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Natural Semantic Metalanguage as a Tool for Mediating Communication in Language Teaching and Learning

Introduction

In this paper we seek to implement the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM, see Goddard 2018; Wierzbicka 2013; Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014) approach as a tool for mediating communication in foreign language classroom. *Mediation* is an important term introduced to language teaching and learning in the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR; Council of Europe 2001) and developed in *CEFR. Companion Volume* (Council of Europe 2020). It refers to one of the four modes of communication (reception, interaction, production and mediation) – in which social dimension of language is put forward, and the language user is viewed as a *social agent* (Piccardo, North, Goodier 2019). As Grucza (1991: 17, 34) notices, terms are above all tools of cognition, useful for understanding the world, and for producing new information about the world. The term *mediation* can be seen as an important tool for language teachers and students, as it makes them think about yet another dimension of acquiring a foreign language: the ability to mediate between the subjects that are not capable of understanding each other. Mediation manifests itself through translation, interpretation, or paraphrasing in simple words of what is obscure and has to be rendered comprehensible. We argue that NSM explications based on reductive paraphrase technique can be a perfect mediating tool in a foreign language classroom.

The article is structured as follows. In sections 2–5 we will describe how the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001, 2020) was born and developed, with a special emphasis on how mediation is understood in both versions of the document. Sections 6 and 7 will deal with two modes of mediation important for the present study, mediation of concepts and mediation of communication, respectively. In section 8, the natural semantic metalanguage, or NSM, approach will be presented. Section 9 will feature three NSM explications of basic greetings in Spanish, English and Polish. In section 10, some preliminary conclusions and indications for implementing NSM in language teaching and learning will be presented.

1. The Threshold Level

Although it is difficult to imagine these days, several decades ago the process of teaching and learning foreign languages was perceived in a completely different manner. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, the growing mobility of European citizens contributed to increasing dissatisfaction with the ineffective methods of teaching and learning foreign languages used so far. In response to this problem, the Council of Europe established an international group of experts, whose aim was to promote further mobility and employability of Europeans and support European integration by teaching foreign languages.

In this way, in the 1970s, the idea of threshold level developed by Jan Ate van Ek was born (Ek 1975). The program, adapted to the needs and capabilities of the student, perceived the entire teaching and learning process as acquiring skills, and not – as it had been understood so far – knowledge, and these skills were supposed to be acquired in action. Teaching became communication-oriented, which allowed the language user to symbolically cross the threshold understood in two ways – (1) as an obstacle preventing language communication, and (2) as a barrier hindering integration with representatives of another culture. It is worth paying attention to this aspect of the project, as it is often presented in a simplified way as a level of linguistic survival, while one of its main goals was to enable participation in the broadly understood cultural life of the community among which the language was used.

2. *CEFR* (2001)

The sociocultural aspect of language was taken up and developed by another document involving the issue of teaching, learning and testing foreign languages, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (*CEFR*),

published in 2001. This document did not stop at the description of competencies at one specific level: it has been extended to include descriptions of levels lying immediately below and above the threshold level as well.

The *CEFR* is usually referred to in the context of exemplary proficiency indicator scales illustrating specific aspects of language proficiency at reference levels (there are over 50 of them), and in particular the competence descriptors for four traditional skills – listening comprehension, speaking, reading comprehension and writing. *CEFR* also pays a lot of attention to interaction, placing it at the intersection of receptive and productive skills. In many aspects, it continues the tradition started by the *Threshold Level* (Ek 1975) – focusing on skills that allow the users to function effectively in the personal, public, occupational and educational domains, appropriately to their linguistic level. *CEFR* stresses achievements instead of shortcomings, emphasizing the importance of the task-based approach in teaching and learning languages, and pointing to the importance of lifelong education. Just like its predecessor, it attaches a huge role to the development of *sociocultural competence,* noting that "unlike many other aspects of knowledge it is likely to lie outside the learner's previous experience and may well be distorted by stereotypes" (*CEFR* 2001: 102). *CEFR* considers it crucial – along with the development of communication competences – to support intercultural skills, which include, among others, "cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures" and "the capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations" (*CEFR* 2001: 104–105).

