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On the Problem of Lexical Meaning Representation: A Semiotic Aspect

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Abstract: *The paper provides comparative analysis of the seme stocks denoting good in modern English and French. The formalized analysis of lexical semantics integrating both mathematical and purely linguistic methods has been employed to conduct the research. The study shows that each word in question is internally structured and presents an organized hierarchy of lexical meanings.*
The seme stocks of the nouns denoting good in English and French present hierarchical systems, subdivided into subsets of polyfunctional, semes with the average degree of functionality, and monofunctional. The comparison of the seme stocks under study has shown that they differ in quantitative characteristics more than qualitative ones. The views on good are partially concurrent in the English and French language world pictures. Both cultures associate it with a good-doer, his/her inner world, social rank, acts of favour, courteous attitude to others, spiritual and material values that promote the highest happiness. The distinctive features reveal the socio-pragmatic character of the concept in English and socially conditioned – in French.

Keywords: *Seme stock; formalized analysis; lexical semantics; subset; language world picture.*

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Introduction

In the era of globalization, when the borders between cultures have been partially erased, cultural differences are perceived as stemming from divergence in world outlook and categorization of reality. Culture is seen as shared values, long held beliefs, and socially-embedded practices. The latter "do not occur in a vacuum" (Halualani, 2018, p. 37), but are instead "situated in a particular historical, socioeconomic, and political moments" (Halualani, 2018, p. 37). Hence, culture encompasses a component flowing through its history and one adjusting to worldwide, national, and global shifts in all areas of human life. The latter is created and reflected daily. It is based on "categories and signs that are necessary to communicate and it is organized into a system at the level of meaning" (Lorusso, 2015, 119). In this respect, the scientific study of culture at the heart of international communications regarded to be urgent and promising.

The link between language, culture, and mind has been on the agenda throughout the history of linguistics. Language is viewed as "a primary mechanism for 'storing' and communicating cultural cognition, acting both as a memory bank and a fluid vehicle for the (re-)transmission of cultural cognition" (Sharifian, 2017, p. 5). It impinges upon every sphere of human activity, which in its turn presupposes the cognition of the outer world, its theoretical acquisition, the formation of structurally decomposed and systemically organized knowledge about world fragments (Prihodko, 2019, p. 131). Since language is culturally transmitted, shaped by cultural values, and serves as "the repository of cultural conceptualizations" (Geeraerts, 2014, p. 66), it plays a crucial role in modelling the world (Chandler, 2017, p. 72), and, hence, helps us "articulate, reflect upon and communicate experience" (Finch, 2013, p. 222). Likewise, Ahearn (2017, p. 12) holds the view that "to use language, therefore, is to engage in a form of social action laden with cultural values". In this regard, it can be said that language is both a mental and a socio-cultural phenomenon.

However, one of the main disputable issues in studying the language is concerned with what it is primarily about. Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014, p. 201) highlight the need for language studies to be conducted through the prism of meaning, as "in so many aspects of human life, however, issues of meaning are integral and essential to understanding what people do and why." Uncovering the knowledge of word meanings is undoubtedly an essential goal of any linguistic interpretation as it attempts to give a realistic description of certain concepts underlying the world. Besides, the description of word meanings is "the most fundamental metalinguistic

activity, one that surfaces naturally and constantly in daily life" (Mel'čuk & Polguère, 2018, p. 418). Moreover, the language allows expressing virtually every thought we have and even our private experiences, embodying unique semantic configurations. Thus, the focus on meaningfulness, generally taken to be one of the defining properties of the language (Lyons, 1995, p. 12), gives the possibility to shed light on solving the issues related to language and thinking interconnection. In the same vein, Israel (2019, p. 169) states that "if we only focus on the way words refer to entities in the world, we will miss some important aspects of linguistic meaning".

