scholars at the forefront of research on language learning and on language and cognition who innovated some of the methods now widely used in the field. For those of us who seek to advance this field of research, T’s book provides a contextualized discussion of the exciting recent discoveries in L2 learning and bilingualism.

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Few books these days go to the core of the linguistic enterprise, questioning what we do, how we do it, and why we do what we do. Wierzbicka’s *Imprisoned in English* is one such book—it

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questions the key assumptions at the heart of the social sciences and offers a definitive version of
the author’s long-standing argument that English is a misleading and unreliable guide to ‘independent reality’ and should not be used as a ‘transparent medium’ of science. The premise alone makes the text worth reading, and the reading is made all the more pleasurable by the perky and engaging style and a rich array of examples from many languages and disciplines.

The book is also notable for the way the author addresses her critics. All of us have strategies for dealing with our academic opponents—some ignore their detractors, others feel hurt by the disagreements, some ‘agree to disagree’, and others go on the offensive. W takes inspiration in objections and critiques and opens the book with a statement that the negative reactions and the ‘derision, incredulity, and skepticism’ (ix) of some of her colleagues have been a great stimulus in writing the book and a way to hone and fine-tune her ideas.

*Imprisoned in English* consists of eighteen chapters subdivided into six parts. Part 1, ‘Every language draws a circle … ’, links W’s views with Whorf’s (2012 [1940]) argument that implicit reliance on linguistic tools is perilous for the scientist, ‘constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free’ (274). Whorf, however, did not go into specifics, while W does, offering a biting critique of theories whose universal claims are grounded in English-language words, such as *color* or *emotion*. The author then offers a way out of this conundrum through the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM), a mini-language whose mini-lexicon of sixty-five words (semantic primes) is purportedly shared by ‘all languages’ (based on the table on p. 247 and the NSM website, the sixty-five words are actually documented in eighteen languages from different language groups). The NSM primes are then used to articulate definitions that capture ‘the idea’ of each semantic category in a ‘neutral’, ‘unbiased’, and ‘language-independent’ way. Part 2, ‘Emotions and values’, features case studies of individual terms, and Part 3, ‘Politeness’ and “Cooperation”, case studies of cultural scripts, which give W an opportunity to rearticulate her critique of the Anglocentrism of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory.

The arguments then heat up in Part 4, ‘Entering other minds’, which raises the question of how we enter the realm of other languages and ensure that our glosses and dictionary entries reflect the actual meanings of the target language. W’s answer stresses the need for linguists working with native-speaker consultants to divest themselves from their own meanings. To show how this could be accomplished, she offers an expanded critique of ways in which other linguists have glossed and explicated words from Aboriginal and Native American languages, followed by her own NSM alternatives. What is lacking, however, is any discussion of the ways in which she arrived at these alternative interpretations; this is an issue to which I return later.

The last chapter in this section, ‘Chimps and the evolution of human cognition’, at first looks like a digression yet, at a closer view, offers the most novel aspect of W’s arguments—a long-awaited response to her critics’ questions about the ontological status of semantic primes. Intriguingly, it turns out that the NSM is but another term for the Ur- or Proto-language, arrived at independently from explorations in historical and Indo-European linguistics. W even postulates the stages of emergence of semantic primes, with ‘think’, ‘two’, ‘body’, and ‘people’, for instance, attributed to the proto-humans of one million years ago (an expanded version of the same argument appears in Goddard et al. 2014).

Part 5, ‘Breaking down the walls of the prison’, has a single chapter that contains a discussion of English influences on Steven Pinker’s thinking and a restatement of W’s belief that the NSM is the best way to avoid such influence. Part 6, ‘Kindred thinking across disciplines’, offers portraits of W’s fellow-travelers in anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, theology, politics, translation, and several areas of linguistics. I also make an appearance in this pantheon, yet I have concerns about the logic of W’s arguments. In what follows, I articulate these concerns, with full confidence that the author will treat this critique not as a personal attack but as grist for her mill.

First, however, I would like to mark the section of the road where W and I walk side by side. I fully share her concerns about the illusory objectivity of our linguistic tools. In fact, I favor Whorf’s version of this argument, which features Standard Average European (SAE), a category that highlights the Indo-European roots of other Western ‘languages of science’ and foregrounds
our heritage of two millennia of doing science in Latin and Greek. I also concur that, instead of bickering about particular color or emotion terms, we should be interrogating the very assumption that words like color or emotion represent universal ‘phenomenologically basic’ categories. Such a reconsideration is undoubtedly threatening to the status quo, yet the health of linguistics as a discipline requires a continuous dialog about our core assumptions.

