

I. ROZPRAWY I ANALIZY

DOI: 10.17951/et.2018.30.133

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A 'SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT'
ENCODED IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR

The study claims that in English there is a grammatical construction, or even a family of constructions, that expresses the notion of a 'sense of entitlement'. In sentences like *Can I have my apple and cheese, please?*, this notion is expressed with the pronoun *my*. In order to describe the meaning of this construction in a way that would be understandable not only to speakers of English but also those whose languages do not contain the word for 'entitlement', Natural Semantic Metalanguage is used. NSM, in the intention of its creators, allows for descriptions of languages and cultures with the use of universal and semantically simple concepts, present in all languages as lexemes or similar units.

The 'sense of entitlement' is expressed when everyday rituals are violated, which disturbs the speaker, e.g. *Would you leave me finish my breakfast?*. The assumption here is that everyone has the right and wants to perform these regular, ritualistic activities. The range of potential obstacles has not been established at this stage of research but can be captured in the formula "I cannot do now what I always do at this time; this is bad; everybody can know this".

The meaning of a 'sense of entitlement' is connected with such words and expressions as *have the right to, be entitled to, personal space, privacy, violate/disturb/interfere*, which express some of the major assumptions and concerns of contemporary Anglo-culture. Especially interesting is the connection between the 'sense of entitlement' and justice because both are grounded in the existence of voluntarily obeyed principles. It appears that the English grammar contains an implicit understanding that everybody has the right to their personal routine that involves having breakfast (*my breakfast*) or dinner (*my dinner*) in a particular way, or e.g. reading (*my newspaper*). It is bad when the routine is disturbed by others.

KEY WORDS: entitlement; function of pronoun *my*; ritualistic activity; privacy; Natural Semantic Metalanguage

1. Introduction

I will start with a small scene from my life. My twelve-year old grandson Nicky comes to our house on a Saturday afternoon to spend a few hours with me, as he does every week. Nicky is autistic, and like other autistic children, likes routine and repetition. Once inside, almost the first thing Nicky says, with a smile, is this: “Can I have my apple and cheese, please?” This is part of our usual routine: Before we start reading together, as we do every week, I give Nicky some Mozzarella cheese, with a sliced apple.

As so often in my bilingual and bicultural life as a Pole in Australia, I am struck by this use of the word “my”. In Polish, a child would ask for “apple and cheese” (*jabłko i ser*), not for “*moje jabłko i ser*” (*my* apple and cheese).

Later on, on the same afternoon, I note that Nicky asks for “my cookie”. Here, too, Nicky is referring to a routine: After every chapter of a book, or act of a play, that he reads to me aloud, he is “entitled” to a biscuit (in Australian English, “biscuit”, but years ago, Nicky and I got into the habit of calling this particular kind of biscuit “cookie” influenced by Sesame Street’s Cookie Monster). In complying with Nicky’s expectation and giving him a cookie after every chapter I am responding to what I clearly perceive as a ‘sense of entitlement’, expressed by means of a particular grammatical construction, one that is, to the best of my knowledge, unique to English.

I use the phrase “sense of entitlement” advisedly: this is, I believe, what the word “my” implies here. I have been noticing, and taking note, of this use of the word “my” for many years, in conversations with my Australian family members. When my daughters were children, they would also refer to “my breakfast”, “my lunch”, “my walk”, whenever they didn’t want to be interrupted in some daily activity to which, they felt, they were entitled; or they would ask for something, like Nicky, with the same implication of “entitlement”. I have not studied this use of “my” in English systematically, but I have noticed it outside my family, too, in the speech of adults, as well as children.

But to describe the meaning of the construction in a question accurately, we need to go beyond a rough approximation such as “sense of entitlement”. To capture this meaning in a way which would make sense both to native speakers of English and to cultural outsiders who have no word like “entitlement” in their own languages, we need to have an appropriate analytical and descriptive framework. As scores of earlier studies in the semantic of grammatical constructions demonstrate, such a framework provided by the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach. (See NSM Homepage.)

2. The framework: NSM and Minimal English

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) is a mini-language which corresponds to the intersection – the common core – of all languages. This intersection of all languages has been identified empirically, through extensive cross-linguistic studies undertaken by many scholars over many years (see e.g. Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 1994, 2002; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; Wierzbicka 2014). Describing languages and cultures in NSM, and through NSM, means describing them in terms of simple and universal human concepts, which can be found as words (or as word-like elements) in all languages (see Table 1). This applies to norms and attitudes as much as to any other domain: by using NSM, we can explore norms and attitudes from a universal point of view, independent of any particular languages and cultures. (For references, see the NSM homepage: <<https://intranet.secure.griffith.edu.au/schools-departments/natural-semantic-metalanguage>> [short URL bit.ly/1XUoRRV]).

