

SEMANTIC UNIVERSALS

One of the subjects I stumbled upon is the work of Anna Wierzbicka, Professor in linguistics. In 1972 she wrote a book entitled “Semantic Primitives” and since then there has been a lot of linguistic studies based on her theory, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage. In short her work aims at finding the semantic primitives of human language (that is: indefinable words/concepts occurring in all the languages of the world) and build a metalanguage based on these primitives, such that all the words of all the languages can be defined by these primitives.

This linguistic research is interesting because it uses a solid method for constructing theory: the use of axioms and deriving theorems from the axiomatic system. Euclid in his “Elements”, for example, uses this method to build a system of rigorous mathematical proofs still valid 23 centuries later. Think also of the endeavor of Spinoza, who structured his “Ethics” like Euclid did. Of course I don’t agree with Spinoza who thinks that all of nature follow from the causal necessity of there being a God, but his endeavor is an interesting one.

As for my thesis, the work of Wierzbicka urges me to ask: can we trace ‘primitives’ in the way we work together in organizations? Jan Dietz and Fernando Flores have something to say about this. But that’s for a future posting.