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THE SEMANTICS OF «SEX» IN A CROSS-LINGUISTIC AND CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Abstract. In his widely read book *The Saturated Self*, social psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1991: 8), writes: «If there is one message writ large within the annals of anthropology, it is to beware the solid truths of one's own culture. If we contrast our views with those of others, we find that what we take to be 'reliably known' is more properly considered a form of folklore».

Gergen may be exaggerating the dependence of human knowledge on language and culture, for rhetorical purposes. Surely there are some things that we do know reliably: for example, that all people die. Very frequently, however, it is indeed the case that what we take as a given is a form of «folklore» — part of the naive picture of the world (in Apresjan's sense) grounded in our native language. It is also often the case that in the present English-dominated world social scientists take as givens — even «biological givens» — concepts that are grounded in the vocabulary of modern English. Gergen's advice to «beware the solid truths of our own culture» is insightful and still much needed in the human sciences.

A good example of (putative) biological givens which are in fact conceptual artefacts of modern English and Anglo culture is the concept of 'sex'. This paper explores the meanings of the English word *sex* in a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective, and argues that — unlike the universal and indefinable concept 'die' — the concept encoded in the present-day English word *sex* is culture-bound and in fact, is a relatively recent conceptual artefact of Anglo culture. The paper seeks to show that the meanings of this word can be elucidated through the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) based on simple and universal concepts (Goddard, Wierzbicka (eds.) 2002; Wierzbicka 2011).

Keywords: biological givens vs. cultural givens, naive picture of the world, Anglo culture, different meanings of the English word *sex*, continuity and change in the meaning(s) of *sex*, *sex* as a loanword in Russian

No sex in the Soviet Union?

Sex is a ubiquitous word in modern English. It is also one which is spreading widely into other languages as a loan word, usually with a meaning somewhat different from the one it has in English. Often, the difference between the meaning of *sex* as a loanword in other languages illuminates the culturally unique aspects of the English concept.

For example, in Russian the word *seks* is linked, for many speakers, with a famous episode from the pre-perestrojka period, when Phil Donahue and Vladimir Posner organized one of the first Soviet-American «tele-bridges». When an American participant in this encounter complained about the use of sex images in American TV ads and asked if the same was the case in the Soviet Union, the Russian respondent, a certain Ivanova (a representative of the «Committee of Soviet Women») replied famously: «U nas seksa net...», ‘there is no sex in the USSR...’, a comment that created a still popular catch phrase.

According to Posner, the woman meant (and said) «on television», but these last words were drowned in an outburst of laughter. According to Ivanova herself, however, she wanted to say (and said) «In the USSR there is no ‘sex’, there is love». Her additional comment on this point is instructive: «Later, people remembered only the beginning of the phrase. (...) But in our country, the word *sex* was really almost a dirty word. We always occupied ourselves not with sex [seks] but with love. And this is what I had in mind».

Ivanova’s version is confirmed by an opinion survey conducted in 2008 on the subject «The generations of Russian sex [seks]» (Žuravleva 2008). Many of the young respondents, who presumably know English to some extent, use the word *seks* in ways comparable to how the word *sex* is used in English. Older respondents, however, offer comments like the following:

Of course there was no **sex** (*seks*) in the Soviet Union. (...) The process, of course, was there, but there were no words for it, only interjections. Married couples used to say: «Why don’t we that, this, y’know what?» (Maria, 78 years old).

It sounds paradoxical, but there was really no **sex** in the Soviet Union. In this country, there was love, and all the rest was just added on (Valeriy, 63 years old).

At the beginning of the 1980s the air was, it seemed, saturated with **sex**, although the concept as such did not yet exist (Anna, 45 years old).

Before we discuss the differences between the English *sex* and loanwords like the Russian *seks* (as used by the older generation of Russian speakers), however, we need to note that *sex* has several different meanings in modern English and to try to sort them out.

Different meanings of the English word ‘sex’

Above all, *sex* in phrases like *age, weight and sex, regardless of sex, and sex discrimination* has a different meaning from *sex* in *sex drive, sex life and safe sex*.

Thus, broadly speaking, there are two main types of uses of *sex* in contemporary English: *sex* as the difference between two kinds of people based on two main

kinds of human bodies, and *sex* as something that people do, or can do, and that is perceived against the background of activities involving two people with two different kinds of bodies (a man and a woman).

