Re-thinking THINK: Contrastive semantics of Swedish and English

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1. Introduction

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework originated by Anna Wierzbicka (1996, and other works) has long postulated THINK as a semantic prime, and a large body of cross-linguistic research demonstrates that lexical exponents of THINK can be identified in a diversity of languages (Goddard and Wierzbicka, eds 1994, 2002; Goddard 2003; Wierzbicka 1998). This result is challenged, however, by the apparent existence in Swedish and other Scandinavian languages of several basic-level "verbs of thinking". Viberg (1980) and Fortescue (2001) describe the uses of these verbs in the following terms:

tänka 'thinking about', "cogitation"
tro "opinion"; "used in relation to verifiable state of affairs"
tycka "to express judgements based on private experiences or subjective evaluation"

Dictionaries and native speakers often gloss *tro* as 'believe', and *tycka* as 'think, be of the opinion'.

The three verbs are exemplified in the following examples. Sentence (1) shows a typical example of *tänka* as 'thinking about' (with Swedish *på* corresponding, in this context, to English *about*). Sentences (2) and (3) respectively exemplify *tro* and *tycka*. Notice the clausal complement introduced by complementiser *att* (corresponding to English *that*). *Tro* can be used not only for casual, mundane judgements, as in (2), but also to state firmly held beliefs.

(1)   *Jag mår så illa när jag tänker på det!*
          'I feel so nauseous when I think about it!'

(2)   *Jag tror/*tänker att det blir soligt i morgon.*
          'I think it's going to be sunny tomorrow.'

(3)   *Jag tycker/*tänker att hon är söt/trevlig.*
          'I think she's pretty/nice.'

The crucial thing about this data set is that Swedish *tänka* is impossible in contexts like (2) and (3), while English *think* is perfectly ordinary and natural. We therefore seem to see a situation where, as Fortescue (2001) puts it, "languages divide up the semantic space" of cognition differently.

In this connection, one recalls Vendler's (1967) widely accepted view that even English *think* has "two basic senses":

> *Thinking* functions differently in *He is thinking about Jones* and in *He thinks that Jones is a rascal*. The first 'thinking' is a process, the second a state. The first sentence can be used to describe what one is doing; the second cannot. (Vendler 1967: 110)

In this study we will argue that the primary senses of Swedish *tänka* and English *think* are in fact semantically identical, and correspond to semantic prime THINK as proposed in the NSM theory. We will propose and justify semantic explications for Swedish *tro* and *tycka*, as in (2)-(3), and for the use of *I think* in English as an epistemic formula (Aijmer 1997), as in the English translations of (2)-(3). In the process we will discover that previous NSM assumptions about semantic prime THINK have been incorrectly influenced by language-specific properties of English *think*. Likewise, we will find cause to amend the widely held Vendlerian view of the relation between *thinking about* and *thinking that*.

2. THINK and TÄNKA: exponents of the same semantic prime

Tänka is clearly the most basic verb in the Swedish lexicon of cognition, far outstripping *tro* and *tycka* in terms of morphological and phraseological productivity. Some of its numerous derivatives are listed in (4).

(4)   *tanke* 'thought', *tankfull* 'thoughtful', *tänkbar* 'thinkable', *tänkesätt* 'way of thinking', *tänkare* 'thinker', *misstänka* 'suspect(v)', *tankspridd* 'distracted, absentminded', *tänkvärd* 'remarkable, worth thinking about'

If one of the three Swedish verbs of thinking is going to match semantic prime THINK, *tänka* is clearly the most likely candidate.

In this section we show that all the syntactic frames currently proposed for semantic prime THINK (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2002) are equally possible with both *think* and *tänka*. Example (5) shows THINK, in parallel English and Swedish versions, in the "the topic of cognition" construction. (6) shows an elaborated version with a substantive complement SOMETHING/*NÅGONTING*.

(5a)   X thinks about Y
(5b)   *X tänker på Y*

(6a)   X thinks something (good/bad) about Y
(6b)   *X tänker någonting (bra/dåligt) om Y*

The examples in (7) and (8) illustrate the "way of thinking" construction (WAY is regarded as a nominal "allolex" of semantic prime LIKE, cf. Goddard (2002: 313)). Notice that the fixed Swedish expression *det här* (though usually written as two words) is the semantic equivalent of THIS; conversely, the prime THE SAME, which has a fixed two-word exponent in English, is expressed by a single Swedish word *samma*. The difference in form in the Swedish equivalents of WAY (*sättet/sätt)* is due to grammatical gender and has no semantic import in this context.

