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## I and Thou: Universal human concepts present as words in all human languages

Anna WIERZBICKA  

*Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*

 [anna.wierzbicka@anu.edu.au](mailto:anna.wierzbicka@anu.edu.au)

### Abstract

This paper argues that “YOU” and “I” (“I” and “THOU”) are fundamental elements of human thought, present as distinct words (or signs) in all human languages. I first developed this thesis in my 1976 article “In defense of YOU and ME” (and before that, introduced it in my 1972 book *Semantic Primitives*; cf. also my 2021 article “‘Semantic Primitives’, fifty years later”). Since then, it has been confirmed by wide-ranging cross-linguistic investigations conducted in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework. But neither the truth of this thesis nor its importance have become widely recognised in linguistics or anthropology. Influential scholars in both these fields continue to undermine the notion of the fundamental unity of humankind and to put total emphasis, instead, on the diversity of languages and cultures. As cross-linguistic investigations of the last fifty years show, however, despite the phenomenal diversity of human languages a shared “alphabet of human thoughts” was not just a figment of Leibniz’s imagination but a fitting metaphor for something real and immeasurably important. As the present article aims to show, “YOU” and “I” (“I” and “THOU”) are two twin cornerstones of this reality. To quote the entry on “Psychic unity of humankind” in the *Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, “Ineluctably, the idea [of a deep psychological unity of humankind] has ethical significance. For attempting to inform humans about what they are and what they have in common is not a neutral act” (Prono 2006). As the present article seeks to demonstrate (and as Martin Buber compellingly affirmed a century ago), “I” and “THOU” are an ineluctable part of who we are: how we think, how we speak and how we relate to others.

**Keywords:** *semantic universals, universal semantic primes, Natural Semantic Metalanguage, the concepts of “I” and “THOU”, sign languages, psychic unity of humankind*

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## Я и ты: универсальные концепты, существующие во всех языках мира

Анна ВЕЖБИЦКАЯ  

*Австралийский национальный университет, Канберра, Австралия*

anna.wierzbicka@anu.edu.au

### Аннотация

В статье высказывается идея о том, что «Вы» и «Я» («Я» и «Ты») – это базовые элементы человеческого мышления, которые присутствуют как отдельные слова (или знаки) во всех языках мира. Впервые это положение прозвучало в (Wierzbicka 1972, 1976, см. также Wierzbicka 2022). С тех пор оно было неоднократно подтверждено разноплановыми кросс-лингвистическими исследованиями, проведенными в рамках Естественного Семантического Метаязыка (ЕСМ). Но справедливость этого положения и его значимость не были признаны ни в лингвистике, ни в антропологии. Влиятельные ученые, представляющие данные направления, продолжают подвергать сомнению фундаментальное единство человечества и вместо этого абсолютизируют разнообразие языков и культур. Однако, как показывают кросс-лингвистические исследования, проведенные в последние пятьдесят лет, несмотря на феноменальное разнообразие человеческих языков общий для них «алфавит человеческой мысли» – это не просто плод воображения Лейбница, а метафора, подходящая для чего-то реального и чрезвычайно важного. Цель настоящей статьи – показать, что «Вы» и «Я» («Я» и «Ты») – два краеугольных камня этой реальности. Как говорится в статье “Psychic unity of humankind” в «Энциклопедии антропологии» (*Encyclopedia of Anthropology*), “идея [глубинного психологического единства человечества] безусловно имеет этическую значимость. Поскольку показать людям их сущность и то, что их объединяет, – это не нейтральный акт» (Prono 2006). Как демонстрирует данная статья (и что убедительно доказано Мартином Бубером сто лет назад), «Я» и «ТЫ» – неотъемлемая часть того, кто мы есть: как мы мыслим, как мы говорим и как взаимодействуем с другими.

**Ключевые слова:** *семантические универсалии, универсальные семантические примитивы, Естественный Семантический Метаязык, понятия «Я» и «ТЫ», жестовые языки, духовное единство человечества*

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### Dedication

I am dedicating this study to my dear friend Igor Mel’cuk, whom I first met at the International Congress of Slavists in Sofia exactly sixty years ago. It was then that I first heard the term “yazyk posrednik” (“language mediator”). The way Mel’cuk and his colleagues thought of what a semantic “language mediator” should look like was different from how my colleagues and I think of it, but in essence this is what NSM is: a semantic language which can act as a mediator between different languages.

A key difference is that our language mediator is carved out of natural languages and therefore looks like a natural language (in miniature), whereas Igor

and his colleagues saw their “yazyk posrednik” as an artificial, or semi-artificial language. All the same, it is a joy to acknowledge the historical connection between the idea of a “yazyk posrednik” (“language mediator”) and the idea of a Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM).