Using this set of universal human concepts (semantic primes) as their bedrock, NSM researchers have also developed, in recent years, a new descriptive tool known as “Minimal Language” (see e.g. Goddard ed. 2018; Wierzbicka 2017 and In press). Usually, the term “Minimal Language” is used for a somewhat enlarged version of the NSM, with some additional vocabulary allowed for a particular purpose. For example, in my book *What Christians Believe: The Story of God and People in Minimal English* (In press), where the “Christian story” is presented in a narrative form, I permit myself to use words like “shepherd”, “bread” and “wine”, which are not universal but which are integral to the theme. With one exception: the word “God”, no such additional vocabulary is needed for the domain discussed in the present paper, so the analyses presented here do not go beyond “classical NSM”. On the other hand, the label “Minimal Language” can also be used as an umbrella term, covering both the enlarged versions of NSM (such as Minimal English, Minimal Polish or Minimal Chinese) and the NSM itself (as a limiting case). Essentially it is in this second sense that the term “Minimal Language” is used in the present paper.

3. “My breakfast”

I will start with some characteristic examples from an English corpus (Collins Wordbanks):

- (1) Would you leave me finish my breakfast?

Table 1. Semantic primes (English exponents) (Goddard and 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 allomorphs (indicated with ~). – Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

- (2) But, sir, would you allow me to finish my breakfast?
- (3) One of these days I'll get to finish my breakfast in peace.
- (4) Righto, I'll be there. But I'm going to finish my breakfast first. It's a privilege of rank.
- (5) Go on. I'm having my breakfast. Just let me finish. All right?
- (6) He looked up with a scowl. "Since when has it been necessary for you to stand over me while I finish my breakfast? Go."

In all the examples above, the phrase "my breakfast" is combined with the verb "to finish". There are also many examples of sentences with "my breakfast" without the verb "to finish" in the corpus, but the combination *with* the verb is particularly characteristic and telling: roughly speaking, it implies that somebody's routine seen as sacrosanct is being interrupted. The assumption is that the person spoken about has the right to finish their breakfast in peace, and more generally, that everyone is "entitled" to keep to their breakfast routine.

Trying to capture the meaning encoded in this construction in simple and cross-translatable words and phrases, I would start with the following provisional explication.

I want to eat my breakfast now. (Can I finish my breakfast?)

I want to do something now as I do every day at this time.

It will be good for me if I can do it as I want, it will be bad for me if I can't.

I think about it like this:

If I can't do it because someone says to me now: "you can't do it",

I can say: "this someone is doing something bad",

other people can't not say the same

To test this preliminary semantic formula against some further material (for the moment, still with the phrase "my breakfast"), I have selected the following examples from the same corpus:

(7) Rowdy Rainbow puppet Zippy is making his telly comeback – by advertising Marmite. The fun ad shows the Orange motormouth rant: "Where's my breakfast?" A plate of Marmite on toast is put in front of him but he zips his mouth up in disgust.

(8) I didn't have time to have my breakfast so I decided to take it on the run.

(9) Your first step to healthier looking nails. I do not want to see a yellowed, chipped toenail while I'm eating my breakfast.

(10) What do you mean, doing them all now? Listen, Mandelson -I want my breakfast on the table when I come downstairs. Why do you think I let you stay here? Any more of this and I'll pack you off back to your hovel in St Helens. . .

(11) Gloria finished making her herbal tea and turned to glare at Tamar, who was helping herself to a slice of Jett's toast. If I had my breakfast in an atmosphere like that, I'd be sucking Rennies for the rest of the day.

(12) "Sorry, Miss, I'm just here about the lupins. Mr Withington knows all about everything, he can fill you in far better than I. My wife and my breakfast are waiting for me in the dining-room, so you'll have to excuse me."

(13) As soon as the first rays of morning light came through my window, I hopped out of bed and took my shower. I wanted to have my breakfast quickly and go out on deck to watch us approach Boston.

(14) By the third call I found myself yelling for someone to please bring me my breakfast.

(15) Matt said, "Cloud Manor is inland, Tarra, and British earthquakes rarely do more than rattle dishes." I beamed at him and said, "Oh, thank you so much, Matt. I am so relieved I can now eat my breakfast in safety."

