

ON THE INDISPENSABILITY OF SEMANTICS:  
DEFINING THE 'VACUOUS'

by  
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Important advances in the study of linguistic communication over recent years show that a simple 'grammar-lexicon' view of language does not account for the facts of language use. Language is clearly more than just a system in which signs with fixed meanings are assembled in complex expressions, by which the import of utterances is predictably and exhaustively determined (in 'encoding' and 'decoding') by rules of syntactic and semantic combination. It is now clearer than ever that context and background knowledge (crucially including second-order knowledge of what knowledge is *shared* between speakers), are fundamental in the mechanisms of linguistic communication.

Scholars working in this area recently, however, in strongly stating this point, have allowed the role of 'encoded semantics' to be drastically understated, often giving the misleading impression that it is in many cases irrelevant or even non-existent. A recent paper by William Hanks, 'Language form and communicative practices' (1996), for example, begins by depicting language as a primarily context-based system, without necessarily including encoded meaning or the kinds of grammatical rules for combining meaningful units traditionally assumed in linguistics. Hanks claims on the basis of a 'practices approach' to linguistic meaning that: (a) 'there is reason to rethink the standard idea... that semantic structure is part of grammar' (p. 232); (b) 'it is not that people must share a grammar' (p. 235); (c) there is now 'widespread recognition that meaning arises out of the interaction between language and circumstances, rather than being encapsulated in the language itself' (p. 266). These claims are meant to counter a view of communicative import being *wholly* encoded in the semantics of lexicon and grammar, but the way they are phrased ('meaning arises from interaction *rather than* encoding') suggests that there is (or may be) no semantics encoded at all. But Hanks clearly sees the distinct sources of 'meaning' (context/interaction versus encoding) as complementary, rather than as competing. Elsewhere, he acknowledges the existence of grammar and encoded semantics, where he says, for example, that 'it is clear that there exist rules governing the grammatical

structure of linguistic forms', and there is 'no necessary contradiction between the idea of grammar and the idea of practice...' (Hanks 1996: 236). He freely refers to 'semantic structures' which are 'part of language' (Hanks 1996: 244), and evidently works with a clear distinction between sentence-meaning and utterance-meaning, when he describes the deictic morphemes he is discussing as having 'linguistic meanings', which 'remain relatively constant across contexts' (1996: 255).<sup>1</sup> Thus one can afford to not take the tone of the earlier 'anti-encoding' remarks too seriously. Clearly, Hanks acknowledges a level of semantic encoding in lexicon and grammar, but wants to argue against any claim that encoding *alone* could account for the mechanisms of linguistic communication. Stephen Levinson (e.g. 1995) creates a similar tension when he strongly criticizes the 'encoding' position, and yet works with a very clear sentence- versus utterance-meaning distinction, a model which *entails* a level of encoded semantics. Again, Levinson is not arguing that there is *no* encoding, but the tone of his discussion may lead readers to think this.

In the same vein, Clark (1996) works with a sentence- versus utterance-meaning distinction, where he argues that 'what speakers mean is narrower than what they say' (Clark 1996: 331). This view attributes a certain amount of meaning to encoded semantics (in 'what people say'), and this feeds into processes of inference which people may rely upon in getting across, or unravelling, 'what people mean'. But then Clark claims that something semantically *empty* may still be systematically informative. To use an expression like 'what's-his-name', he argues, is to 'start with nothing' (Clark 1996: 331). In such a case interlocutors are said to establish meaning *entirely* by collaboration' (Clark 1996: 331, emphasis added). Below, I will argue that this is going too far.

Perhaps by stating the case so strongly, these scholars assume it is worth 'taking the chance that [the] reader would use his thinking apparatus' (Lee 1996: 153), as Whorf noted in anticipation of misunderstandings that would arise from the 'condensed and unqualified' form of one of his most important papers (i.e. Whorf 1956[1939]). In Whorf's case, he felt it unnecessary to spell certain things out as long as 'the reader uses ordinary common sense', adding with uncanny foresight, 'but then one can never tell' (Lee 1996: 153). The depth and breadth of misunderstanding of the particular paper Whorf was referring to is now well documented (cf. Lee 1996). It is thus worthwhile trying to clarify the point, which remains to some

extent obscured in recent work such as Clark (1996), Hanks (1996), and Levinson (1995), that the context-based (or 'radically pragmatic') view of linguistic communication is not an '*anti-encoding*' one, but simply one that argues that semantic encoding *alone* is not enough to account for the full import of linguistic expressions. A level of stable encoding remains necessary, and I would like to show that this holds even in the most extreme cases of apparent semantic 'emptiness' or 'vacuousness'.