3. Mediation

The term *intermediary* is associated with yet another key phenomenon signaled by the *CEFR*, i.e., *mediation*. In the 2001 study, mediation was classified as one of the communicative language activities. The description of the activity itself, however, was very poor. It included a catalog of activities under oral mediation (simultaneous interpretation, consecutive interpretation, and informal interpretation) and written mediation (exact translation, literary translation, summarizing gist, and paraphrasing) (*CEFR* 2001: 88). The section on mediation strategies was equally insufficient: in contrast to the four traditional skills, no detailed description of scales was given.

Nonetheless, the *CEFR* 2001 was a very successful document, as its translation and publication in more than 40 languages shows. It is worth noticing that the study, originally created for European languages only, has also been translated into many Asian languages and is used in education systems in China, Japan, Vietnam and Malaysia. One of the values of *CEFR* is the fact that the document is addressed to three groups of users, which is reflected in the complete title of the publication: *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment.* Its guidance affects both learners and their teachers (and the materials they use), as well as the course planners who design curricula and syllabuses, write textbooks, and develop evaluation procedures that learners are subjected to.

4. *CEFR/CV* (2020)

Having analyzed the feedback given to the editors of *CEFR* over more than 15 years, the Council of Europe asked a group of experts to critically review the 2001 version and to supplement the document. The result of this work is the updated version, released in 2020, entitled *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Companion Volume.*

Apart from the updated original text, the *CEFR/CV* provides entirely new content, e.g. the description of the Pre-A1 level, or the descriptors for sign languages. The document takes into account different modalities of the online communication as well. Probably the greatest merit of the *CEFR/CV* is providing description of the competencies of the two groups of language activities that have not been treated as full-fledged complements to receptive and productive activities so far, i.e. interaction and mediation.

The whole 30-page chapter is devoted to mediation activities, and three types of mediation activities are distinguished – mediating a text (present, though to a small extent, in the 2001 version) and, completely new, mediating concepts and mediating communication. Here we will deal mostly with the latter. At the same time, it is worth noticing that the *CEFR/CV*, although discussing these three variants separately, notes that they often intertwine, and "one cannot in practice completely separate one type of mediation from another" (*CEFR/CV* 2020: 91).

Independently of its type, mediation is observed when someone "acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language, sometimes from one language to another" (*CEFR/CV*, 2020: 90). One may say that all the activities performed

by teachers and learners alike, when new words are explained, and differences between deceptively similar concepts are presented, count as mediation activities. It is worth mentioning that according to North (2016: 133), mediation is the most difficult language activity which comprises all other activities, i.e. reception, interaction and production.

5. Mediating concepts

It turns out that, in the context of crossing symbolic communication thresholds, the actions from the Mediating concepts group are particularly valuable. They comprise, above all, "the process of facilitating access to knowledge and concepts for others, particularly if they may be unable to access this directly on their own", taking into account all the participants in communication. As the authors of the *CEFR/CV* (2020: 91) note, these actions form an integral part of parenting, mentoring, teaching and training, and are crucial for collaborative learning and work. Regardless of the situation in which mediation activities take place, they require participants in mediation to have "a well-developed emotional intelligence, or an openness to develop it, in order to have sufficient empathy for the viewpoints and emotional states of other participants in the communicative situation" (*CEFR/CV* 2020: 91). It is all the more important as it is impossible to work on the development of new knowledge without building and maintaining positive interactions, and this in turn requires that the participants of the interaction be sensitive to others' views, and have the capacity to deal with *otherness*. In other words, *CEFR/CV* acknowledges the existence of different cultural and linguistic viewpoints, and describes mediation as an activity which facilitates the understanding of such differences and gaining access to new knowledge. The scales presented in the *CEFR/CV* are directly relevant to the educational domain, although they can also be used in other industries, such as language assessment for healthcare professionals, employment agents and contractors, or for citizenship and settling.