The most effective way to study word meaning is to turn to the language's lexical stock, which reflects the people's consciousness specificity and reveals national peculiarities of the world perception. Jaszczolt (2016, p. 106) claims that "the assignment of meanings to lexical items draws on many sources that pertain to our experience, properties of the human inferential system (and as such, the structure and operations of the brain), knowledge of the language, purpose at hand, as well as various other external and internal factors".

Words are the bearers of meaning in language and "do have a central role in the coding of meaning, being responsible for much of the richness and subtlety of messages conveyed linguistically" (Cruse, 2000, p. 83). Moreover, they are very "powerful" (Brinton, 2010, p. 2) since they can fix unique cultural patterns and provide people with things considered vital to the ethnos. In this regard, each lexical unit's meaning can be understood as the conditions in which a particular expression holds extralingual entities proving "an inevitable connection between the structure of language and the structure of reality" (Beni, 2019, p. 43). However, these interpretations of words overlook many aspects of lexicalization processes. In their ground breaking study, Pirelli et al. (2019, p. 2) concluded that words emerge from "interrelated patterns of experience, social interaction and psychological and neurobiological mechanisms", drawing attention to psycholinguistic facets.

Another essential aspect of lexical semantics is studying how words are structured in the lexicon and semantically related to one another. The vocabulary of a language is not usually described as a random assemblage of points in semantic space. Conversely, it presents a collection of words capturing the knowledge that speakers and hearers have about basic lexical expressions in a language (Pustejovsky & Batiukova, 2019, p. 3). Many publications on the problem prove that each word is viewed within a matrix of all the others that may have a relationship with it (Cruse, 2000; Kroeger, 2019; Mel'čuc & Milićević, 2020; Onyshchak, 2018; Valenzuela, 2017; Weiner, 2018). In the structure of lexis, depicting nationally-cultural

tradition, much importance is given to words whose conceptual content uncovers different aspects of human life and peculiarities of national worldview. In the first place, it concerns values that are fast becoming a key instrument in determining the way people perceive the world, "a goal that guides people in their lives and sets the standards of their behaviour" (Konnova & Babenko, 2019, p. 91). Wierzbicka (2014, p. 66) elaborates this idea by suggesting that "in the contemporary globalized world, where the tempo and intensity of international and cultural contacts are continuously strengthening, communication (Carston, 2010) about values has become increasingly crucial". Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the study of values as important landmarks of ethnocultures. Furthermore, so far as "vocabulary, irrespective of its language, is in a constant state of flux" (Nykytchenko, 2019, p. 64), the word meanings fix the 'footprints' of human cognition and reflect the concepts emerging in human minds in the language in the best possible way.

The present paper *aims* to conduct a complex comparative analysis of the seme stocks denoting *good* in English and French, pointing out their common and distinctive features.

The article highlights the importance of the research in several dimensions. Firstly, it contributes to the academic field of semiotics, contrastive lexicology, and ethnolinguistics. Secondly, the research provides insights into how the knowledge about *good* is encapsulated in the English and French lexicon. Thirdly, it presents a new, formalized approach to studying the system and structural organization of the lexis denoting *good* in two distantly related languages. Furthermore, the study opens a new opportunity to penetrate into the national language world pictures, revealing their specificity and common vectors of cultural development.

Language as a Semiotic System

Human language is "a complex sign system, 'designed' to ensure infinite expressive capacity, that is to say, there is nothing that is thinkable which cannot in principle be encoded" (Cruse, 2000, p. 6). In this regard, the fundamental property of language (Bibok, 2019) is "the internal construction of indefinitely many expressions by a generative procedure that yields a uniquely human perspective (in the form of a conceptual structure) on the world" (Asoulin, 2016, p. 17). Consequently, there is an unambiguous relationship between cognition and language. However, in his seminal book "Cognitive Semiotics: Integrating Signs, Minds, Meaning and Cognition", Paolucci (2021, p. 6) argues that "cognition does not serve to construct a true representation of the world, but it is a means to act in the world in

effective ways". The scholar maintains that "for action to be effective, it is necessary to construct significant surfaces" (Paolucci, 2021, p. 6). The information encoded in linguistic forms helps people convey the subtlety of meanings through specific signs and orient in the ambient world (Nerubasska & Maksymchuk, 2020; Nerubasska et al., 2020; Onishchuk et al., 2020).