### 1. *Semantics of 'vacuous' expressions*

Exemplifying the modern 'radically pragmatic' view, Levinson (1995) characterizes 'the model we used to have... of the way that language works in communication'<sup>2</sup> as follows: 'we have a thought, we encode it in an expression, emit the encoded signal, the recipient decodes it at the other end, and thus recovers the identical thought'. He continues, claiming that a

moment's reflection will reveal that this picture is absurd. Consider the 'thing-a-me-jigg' phenomenon:

A: Where the hell's the whatdjacallit?

B: Behind the desk.

Just as in a crossword puzzle, the filled blank, *the whatdjacallit*, advertises itself to the recipient as a puzzle the recipient can solve. This works. In fact it works all the time – we don't say exactly what we mean. We don't have to and anyway we couldn't. (Levinson 1995: 232)

This claim of the 'absurdity of encoding' presupposes that 'the encoding model' being criticized attributes the *entirety* of linguistic communication to semantic encoding. But while it is clear that semantic encoding cannot account completely for the way we speak and understand language, it does not follow from this that we can 'do without' encoded semantics, or get away with communicating via literally nonsensical signals. A stable level of semantic encoding remains crucial in the model Levinson describes. Let me demonstrate this point by taking up Levinson's example *what-do-you-call-it*. I will claim that



the expression has stable and storable encoded semantics, and it is this which both constrains and promotes specific interpretations in specific contexts.

### 1.1 Defining the 'vacuous': the case of *what-do-you-call-it*

Suppose Mary is doing some power-drilling. John is nearby, aware of her progress. She mislays the chuck key while changing drill-bits, and the following exchange ensues:

- (1) Mary: *Hey John, where's the what-do-you-call-it?*  
 John: *I put it back in the toolbox.*

The exchange is a success.

In a sense one can argue that in (1) Mary does not actually say 'what she means', since what she 'meant' was *Where's the chuck key?*. But she didn't use the expression *chuck key*. This specific referent for the apparently very non-specific expression *what-do-you-call-it* was not only in Mary's mind, but she fully expected John to understand that she was talking about 'the chuck key' on the basis of this 'vacuous' locution alone. And he did, naturally, since he knew what Mary *had to be* talking about. She was standing there, power drill in hand, drill bit placed loosely in the chuck of the drill. According to the usual power-drilling scenario, the chuck key was right then crucially required, before any further progress in the task at hand could be made. The success of this exchange requires that both Mary and John know this information about the typical power-drilling scenario, that they each know that the other knows, and further that they each know that the other knows that they themselves know. This is what is required for the term *what-do-you-call-it* to successfully refer in this case to 'the chuck key', by means of inferential processes which make reference to mutually manifest 'normal' cultural scenarios (which, I would add, are to a large extent embodied in lexical semantics; see Wierzbicka 1985 for an extensive study of the vast amount of cultural information embodied in the semantics of concrete expressions; cf. also Keesing 1979).

To say that Mary did not *encode* 'what she meant' in (1) requires an assumption that an 'encoding' model conflates the levels of sentence-meaning and utterance-meaning (or else fails to recognise a level of utterance-meaning at all), equating what the speaker 'is talking about'

(i.e. 'the chuck key') with what is encoded in the linguistic expression(s) she chooses to utter. (This explains Levinson's view of the model as 'absurd' in the case of *what-do-you-call-it*.) But there is no need to assume such a conflation. An encoding model merely asserts that there are encoded semantics, which are storable, and cross-contextually stable. This anchoring level of sentence-meaning is then crucial to constraining and guiding our context-dependent inferences as to utterance-meaning in any case.

So, in a sense, Mary *does* 'mean' to say *what-do-you-call-it* in (1), and this 'meaning' is just what is encoded in the expression. *What-do-you-call-it* in (1) is *not* a 'blank'. By saying *what-do-you-call-it* where she might have said *chuck key*, Mary was not literally saying *nothing*. She was communicating a specific message *by her words*, namely that she wanted to know where *something* was, that she couldn't think of *the word for this thing* right at that moment, but that she thought John would know *what* she must want, so she used the word *what-do-you-call-it* so he would understand all this.<sup>3</sup> These aspects of the message of *what-do-you-call-it* are encoded in its semantics, and as such are part of the invariant meaning of the expression. And that is why she chose the word *what-do-you-call-it*, and not just some completely random word like *table*, *carburetor*, *bureaucrat*, or *the* (let alone a nonsense syllable or a non-linguistic noise). The term is *conventionalized*, and as such has a stable meaning.