The juncture where she and I part ways involves her identification of the root of the problem, her proposed solution, and, on a more existential level, the very existence of a solution. The central premise of Imprisoned in English is that scientists are mistaken in treating the categories of English as ‘real’ and universal. No argument from me. The trouble begins when, having put forth a compelling case for the pervasiveness of Anglocentrism in cognitive science, W displays the very same bias. Take, for instance, her reanalysis of the Yucatec word kib, which opens with this statement: ‘I do not believe that a phrase glossed by Lucy as “one long thin wax” does justice to the Yucatec meaning’ (131). Instead of ‘wax’, she argues, the term ‘must mean’ ‘a thing made of wax’. The same lexeme, however, is used to refer to a blob of soft wax used to plug a hole in a bucket or to wax that melts and drips on the table, neither of which is a thing in any meaningful sense. Moreover, structurally, in Yucatec you cannot count things made of wax without a classifier, suggesting that no intrinsic unit or shape is presupposed in the basic lexical meaning, which is also the case for the English wax (John Lucy, p.c.).

Now, disagreement between linguists who have knowledge of a language and those who do not (but are nevertheless passionate about their own interpretations of lexical meanings or the existence of particular structures) is by no means new—think only of the heated debates about Pirahã or the insistence of countless scholars that Russian ‘must have’ only one basic term for blue. In the context of Imprisoned in English, however, such insistence raises an unwelcome question: how does W herself escape the constraints of Polish and English to interpret the words of languages she does not know? In the case of kib, the uncomfortable answer is that, having reduced the meaning to basic denotation, she bases her reanalysis on the English-language version of Lucy’s Yucatec data and ‘on the more fine-grained analysis of English nouns’ (131). What this gets us is a ‘common-sense’ denotation, based on the author’s SAE (Polish, Russian, English) and imposed on Yucatec.

This example reveals that, despite the obvious differences, W and Chomsky have a lot in common, starting with a fundamental belief in universal concepts that underlie surface variation and ending with a deep-seated conviction that our status as linguists makes our intuitions privileged and unconstrained by the languages we know. Anglocentrism, for W, is just a belief system, which we can get rid of by adopting the NSM. I do not think it is that simple. Anthropologists and linguists are fully aware of translation nonequivalence, but it is a mistake to believe that we can control our own language processing. Studies of second language (L2) acquisition convincingly show that the reliance on previous languages is unavoidable and no L2 learner—not even a linguist—is immune from the influence of the first language(s) (L1) on the L2, including in the areas of meaning and categorization (Pavlenko 2014). There is also a good reason why we perceive L1 categories as more ‘natural’: L1 learning invariably combines linguistic, cognitive, and affective processing, and as a result, L1 words automatically trigger imagery, autobiographical memories, and implicit knowledge of situations to which they apply, all of which contribute to the perception of the categories they denote as ‘real’.

I am not immune to such L1 influence: after more than two decades in the US and having authored numerous articles and books in English, I do know what the and a ‘must mean’ yet do not always feel the same need for pesky articles as native speakers of English do, which arguably places constraints on my knowledge. What I do know is that semantic primes incorporating English articles, such as ‘the same’ or ‘a long time’ (35), cannot be universal, even from a synchronic point of view. And now that W has given her theory a diachronic dimension, the universality of the supposed primes should invite a much larger array of questions from historical linguists and scholars of language contact and language change: Don’t word meanings change over time? What does this change say about the conceptual categories they purportedly reflect? Or should we assume that some universal meanings perennially drift around, attaching and disat-
taching themselves from words? If so, what is the evidence for such proto-words? Can we comfortably identify them on the basis of a few dozen currently spoken languages? And how do we actually know that the identifications made by NSM researchers represent the local understanding of the terms and not wishful thinking?

The latter question is central to the linguistic enterprise at large because the pervasiveness of L1 influence on the L2 raises important questions about the authenticity of our data and correctness of our analyses. The proliferation of errors I have seen in academic work on Russian, one of the world’s most widely spoken languages, makes me wonder about ‘linguistic facts’ we know only through the mediated assistance of linguists who studied the language for six months or psychologists who rely on bilingual assistants. The mantra of field linguistics has traditionally been ‘one does not need to be able to speak a language in order to analyze it’ (Crowley 2007:155). This may or may not be the case for structure, but it is definitely not the case for meaning. No matter how thorough and well-meaning scholars may be, the process of ‘entering another mind’ is not that easy and there is a considerable possibility that some of the currently accepted ‘facts’ are distorted through imposition of ‘the languages of science’ on indigenous languages.

Unlike W, I do not think there is a way to escape this influence. There is, however, a way in which field linguistics can address concerns about ‘language effects’: by making researchers’ own language competencies explicit, revealing their methods and procedures, and outlining the many delicate interpretive steps that transform the world of Pirahã or Yucatec for English-language publications. The realization that these issues should be discussed openly, despite the threats to one’s face, authority, and legitimacy, has been growing in anthropology (e.g. Borchgrevink 2003, Moore 2009). The fundamental lesson of *Imprisoned in English* is that the time has come for linguists too to become more open about how we know what we know.

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