It is also a joy to acknowledge that my life-long interest in semantics first developed during my extended stay in Moscow in 1964–1965, where I was fortunate to be able to work with, and learn from, Igor and his closest colleagues, Aleksandr Zholkovski and Jurij Apresjan. As discussed by Apresjan in his essay “On the Language of Explications and Semantic Primitives” (2000), in the early 1960s the Moscow Semantic School, that is Igor Mel’cuk and his colleagues, were also pursuing the notion of “semantic primes” in their work. Their approach was different from that of my Polish mentor Andrzej Bogusławski (see Bogusławski 2003[1963]) and of what Apresjan called the Polish Semantic School, but the two had a great deal in common. I feel immeasurably indebted to Igor and his colleagues in the Moscow Semantic School.

Most importantly, perhaps, I caught from them a fascination with words and meanings, a double focus reflected fifty years later in the title of a book co-authored with my closest Australian collaborator and partner in NSM Cliff Goddard, *Words and Meanings* (2014). In this paper, I want to honour Igor at the beginning of the tenth decade of his life, a life dedicated largely to words and meanings, and also, to *chelovechnost’*.

Dear Igor, this paper is for YOU from ME, with love.

### 1. Introduction: What is at stake?

Nearly fifty years ago, in a paper entitled “In defense of YOU and ME”, I wrote:

What is the status of the notions “you” and “I” in human thinking? Can they be reduced to, explained in terms of, certain other notions or are they among those notions which are so basic and so clear of themselves that any attempt at explaining or further analysing them must be judged as futile and absurd (see **Descartes 1642**, Pascal 1958, **Arnauld & Nicole 1662**)? Are they or are they not semantic primitives, i.e. essential, irreducible elements of our ‘mental language’? (Wierzbicka 1976: 4)

As the title of that paper indicates, I was defending the thesis that YOU and ME (or I and THOU) are essential and irreducible elements of human thought and language. In mounting that defense, I noted that “you” and “I” as semantic primitives had found a splendid advocate in the person of the Danish structuralist Holger Steen Sorensen, who more than a decade earlier firmly declared “‘I’ and ‘you’ are indefinable”, adding: “They are consequently semantic primitives of the English language.” (Sorensen 1963: 96). As I noted at the time, however, Sorensen, the pioneer in the search for semantic primitives, true to the spirit of structural linguistics did not venture to conceive that the set of “semantic primitives of

English” could be identical with that of every other human language. Going beyond Sørensen, I argued just that.

At that time, in the mid-1970s, writing in a new historical context, I was seeking to rebut, above all, two ideas widespread in linguistics and philosophy of that time: first, that the meanings of “I” and “thou” (you and me) should be interpreted as “the speaker” and “the addressee”; and second, that the meaning of these elements should be represented by means of referential indices (promulgated by “generative semanticists” such as James McCawley and George Lakoff). I concluded:

“I” and “you” are semantic primitives. They cannot be defined away in terms of other primitives and they cannot be dispensed with in favour of some arbitrary indices. The idea advanced by McCawley, George Lakoff, and others, that semantic primitives can be thought of as “atomic predicates” because everything in the semantic representation which is not a predicate is a referential index, is mistaken. <...> [I]t has not been arrived at by empirical semantic research but simply assumed a priori, on the model of the artificial language of symbolic logic. Empirical semantic studies suggest that there are semantic primitives which function as arguments, not as predicates. “You” and “I” are among their number (Wierzbicka 1976: 19).

Today, after almost fifty years of extensive cross-linguistic (as well as intra-linguistic) investigations undertaken by many scholars working within the NSM framework, the evidence in support of this conclusion seems to me overwhelming<sup>1</sup>.

It seems also overwhelmingly clear that this is not a technical issue, relevant to linguistics and philosophy but without any broader implications. On the contrary, the place of the concepts ‘I’ and ‘THOU’ (“you” and “I”) in human thought and in human languages is an essential aspect of who we are.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate both the truth and the importance of the thesis that, as evidence indicates, “I” and “THOU” are present, as words (or signs) in all human languages.

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym NSM stands for the Natural Semantic Metalanguage. Scholars working in the NSM framework believe that through decades of sustained cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic investigations, they have identified the complete inventory of simple and universal concepts that are embedded in the lexicon of all human languages. As Cliff Goddard and I put it in our 2014 book *Words and Meanings* (pp. 11–12), we claim that “a plausible, stable, and well-evidenced set of ‘universal words’ have been identified and that this can provide the seemingly solid foundation for the prospect of decoding meanings across languages, <...> These putatively indefinable word-meanings are known as semantic primes and they are 65 in number” (See Wierzbicka 1972, 1980, 1996, 2021, Goddard 2011, Goddard (ed.) 2018, 2021, Goddard & Wierzbicka (ed.) 2002, Gladkova & Larina 2018).