Geeraerts (2010, p. 52) adopted a broader perspective, maintaining that "language constitutes an intermediate conceptual level between the mind and the world". Commenting on the issue, the researcher concludes that reality depicts a range of things and events and language is capable of capturing the knowledge about them. In this regard, the signs in the word meanings are interdependent, representing a specific fragment of the world and forming the branching hierarchy. What is not yet clear is the impact of culture on the nature of word meanings encoded in linguistic form.

This view shows the need to be explicit about precisely what the semiosphere means, as it is of paramount importance in our research. Violi (2018, p. 50) uses the term "semiosphere" to refer to "a notion that aims to explain the organized structure of every specific cultural system, discovering the cultural variables that belong to each culture, or subculture, which can be envisioned as the actual attitudes that each single culture possesses in relation to their own signs". Hence, there are strong structuring tendencies manifested in the interrelations between the signs envisaging culture.

One of the most widespread ways of approaching word meanings and deciphering the hidden conceptual content is to think of them as being constructed of more elementary indivisible units or signs. Modern linguistics operates a great variety of terms referring to lexical meaning's components: "semantic marker", "the figure of content", "differential feature", "differential element", "seme", "semantic feature", "semantic primitive", "semantic component", "generalized seme", "semantic multiplier" and others. The componential analysis is widely used to disclose meanings' essential features, providing "a descriptive model for semantic content" (Geeraerts, 2010, p. 91). The same approach is applied to the study of English and French seme stocks denoting *good*.

Good as a constituent of archetypal dichotomy is an entity encompassing the results of people's social activity and views on values functioning in English society. The words denoting *good* in English and French pose fascinating challenges for semantic description. Firstly, the study is relevant due to the general orientation of modern linguistic research towards the study of words reflecting universal cultural values and the forms and means of their expression. Secondly, there is a substantial lack of

research works describing the semantics and interrelations between the words denoting *good* in English and French. Thirdly, a complex study of the lexis in question will open a window on the nature of *good* and the English and French views on this notion.

Much work on *good* have been carried out, regarding different aspects and involving varied methods. The attempts have been made to capture the semantics of *good* from a cross-linguistic perspective. Over the past decade, most research has focused on the problem of *good* as a lexical universal (Goddard, 2018), lexicalized in all languages and "necessary for explicating hundreds and hundreds of words" (Goddard, 2018, p. 33). Some preliminary work was carried out by Wierzbicka (2014), who defined it as a "universal concept". In the sphere of computational linguistics, Kornai (2020) took up the problems concerned with the definition of *good* in 4lang computational system containing a dictionary. Notwithstanding a number of serious research works that have appeared recently, there is still ample room for further research, and integration of linguistic and mathematical theories definitely opens up new perspectives of lexico-semantic analysis that provide deeper penetration into its vast expanse.

The selection of the research material was influenced by the fact that nouns hold a universal status as a word class, being placed at the top of parts of the speech hierarchy. It is uncontroversial that all well-developed taxonomic hierarchies are at large prevalent among nouns. Furthermore, the latter constitute "firm evidence of the presence of certain categories, thereby offering a window onto the conceptual mechanisms by which categories are formed" (Ye, 2017, p. 2) and present a special interest for semantic research. The research material has been represented by 411 English nouns denoting *good* possessing 1147 meanings and 148 French words with 262 meanings.

The system and structural characteristics of English and French are best described in monolingual defining dictionaries, providing a wealth of information on a picture of human life, a person's biological and psychological characteristics, his/her behaviour, mental functioning, social activity, moral and religious values. The theoretical frame of this article is based on the idea that the more complete the dictionary, the more detailed and accurate language data for an objective analysis it presents. The language material presented herein was obtained from the Oxford English Dictionary in 20 volumes (2009) and Grand Larousse de la Langue Française (Gilbert et al., 1986), which are considered the most reliable reference resources of the English and French languages, regularly enlarged with new language data.