(7a)   X thinks in this way
(7b)   *X tänker på det=här sättet*

(8a)   X thinks in the same way
(8b)   *X tänker på samma sätt*

The examples in (9) and (10) show semantic prime THINK in two versions of its "quasi-quotational" frame. In example (9b), Swedish *såhär* is a portmanteau for the combination LIKE THIS, though it is also possible to express the combination as *som det=här* [like this], as in (10b).

(9a)   X thinks like this: – –
(9b)   *X tänker såhär: – –*

(10a)   sometimes a person thinks something like this: – –
(10b)   *ibland tänker en person någonting som det=här: – –*

The most problematical frame for THINK, so far as Swedish is concerned, is the propositional complement frame, i.e. the *think that* frame. One might imagine, given the unacceptability of *tänka att* in contexts like (2) and (3), and the typical characterisation of *tänka* as denoting "cogitation", that *tänka* simply cannot take an *att*-complement. But this is not so. Although *tänka* THINK cannot be used in this way to state an "opinion", an *att*-complement can be used to depict an occurrent thought, i.e. a concrete thought which is specified as occurring at a particular time, as in (11) and (12). In (12b), the temporal adverb *då* 'then' acts a portmanteau for the semantic combination 'at this time (not now)'.

In cross-linguistic terms, it appears that English may be the "unusual" language, in allowing *think* to be used so freely in "opinion" contexts: see section 4 below (also Goddard 2003).

(11a)   X now thinks that [——]$_S$
(11a)   *nu tänker X att [——]$_S$*

(12a)   at that time, X thought that [——]$_S$
(12b)   *då tänkte X att [——]$_S$*

These facts cut across Vendler's (1967) distinction between a dynamic time-bound process ('thinking about' = "cogitation") vs. a timeless state ('thinking that' = "opinion"). Actually, Wierzbicka (1998: 300-304) had already observed that Vendler's dichotomy does not correspond even to the facts of English, in view of sentences like 'I think that someone is knocking at the door'. A comparable "time-bound" use of *tänka att* in Swedish is given in (13).

(13)   *När jag hörde det, tänkte jag att vi kanske hade en chans.*
          'When I heard that, I thought that maybe we had a chance.'

We conclude that contrary to initial appearances, English *think* and Swedish *tänka* express the same semantic prime, at least in the narrow range of syntactic frames which are found in the natural semantic metalanguage. If we stick to these frames, therefore, we can compose semantic explications in either English-based NSM or Swedish-based NSM, confident that we will be able to transpose the explications into the other language. We now turn to the task of explicating Swedish *tro* and *tycka*.

3.   Explicating Swedish *tro* and *tycka*

For reasons of space, our treatment must be rather abbreviated; for an expanded version, see Goddard and Karlsson (in press). Examples (14)-(17) will help give a further insight into the meaning differences between these two verbs. The contrast shown in the first pair is particularly revealing (we thank Elisabet Engdahl for these). In (14), with *tro*, the speaker backs up his or her assessment with a known fact, whereas in (15), with *tycka*, the backup relies on a sensory experience.

(14)   *Jag tror att potatisen är färdig nu. Den har kokat i tjugo minuter.*
          'I think the potatoes are done now. They've been cooking for twenty minutes.'

(15)   *Jag tycker att potatisen är färdig nu. Den känns mjuk.*
          'I think the potatoes are done now. They feel soft.'

(16) would be an appropriate way for the speaker to report his or her own subjective evaluation of the music in question. A speaker who frames his or her evaluation in such a way has presumably experienced the music first

hand. (17) would be an appropriate way to pass on an authoritative evaluation from someone else, presumed to be reliable in this context. The speaker will not have experienced the music him or herself.

(16)   *Men jag tycker det är ganska bra musik ändå.*
         'But I still think the music's pretty good.'

(17)   *Men jag tror det är ganska bra musik ändå.*
         'But even so I believe the music's pretty good.'