Thus, if an English speaker had to write a dictionary entry for *what-do-you-call-it*, they would surely not leave a blank, but would at least say that it is 'a word you say for something that you can't think of the word for'. More precisely, and in more detail, I would suggest the following definition:<sup>4</sup>

- (2) *what-do-you-call-it* (as in *Where's the what-do-you-call-it?*)  
 a. something  
 b. I can't say the word for this thing now, because I can't think of it  
 c. I say: *what-do-you-call-it*  
 d. I think you know what I'm thinking about

The details of this semantic explication explain certain restrictions on the usage of the expression. First, Mary had to be talking about *something*, which best refers to objects (referred to by count nouns) like



*chuck keys*, but also to substances (referred to by mass nouns), like *sodium bicarbonate*, *oral rehydration salts*, and *vitamin E cream*:

- (3) *There were traces of what-do-you-call-it at the bottom of the test-tube*
- (4) *I need to drink some what-do-you-call-it*
- (5) *You should put some what-do-you-call-it on that dry skin*

That *what-do-you-call-it* should refer to 'something' accounts for its oddness in place of adjectives, and especially in place of verbs and determiners:

- (6) *?John is far too what-do-you-call-it*
- (7) *?Mary said she would what-do-you-call-it the council on John's behalf*
- (8) *\*Mary what-do-you-call-it-ed the council on John's behalf.*
- (9) *\*There were what-do-you-call-it people at Mary's party<sup>5</sup>*

Secondly, according to the definition in (2), Mary's use of the word *what-do-you-call-it* would entail an interpretation that she *cannot think of the word* for the thing, (namely *chuck key*). This accounts for the following contrast:

- (10) *Where's the what-do-you-call-it?... , you know, the chuck key?*
- (11) *\*Where's the chuck key?... , you know, the what-do-you-call-it?*

In (10), the speaker at first cannot think of the word, and then is able to be more specific a moment later when the word comes to mind. This represents a natural and common flow of events. (11) presents the opposite sequence, which is infelicitous, as predicted by (2). The speaker who utters *what-do-you-call-it* in (11) obviously *can* think of the word for the thing she is thinking of, since she has just uttered it. The unacceptability is due to a clash with the invariant encoded semantics of the expression.

Third, by the definition in (2), to use *what-do-you-call-it* entails an interpretation that the speaker assumes the addressee knows what the speaker is thinking of once she has said the word. Mary's utterance in (1) is fine, since she can quite well make this assumption of John (given the context). However, if John were somewhere on the other side of town, with no idea of what Mary was doing, and she called him on the

telephone and uttered the string in (1) without any contextual set-up (not that much would be needed), not only would the communication not work, but the utterance would be infelicitous (i.e., unlike Mary's utterance in (1), it would be distinctly *uncooperative*). Imagine if Mary had never met John, and approached him, say, at a conference, reading his name-tag, and uttering *Hey John, where's the what-do-you-call-it?* This would be simply ridiculous, since she could not assume he had any idea what she was talking about.

What I have said for *what-do-you-call-it* presumably holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for *what's-her-name* and *what's-his-name*. These expressions refer to people rather than things, maintaining the gender distinction found in third-person singular personal pronouns in English. While Clark (1996: 331) claims that *what's-his-name* has 'nothing' encoded, I would argue that its encoded meaning is substantial, and can be stated thus:

- (12) *what's-his-name* (as in *Where's what's-his-name?*)
  - a. someone
  - b. I can't say this person's name now, because I can't think of it
  - c. I say: *what's-his-name*
  - d. I think you know who I'm thinking about

## 1.2 Semantics of *You-know-what*

Consider once again the implications of an extreme radical pragmatics position. If construal of an expression like *what-do-you-call-it* had nothing to do with any inherent semantics of the expression itself, but was completely due to certain omnipotent principles governing inference (which would follow from a neo-Gricean assertion that *what-do-you-call-it* were truly vacuous), then there would be no consistent or storable contrast between the usage of *what-do-you-call-it* and similarly 'blank' expressions, such as *you-know-what*. But consider the following:

- (13) *Mary: Hey John, where's the you-know-what?*

We may note certain similarities between (13) and (1), namely that in both cases, Mary does not say the word for the thing she is thinking about, and also that in using a 'vacuous' word, she is assuming that



John knows (or can figure out) what she is talking about. But the expressions are not equivalent. We surely could not assume Mary has the same communicative intention in uttering (13) as she had in uttering (1). And John receives somewhat different clues for feeding into the inferential process by which he may figure out what Mary is referring to.