As for the status of “YOU” (sg) and “I” as universal semantic primes, they are well attested, as distinct lexical elements, in every known human language. For a rebuttal of the claims that languages like Thai and Japanese lack personal pronouns, see Diller 1994 and Onishi 1994, in (Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994).

## 2. The concept of 'I' and moral reflection

According to the primatologist Frans de Waal (2006), a key difference between humans and (other) animals lies in people's capacity for self-reflective reasoning and judgement. Discussing de Waal's view in his 2013 book *The Gap*, evolutionary scientist Thomas Suddendorf strongly agrees, adding: "we can consider the long-term consequences of our actions. We are the only species on that planet with the foresight capable of plotting a path towards a desirable future" (Suddendorf 2013: 283). Suddendorf also cites Charles Darwin's assessment:

A moral being is one who is capable of reflecting on his past actions and their motives – of approving of some and disapproving of others; and the fact that man is the one being who certainly deserves this designation, is the greatest of all distinctions between him and the lower animals (Darwin 2003[1871]: 610).

Trying to unpack Darwin's, and de Waal's, conclusions about "the gap" in simple words, we can identify the following clear ideas:

people can think like this about something:  
when I did this, I did something bad,  
when I did this I did something good

If we want to similarly unpack Suddendorf's ideas about "the gap", we can say:

people can think like this about something:  
if I do this, some time after this something bad can happen because of this  
if I do this, some time after this something good can happen because of this

To be able to conceive such "self-reflective judgments" and to consider possible long-term consequences of our actions we need to have at our disposal a handful of basic concepts to think with, including "do", "happen", "good", "bad", "if", "because", "before", "after", and – crucially – "I". But do all languages have conceptual and lexical resources which would allow their speakers to conceive and express such thoughts? In particular, do they all have a concept expressed in English in the word *I* (or *me*)? And do they all have a word (equivalent to the English *I*), which would enable a person to keep this concept in focus for some time, while reflecting on his or her past actions (or planning for future ones)?

If Darwin, de Waal and Suddendorf are right, the matter is of "unspeakable importance" (to use David Hume's words), as clearly recognised by a number of thinkers who thought about language deeply and considered languages both in their diversity and in their fundamental unity – such as Wilhelm Humboldt, Franz Boas, and Emile Benveniste. To quote just one of them, Benveniste (1971: 224):

Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use *I* only when I am speaking to someone who will be a *you* in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of *person*, for it implies that reciprocally *I* becomes *you* in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as *I*. Here we see a principle whose consequences are to spread out in

all directions. Language is possible only because each speaker sets himself up as a *subject* by referring to himself as *I* in his discourse. Because of this, *I* posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to “me”, becomes my echo to whom I say *you* and who says *you* to me. This polarity of persons is the fundamental condition in language, of which the process of communication, in which we share, is only a mere pragmatic consequence.

Given the importance of the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘you’ as a condition of language, it is hardly surprising that thinkers such as Humboldt, Boas and Benveniste were all keenly interested in the question of whether ‘you’ and ‘I’ were clearly recognised in all languages. Again, I will only quote Benveniste (1971: 225):

It is a remarkable fact—but who would notice it, since it is so familiar?—that the “personal pronouns” are never missing from among the signs of a language, no matter what its type, epoch, or region may be. A language without the expression of person cannot be imagined. It can only happen that in certain languages, under certain circumstances, these “pronouns” are deliberately omitted; this is the case in most of the Far Eastern societies, in which a convention of politeness imposes the use of periphrases or of special forms between certain groups of individuals in order to replace the direct personal references. But these usages only serve to underline the value of the avoided forms; it is the implicit existence of these pronouns that gives social and cultural value to the substitutes imposed by class relationships.

Broad typological surveys of many languages such as Ingram’s (1978) study “Personal pronouns” confirm the view that personal pronouns “are never missing from among the signs of a language, no matter what its type, epoch, or region may be”. In particular, such surveys confirm that while there can be a good deal of variation concerning the conceptualisation of human *groups* (reflected in words comparable to *we*, see Goddard 1995, Goddard & Wierzbicka 2021); and of persons spoken of (reflected in words comparable to *he* and *she*), words matching ‘I’ and ‘you’ (‘thou’) can be found in all studied languages.