6. Mediating communication

Equally important for crossing thresholds – especially in the context of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity – are the activities from the Mediating communication group, which aim to "facilitate understanding and shape successful communication between users/learners who may have individual, sociocultural, sociolinguistic or intellectual differences in standpoint"

(*CEFR/CV* 2020: 91). The *CEFR/CV* emphasizes that "[l]anguage is (…) not the only reason why people sometimes have difficulty understanding one another", noting that "[e]ven if one thinks of mediation in terms of rendering a text comprehensible, the difficulty in comprehension may well be due to a lack of familiarity with the area or field concerned. Understanding the other requires an effort of translation from one's own perspective to the other, keeping both perspectives in mind" (*CEFR/CV* 2020: 114). In addition, mediation is not focused on the linguistic expression of a speaker; instead, it concentrates on the role language plays in creating space and conditions for communication and learning (North 2016: 133).

With *CEFR/CV* the accuracy and fluency are not so relevant anymore, and what really counts is the social use of language. That's why *speaker* and *hearer* known from *CEFR* give way to *social agent* who has to mobilize his general, plurilingual and pluricultural competences as he pretends to be an intermediary between different interlocutors. According to *CEFR/CV*, there are three ways that he can do this: (1) by facilitating pluricultural space (e.g. "using questions and showing interest to promote understanding of cultural norms and perspectives between participants; demonstrating sensitivity to and respect for different sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives and norms; anticipating, dealing with and/or repairing misunderstandings arising from sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences"; *CEFR/CV* 2020: 114); (2) by acting as an intermediary in informal situations (e.g. "informally communicating the sense of what speakers/signers are saying in a conversation; conveying important information (…); repeating the sense of what is expressed in speeches and presentations"; *CEFR/CV* 2020: 115); and (3) by facilitating communication in delicate situations and disagreements (e.g. "exploring in a sensitive and balanced way the different viewpoints represented by participants in the dialogue; elaborating on viewpoints expressed to enhance and deepen participants' understanding of the issues discussed; establishing common ground; establishing possible areas of concession between participants; mediating a shift in viewpoint of one or more participants, to move closer to an agreement or resolution" (*CEFR/CV* 2020: 116).

Obviously, the above-mentioned competences are not applicable in the same measure to all language users. We can observe that for the Pre-A1 user, there are no descriptors available; at the A1 and A2 levels, the user is usualy able to mediate in a very simple way, and at B1 he can faciliatate com-

munication only in predictable, everyday situations. As in all the competences at this level, the user's activity is dependent to a large extent on other interlocutors being supportive and using another expression, or repeating the information as necessary. It is for this reason that the role of the teacher as mediator is important as well.

CEFR/CV indicates teachers, trainers and students as groups for which mediating communication competences are particularly relevant. Mediating communication is not possible without facilitating pluricultural space, therefore the role of cultural mediators is "creating a neutral, trusted, shared «space» in order to enhance communication between others. They aim to expand and deepen intercultural understanding between participants in order to avoid and/or overcome any potential communication difficulties arising from contrasting cultural viewpoints" (*CEFR/CV* 2020: 114).

7. NSM – atoms and molecules

NSM, or natural semantic metalanguage (Wierzbicka 1996, 2013, Goddard 2018)*,* is a method of semantic analysis which can create such a neutral and shared space for intercultural communication. NSM approach has been developed over fifty years already, and it has been applied to investigate both vocabulary and grammar of many languages from different linguistic families. It has also been used extensively for working on (often tacit) cultural norms and beliefs (see e.g. Wierzbicka 1991). Nevertheless, little research has been done on applying NSM in language teaching and learning (see however Goddard and Wierzbicka 2007, Fernández 2016, Sadow and Fernández 2022), and we hope that this paper will partially fill this gap.