As suggested by the morphology of *you-know-what*, the speaker is somehow assuming that the addressee *knows* (or, perhaps, 'can know') what she is talking about. *You-know-what* has this in common with *what-do-you-call-it*. But the crucial difference concerns the speaker's reason for not saying the word for the thing in mind.

Suppose Mary's utterance in (13) emerges in the same context given for (1). Now, it is not that she *can't* say *chuck key*, but that she *doesn't want to* (knowing that she *doesn't have to*). It may be that John is accustomed to losing or hiding the chuck key, and she is tired of constantly asking him where it is. By saying *you-know-what* instead of *chuck key*, she is underscoring this point, namely that she does not want to say the word, since it should be very clear to John what she is talking about. This has a kind of 'accusing' force, which *what-do-you-call-it* could not achieve (i.e. 'I know you know what I'm talking about').

More commonly, *you-know-what* may have both an 'avoidance' and a 'conspiratorial' function, whereby the speaker deliberately avoids uttering a certain word, either to not allow a third party to overhear, and/or to create a conspiratorial air between interlocutors. Suppose that John and Mary are expatriate Australians in a tropical country, hosting a function for their compatriots. They have had a crate of delicious fresh top-quality peaches flown in for the occasion. And they know that most of their guests, who will have fiendishly devoured peaches during summers in Australia, will have only been able to dream of them in the tropics. Once dinner is finished, John says to Mary:

(14) *I think it's time to serve the you-know-what.*

John could have said *peaches*, but avoided doing so, presumably to create some tension among the guests as to what to expect for dessert, and to allow the sight of the peaches themselves to reveal the surprise. Mary of course is well aware of what John means. Overhearing John's utterance in (14), the guests are also well aware that his expression is a deliberate avoidance, such that his reference excludes them and is intended to be understood by Mary alone. This effect could not be

achieved by using *what-do-you-call-it*, which has different semantics encoded, and thus provides different clues for listeners to make inferences about what John 'must mean'.

Here are a few more examples of this avoidance/conspiracy function of *you-know-what*:

- (15) (a) *Did you bring any you-know-what?*  
(i.e. 'marijuana', to a party)  
(b) *Look, his you-know-what is not on straight.*  
(i.e. lecturer's 'hairpiece')  
(c) *I could do with a you-know-what.*  
(i.e. 'gin and tonic', at the end of a stressful day)

In all these cases, the actual reference of *you-know-what* is of course crucially dependent on both the situational context and the 'common ground' (in the sense of Clark 1996) of the speakers, and each of the usages may have a rather different tone in different given contexts. (The actual *reference* is not part of the semantics.) But these usages are not unconstrained. They are anchored by their common semantic core, specifying that the speaker does not want to utter a certain word/expression s/he is thinking of, which s/he figures is an option since s/he supposes (given the context) the listener knows or can know what s/he is talking about. We may therefore offer a definition of *you-know-what* along the following lines:

- (16) *you-know-what*  
a. something  
b. I don't want to say the word for this thing now,  
c. I know I don't have to say it to you now  
d. I say: *you-know-what*  
e. I think you know what I'm thinking about

As in the case of *what-do-you-call-it*, *you-know-what* has an equivalent expression for people, with the same kind of avoidance/conspiratorial flavor. Consider the following examples:

- (17) (a) *Here comes you-know-who.*  
(i.e. 'John', who we have just been talking about)  
(b) *I saw John at the pub again with you-know-who.*



(i.e. 'Mary', who John has been surreptitiously courting)

We may thus define *you-know-who* as follows:

- (18) *you-know-who*  
 a. someone  
 b. I don't want to say this person's name now,  
 c. I know I don't have to say it to you now  
 d. I say: *you-know-who*  
 e. I think you know who I'm thinking about

