



English: Meaning and Culture

By Anna Wierzbicka

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It is widely accepted that English is the first truly global language and lingua franca. Its dominance has even led to its use and adaptation by local communities for their own purposes and needs. One might see English in this context as being simply a neutral, universal vehicle for the expression of local thoughts and ideas. In fact, English words and phrases have embedded in them a wealth of cultural baggage that is invisible to most native speakers. Anna Wierzbicka, a distinguished linguist known for her theories of semantics, has written the first book that connects the English language with what she terms "Anglo" culture.

Wierzbicka points out that language and culture are not just interconnected, but inseparable. This is evident to non-speakers trying to learn puzzling English expressions. She uses original research to investigate the "universe of meaning" within the English language (both grammar and vocabulary) and places it in historical and geographical perspective. For example, she looks at the history of the terms "right" and "wrong" and how with the influence of the Reformation "right" came to mean "correct." She examines the ideas of "fairness" and "reasonableness" and shows that, far from being cultural universals, they are in fact unique creations of modern English. This engrossing and fascinating work of scholarship should appeal not only to linguists and others concerned with language and culture, but the large group of scholars studying English and English as a second language.

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Review

"A great book, one which must be applauded. The strength of this book is to propose a kind of linguistics which takes into account the various, subtle, rich, and extremely interesting interactions between language and cultural scripts. Given that books like this are rare, the author deserves countless words of praise."

--*Studies in Language*

"This is an important book. The strength of this book lies in its accurate and insightful analysis of various linguistic elements and their cross-linguistic equivalents. Wierzbicka's command of a large number of European languages and her personal experience of cross-cultural communication provide an excellent background for this type of study." --*Language in Society*

"There is a huge literature on the relation between language and our perception of the world, including well-known myths involving words for snow, but a feature of much previous work in this area has been a focus on an exotic (to anglophone readers) language whose strange structures appear to remake the world. The shock of this book is that the exotic language under the construction of English, and the world which is remade may very well be your own. This is a striking contribution to the history of English, and the history of ideas."

--*Language*

About the Author

Anna Wierzbicka is Professor of Linguistics at Australian National University. She has an international reputation for her work on semantics, pragmatics, and cross-cultural linguistics. Other published works include *What Did Jesus Mean?* (O.U.P., 2001), *Semantics, Culture, and Cognition* (O.U.P., 1992), and *Semantic Primitives*, in which she is credited with establishing the Natural Semantic Metalanguage.

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