The NSM analysis of a concept (or cultural value) is always based on *reductive paraphrase*, i.e. the meaning of a word, an expression, or a cultural norm in question, is paraphrased via 65 basic elements, called *semantic primes.* The primes may be pictured metaphorically as universal and simple *atoms* of meaning, which can be found in every human language, and cannot be decomposed any further. Being universal, the 65 primes are devoid of ethnocentric bias, which is present in culture-specific concepts such as *respect* or *cordiality*. Being simple, or basic, they allow researchers to avoid vicious circles, or defining *ignotum per ignotum* (Wierzbicka 1996, 2013; Goddard 2018)*.*

All the 65 elements, organised in categories, such as PLACE, TIME, SUBSTANTIVES, or LOGICAL CONCEPTS, can be seen in Table 1. (below). Among the elements which will be pertinent to the analyses proposed here

are mental activity verbs THINK and KNOW, adjective-like evaluator GOOD, and deictics HERE and NOW.

Table 1. Semantic primes (English exponents) (Goddard & Wierzbicka 2014)

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	Substantives
KINDS, PARTS	Relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	Determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW	Quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	Evaluators
BIG, SMALL	Descriptors
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	Actions, events, movement
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	Location, existence, specification
(IS) MINE	Possession
LIVE, DIE	Life and death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	Time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	Place
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	Logical concepts
VERY, MORE	Augmentor, intensifier
LIKE	Similarity

Notes: *Exponents of primes can be polysemous, i.e. they can have other, additional meanings. *Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes. * They can be formally, i.e., morphologically, complex. * They can have combinatorial variants or allolexes (indicated with ~). * Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

Sometimes, while working on the explication of a concept in question, it may be convenient to use bigger chunks of meaning called, by analogy to atoms, *semantic molecules* (Goddard 2010). These molecules may be universal, but many of them are culture-specific, too. Some examples of universal, or near-universal semantic molecules are: *men, women* and *children, water* and *sun, eat, run* and *sing,* and also temporal *during the day* or *at night* (https://intra-net.secure.griffith.edu.au/ schools-departments/natural-semantic-metalan-guage/what-is-nsm). In the explication below, we can see that *during the day*

is a level two molecule, i.e. it is paraphrased via semantic atoms and one level one semantic molecule[1], *sky* [m.]:

> *during the day*
> at a time when it is like this:
> people can see things well for some time,
> at the same time they can see the sky [m] well (Goddard 2021).

8. *Buenos días*, *dzień dobry*, *good morning* – how people greet each other [during the day]

To illustrate how NSM can be used in a foreign language classroom to mediate communication in a cross-cultural context, we want to present NSM explications of apparently synonymical, and very basic expressions, actually one of the first expressions acquired in a foreign language classroom: Spanish *buenos días,* English *good morning*, and Polish *dzień dobry.* When we think about the semantic and pragmatic meaning of these three greeting phrases, two questions come to mind:

1) what message does the interlocutor want to convey when they say *good morning, buenos días or dzień dobry*, and
2) when exactly are these salutations used, or, in other words, how is the day divided in a given languaculture[2]?

The answer to question number one is about the nature of greetings *per se*. What message do we convey, basically, while greeting someone? Even though many linguists think about greetings as purely formulaic in nature, we agree with Farese (2015: 1) who says that "greetings' convey a paraphrasable interactional meaning (…) consisting of expressed attitudes and feelings", and that NSM is a perfect tool for decoding their language-specific meaning "which otherwise would not allow for mutual understanding" (Farese 2015: 4).