### 1.3 Discussion

The so-called 'vacuous' expression *what-do-you-call-it* and its cousin *you-know-what* are particularly interesting in that they explicitly bridge the semantics-pragmatics interface. The encoded semantics of both these expressions directly refer to the 'common ground' (Clark 1996), or what is 'mutually manifest' (Sperber and Wilson 1986), among interlocutors. By using *what-do-you-call-it*, the speaker asserts her inability to say the word for what she is thinking about (either because she can't think of it right now, or doesn't know it), as well as her own assessment that the addressee can figure out what she is talking about anyway. She does this by selecting a linguistic expression which *encodes* these assertions. It is this very selection (i.e. *what-do-you-call-it* as opposed to another word), that gives the listener just the right guidelines for inferential 'computation' in the context. *You-know-what* is more explicitly conspiratorial, in that the speaker is *purposely* choosing not to say the word(s) in mind, knowing it is unnecessary (given context and addressee). It is often used to not allow overhearers to know the intended reference, and/or to underline the solidarity between speakers by explicitly referring to the fact that they share certain common ground.

The analysis offered here shows how 'radical pragmatics' (Cole 1981) and 'radical semantics' (Wierzbicka 1991) may be complementary aspects of a full account of linguistic communication. Context- and assumption-based inference accounts for rich and variable interpretations of utterances in specific contexts. Encoded semantics accounts for the fixed clues and anchors speakers rely on in formulating

utterances in context, and attributing communicative intention to the speakers who utter them.

### 1.4 A Lao 'vacuous' term '*an-nân*' 'that thing'

Wierzbicka (1991: Ch. 10), in her discussion of the semantics of tautologies, argued that if radical pragmatists were right about the putative semantic vacuousness of tautological expressions, and about the non language-specific status of the principles that guide inference, then the import of tautologies would not regularly differ from language to language. But the evidence does not support this conclusion, as she showed with reference to tautologies in Chinese (Wierzbicka 1991: Ch. 10). Similarly, it appears that so-called 'vacuous' expressions like *what-do-you-call-it* do not have the same range of import from language to language. Let us briefly examine a *what-do-you-call-it* type word from Lao (Southwestern Tai, Laos), namely '*an-nân*', literally 'that thing' (*an* is the 'all-purpose' classifier, meaning 'thing'; *nân* is a basic demonstrative meaning 'that').

Since '*an-nân*' may simply mean 'that one', there are of course many strictly anaphoric or deictic usages (related to either preceding discourse or situational context) which do not concern us here. In the usage we are interested in, construal of the expression's referent requires no discourse antecedent or contextually present referent. Consider the following example:<sup>6</sup>

- (19) *mēe cāw nāng bōw 'an-nân jūu tīi*  
 mother 2 still not thing-that crnt pcl  
 'Your mother's not yet 'that thing', right?'

The speaker here is referring to my mother's being already 'old' (60 years), and checking that she is still in good health. He uses '*an-nân*' to avoid explicitly saying what he is thinking (i.e. something about her being in a bad state of health; 'senile', 'weak', 'crippled', or what have you), since this may be impolite or hurtful to my feelings. Also, in this example, unlike in the case of *what-do-you-call-it* or *you-know-what*, it does not seem that the speaker has specific *words* in mind (i.e. informants do not suggest specific words he 'must have' had in mind, but talk in general terms about what he must have been talking *about*). Thus, while '*an-nân*' looks like *you-know-what* in that it seems to



contain a component along the lines of 'I don't want to say' (rather than 'I can't say'), it encodes an additional idea that 'it could be *bad* if I say'. *You-know-what* often has a connotation that 'it is *good* to not say'. The difference may seem subtle. It means that in the case of *you-know-what* the result of the usage may be somehow 'good' (e.g. by underlying solidarity, conspiratorial comment), while not using it would not necessarily be 'bad'. In the case of *'an-nân*, the usage itself is not necessarily 'good', merely 'not bad', while it is perceived that to *not* use it (in the context where it is used) *would* be 'bad'. Put another way, while the English *you-know-what* can be used to *create* a 'positive' way of referring, the Lao *'an-nân* is used to *avoid* 'negative' feelings or a bad situation which may arise from overt reference.