When we consider these further examples (7–15) it becomes clear that the preliminary semantic formula prepared for examples 1–5 was too narrow. Evidently, it is not always the case that someone's sacrosanct routine, to which they feel entitled, is being unjustifiably interrupted: it could also be that this routine can be, so to speak, "threatened" by someone else's inconsiderate behavior, or lack of cooperation. For example, the person "yelling for someone to please bring me 'my breakfast' (example 14) is

implying that someone is not doing what they should be doing to ensure that I can have “my breakfast” (to which I am entitled).

So here is another attempted explication for what looks like the same construction:

“...yelling for someone to please bring me my breakfast”

I want to do something now as I do every day at this time.

It will be good for me if I can do it as I want, it will be bad for me if I can't.

I can do it if someone else does something.

I think about it like this:

If I can't do it as I want because this someone doesn't do something now

I can say: “this someone is doing something bad”,

other people can't not say the same

4. “My newspaper”

Before returning to my grandson Nicholas and his cookies, let me consider a few examples involving another routine regarded by many Anglo/English speakers as sacrosanct: a person's right to their daily newspaper.

(16) I told them this and they refused to accept it at face value. “Are you sure you didn't see anything?” “I'm positive.” “I find that hard to believe.” “I was focusing on my newspaper and my breakfast. I'm getting ready to go to work.”

(17) There was nothing funny about this neighbor of ours, but then I was thinking about something in my own life . . . I was desperate for my newspaper and one morning I got up to get it and said, “Sweetie, where's my robe?” She said, “It's wet. It's not dry. It's in the dryer.” And I said, “But I need my paper. It's out there.”

(18) “Those who lunch and breakfast without a newspaper is a horse without a saddle. You are just riding bareback. Take away my ham, take away my eggs, even my chili, but leave my newspaper,” said Will Rogers.

(19) I loved Geneva and Switzerland. It was my first opportunity to be there. It is a lovely, clean and friendly city and country. But it is frightfully expensive. On the Saturday afternoon I sat reading my newspaper for two hours at a lakeside cafe. And a Diet Coke, ice cream and coffee cost me £13!

(20) It seemed good that sex was no longer a subject to be hidden, that writers and artists were given the freedom to shock and that there was no longer a stigma attached to being an unmarried mum. But there are days now when, reading my newspaper, I want to howl with rage. Few could have missed the reports that say teenagers have more babies, more venereal disease, more abortions – and that's leaving aside the drinking, drug use and illiteracy.

Examples such as these appear to make it clear that the phrase “my newspaper” is often used in English to refer to a “habit” – something that one does regularly, because one wants to, and that one assumes other people do regularly, because they want to. Some components therefore seem to be clear:

I do this often (always/everyday) at this time.
 I do it because I want to do it.
 I think about it like this: many other people do the same.
 It is good if people can do it as they want.

Many sentences with “my newspaper” that can be found in Collins Wordbanks do not appear to go beyond the three components stated above, and in particular, do not appear to imply something like “a sense of entitlement”. But it is not always easy to judge without a larger context.

5. “My dinner”

In the corpus Wordbanks Online, we can find close to 200 sentences with the phrase “my dinner”, many of them clearly implying something like “entitlement” to getting dinner on time and being able to eat it without interruption. I will start with several examples from the corpus:

- (21) “Where’s my dinner?” he says. He might be four. “Not ready,” she says.
 (22) My friend took her five-year-old son to church for morning service for the first time. He sat patiently through several hymns but after ten minutes of the sermon he sprang to his feet shouting: “Hurry up, I want my dinner!”
 (23) “It’s what they’re all saying up the canteen.” “Oh yes?” “You don’t go up there very often do you?” “No, I prefer a bit of peace and quiet with my dinner.”
 (24) I’d finished at six o’clock and I always have my dinner about six thirty in the canteen when I’m on this shift to save my mum having to cook.
 (25) Orico dusted his plump hands. “Good. That settles that. Now, by the gods, I want my dinner.”
 (26) Greeley makes a great show of consulting his watch, then clicks it shut again and nods back toward the mob below. “Let them burst their throats bawling at me. If I cannot eat my dinner on time, my life is not worth anything, anyway. Theodore?”
 (27) F1: “[...] We’ll have to go home soon and Nanny said ‘Why?’ I said ‘Because it’ll be time for FX to have her feed.’ Well we all got stuck in the car park and it came to the time of your feed and we weren’t home. And did you scream. Yes. All the way home in the car from Place Name you screamed and screamed.” <interrupting> F3: “Cos I wanted my dinner.” F1: “and screamed ‘cos you wanted your dinner.”
 (28) ... his reasoning was all very well and it worked for a while, but as midnight came and went Hunter began to feel both resentful and uneasy. “This is all very well,” he muttered to himself, “but what about my dinner? I have to eat as well. Yet if I go out now, she might return in the meantime and I might miss her once again. She could have been a little more considerate.”