In our explications, we have to recognize the fact that we do not usually greet other people *every* time we see them during the day. It seems too much, so we usually say *good morning,* or its equivalent, when we speak to the person for the *first* time on a given day. Greeting someone means we want to say *something good* to them, but also to let them know that we are here (e.g., when we enter a shop, and there is no one there, and we say *dzień*

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[1] A level one molecule is a molecule which can be explicated via semantic primes only.
[2] The notion of *languaculture*, coined by Agar (1994), pictures well the fact that language cannot be separated from the culture it represents.

dobry!). We want to acknowledge their presence, too, we want to say 'I know *you* are here'. Expressed via semantic primes, the message is:

> **[A.]** I want to say something good to you at this moment,
> I couldn't say anything to you this day before,
> I want to say:
>> I am here now
>> you are here now
>> I know it
>> (I feel something good because of it) [3].

The answer to question two, how is the day divided and, hence, when are these greetings used, is definitely culture-specific, so let us have a look at each culture separately.

In Spain, the basic greetings are *buenos días*, *buenas tardes* and *buenas noches*, and they look deceptively similar to English *good morning*, *good afternoon* and *goodnight*. However, when one learns *buenos días* in a Spanish language classroom, they must be taught that this greeting is used only *before lunch.* Without this information, the student would not be able to use *buenos días* correctly. Plus, the teacher must inform the student that this greeting formula can function as a way of saying goodbye as well, which is not possible either for English *good morning* or Polish *dzień dobry.*

> **[B.]** [when people in Spain say "buenos días" they think like this:]
> I want to say something good to you at this moment
> I want to say:
>> I am here now
>> you are here now
>> I know it
>> (I feel something good because of it)

people say it during the day [m.] before they have eaten [m.] lunch [m.].

Because it is used as a farewell, line two from the partial explication of the greeting formula in [A.], i.e. 'I couldn't say anything to you this day before', is absent from the explication of *buenos días* in [B.]. And, as we can see in the

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[3] In this explication we propose, albeit only tentatively, the feeling component (the line in brackets). Roughly, the speaker wants to say that knowing that someone is there makes him happy. The matter requires further investigation though.

explication above, apart from the semantic prime BEFORE, three molecules are used to paraphrase its temporal meaning: *during the day*, *eat*, and *lunch*[4].

In UK *good morning* is used strictly till noon. After 12 pm, one has to use *good afternoon,* and when it gets dark, *good evening* (https://www.ldoceonline.com/about.html). Unlike *buenos días*, *good morning* on its own cannot be used as a farewell. In NSM, the use of *good morning* can be rendered as:

[C.] [when people in UK say "good morning" they think like this:]
I want to say something good to you at this moment
I couldn't say anything to you this day before
I want to say:
    I am here now
    you are here now
    I know it
    (I feel something good because of it)

people say it during the day [m.] before the sun [m.] is high [m.] in the sky [m.].

Four molecules have been used in the explication, *during the day*, *sun*, *high*, and *sky*, to make the concept of *noon* understandable cross-culturally.

Comparing to the previous two, the range of use of Polish *dzień dobry* is actually the broadest, since it can be used even when it is completely dark. Małgorzata Marcjanik, Polish linguist specialising in politeness theory, suggests that when in doubt, especially with strangers, it is better to say *dzień dobry* no matter what the actual time is (https://sjp.pwn.pl/poradnia/haslo/Dzien-dobry-czy-Dobry-wieczor;6906.html). So even though, just like Spanish and English, Polish has another option, *dobry wieczór*, roughly 'good evening', it rarely makes use of it[5]. That is why, the last line of the explication of *dzień dobry* in [D.] reads: "people say it during the day [m.], sometimes they say it at night [m.]".

[D.] [when people in Poland say "dzień dobry" they think like this:]
I want to say something good to you at this moment
I couldn't say anything to you this day before
I want to say:

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[4] The status of *lunch* as a molecule is problematic. This part of explication is tentative, and requires further investigation.
[5] It is important to notice here that Polish lacks the equivalent of *good afternoon*.

I am here now
you are here now
I know it
(I feel something good because of it)

people say it during the day [m.], sometimes they say it at night [m.].