Before proposing an explication for *tro*, we would like to add two observations about *tro* compared with English *believe*. (Unfortunately space does not permit a fuller contrastive analysis. Wierzbicka (in press, ch. 5) includes an extensive treatment of the semantics of English epistemic verbs, including *believe*, *suppose*, *assume*, *imagine*, and many others.) First, *tro* is more "evidentiary" in orientation than English *believe* and does not imply the same degree of personal conviction. Second, *tro* seems to make allowance for the possibility that others might not share the speaker's view. As Linnéa Anglemark (pc) has pointed out, statements with *jag tror* can in most cases be challenged by interlocutors without any resultant bad feelings on either part. Both these facts are illustrated in the exchange in (18).

(18)   A: *Jag tror att det blir soligt i morgon.*
         B: *Nej, på radion sade de att det skulle regna.*

         A: 'I think it's going to be sunny tomorrow.'
         B: 'No, on the radio they said it's going to rain.'

We now propose an explication for Swedish *tro,* in the frame *Jag tror att,* i.e. "I *tro* that". The explication is presented in parallel versions in English and Swedish NSMs. As one can see, as well as voicing the speaker's view ('I say: I think like this: – –'), it contains an "epistemic disclaimer" ('I don't say I know it'), an evidential component referring to an item of the speaker's knowledge ('I think like this because I know something'), and an allowance for a contrary point of view ('I know someone else can think not like this').

[A1]   *Jag tror att – – =*

         I say: I think like this – –
         I don't say I know it
         I think like this because I know something
         I know someone else can think not like this

[A2]   *Jag tror att – – =*

         jag säger: jag tänker såhär – –
         jag säger inte att jag vet det
         jag tänker såhär på grund av att jag vet någonting
         jag vet att någon annan kan tänka på ett annat sätt

Moving now to *tycka*, we propose the following explication, again presented in parallel versions. Comparing the explications, it can be seen that although they share most components, the critical difference resides in the nature of the evidential component. Whereas with *tro* this is based on something the speaker KNOWS, with *tycka* it is based on something the speaker FEELS.

[B1]   *Jag tycker att – – =*

         I say: I think like this – –
         I don't say I know it

I think like this because I feel something
I know someone else can think not like this

[B2]   *Jag tycker att – – =*

jag säger: jag tänker såhär – –
jag säger inte att jag vet det
jag tänker såhär på grund av att jag känner någonting
jag vet att någon annan kan tänka på ett annat sätt

The proposal that *tycka* is grounded in the speaker's feeling not only enables us to capture the intuition that this verb is more "personal" than *tro*, it is also compatible with some further subtleties of usage; for example, that *tycka* can be used equally about emotional, aesthetic and sensory matters (just like semantic prime FEEL). It is also a more appropriate characterisation than a complex expression like "personal experience", which would not fit examples like (18), for instance.

(18)   *Det tycker jag faktiskt är en skymf emot fäderna till Gemenskapen och sedermera EU.*
         'I think that this is actually an insult to the founding fathers of the Union, viz. EU.'

4.   Language-specific peculiarities of English *think*

How can we account for the fact that English *think that* can be used in "opinion" contexts, e.g. *She thinks that Max did it*? This usage evidently conveys something semantically "weaker" or less specified than Swedish *tro*; but since one cannot use Swedish *tänka* in these contexts, how can be it explicated in terms of *tänka*?

Our proposal is that these usages involve a kind of "generic" time-specification, as in the following explication. As can be seen, there is no problem with rendering this explication into Swedish, using *tänka* as the exponent of THINK, because the initial clause 'when she thinks about it' provides sufficient temporal grounding to support an *att*-complement.

[C1]   *She thinks that [- -] =*

         when she thinks about it
         she thinks that [- -]

[C2]   *She thinks that [- -] =*

         när hon tänker på det
         tänker hon att [- -]

A different treatment is required for the "performative-like" combination *I think*, i.e. with first-person subject, in present tense, and without an explicit *that* complementiser. A number of scholars (Thompson and Mulac 1991; Aijmer 1997; Kärkkäinen 1998; Scheibman 2001; Wierzbicka 2002) have argued convincingly that this *I think* is a conversational formula of English, with distinct semantic and pragmatic functions. It has a very high frequency, even compared with comparable formulas in other European languages, and serves a range of conventionalised conversational functions. Formula *I think* also has distinctive syntactic properties, especially its so-called "parenthetical" syntax, i.e. the fact that it can occur clause-medially or clause-finally. The general view emerging from the studies just cited is that formula *I think* functions like an epistemic adverb with respect to a single clause, rather than as a full complement-taking verb.