Thus, compare (19) with the following:

- (20) (a) *Your mother's not yet what-do-you-call-it, is she?*  
 (b) *Your mother's not yet you-know-what, is she?*

Neither (a) nor (b) would have the same import as (19). While (19) is interpreted as a coy avoidance which leaves reference rather open, the English expressions are (if acceptable in this context) somewhat different in flavor. In both (20a) and (20b), one would gather that the speaker has something quite specific in mind (which would have to emerge from the context given). In (20a), one would have to assume that the speaker can't say the expression for what s/he is thinking of, since presumably s/he can't think of it right then. This is not the case in (19). In (20b), the conspiratorial flavor of *you-know-what* certainly does not give the utterance the polite tone of avoidance imported by (19).

The claim that *'an-nân* is used to avoid saying what could be bad is supported by the following example, in which we are concerned with B's response to the question posed by A in the context of discussing a poster of King Bhumibol of Thailand on the wall of a Vientiane shop:

- (21) A. *câw hāk*            *phən*    *bɔɔ*  
 2    love/endear    3hon    pcl(q)  
 'Do you endear him?'  
 B. *kaa... 'an-nân*    *jūu*  
 so... thing-that    crnt  
 'Well, "that thing".'

B's answer essentially means 'yes', or perhaps an affirmative but slightly downplaying answer like English *something like that*. The use of *'an-nân* here is clearly an avoidance strategy, given the political sensitivity of the issue. Laos had a royal family, which has not been on the scene since late 1975, when the Lao PDR was founded after a long revolutionary struggle. Recently, increased access to central Thai culture, especially through television (and also through dramatically increased trade and cross-border traffic), has exposed lowland Lao to the fervent monarchism of neighbouring Thailand (cf. Enfield 1998, Evans 1998a, b). While the Thai king is basically well-liked by many Lao people, there is naturally a tension between the nationalist nature of monarchism (in this case *Thai* nationalism) on the one hand, and being a Lao national, on the other. In this context, the Lao speaker is reticent to actually *say* that she endears the Thai king, and her response is fitting. She figures that if she were to say something more direct, such as *hāk* '(Yes, I) endear (him)', it could be bad (e.g. people could think she was not a patriotic Lao, for example).

In the next example, the speaker has just asked me if I paid Lao Kip or foreign currency (i.e. US dollars) for a recent purchase. At this time, the exchange rate for Lao Kip is very much in favour of the dollar, and he knows that the shop would have much preferred to take my dollars. If I paid Lao Kip, then I got the good deal. I replied that I did pay Lao money, and he asked:

- (22) *câw 'aw ngən láaw hāj láaw,*  
 2    take money Lao    give 3  
*láaw kaa 'an-nân lōt            vǎa*  
 3    1nk thing-that    right:away    pcl(q)  
 'You gave them Lao money, and they just "that thing"-ed  
 right away, did they?'

The speaker is avoiding explicitly referring to the exchange of money for goods, and I suggest that this accords with the semantic component proposed above, i.e. 'people could think something bad if I say what I'm thinking'. This is perhaps due to two factors. First, to talk openly about money and financial deals is to an extent restricted, at least on a less informal level such as the context in which (22) was uttered. Rachel Dechaineaux (personal communication) has described a meeting of Lao Ministry of Forestry officials, in which the expression *'an-nân* was used ongoingly to refer to the matter of low salary, and the workers' need for



a raise (especially given the plummeting value of the Kip). Lao people are generally quite accepting of less-than-ideal conditions, and are often reticent to voice any desire to change their situation, especially in public contexts. The idea of employees asking project directors for a raise in an official setting is so face-threatening that apparently it was very difficult for anyone to bring themselves to actually utter the words required. The expression '*an-nân* 'that thing' was available as an avoidance tactic in this case. (Note that neither *you-know-what* nor *what-do-you-call-it* would be at all appropriate in the same situation in English.)

A second factor which may have encouraged the speaker of (22) to use '*an-nân* for avoidance may relate to a kind of superstition about openly mentioning anything to do with good luck, or lucky deals that are not yet confirmed. Since the purchase in question was brand new, and since the speaker suspects I was getting a very nice deal, he perhaps did not want to risk 'ruining' that by openly referring to it.

Note that in (21, 22), '*an-nân* is treated grammatically as a verb, which as we saw above is much less an option for *what-do-you-call-it* and *you-know-what* in English. Thus, it would seem that the semantics of '*an-nân* refer more explicitly to the overall proposition that is being avoided, rather than a 'thing' being discussed.