To begin with the first use of *sex*, there is the heading «sex» on countless forms which people living in English-speaking countries have to fill out and which offers the respondents the choice between «M» and «F», «male» and «female», and there are many uses of *sex* linked with the distinction between the two categories, «male» and «female». The assumption that there are two kinds of people, by virtue of people's anatomy, is reflected in contemporary examples such as the following ones from Cobuild:

Many professional women prefer to deal with members of their own **sex**.

The reality is that good financial advisers of any **sex** are scarce.

The use of *sex* as, roughly speaking, one of two major categories of people (defined in terms of their anatomy) is closely related to, but not identical with, *sex* as an abstract parameter distinguishing between those two categories of people. This 'parameter' sense of *sex* can be illustrated with the following sentences from Cobuild:

Nor, when hiring people, may you make your hiring decision based on age, **sex**, or appearance.

Obviously, the intention of banning advertisements which specify age or **sex** is to ensure older people, or women, get a fair go.

The Stairmaster machine measures your fitness level by testing your ability to walk on the spot for five minutes. By taking into account your age, weight and **sex** it spits out a fitness reading.

While the meaning of *sex* as an abstract parameter is of course different from that of *sex* as a category of people, basically, both these meanings can be linked with the following way of thinking (which I will label here *sex*₁):

*sex*₁

people can think like this about people:

«there are two kinds of people because there are two kinds of people's bodies

women's bodies are bodies of one of these two kinds»

men's bodies are bodies of the other kind

people can think in the same way about children

people can think in the same way about animals

I have used in this schematic explication the words *men* and *women* rather than *male* and *female* for a number of reasons. First, *men* and *women* are semantically simpler and more accessible than *male* and *female*. For example, if one wanted to

explain the meaning of *sex* to a child, *men* and *women* would be more useful than *male* and *female* which would not be clear to a child. Second, the idea that there are «two sexes» focuses on the difference between men and women (adults) rather than on all ‘males’ and all ‘females’, regardless of age.

One can of course speak about the ‘sex’ of a baby, but in doing so, one assumes that there are two main kinds of human bodies, with their prototypes in a man and a woman. In asking about the ‘sex’ of a baby one is asking, essentially, to which of these two main kinds of human bodies the baby’s body belongs.

Continuity and change in the use of ‘sex’ in English

It is interesting to note that the use of *sex* referring to two kinds of people has changed somewhat over the centuries. In older English, it was common to refer to «the sexes», «the two sexes», «both sexes», and *sex* usually stood for a category of people rather than for an abstract parameter, as in modern questionnaires.

Consider for example the following quotes:

Sometimes, through pride, the **sexes** change their airs;

My lord has vapours, and my lady swears.

Young, *Love of Fame* (18th century)

The nonsense of the old women (of both **sexes**).

Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (18th century)

Breathes there a man with hide so tough

Who says two **sexes** aren’t enough?

Samuel Hoffenstein, *The Sexes* (early 20th century)

The little rift between the sexes is astonishingly widened by simply teaching one set of catchwords to the girls and another to the boys.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *VirginibusPuerisque* (19th century)

While *sex* in its older meaning could, in principle, refer to both «divisions of the human race» (as the OED puts it), in practice in older periods it tended to refer predominantly to one of these two ‘divisions’: women. For example, the 19 uses of *sex* in Shakespeare’s works all refer to women — usually in phrases with possessive pronouns, like «her sex», «my sex», «our sex», «your sex». For example, in *King Henry VI*, «Joan La Pucelle» (Joan D’Arc) says to the Dauphin (Part 1, Act 1, Scene 2):

My courage try by combat, if thou darest,

And thou shalt find that I exceed my **sex**.

Similarly, in the *Rape of Lucrece*, one reads (of women, of course) that «their gentle sex to weep are often willing» (Stanza 177). The common collocations with

sex in older English include, prominently, *the fair sex*, *the gentle sex*, and *the weak(er) sex*.

The use of *sex* in such collocations is still possible, or at least understandable, in contemporary English, and so are references to «the sexes», as the following example from Cobuild illustrates:

The former Midday host is in charge of a Channel 9 studio debate called the Battle of the **Sex-es**.

Generally, however, such uses tend to be perceived as old-fashioned. The use of *sex* as a parameter (as in the phrase *sex-discrimination*) is closely related to the old-fashioned sense of «the two divisions of the human race», but, as mentioned earlier, it is not identical to it. Roughly speaking, it doesn't have the 'collective' ring of the earlier usage and focuses instead on identifying features of an individual.