The first two examples above are particularly interesting. The fact that they come from young children illustrates how widespread the “my dinner” routine is in English, and how culturally basic is the “sense of entitlement” which it expresses. Some of the components proposed in the “my breakfast” section clearly apply here too, although the full explication may require further adjustments:

I want my dinner

I want to do something now as I do every day at this time.

It will be good for me if I can do it as I want, it will be bad for me if I can't.

I can do it if someone else does something.

I think about it like this:

If I can't do it as I want because this someone doesn't do something now

I can say: "this someone is doing something bad",

other people can't not say the same

What is not quite clear to me at this stage is the exact range of possible "obstacles" which may prevent the speaker from doing what they want to do at that particular time: sometimes, one can't eat dinner "as one wants, when one wants" because someone else says: "you can't do it"; sometimes, one can't do it because someone else wants us to do something else at the time; sometimes, one can't do it because someone else has not done something on time, and so on. The optimal way of stating the different options, or reducing them to a common denominator requires further investigation. The general cultural assumption, though, is clear: "I can't do something now as I always do at this time, this is bad, everyone can know this."

6. "My apple and cheese"

To return now to my grandson Nicky's requests for "my apple and cheese" and "my cookie", they clearly do not envisage interruptions or obstacles of any kind; rather, they express Nicky's sense of confident expectation that his "entitlements" will be honoured.

Can I have my apple and cheese, please?

I want to do something now as I always do at this time.

It will be good for me if I can do it as I want, it will be bad for me if I can't.

I can do it if someone else does something.

I think about it like this:

If I can't do it as I want because this someone doesn't do something now

I can say: "this someone is doing something bad",

other people can't not say the same

What seems unusual about Nicky's use of the construction is that it doesn't refer to any common daily routines, such as breakfast, dinner, a newspaper, a walk, a shower. In Nicky's case, the routines to which he feels entitled are individual rather than shared by many people. Could this be somehow connected to Nicky's autism? Or do other people – those not on the autism spectrum – also express their personal "sense of entitlement" (unrelated to widely shared routines) in this way? Like much else about this construction, the matter requires further investigation.

7. Conclusion

My conclusion is that English has either one construction, or a family of constructions, embodying a culture-specific meaning which can be loosely labelled “a sense of entitlement”. I have not been able to investigate the relevant material exhaustively enough to establish whether it is in fact a single construction or more, and if it's one, what the full set of its invariant components is. Some components, however, are clear enough. They are:

A tentative explication of the construction as such

I want to do something now as I do every day at this time.

It will be good for me if I can do it as I want, it will be bad for me if I can't.

I can do it if someone else does (doesn't do) something.

I think about it like this:

If I can't do it as I want because this someone does (doesn't do) something now

I can say: “this someone is doing something bad”,

other people can't not say the same

This meaning is related to those embedded in words and phrases such as “to have a right”, “to be entitled to”, “personal space”, “privacy”, “intrude”, perhaps, above all, “fairness”, which reflect some of the central preoccupations and assumptions of modern Anglo culture. I have studied some of those links between meanings and culture in my 2006a book *English: Meaning and Culture* and in other publications (see e.g. Wierzbicka 2006b; 2010), and so have other NSM researchers.