Modern linguistics has recently witnessed a great deal of activity in developing efficient methods and quantitative procedures to study different

aspects of lexical semantics. This fact is hardly surprising because the scholars working in this field tend to make assumptions about how words are semantically related to one another and what types of relations are involved in structuring vocabulary. In this regard, the development of mathematical structures and methods contributed significantly to linguistic research since it stimulated still further the intertwining of logical and linguistic concerns (Gillon, 2019, p. 17). Moreover, the very "formalization of mathematics" (Gillon, 2019, p. 17) proved a highly effective explanatory tool in scientific research on meaning and its interpretation.

For the comprehensive study on the systemic and semantic characteristics of English and French words denoting *good*, a method of formalized analysis of lexical semantics has been used. The latter has been devised by prof. M. P. Fabian (2019). This method holds the greatest promise of disclosing the semantics of the nouns under research by studying the relations between the units and their lexical meanings. The proposed approach is enacted based on "a formal, purely language criterion – belonging of the words under analysis to a definite part of speech" (Fabian, 2019, p. 164) – the nouns. The matrix method representing semantic correlations between the words in the studied languages serves as a metalanguage for the description of *good*, and the matrix itself (Table 1) – as the semantic structure of the lexis in question.

Tab. 1. Matrix fragment of the lexical units denoting good in modern French (upper left part)

Lexical stock / Seme stock	fortune[15]	passion[13]	bien[12]	veine[12]	accord[10]
En collocations	+	+	+	+	+
Action, acte, activité					+
Sciences		+	+	+	+
Qualité, faculté		+			
Ce qui	+	+	+		
Ensemble	+				
Au pluriel	+				+
Avantage			+		
État	+				
Amour, attachement tendre		+			
Situuation	+				
Résultat					+
Chance ou hasard favorable	+			+	
Bonheur	+				
Autorité, puissance souveraine	+				
Mouvement		+			
Bienfait			+		
Entente					+
Malchance	+			+	
Sort, destin heureux	+				

Source: Author's own conception

This model depicts the semantic relations between the lexical units through columns and lines indicating the lexical and seme stocks. The sign (+) shows the semantic relations between the words in the language. The latter and the components of their meanings are arranged from the most polysemantic nouns to monosemantic ones and from most polyfunctional semes to monofunctional ones. The methodology of collecting, classifying, and analyzing our language material and analyzing both its lexical and seme stocks presupposes the next successive steps: 1) from the most authoritative defining dictionaries of English and French the words, the semantics of which contains explicit and implicit forms of *good* expression are selected; 2) based on the obtained data the qualitative and quantitative analyses of the lexical units are made; 3) a matrix represents semantic space, where each

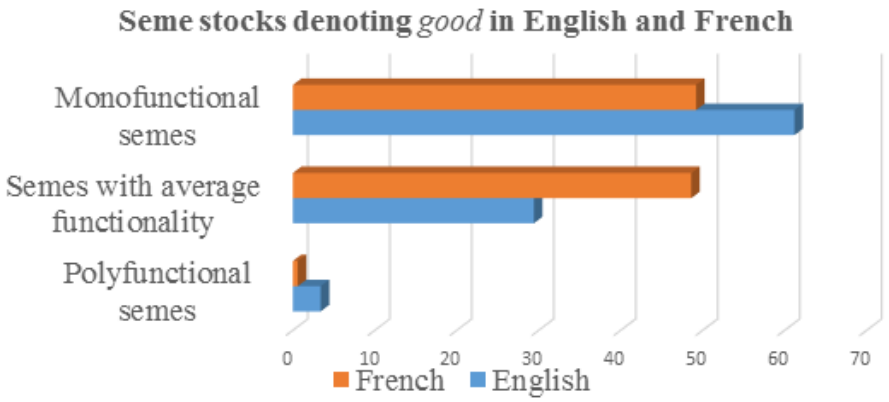
noun under study occupies its definite place and acquires its peculiar features; 4) the comparison of the lexical and seme stocks within each group and subset, disclosing relevant qualitative and quantitative characteristics is made.