Concluding remarks

In this paper we hope to have shown that the natural semantic metalanguage, or NSM, can be applied successfully for mediating communication in a foreign language classroom. To illustrate its efficacy, we have used as examples very basic A1 level expressions, *buenos días*, *good morning*, and *dzień dobry*, explaining via NSM how these deceptively similar concepts vary between Spanish, English and Polish language. The first person perspective and the use of simple words, such as KNOW, HERE, or GOOD, let the students understand better the meaning greetings have in different languacultures, and this knowledge can improve to a great extent their intercultural competence (see Farese 2015: 15), leading to a successful communication between learners from different cultural backgrounds.

Language per se is an important mediating tool "that facilitates thought and the construction of ideas" (North, Piccardo 2016: 15). A mini-language which can be curved out of any human language is even stronger facilitator of meaning. It can be useful both in constructing and co-constructing new meaning, and, as we hope to have shown in this paper, in passing on information, especially in multi-cultural contexts. Being free from ethnocentric bias, NSM can provide a clear and effective strategy to deal with *otherness* and to create a neutral, safe communication space for language users.

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Naturalny metajęzyk semantyczny jako narzędzie mediacji komunikacyjnej w nauczaniu i uczeniu się języków

Streszczenie: W artykule staramy się wdrożyć podejście naturalnego metajęzyka semantycznego (NSM) jako narzędzia mediacji komunikacyjnej na lekcjach języka obcego. *Mediacja* to ważny termin wprowadzony do nauczania i uczenia się języków przez *Europejski system opis kształcenia językowego* (*CEFR* 2001) oraz rozwinięty w tomie uzupełniającym *CEFR/CV* (2020). Odnosi się do jednego z czterech typów działań komunikacyjnych (recepcja, produkcja, interakcja i mediacja), w którym przedstawia się społeczny wymiar języka, a użytkownik języka postrzegany jest jako *social agent*, uczestnik życia społecznego. Język sam w sobie jest ważnym narzędziem mediacji, natomiast minijęzyk wywodzący się z dowolnego ludzkiego języka jeszcze bardziej ułatwia objaśnianie znaczenia pojęć. Może być przydatny zarówno w konstruowaniu i współkonstruowaniu nowych znaczeń, jak i w przekazywaniu informacji, zwłaszcza w kontekstach wielokulturowych. Będąc wolnym od etnocentrycznych uprzedzeń, NSM może zapewnić jasną i skuteczną strategię radzenia sobie z „innością" i tworzenia neutralnej, bezpiecznej przestrzeni komunikacyjnej. Aby zilustrować jego skuteczność, podamy kilka przykładów, wyjaśniając za pośrednictwem NSM, jak zwodniczo podobne pojęcia, takie jak nazwy pór dnia, zwłaszcza te używane w powitaniach, różnią się w języku hiszpańskim, angielskim i polskim.

Abstract: In this paper we seek to implement the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach as a tool for mediating communication in foreign language classroom. *Mediation* is an important term introduced to language teaching and learning in the *Common European Framework of Reference* (*CEFR* 2001) and developed in *CEFR. Companion Volume* (2020). It refers to one of the four modes of communication (reception, production, interaction and mediation) – in which social dimension of language is put forward, and the language user is viewed as a *social agent.* Language *per se* is an important mediating tool, a mini-language curved out of any human language is even stronger facilitator of meaning explication. It can be useful both in constructing and co-constructing new meaning, and in passing on information, especially in multi-cultural contexts. Being free from ethnocentric bias, NSM can provide a clear and effective strategy to deal with "otherness" and to create a neutral, safe communication space. To illustrate its efficacy, we will give some examples, explaining via NSM how deceptively similar concepts, such as names for time of day, especially the ones used in greetings, vary between Spanish, English and Polish language.

Słowa kluczowe: naturalny metajęzyk semantyczny (NSM); Europejski system opisu kształcenia językowego (ESOKJ); nauczanie i uczenie się języków; mediacja; formuły powitalne
Keywords: natural semantic metalanguage (NSM); Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR); language teaching and learning; mediation; greetings