

II. REVIEWS

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THE DANISH UNIVERSE OF MEANING*

Carsten Levisen, *Cultural Semantics and Social Cognition: A case study on the Danish universe of meaning* [Trends in Linguistics. Studies and Monographs 257], Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2012, pp. xx, 333.

Carsten Levisen's monograph *Cultural Semantics and Social Cognition: A case study on the Danish universe of meaning* (2012) appeared a few years ago and has reached the Review Section of this journal with some delay. However, it is obvious that a review of it must appear in the journal, for several reasons.

First, as suggested by the book's subtitle, it deals with "the Danish universe of meaning", i.e., it contributes to the broadly understood research on the linguistic worldview. This very term, in fact, *linguistic worldview*, is used by the book's author: the monograph is a semantic-cultural analysis of Danish linguacultural key concepts. Second, Levisen's analysis is couched within the framework of Anna Wierzbicka's Natural Semantic Metalanguage – the long-standing and multifarious links between Anna Wierzbicka and the Lublin ethnolinguistic circles cannot be overestimated. Third, Levisen's book explores a geographically novel and as yet unexplored field (in NSM studies): the author himself (p. 1) points out that his is the first attempt to describe (certain aspects of) the Danish language with the use of the NSM framework, which, given the dubious status of ethnolinguistics in Western scholarship,¹ is especially noteworthy. Fourth, to put it simply, *Cultural Semantics and Social Cognition* is a good book, characterised by intellectual precision, detailed analyses, meticulous semantic distinctions, and competent application of the NSM model. This is hardly surprising, as the author learned the skill from the best source possible, from Anna Wierzbicka herself and her colleagues, during his research stays and workshops at the Australian Linguistics Institute and Australian National University. Levisen pursued his doctoral studies at the University of New England,

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¹ The author claims (personal communication) that he is probably the only ethnolinguist in Denmark (more on ethnolinguistics in the West in Bartmiński 2016).

which culminated with a defence of a doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Wierzbicka's close collaborator, Cliff Goddard.

Cultural Semantics and Social Cognition consists of the front matter (Preface, Acknowledgments, the Figures and Tables List, the Conventions and Symbols List), seven chapters, a concluding Chapter 8, plus an Appendix with Danish versions of the NSM explications presented in the book in English. Very appropriately, there are two separate indexes, an author index and general index; however, the otherwise excellent publisher, De Gruyter Mouton, has decided to use end-of-the-book endnotes, rather than footnotes, which hampers the reading, rather than facilitating it.² In Chapter 1, the author outlines the state of the Danish language and culture, positions them against the backdrop of other Scandinavian languages and cultures, and surveys the historical developments that have led to the current status quo. The reader is also provided with a review of the literature on the Danish mentality and the cultural values, as well as a description of the sources and data elicitation procedures for analysis. Chapter 2 is a presentation of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage conception, focusing on the Danish context. The next five chapters contain exhaustive analyses of keywords regarded by the author as especially characteristic of the Danish thinking and lifestyle. These include: *hygge* 'pleasant togetherness'³ (the core and defining feature of Danish sociality), *tryk* 'secure'/*tryghed* 'security', *janteloven* 'the *Jante* law' (the negative, "dark" side of Danish mentality), *synes* and *mener* 'think, believe, find that' (also compared with the Russian *sčitat'* and English *think*, *find* and *believe*), *lykke* (n.)/*lykke* (adj.), *glad* (adj.) and *tilfreds* (adj.), which describe the taste and sense of satisfaction of good life or current situation and are often erroneously identified with the English *happiness/happy* (to the point of being thoughtlessly included into the so-called "happiness research"). Chapter 8 synthesises conclusions from individual analyses, as well as proposing directions for further research.

The task that Carsten Levisen sets for himself is ambitious but feasible: it is not to reconstruct the "totality" of the Danish linguistic or linguacultural worldview – *that* would have been unrealistic. Rather, it is to make that worldview more accessible to the reader by dispelling the false images and ideas about a country and society that is rather mysterious but that is nevertheless tightly linked to the rest of Europe, and geographically nearly lies in its very heart. To fulfil that task, the author assumes the internal perspective of a native speaker of Danish, but at the same time maintains a scholarly distance. As a result, his analyses are impressively factual and reliable, as well as being characterised by intuitive sensitivity to semantic and cultural detail (but cf. the critical comments on the analysis of *janteloven* below). By proposing a description of the mentality of native

² Another editorial shortcoming, for a publication of this standing and which is otherwise well-prepared, is a far-too-large number of line-breaking hyphens (e.g. *na-tions*, *cate-gories*) and misused spaces (*fu rhter*, *cri tical*), sometimes several on a single page (all the examples above come from p. 203).