Notwithstanding the benefits of the proposed method within the realms of one language, it is worth mentioning that it also offers many advantages for comparative purposes.

Seme Stocks Denoting Good in English and French

English and French languages are "self-sufficient" (Wu & Yuan, 2019, p. 4), autonomous systems, possessing a unique structure and being "rule-governed" (Brinton & Brinton, 2010, p. 4). Their structure is represented by smaller units that stand in relation to each other, perform particular functions, and are organized on certain principles. The nouns denoting *good* in modern English and French form systems and establish close relations between them, having a unique position in a relational network. The theoretical framework of this articleis largely based on the idea formulated by Lyons (1981, p. 152) that "some lexemes, if not all, are related both to other lexemes in the same language and to entities, properties, situations, relations in the outside world". Thus, the correlations between phenomena in the ambient world appear to be of much importance in the lexical meaning's representation.

1147 semes constitute the seme stock denoting *good* in English and 262 – in French. Due to the frequency criterion (their degree of functionality and occurrence in the meanings of the words in question), the semes are divided into subsets of polyfunctional, with the average degree of functionality and monofunctional. Consequently, their percentage share is quite different in the languages under study (Graph 1).



Graph. 1. Quantitative characteristics of English and French seme stocks denoting good
Source: Author's own conception

As highlighted in Graph1the subsets of monofunctional semes substantially exceed the subset of polyfunctional ones (0,6% – in English and 3,4% – in French) and that with the average degree of functionality (48,6% – in English and 29,4 % – in French), making up 49,2% and 61,2 % of the whole seme stocks. Although the semes within the English and French seme stocks relatively coincide in quantitative characteristics but display differences in qualitative ones. Beyond any doubt, the shared concepts they refer to are the results of the speakers' cognitive processes somewhat similar in English and Ukrainian.

The polyfunctional semes are more generalized than two other subsets and therefore deprived of emotive and evaluative force. There are 7 polyfunctional semes in English and 9 – in French. They demonstrate numerous coincidences. The references to actions ("*action, deed*"; "*action, acte, activité*"), qualities ("*quality*"; "*qualité, faculté*") and the object of activity ("*that which*"; "*ce qui*") can be traced in both languages. The semes underlining specific semantic and syntactic features of the words denoting *good* ("*in phrases and word combinations*", "*in plural*", "*fields of sciences*"; "*en collocations*", "*au pluriel*", "*sciences*") also belong to this subset. The differences in verbalizing *good* by the polyfunctional semes lie in the depiction of condition or state ("*condition, state*") in English and advantage ("*avantage*") and character ("*caractère*") in French.

The subset of semes with the average degree of functionality is represented by 558 semes in English and 77 – in French. They can be classified according to the shared notions they denote into the following groups referring to: 1) a person capable of doing *good* ("*a person who*"; "personne(s)"); 2) a disposition typical of a good-doer ("*disposition, character*";

"*disposition(s)*"); 3) a thing that brings *good* or joy ("*a thing*"; "*la chose*"); 4) a strong feeling of caring about someone ("*love, liking, fellow-feeling*"; "*amour, attachementtendre*"); 5) the feeling of happiness, enjoyment, or satisfaction that a person gets from an experience ("*delight, pleasure, predilection*"; "*plaisir*"); 6) an assistance given or received ("*assistance, help, aid*"; "*aide, appui, secours donnésoureçus*"); 7) respect ("*respect*"; "*respect, respectability, respectfulness*"); 8) an advantage that you gain from doing something ("*profit*", "*benefit*", "*advantage*"; "*profit*", "*gain*"); 9) a favourable chance or event ("*chance*", "*event*"; "*chance ouhasard favorable*", "*événement*"); 10) values prevalent in society ("*value, worth, worthiness*"; "*la valeur*"); 11) compliance with the laws and social norms ("*conformity*", "*compliance*"; "*conformité*"); 12) material values ("*money, cash, salary, wages*", "*goods, riches*", "*abundance*", "*exuberance*", "*prosperity*"; "*richesse*"); 13) success ("*success*"; "succès"); 14) chance or luck, and its favourable effect in life ("*good fortune*"; "*heureuse fortune*"); 15) the quality of being better, more skillful, or more powerful than other people ("*superiority, superior position*", "*status, standing, rank, high rank, courtesy-title*"; "*supériorité*", "*privilège*"); 16) the opinion about someone ("*repute, reputation*"; "*réputation*", "*appréciation*"). The semes "*good*" and "*bien*" expressing *good* explicitly are also limited in their functionality.