Aijmer (1997: 21) describes its function as follows: "the tentative *I think* expresses uncertainty (epistemic modality) or softens an assertion which may be too blunt (interactive meaning)". Wierzbicka (2002, in press) has

advanced the following account and explications. A normal declarative sentence, she points out, conveys the impression of a "knowledge claim" by the speaker. From a semantic point of view therefore, a simple sentence like *Bill wrote it* is accompanied by the illocutionary assumption spelt out in (19). The effect of prefacing such a sentence with *I think*, on Wierzbicka's analysis, is not only to present the content within the frame 'I think like this', but concomitantly to add a disclaimer about knowledge, as spelt out in (20). By the way, note that the "disclaimer" component reads 'I don't say I know it', rather than 'I don't know it': the speaker is not professing a lack of knowledge, but rather explicitly declining to claim knowledge.

(19)   *Bill wrote it =*

       I say: Bill wrote it
       I know it

(20)   *I think Bill wrote it =*

       I say: I think like this – Bill wrote it
       I don't say I know it

To capture the effect of *I think* in a declarative sentence with a modal, such as *We should go,* we must first do a bit of semantic analysis on the modal itself. In the case of *should*, we suggest that this can be done roughly as in (21); that is, to say *We should go* is to say that it would be good if we go, and not good if we don't go. (The => symbol is intended to indicate that this semantic breakdown may be partial and/or approximate.) The effect of prefacing such an utterance with formula *I think* is again to add the disclaimer 'I don't say I know it', with a "softening" effect.

(21)   *We should go =>*

       I say: it will be good if we go, it will not be good if we don't go
       I know it

(22)   *I think we should go =>*

       I say: I think like this – it will be good if we go, it will not be good if we don't go
       I don't say I know it

As one would expect at this point, the explications in (19)-(22) can be transposed into Swedish-based NSM without difficulty.

Wierzbicka (2002, in press) argues that the evolution of the English *I think* formula, and its extraordinarily high frequency, is consistent with the existence of a portfolio of English-specific cultural scripts linked with the ideal of personal autonomy, including autonomy of thinking. In this context, she argues, there is a need to distinguish explicitly what one knows from what one thinks – a need directly served by the *I think* formula. We cannot discuss this matter here, except to say that the lexical discrimination in Swedish between *tänka, tro* and *tycka* presumably indicates the existence of some Swedish-specific cultural scripts which remain to be investigated.

5.   Conclusions

We have argued that English *think* and Swedish *tänka* are exponents of a single semantic prime THINK. At the same time, however, we have acknowledged and sought to explain the considerable divergences in usage patterns between the two words in ordinary discourse in their respective languages. This has required us to propose explications for the other common Swedish verbs of cognition, *tro* and *tycka*, neither of which has any exact equivalent in English. We have also identified and explicated two English-specific uses of *think*, namely

the generic or "opinion" frame (as in *She thinks that* --) and the conversational formula *I think,* which have no exact equivalents in Swedish. Since the explications are composed within the narrow confines of the natural semantic metalanguage, however, they are freely transposable between the two languages.

The contrastive exercise has also enabled us to more precisely specify the universal syntactic properties of semantic prime THINK. It has emerged that some earlier NSM hypotheses (as presented in Goddard and Wierzbicka (1994), for example) were invalidly influenced by the peculiarities of English. In particular, it seems clear now that the propositional complement construction, i.e. the *think that* frame, is possible only in relation to a temporally-grounded concrete thought.

In short, the results of this study consolidate the status of THINK as a universal conceptual prime in the face of apparent counterevidence, while at the same time enabling us to characterise its syntax with greater precision.

Acknowledgements

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www.une.edu.au/arts/LCL/disciplines/linguistics/nsmpage.htm