³ Or more fully, "a pleasant, attentive and relaxed mode of 'togetherness'" (p. 80). Naturally, the English glosses are very imperfect approximations to Danish words and only mark the directions for semantic analyses.

speakers of a language, based on solid methodological grounds, Carsten Levisen – I daresay – continues the work of Bronislaw Malinowski, for whom this was exactly the optimal approach. The only major difference between the two scholars is only that Malinowski inquired into the Trobriand linguaculture from outside, whereas Levisen, being Danish, must distance himself from his own culture as a researcher. This move is facilitated by the use he makes of Wierzbicka's NSM, as well as by being physically separated from his own country, over extended periods of time, when researching in Australia and the Pacific region.

Levisen's monograph must also be appreciated for, on the one hand, isolating the Danish context from the broad and indiscriminating category of the "Western world", and on the other hand, for avoiding the attractive but misleading allure of "Scandinavian unity". The former issue is also linked to the fact that "the West" is usually identified with the English-speaking perspective – this the author counteracts by carrying out comparative analyses of Danish and English keywords (*synes* and *mener* vs. *think*, *find*, *believe*; *lykke* vs. *happiness*), as well as by recalling the warnings issued in the same spirit by Anna Wierzbicka (e.g. 2006, 2009). We thus have a non-anglocentric monograph written in English. The latter trap Levisen avoids by assuming the perspective of a Dane who constructs his identity in terms of "Danishness", rather than "Scandinavianness", illustrated with a juxtaposition of the differences between selected keywords in Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian (pp. 22–24).

From the theoretical perspective, it is worth pointing out that, apart from the NSM framework, Levisen's book indirectly relates to other ethnolinguistic models, specifically to Bert Peeters's (2015a) six-element proposal. Levisen calls his proposal an "ethnopragmatic" study, which is, apart from ethnolexicology, ethnorhetorics, ethnophrasology, ethnosyntax and ethnoaxiology, one of Peeters's "pathways" for ethnolinguistic research. Besides, while projecting the range of future analyses, Levisen mentions the need for delving deeper into Danish "ethnopsychology", which may in fact augment and enrich Peeters's framework.

However, so as not be accused of one-sidedness, let me also make a critical comment: Levisen's analysis of *janteloven* in Chapter 5 (*janteloven* being usually regarded as the negative, dark side of Danish mentality) is less convincing than the other ones. In very broad terms, *janteloven* sends the following message: "don't think that you are anybody special, don't be different, don't stick out socially" (p. 145). The message may not be characteristic of Danish culture alone,⁴ but it is nevertheless responsible for the stereotypical image of Danes, as well as for the psychological discomfort (or even trauma) of people whose creative personality was in this way suppressed or even, in more drastic cases, ruined. Levisen distinguishes the literary source of the "law" from its contemporary linguistic picture, proposes a carefully drafted explication of it in terms of the NSM, and provides examples of social campaigns against the anti-individualistic spirit of *janteloven*. All this builds a coherent description. Nonetheless, the reader might appreciate a somewhat greater clarity in those passages (pp. 158–164) where the author claims that *janteloven*

⁴ Cf. the so-called *Tall Poppy Syndrome* in Australian English (Peeters 2015b).

in fact projects a covert message contrary to its face value: the message of every person's "self-worth". It is impossible for an outsider to the Danish context to judge whether Levisen is right or not. On the one hand, he certainly appears to be a trustworthy scholar, a reliable semanticist and a native speaker of Danish. On the other hand, in this section of the book his argumentation is a little weaker in clarity and logic than in analyses of the other keywords.

Does this (admittedly minor) critical comment influence the overall very positive impression of the book? Decidedly not. Carsten Levisen can be described as an interesting, up-and-coming author, prolific⁵ and open to international debate. It is beyond doubt that Polish ethnolinguistics would find in the Danish scholar a sympathetic and open debating partner, to the benefit of both sides.

Translated by Adam Głaz

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⁵ Of relatively recent publications, let us note Levisen 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016; Levisen and Priestley 2017. On Dec 18, 2017, the author's profile page at Roskilde University lists 45 publications altogether, including many in print.