The nationally-cultural specificity of *good* reflection in English is revealed in its peculiar interpretation as something one does for someone in order to help them ("*favour*"), kindness or sympathy that you show towards other people ("*charity, mercy, benefaction*"), the quality of being polite and well-educated, in a way that is typical of a high social class ("*refinement, improvement, perfection*") and the ability to behave reasonably even in a tense situation ("*dignity*"). The semes "*worship*", "*a deity, divinity, a divine being, God*", "*angel*" and "*heaven, paradise*" prove that the English are much concerned about their religious life and compliance with preaching.

The French associate *good* with a situation in which they win ("*victoir*"), friendly agreement and understanding between people ("*affirmation, declaration d'une identité de vue avec quelqu'un, assentiment*", "*rapport*", "*accord*"), something that you do or have for pleasure, not because you need it ("*bontédouce, indulgence*"), favourable consequences ("*effet bien faisant, conséquence favorable de quelque chose*").

The monofunctional semes (582 semes in English and 176 – in French) can concretize the analyzed concept, revealing its essential characteristics. They depict versatile aspects of *good* that complement the notions expressed by polyfunctional semes and those with average functionality. For instance, among their essential features in the English language, one can single out the depiction of good sense and judgment,

based on the experience of life ("*wisdom*"), behaviour that shows respect and is correct for a particular situation ("*decorum*"), delicacy ("*daintiness*") and a good idea about what one should do ("*inspiration*"). On the other hand, the monosemantic semes in French indicate the quality of trying to do something even when it is difficult ("*détérmination*"), polite manners or behaviour ("*politesse*"), happiness ("*félicité*"), and a calm and serious quality ("*dignité*").

The comprehensive study of the seme stocks denoting *good* in English and French has proven that the semes constituting the subsets are characterized by common and distinctive features. The correlations between them serve to visualize the relations between objects and phenomena in the ambient world.

Conclusions

Returning to the issues addressed at the beginning of the proposed study, we may assume that the nouns denoting *good* in English and French due to their multiple meanings are engaged in a relational network, deriving its meanings from the position in this network. It promotes the formation of paradigmatic relations between the words in question and semantic microsystems based on their semantic similarity. The following features prove both the system and structural specificity of English and French languages and the lexical stocks' mobile character.

The complex comparative study of English and French seme stocks denoting *good* has elucidated that each word's sememe isstrictly organized into a system of interconnected meanings. It is particularly envisaged concerning social, spiritual, moral, communicative, and psychological constraints. Its axiological stance embodied in the meanings of the lexis in question approves the generalization of key moral, social, and cultural values in English and French societies. Thus, the semantics of *good* is revealed through expressing a good-doer, character traits, virtues, and merits, standing in society, actions for others' sake and assistance, kindly attitude to others, spiritual and material values that promote the highest happiness. Hence, the anthropocentric semantics is shared for the words under study in the two languages. The distinctive features are represented in socio-pragmatic references in English and socially-embedded – in French.

The research results may be applicable in the field of lexical semantics and can contribute to the study of both related and non-related groups of lexis in the English and French lexicon.

Future study should concern a more detailed typological analysis of the lexis depicting values in distantly related and non-related languages.

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