Furthermore, it appears that the modern emphasis on *sex* as an abstract feature of an individual rather than a collectivity is linked with a more biological emphasis, which allows *sex* in the relevant sense to be readily extended to animals, as in the following example (from Cobuild) about horse races:

Sams is keen to try Like A Rose over 1400m, but will restrict her to races for her own **sex** while they are available.

The predominantly biological emphasis of the word *sex* used in relation to the features distinguishing two major categories of people has often been perceived as a limitation of this concept as a basic tool for categorising people and characterising them. Hence the emergence and spread of the word *gender* in modern Anglo usage, especially in feminist discourse — a word which makes room, so to speak, for the psychological and social aspects, in addition to biological ones. But despite the growing use of the word *gender* in some registers of English, especially the academic and feminist ones, the word *sex* as a major conceptual tool for categorising people continues to hold its own.

***Sex*₂, as in «Sex and the City» and «sex on TV»**

The predominant contemporary use of *sex* which focuses on what people *do* with their bodies is quite recent. The 'explosion' of this new use is largely a twentieth-century phenomenon, although phrases like *sex mania* and *sex maniac* started to be used in the late nineteenth century, as the following examples cited by the OED testify:

Sex mania in art and literature can be but a passing phase. (1895)

Sex in modern literature. (1895)

The expression *to have sex* appears to have been popularized, if not introduced, by D. H. Lawrence, in contexts like the following one:

If you want to have **sex**, you've got to trust, at the core of your heart, the other creature. (1929)

This relatively recent, activity-based use of *sex* developed a large network of collocations during the twentieth century, some of them neutral and lending themselves to positive interpretations (for example, *sex appeal*, *sex life*, *sex drive*, *safe sex* and *sex education*) and some more or less negative ones (for example, *sex offences*, *sex offenders*, *sex slaves*, *unprotected sex*, *sex object*, *underage sex*, *sex abuse*, *sex crime*, and so on). The predominant contemporary use of *sex* (as a type of human activity) can be explicated as follows:

sex (as in: *There is a lot of sex on TV*)

- a. some people are doing something of one kind
- b. two people can do something of this kind when it is like this:
- c. one of these two people is a man, the other is a woman
- d. people know that men's bodies have one part not like any part of women's bodies
- e. this man is doing something with this part of his body to some parts of this woman's body
- f. people know that men's bodies don't have parts like these
- g. these two people are doing this because they want to feel something good
- h. people can do things of the same kind when it is not like this
- i. people can do things of this kind in many ways

This explication treats a heterosexual couple engaged in activities allowed by the differences in their anatomy as a conceptual model for a wider range of human activities, seen by the speakers of English as being «of the same kind» — including, for example, gay sex, lesbian sex, group sex, and so on.

If we compare *sex* in the sense of an activity with the older sense of 'two categories of people' we will note a number of differences, in addition to the basic one, between 'being someone (a man or a woman)' and 'doing something'.

First, there is an extension from a dichotomy between men and women to a wider perspective including other (unspecified) possibility: «people can do things of the same kind when it is not like this», for example, when the actors are not a heterosexual couple.

Second, there is a greater anatomical specificity in the concept: the older concept made a reference to men's and women's bodies, but the more recent one refers, more specifically, to one part of men's bodies which women's bodies don't have, as well as to some parts of women's bodies that men don't have.

Third, while the activity in question is conceptualized as being of «one kind», it is also conceptualized as one that can be performed in «many ways», thus allow-

ing various extensions from the prototype and potentially activating the speaker's imagination.

Fourth, the most prominent contemporary sense of *sex* includes a reference to pleasurable feelings, thus inviting a plethora of phraseological and cultural extensions (from *good sex* to *sex toys* and the like). One of the sentences with *sex* in the Cobuild database reads: «‘Say *cheese*’, photographers used to mutter to get a smile before they switched to ‘say *sex*’», thus highlighting the presence of ‘good feelings’ in the conceptual prototype of *sex*.

These potential ‘good’ feelings are evoked not only by the topic (i.e. the thought of the physical activity as such) but more specifically, by the word *sex*. Thus, while «Say *sex*» may work as a substitute for «Say *cheese*», alternatives like «Say *intercourse*» or «Say *sexual act*» would not. This shows that the word *sex* itself (in contrast to *intercourse* and *sexual act*) is linked for speakers of English with a thought of pleasurable experience.