This doesn’t stop some linguists, however, from raising doubts about it in a surprisingly cavalier manner (as if it were a matter of no great significance). For example, in their wholesale attack on “the myth of language universals” Evans and Levinson (2009) write: “There are languages without tense, without aspect, without numerals, or without third-person pronouns (or even without pronouns at all, in the case of most sign languages).” (Evans & Levinson 2009: 435)

### 3. I and you (thou) in sign languages

The fact that many languages don’t have words like “he” and “she” (so-called third person pronouns) is well known and is no obstacle to what a language can express, because one can always say “this someone” instead of “he” or “she”. But the availability of words for “I” and “you” (thou) is of fundamental importance,

because there are no phrases which could be substituted for these two words without a change in meaning. To begin with I (the so-called first-person pronoun), there is no expression which could be substituted for I in sentences like “when I did this, I did something bad” (cf. Sorensen 1958, Lyons 1977). Accordingly, if a language didn’t have a word meaning “I”, the speakers could not express the basic self-reflective judgment “when I did this, I did something bad”.

The point is dramatised by Evans & Levinson (2009) reference to sign languages. They provide a table titled “Every language has X, doesn’t it?”. Proposed substantive universals (from Pinker & Bloom 1990) supposedly common to all languages” which list eight points (one of them relating to pronouns). Evans & Levinson (2009) reject all the universals included in the table: “There are clear counterexamples to each of these claims” (Evans & Levinson 2009: 431) Commenting on the point relating to pronouns they write: “Some Southeast Asian languages lack clear personal pronouns, using titles (of the kind “honorable sir”) instead, and many languages lack third-person pronouns (<...>) Sign Languages like ASL (American Sign Language) also lack pronouns, using pointing instead.” (Evans & Levinson 2009: 431).

Apart from the Southeast Asian languages (which are mentioned in the quote from Benveniste and to which I will return shortly), the rejection of first- and second-person pronouns (“I” and “you”) as lexico-semantic universals hinges, above all, on sign languages. The argument goes as follows: even if all spoken languages had words like “you” and “I”, these words could not be regarded as language universals because many sign languages don’t have such words.

The logic of this argument seems odd. Speaking for the moment about “I” alone, if “I” is necessary for reflective self-judgment, then either sign languages do have “I” (like all spoken languages do) and can express such judgments or they don’t have the same expressive power as spoken languages. The authors of “The myth of language universals”, however, appear to want to have it both ways: they claim that many sign languages don’t have a sign for “I”, and at the same time insist that they have the same expressive power as spoken languages. Thus, in a section entitled “The challenge of sign languages” they write:

Many proposed universals of language ignore the existence of sign languages – the languages of the deaf, now recognized to be full-blown languages of independent origin. <...> When due allowance is made for the manual-visual interface, sign languages seem to be handled by the same specialized brain structures as spoken ones, with parallel aphasias, similar developmental trajectories (e.g. infants “babble” in sign), and similar processing strategies as spoken languages <...> The neurocognition of sign does not look, for example, like the neurocognition of gesture, but instead recruits, for example, auditory cortex. (...) These results show that our biological endowment for language is by no means restricted to the input/output systems of a particular modality (Evans & Levinson 2009: 438).

But how could sign languages be “full-blown languages” (in a conceptual sense) if they didn’t have signs for “you” and “I” and if the closest they could get

to the idea of “I” would be to use the manual equivalent of the expression “this someone”? Replacing “I” and “you” with “this someone” (accompanied by pointing) could do at the level of communication epitomised by the statement “Me Tarzan you Jane”, but it would hardly do for the purposes of ethical reflection that Darwin was, so tellingly, concerned about.

Translated into a conceptual language in which “I” would be rendered as “this someone”, Darwin’s statement about people would read like this:

people can think like this about someone: “this someone did something bad”  
(animals cannot think like this)

This, however, would be tantamount to saying that people can pass moral judgment on (other) people, not that they can pass moral judgment on themselves: for this latter, more demanding, act of reflection they would need a word (or sign) meaning “I”.

The point is really quite simple and can be illustrated with mundane examples of reported speech. For example, if Mary says (speaking of John): “he said to me: I did it”, the *referents* of “me” and “I” are different (the referent of “me” is Mary, and that of “I”, John), but the *meaning* is the same in both cases: “I” (“me”). The sentence cannot be paraphrased as “he said to this someone: this someone did it”. To convey the intended meaning, the speaker needs a word (or sign) meaning “I”.

