, poverty, and so on are social conditions imposed on the sufferers by other people.
5. Though this article deals exclusively with the role of lexical meanings in relation to culture and cognition, it should be noted that grammatical constructions too can embody language-specific, culture-related meanings, cf. Wierzbicka (1988), Ameka (1990), Chappell (1986).

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