Despite the reference to ‘good feelings’ in the conceptual prototype implicit in the modern English concept of ‘sex’ (as explicated here) what is most striking about this concept from a cross-cultural, cross-linguistic, and also, historical point of view is the largely physical, ‘behaviouristic’ characterisation of the activity in question, without any reference to human relationships and interpersonal emotional attitudes.

English ‘sex’ in a cross-cultural perspective

While a reference to seeking pleasure is included in the prototype, it is not accompanied by any reference to good feelings directed at the other person (not even in the prototype). Of course phrases (and book titles) like «Love, sex and marriage», linking ‘sex’ with ‘love’ are possible and even common, but by itself *sex* is free of such associations (unlike, for example, the French phrase *faire l’amour*, or indeed its literal English equivalent to *make love*).

In Tim Parks’s novel *Destiny* polyglot prostitutes on a night train in Italy offer sex to passengers, possibly international tourists, with two words «amore» in Italian and «sex» in English:

Amore. A black woman is standing beside me. **Sex?** You want? (...) *Amore*, she repeats (p. 189—190).

The offer is the same but it is conceptualized differently because the meaning of the words is different. In English, the physical activity which is being proposed is conceived without any reference to emotions: *sex* is, roughly, what a man and a woman can do together with some parts of their bodies (because the body of a man is not like the body of a woman). In Italian, however, the same physical activity is

conceptualized with an indirect reference to love: roughly, *amore* (in the relevant sense) is what a man and a woman can do together with their bodies (because the body of a man is not like a body of a woman), of the kind that men and women often do if they love one another.

It is not that Italian has no word to refer to the physical activity in question as such, as in fact the same polyglot prostitute in Tim Parks's novel also illustrates when she persists: «Fuckie. *Figa. Baiser.*» (p. 190). But these words are not neutral and descriptive: they also express an attitude to this activity — one which dissociates the activity itself from any emotions and interpersonal relationships. For example, they could not be used in titles like «Love, sex and marriage».

As this last example illustrates, *sex* can be used in English not only in relation to a particular act of intercourse, but more generally, to an aspect of life involving such acts but understood more broadly.

In most other languages, for example in Russian or even in French — there is no colloquial equivalent of «they were talking about sex». One could use something euphemistic like *l'amour* ('love'), or use something vulgar and «in your face» like *baiser*, or use something scientific-sounding like *act sexuel*, but nothing as neutral, matter-of-fact, and colloquial as *sex*.

It is this dissociation of physical acts (of what people do with some parts of their bodies) from the expectations about the accompanying feelings and attitudes which is the hallmark of the prevalent contemporary use of the English word *sex*.

The lexical dissociation between the body and the heart, or between physical activities involving the genitals and interpersonal relations, has wide-ranging ramifications in modern English phraseology and discourse. Expressions such as *good sex*, *enjoy sex*, *consensual sex*, *sex toy*, *sex games*, *sex-starved*, *kinky sex*, *sex industry*, *sex workers* and even *sex education* are translators' nightmares and their untranslatability contributes to the wide-spread borrowing of the English word *sex* into other languages, and also, to changes in meaning which often go with such borrowing. The lack of conceptual and cultural equivalents of such phrases in other languages often leads to the perception that 'sex' is something specific to Anglo-American culture, something cheap, immoral, and lending itself to commercialization. Hence the somewhat pejorative meaning of loanwords such as Russian *seks* mentioned earlier.

The discourse of *sex* as something separate from human relations and emotions has often been the subject of critical discussions in English itself. For example, Cobuild includes some critical remarks on a government-sponsored 'Safe Sex Guide' promoted by «Cleo» magazine under the motto «It is not who you have sex with but how safe the sex is that counts». According to the commentator cited in Cobuild, «The naked truth about the values promoted in this 'Safe Sex Guide' is that sex has nothing to do with relationships, love, other people'. (...) If the value of

the other person is totally discounted in this most deeply personal human activity, how long can we survive as a human society?»

This is of course a commentary that one may or may not agree with. Someone else can take the view that the largely ‘behaviourist’ character of the prevalent modern English meaning of *sex* (with its connotations of potential pleasure rather than interpersonal connectedness) reflects a healthy attitude to the body, without «hang-ups» of any kind, and that the same applies to publications like the «Safe Sex Guide» promoted by «Cleo». Whatever view of the modern English ‘discourse of sex’ one takes, it needs to be recognized that this discourse — which is now spreading, through English, across the global world — is a new cultural phenomenon, entrenched in, and transmitted through, contemporary English.

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