Unfortunately, dictionaries of sign languages are often misleading in their entries for “I”. For example, the otherwise impressive dictionary of Auslan (Australian Sign Language) edited by Trevor Johnston (1998) defines one of its signs (pointing with the index of the right hand to the middle of one’s chest) as follows: “Reference. Used to refer to the signer by the signer. (...) English = I, me.” But clearly, when a signer says “she said: it is me” using the sign in question, he or she is not using it to refer to the signer. Rather, the gesture is a conventional rendering of the meaning ‘I’, and it cannot be paraphrased as “this someone” or “this person”. Evidently, the dictionary’s description of the meaning of the sign pointing to one’s chest as referring to the signer does not take into account the use of this sign in reported speech. The only possible description which would fit both direct speech and reported speech is one which interprets this sign as meaning ‘I’, not ‘this person’.

Or consider the basic Jewish prayer” “Shema Israel”, which religious Jews recite twice daily, and which Jewish children are expected to say before going to sleep. The prayer ends with the words: “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: I am the Lord, your God, who led you from the land of Egypt to be a God to you”. How could a deaf person recite such a prayer in a sign language if they only had a sign meaning ‘this person’ and didn’t have one meaning “I”? It seems hardly necessary to add that not even God can point at God. The only way a signer can convey the meaning of the words attributed to God in “Shema Israel” is first to establish that it is God who is speaking and then to use a sign meaning ‘I’.

In other words, a sign with which the signer points to his or her own chest means, conventionally, “I”, not “this person”, and this is why it can be used in



quoting any statements in which God (or anybody else) says “I”. So when, for example, God says to Moses (out of the burning bush): “Moses, Moses”, and Moses replies: “Here I am”, God is not saying to Moses: “I want to say something to someone called Moses”, and Moses is not saying to God “this someone is here”. Furthermore, when God continues by saying “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”, he (being invisible) is not pointing to himself and meaning “this someone”. The notion of ‘I’ is essential to the exchange, both in relation to Moses and to God.

To cite one more example from a classic text (Matthew’s Gospel, Mt 14:27), when Jesus walks on the water and the disciples take him for a ghost and are frightened, Jesus tells them: “Be of good cheer; it is I, be not afraid” (KJV). To paraphrase these words as “be not afraid, it is this someone” would make no sense: they can only be understood through a word, or a sign, meaning “I”.

To reiterate the main point: either sign languages have the same expressive power as spoken languages or they don’t. If they didn’t have a sign meaning “I”, they wouldn’t be able to convey meanings such as those expressed in reported speech. Nor would they be able to carry “self-reflective judgment” (“she thinks like this: ‘I did something bad’”) singled out by Darwin as a key difference between humans and animals. In fact, evidence suggests that sign languages are fully equipped to express such meanings – but only because they do have signs meaning “I” and because they do allow for what is known in the literature on sign languages as “role shift” (cf. e.g. Goswell 2014).

In his *Penseés*, Pascal wrote: “Le moi est haïssable”, “the I is repugnant” (“self is hateful”, Pascal 1958 online). Can this idea be expressed in sign languages? For example, could it be explained through signing to deaf students in a school for the deaf? Presumably, not in one sentence. Once we recognise, however, that Pascal’s “thought” is highly compressed and that for its sense to be fully grasped it needs to be “translated” into several sentences, it becomes clear that it is not beyond the power of sign languages to express it. As the passage in which this pithy saying is embedded suggests, the idea can be unpacked along the following lines:

people often think like this about something: “I want this, this can be good for me”  
often, when they think like this, they don’t think about other people  
this is very bad

Recent literature on sign languages and pronouns makes it abundantly clear that certain signs function in sign languages as “shifters”, and that a signer can easily attribute thinking in terms of “me (I)” to someone other than him- or herself. For example, Cormier et al. (2013) cite the following two sentences, one in British Sign Language (BSL) and the other in English:

- a. BOY SAY (LOOK-FOR ME)<sub>NS:body</sub> (BSL)
- b. The boy said, “Are you looking for me?” (English)

Given the secure finding that sign languages do allow reported speech and “role shifting”, it is in fact puzzling that the availability of “I”-based thinking in

these languages can still be questioned or denied, and that the Evans & Levinson (2009) claims on the subject have not been clearly and vigorously opposed in the relevant literature. This is not to say that these claims have not been challenged at all, but unfortunately the discussion which they gave rise to has usually been framed in technical specialist language rather than in plain “human” terms. Thus, more often than not the main question addressed is this: are the counterparts of “I” and “you” in sign languages pronouns (in the full sense of the word ‘pronouns’) or are they not? Since there is no God-given definition of the word ‘pronoun’, the issuing discussion can slide into points of grammatical terminology and grammatical theory (where linguists can be bitterly divided), rather than addressing the conceptual and semantic aspects of Evans’s & Levinson’s (2009) claims.