All this would suggest the following definition for the avoidance usages of '*an-nân*':

- (23) '*an-nân*  
 a. I could say something about someone/something  
 b. I don't want to say it now,  
     because if I say it now, someone could think something  
     bad  
 c. I say: '*an-nân* ('that thing')  
 d. I think you know what I could say

The definition accounts for the distribution and import of '*an-nân*, as well as the contrast with the distribution and import of the English expressions discussed in §1.1 and §1.2, above. That these contrasts exist, and that they can be accounted for by the definitions provided, shows that they are simply *not* 'vacuous'.

In closing this section, let me note an important feature of the NSM style of explicating encoded semantics, namely its cross-linguistic validity and verifiability, made possible by the methodological principle of using only lexical and grammatical universals (or virtual universals)

in the definitions. This provides a calibrated system for universal comparison of semantic structures. Thus, (23) may be directly rendered into Lao, with minimal slippage, making possible direct discussion and verification of the explication with Lao informants (cf. Enfield to appear, for a general survey of NSM expressions in Lao):

- (23') a'. *kuu vâw 'an-dǎj-'an-nǎng kiaw-káp*  
 I say something about  
*phǔu-dǎj-phǔu-nǎng/'an-dǎj-'an-nǎng dǎj*  
 someone/something can  
 b'. *kuu bǔw jàak vâw 'an nǐi diaw-nǐi,*  
 I neg want say thing this now  
*ñǔw vāa thǎa kuu vâw 'an nǐi diaw-nǐi,*  
 because comp if I say thing this now  
*phǔu-dǎj-phǔu-nǎng khǔt 'an-dǎj-'an-nǎng*  
 someone think something  
*bǔw -dii dǎj*  
 bad can  
 c'. *kuu vâw: 'an-nân*  
 I say 'that thing'  
 d'. *kuu khǔt vāa mǎng hǐu vāa kuu*  
 I think comp you know comp I  
*vâw nǎng dǎj*  
 say what can

## 2. Conclusion

Success in communicative exchanges like (1), above (i.e. Mary's eliciting from John the whereabouts of the chuck key), relies crucially on the kinds of context-based processes of inference and intention-attribution that neo-Gricean scholars describe. The widening currency of the study of these processes is likely to revolutionize the way many linguists look at describing language. But there is a danger, in the excitement of exploring these advances, that we may ignore other features of the overall mechanism which remain crucial. Just as the Chomskyan obsession with abstracting 'language' away from usage has resulted in volumes of work which say nothing of communicative realities now known to be indispensable in a proper description of



language, an overzealous radical pragmatist is in danger of producing similarly grave deficiencies, by neglecting the task of accounting for linguistically encoded meaning.<sup>8</sup>

I have argued here that in any account of the mechanisms of linguistic communication, it is necessary to maintain, and attend to, the level of sentence-meaning, where stable and stable semantics are encoded in lexicon and grammar. Invariant encoded semantics of expressions provide anchoring 'clues', both constraining and guiding pragmatic inference. They, too, are a crucial part of interlocutors' 'common ground' (cf. Clark 1996). If expressions like *what-do-you-call-it* were truly 'blank', then their distribution would be unconstrained, contrasting neither with other 'vacuous' expressions in the language, nor with similar 'vacuous' expressions in other languages. But they *are* so constrained. And there are consistent and stable differences which hold between these expressions within and across languages.

The point I have tried to make here is one that Anna Wierzbicka has been making for years. Her 'radically semantic' approach poses a very constructive challenge to radical pragmatists, not just in the theoretical terms described above, but in the challenge of one of her strongest methodological principles, which I call the Principle of Dogged Perseverance. According to this principle, one acknowledges that discovering meaning can be extremely difficult, entailing long periods of very heavy thinking, searching for ways to nail down a semantic invariant amongst all the various usages an expression may have. So the semanticist does not give up easily, but perseveres doggedly in the attempt to uncover encoded semantics (cf. Wierzbicka 1996: Ch. 8). It is all too easy to abandon one's attempts to define an expression, and conclude (*à la* Wittgenstein) that no semantic invariant can be found at all. Wierzbicka has long maintained that just because something seems exceedingly difficult, and/or that previous attempts have failed, this should never justify a conclusion that it is impossible.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, it is true that encoded semantics cannot provide an exhaustive account of linguistic communication and linguistic practices. But it does not follow from this that there are no encoded semantics, nor that encoded semantics are not crucial in the overall mechanism of linguistic communication. We can maintain a quite 'radical' level of *both* semantics *and* pragmatics, without any conceptual or descriptive clash. It seems untenable to suggest that either semantics or pragmatics could explain the full import of linguistic expressions to the exclusion of the other, and I think 'radical-ists' from neither side would really