The link between “the sense of entitlement” and “fairness” is particularly interesting, as both these concepts presuppose “rules” and “consensus” about the need for everyone to comply with rules. Discussing “fairness” in their entry on “Ethnopragmatics” in the *Routledge Handbook of Language and Culture*, Goddard and Ye (2015) write:

As noted by Wierzbicka (2006), appeals to *fairness* and expressions such as *That's not fair!* are commonly heard in daily life from both children and adults, and across informal and formal registers, e.g. in scholarly works, government publications, public administration, business, trade, and law. Yet unlike the word *just*, which arguably represents a pan-European concept, *fair* lacks precise equivalents even in other European languages. [...] One can easily describe a teacher, for example, as *fair* or *unfair*, but hardly as *just* or *unjust*. Likewise, *rules* can be *fair* or *unfair* (and *rules* apply in situations in which people want to do things together). The link between *fairness* and *rules* highlights the fact that the idea of *fairness* implies a potential consensus about what can and can't be done within the “rules of the game”, so to speak. (p. 79)

Well, it appears that Anglo “rules of the game” include, inter alia, everyone's “entitlement” to their personal routines, especially common daily routines such as breakfast, dinner, newspaper, perhaps a walk, perhaps

a shower. There appears to be a consensus that it is bad if such routines are violated by other people – a consensus now encoded in English grammar.

The construction labeled here as “a sense of entitlement” has a first-person singular orientation and relies, especially, on the word “my”. It is not, however, concerned with “personal possessions” (based, conceptually, on the semantic prime MINE), but rather, on “personal routines”: it is good if everyone can think about some things: “I can do it, other people can’t say to me: ‘you can’t do it’”. The idea of “personal possessions” is wide spread outside the Anglosphere, and finds lexical expression in phrases like “własność osobista” in Polish or “ličnaja sobstvennost’” in Russian. On the other hand, the idea of, roughly speaking, being “entitled” to certain personal routines appears to be specific to Anglo culture. The fact that this idea is embedded in modern English grammar is a clear indication of its cultural significance. The roots of this idea in the history and culture of the speakers of English require further investigation, as does, of course, its semantics.

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„POCZUCIE UPRAWNIENIA” ZAKODOWANE W GRAMATYCE ANGIELSKIEJ

Autorka zauważa, że język angielski ma konstrukcję, a być może nawet rodzinę konstrukcji gramatycznych, pozwalającą wyrażać specyficzne dla angielskiej kultury znaczenie „poczucia uprawnienia” („poczucie bycia uprawnionym do”). W zdaniach takich jak *Can I have my apple and cheese, please?* nośnikiem owego „poczucia uprawnienia” jest zaimek *my* ‘mój’. Aby opisać znaczenie tej konstrukcji w sposób zrozumiały nie tylko dla użytkowników języka angielskiego, ale także dla tych, których języki nie mają odpowiedników ang. słowa *entitlement* ‘uprawnienie’, zastosowany został Naturalny Metajęzyk Semantyczny. W intencji jego twórców, ten minijęzyk pozwala opisywać języki i kultury za pomocą wspólnych wszystkim językom, uniwersalnych i semantycznie prostych pojęć, które w tych językach mają wykładniki bądź w postaci słów, bądź w postaci elementów podobnych do słów.

„Poczucie uprawnienia” wyrażane jest wówczas, gdy dochodzi do zakłócenia codziennych rutynowych zachowań, do których mówiący jest przyzwyczajony, np. *Would you leave me finish my breakfast?* (‘Czy pozwolisz mi skończyć moje śniadanie?’). Zakłada, że każdy ma prawo do wykonywania rutynowych czynności, do których przywykł i które chce wykonywać. Zakres przeszkód, które uniemożliwiają mówiącemu robienie tego, co chce w danym momencie, nie został na tym etapie badań sprecyzowany. W przybliżeniu można go ująć formułą: „Nie mogę teraz robić czegoś, co zawsze robię w tej chwili; to jest złe; każdy może to wiedzieć”.

Znaczenie „poczucia uprawnienia” wiąże się z takimi słowami i wyrażeniami, jak *mieć prawo, być uprawnionym, przestrzeń osobista, prywatność, naruszać/przeszkadzać/zakłócać*, które wyrażają niektóre z głównych założeń i trosk współczesnej kultury anglojęzycznej. Szczególnie interesujący jest związek między „poczuciem uprawnienia” a sprawiedliwością, ponieważ oba pojęcia zakładają istnienie zasad i zgodę na ich przestrzeganie. Wydaje się, że w gramatyce angielskiej zakodowany jest konsensus co do tego, że wszyscy mają prawo do osobistej rutyny, na którą składają się czynności takie, jak między innymi jedzenie w określony sposób śniadania (*my breakfast*) czy obiadu (*my dinner*) albo czytanie gazety (*my newspaper*) i jest złe, kiedy procedury te są zakłócanie przez inne osoby.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: uprawnienie; funkcja ang. zaimka *my* ‘mój/moja/moje’; działanie rutynowe; prywatność; Naturalny Metajęzyk Semantyczny