For example, Cormier et al. (2010: 2665) write in their abstract: “we discuss E&L’s claim that sign languages lack pronouns”, and later argue that “there is evidence for considering these pointing signs to be pronouns in sign languages, not only pointing gestures”. In a later paper, Cormier et al. (2013) discuss Evans’s & Levinson’s (2009) claims about sign languages and personal pronouns again, and again focus on the technical aspects of the question. They conclude that “pronominal signs clearly share canonical properties of both pronouns and pointing gestures” (ibid: 243) and that these signs “cannot be characterised exclusively either as pronouns or as pointing gestures” (ibid: 244). But although they profess a keen interest in the question about “real universals of human language” (ibid: 244), they do not take a clear stand on what I see as the central issue: do sign languages have signs meaning “you” and “I” or not?

It seems clear that the authors don’t want to accept that the sign pointing to one’s chest means simply “this someone” and would prefer to allow that it also means “I”. But since their major frame of reference lies in syntax and morphology and not in semantics, they do not formulate their position in semantic terms, and as a result, they equivocate: from a semantic point of view, a word, or a sign, cannot mean both ‘this someone’ and ‘I’ – it is either one or the other.

On this point, Evans & Levinson (2009) seem to be more consistent: they explicitly reject semantic universals along with syntactic and morphological ones, and, accordingly, they reject “I”. It is worth mentioning in this context that in a seminar at the Australian National University, Evans (2014) appeared to be retreating from the strong anti-universalist position taken by E&L (2009), when he said that “I is I, in all languages”. When I questioned him subsequently on this apparent retreat from the Evans’s & Levinson’s (2009) position, he replied (in a personal email) that what he said was an overstatement, and later elaborated:

...certainly this is a place where I would be close to seeing universality, but I'm not convinced this is the case for all sign languages, where the argumentation turning on whether pointing to oneself is conventionalised 'I' vs just pointing at someone who happens in this case to be the speaker is a subtle one so I would not take it as read (27/7/2014, quoted by permission)

I agree with Evans that this is indeed the choice we have to make: either we accept that sign languages have a sign meaning ‘I’, or we argue that they don’t and that they have to make do with a sign meaning ‘this someone’. As I see it, however, this second option does not take into account situations where the signer is reporting someone else’s words. For example, in a signed version of the sentence “Be not afraid: it is I” the conventional sign of pointing at one’s chest performed by the signer evidently refers to the person whose words are being reported, not to the one who happens in this case to be the signer.

#### 4. I and you (thou) in spoken language

Assuming then that the issue of sign languages as lacking personal pronouns in general and a word for ‘I’ in particular is really a red herring, let us return to the more obvious question concerning spoken languages. Do they all have words for “you” and “I”?

In his celebrated paper “Cultural constraints on Pirahã grammar”, which presented Pirahã as lacking words like ONE, TWO and ALL, Daniel Everett (2005) did not go as far as claiming that Pirahã had no words for “you” and “I”, but he suggested that that was the case at an earlier stage (no longer open to empirical investigations). The footnote accompanying this suggestion reads:

It is possible that tones were used rather than free-form pronouns (...) One reader of this paper found it “inconceivable” that there would have been no first-versus-second person distinction in the language at any point in its history. In fact, however, Wari’ (Everett n.d.) is a language that currently lacks any first-versus-second-person distinction.

Thus, not only is Everett suggesting that at an earlier stage in its history (presumably, before contact with Portuguese) Pirahã had no distinction between “I” and “you”, but is also asserting that another Amazonian language, Wari’, lacks such a distinction now.

Yet the data presented in the comprehensive grammar of Wari’ of which Everett was a co-author (Everett & Kern 1997) clearly contradict this assertion, as the *Grammar* provides the words *wata’* and *wum*, glossed, respectively, as “first singular” (i.e. ‘I’) and “second singular” (i.e. ‘you (sg)’, ‘thou’).

As if to make it crystal-clear that Wari’ in fact does have words for ‘I’ and ‘you’, the *Grammar* offers example sentences such as the following ones (ibid: 305):

- |          |    |                  |        |                  |       |
|----------|----|------------------|--------|------------------|-------|
| (572) a. | A: | Ma’              | wari’  | ma’              | quem? |
|          |    | that:prox:hearer | person | that:prox:hearer | ref   |
|          |    | ‘Who is it?’     |        |                  |       |
|          | B: | Wata’.           |        |                  |       |
|          |    | emph:1s          |        |                  |       |
|          |    | ‘(It is) I.’     |        |                  |       |

B: Warut.  
 emph:lpexcl  
 ‘(It is) we.’