deny the role of the other if pressed. It may be a matter of emphasis, and perhaps even taste. The point is that, say, Levinson's account of linguistic communication, with pervasive inferential processes involving interactive intelligence (rather than simple 'unpacking' of information parcels from Reddy's (1979) 'conduit'), is in no way incompatible with, say, Wierzbicka's account, in which encoded semantics in linguistic expressions are indispensable, regardless of the extent to which they interact with the background information and speakers' common ground which serve as inferential heuristics. Encoded semantics are equally crucial in guiding people to make the inferences they do, and it is the intention of this paper to argue for more careful attention to their role in the description of this overall process. I submit, along lines argued for many years by Anna Wierzbicka, that it is neither desirable nor possible to dispense with encoded semantics in an account of linguistic communication.

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#### Notes

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1. The distinction between 'sentence-meaning' and 'utterance-meaning' is an important traditional one in semantics and pragmatics (cf. e.g. Lyons 1977, 1995, Levinson 1983). The distinction is nicely described by Wilkins and Hill, using the terms 'semantics 1' and 'semantics 2' corresponding to sentence-meaning and utterance-meaning, respectively: 'Semantics 1 is concerned with the stored communicable information associated with conventional signs... Semantics 2 is concerned with the information derived online as the final interpretation of utterances (and their parts) in particular contexts' (Wilkins and Hill 1995: 213-4; thanks to Cliff Goddard for bringing this quote to my attention).



2. Here, Levinson is in danger of validating a mere caricature and creating a mythical target with the phrase 'the model we used to have'. He makes no reference to anyone who explicitly espoused 'the model', in the extreme form he describes. This is unfortunately reminiscent of the inaccurate portrayals that have fueled a tradition of (misguided) criticism of B. L. Whorf's work (cf. Gumperz and Levinson 1996, Lee 1996). Despite the obvious rhetorical purpose of the context in which Levinson's comments appear, his portrayal of 'the encoding model' is an unfair one, as if anyone who believes that there is semantics encoded in linguistic signs necessarily holds that encoded semantics can *exhaustively* and *exclusively* account for the import of linguistic expressions.
3. One may also have to recognize a certain contribution by the definite article *the* in (1), particularly since by its own semantics, it refers to what is (assumed to be) known between speaker and listener.
4. The definitions are offered in the style of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, or NSM, the method of semantic description developed over the last thirty years by Anna Wierzbicka and colleagues (see Wierzbicka 1996). Whether one considers the system 'primitive', or truly 'universal' in translatability, is immaterial to the analytical precision and practical applicability of the system. No other semantic metalanguage comes close to offering such a fine-grained and verifiable system for cross-linguistic semantic calibration (cf. examples (23, 23'), herein).
5. This might be okay for a certain stock expression of a certain kind of people, such as, say, 'Orange People', with the right intonation, but NOT if *what-do-you-call-it* and *people* were equally and separately stressed, as in *fourteen people* (cf. *blackbird* versus *black bird*).
6. Lao examples are all attested, and checked/discussed with informants. Abbreviations are: 1/2/3 (first/second/third person pronominals); comp (complementizer); crnt (of current relevance); hon (honorific); lnk (linker); pcl (particle); q (question). Orthography follows Enfield 1998.
7. This analysis of 'an-nân' should be taken as preliminary, based on the examples described. As noted above, the expression itself is widely used in deictic and anaphoric reference, and further research is likely to reveal rich variation in those and perhaps other (less specifically indexical) usages.
8. If one truly maintained an attitude that there were no such thing as 'grammar' or 'encoded semantics', then one would see no value in descriptive grammars or dictionaries. While these documents, as they are traditionally produced, may be deficient in many ways, they are nonetheless of immense importance, both practical and theoretical.
9. I call these reasonings the 'Quitter's Fallacy', and the 'Appeal to a Precedent of Failure'. As a former student and colleague of Anna's, one is awestruck by her

sense of unbending intent when it comes to taking up the challenge of nailing definitions (for a classic case, see Wierzbicka 1988: Ch. 10). This is the valuable lesson she imparts year after year to her students – It's hard work, but it can be done. Hence, acknowledgements in prefaces to graduate theses she has supervised refer just as often to her exemplary 'way of life' as to her tutelage or academic guidance.

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