(572) b. Wum ra?  
 emph:2s 2s:rf  
 ‘(That is) you, isn’t it?’

The contradiction between Everett’s assertion about Wari’ and the data included in his own *Grammar* is so startling that it requires an explanation. Evidently, such an explanation can be found Everett and Kern’s (ibid 1997: 305) description of *wata’* (i) and *wum* as “emphatic pronouns”. Thus, the *Grammar* says that “First and second person emphatic pronouns are frequently used in answer to questions of the type ‘Who is it?’ or to ask ‘Is that you?’” (ibid: 305). In many other contexts, one gathers, the words *wata’* and *wum* are not used, and the person is marked on the verb.

It is a truism, however, that in many languages (including, for example, Spanish and Polish), the words for ‘I’ and ‘you’ are used only in contexts where they are clearly needed (for emphasis, contrast, enumeration, and so on). This doesn’t mean that such languages have no words for ‘you’ and ‘I’, and clearly, the same applies in Wari’. In fact, the *Grammar* itself provides an example where the word *wata’* ‘I’ is used not for emphasis but for enumeration and clarification (ibid: 304):

(571) a. Ji’am xi’ jowin pain ca’ ma’  
 hunt lpincl:rf monkey:species prep:3n this:n that:prox:hearer  
 ‘urut, Jimain Hwara’ Waji, Wem Xao, wata’.  
 lpexcl:rp/p m:name m:name emph:1s  
 “‘We will hunt for *jowin* monkey”, we (said), Jimain Hwara’ Waji,  
 Wem Xao and I.’

The same claim about Wari’ not having words for ‘I’ and ‘you’ is repeated in Everett’s other publications on Wari’, clashing with the data presented in these very publications. Thus, in Everett’s chapter on Wari’ in *The Handbook of Morphology* (2001, online) one reads: “There are two classes of pronouns: demonstrative and emphatic (there are no personal pronouns). <...> Demonstrative pronouns occur only in the first person”. Yet this claim about the absence of personal pronouns is followed by the statement that “Emphatic pronouns may occur in any person and number”, and by the same examples cited in Everett (2005a) and glossed as “(It is) I” [said in answer to the question “Who is it?”] and “we, Jimain Hwara’ Waji, Wam Xao and I”.

Similarly, in Everett (2005: 305) one reads: “There are no first and second personal pronouns in Wari’”. Yet the so-called “emphatic pronouns” *wata’* (‘I’) and *wum* (‘you’) are cited here too. The self-contradiction seems evident.

## 5. you (THOU) in reported speech and in the language of religion

Essentially, what applies to the word for ‘I’, applies also to the word for ‘you’ (thou). To begin with, ‘you’ too is needed for reported speech. For example, if someone wanted to report Everett and Kern’s (1997: 305) sentence ‘Wum ra?’, glossed as “That’s you, isn’t it?”, they would obviously need a word (or, in a sign language, a sign) meaning ‘you’: “She said: that’s you, isn’t it?” In direct discourse and at the level of “me Tarzan you Jane” a word for ‘you’ may seem to be dispensable (because Tarzan could simply point, first at himself and then, at Jane). But in reported speech pointing would clearly not suffice and a conventional sign meaning ‘you’ would be needed.

Furthermore, apart from purely factual reports on who said what to whom, a word for ‘you’ is essential for moral discourse and for social order. To cite a biblical example again, in the book of Genesis (4: 9–10), after Cain killed his brother Abel, the following famous conversation takes place between Cain and God:

And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?  
And he [God] said: What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother’s blood cries unto me from the ground.

In all human groups, and at all times, it has been essential to be able to identify the breakers of moral, and social, law, and to require a person’s personal testimony (e.g. “Did you do it?”).

Speaking more generally, if ‘I’ is necessary for self-reflection, ‘you’ is necessary for the transmission of culture to children – especially moral culture. The reason for this is that moral instruction often needs to rely on scenarios involving ‘you’ and ‘someone else’. Such instruction may be given to a group of people, but each member of this group needs to understand that he or she is being addressed as an individual (thou). For example, to understand the Gospel precept “Give to him that begs from you, and do not refuse him that would borrow from you” (Mt. 5:42), every reader needs to imagine himself or herself as being individually addressed as ‘thou’.

If transmission of moral culture requires the concept of ‘you’ (thou), so does religion. To illustrate again from the Hebrew Bible, Genesis opens with a dialogue between God and Adam: “And the Lord God called unto Adam and said unto him, Where art thou?”, to which Adam replies: “I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Genesis 3:9–10, KJV).<sup>2</sup> There is no way this foundational myth could be conveyed to speakers of sign languages without a word for you (thou).

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, religion –linked with the Latin root – *lig* ‘to bind, to tie’ and the cognate verb *religare* – is widely interpreted as being essentially

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<sup>2</sup> Sentences from the Bible often provide excellent material for cross-linguistic semantic investigations because they are familiar to many readers, easy to access online, and available in hundreds of languages.

about “connection”, dialogical connection, between human beings and God (cf. Nongbri 2013) While most speakers of English are not aware of these etymological links, they are aware of the connection between religion and prayer, and of the “I-thou” relation which the concept of ‘prayer’ presupposes. To illustrate from Psalm 23, which is perhaps more than any other prayer (except the “Our Father”) part of the European ‘cultural literacy’: “(...) though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” (KJV)

The great Jewish philosopher and theologian Martin Buber articulated the fundamental importance of the “I-Thou” relationship to God in Judaism in his classic book *I—Thou* (1966 [1923]) to which I will return shortly. In Christianity, too, the “I-thou” relationship between God and “man” (human person) is seen as constitutive of religion. To quote from one representative book, *Credo for Today: What Christians Believe* (Ratzinger 2006: 47):

The first “thou’ that—however stammeringly—was said by human lips to God marks the moment in which spirit arose in the world. (...) The theory of evolution does not invalidate faith, nor does it corroborate it. But it does challenge faith to understand itself more profoundly and thus to help man to understand himself and to become increasingly what he is: the being who is supposed to say “thou” to God in eternity.

The fact that in most languages the meanings ‘I’ and ‘you’ (thou) are grammaticalised and expressed in different forms of the verb (e.g. *amo* ‘I love’, *amas* ‘you love’ in Latin) underscores the supreme importance of these meanings in human thinking. As Wari’ illustrates, however, the marking of these meaning in the verb is not enough: in some contexts, above all, in the context of self-identification, separate words meaning ‘I’ and ‘you’ (thou) are also needed. To adduce yet another example from the Bible, in Matthew’s Gospel, John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask: “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?” (KJV); Jesus replies quoting from the prophet Isaiah: “Go and show John again those things which you do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear (...)”. (Matthew 11: 3–4, RSV) To be able to convey John’s question to Jesus, and to seek his own testimony on whether or not he is indeed the awaited Messiah, the word ‘thou’ is indispensable. A translation of Matthew’s Gospel into a sign language requires a sign meaning ‘you’ (thou).

## 6. you in English: ‘you’ vs. ‘thou’

At first sight, English may seem to be a glaring counterexample for the generalisation that all languages have a word meaning ‘thou’, that is, ‘you’ singular, and indeed in various typological surveys English has been presented as a language which doesn’t distinguish between ‘you’ as a plural (addressed to two or more people) and ‘you’ as a singular (addressed to one person, that is, ‘thou’). For

example, Ingram’s (1978) survey of pronoun systems cites (building on Forchheimer 1953), inter alia, the following three:

<b>Four-person system</b>		<b>Languages</b>	
I	we	KOREAN (65)	
thou		KAMANUGU (66)	
he			
<b>Five-person system</b>			
A. I	we	BURMESE (43)	
thou	you		
he			
B. I	we	ENGLISH	
thou			
he	they		
<b>Six-person system</b>			
A. I	we	CHINESE (42)	TURKISH (54)
thou	you	JAPANESE (43)	EAST SUKETI (55)
he	they	KOTTISH (48)	CHUKCHEE (56)
		SUMERIAN (49)	KHASI (61)
		SHILH (50)	MASAI (67)
		TSHIMSHIAN (75)	AKKADIAN (68)
		LATIN (76)	AZTEC (74)
		HAUSA (71)	TLINGIT (78)
		HOPI (73)	WIYOT (105)
		FINNISH (53)	

From the point of view of the theme of this paper, the most striking aspect of Ingram’s (and Forchheimer’s) data is the invariable presence of words for ‘I’ and ‘thou’. But the portrayal of English as a language which doesn’t have a word for ‘you plural’ is misleading. In order to recognise (as Ingram does) that present-day English does have a word meaning ‘thou’ we need to show that the word *you* has now two meanings: ‘you singular’ (meaning ‘thou’) and ‘you plural’. It is therefore a “six-person system”, just like, for example, Latin, which has two phonologically distinct words *tu* (you.Sg) and *vos* (you.Pl.).

The problem of the seemingly missing ‘thou’ in modern English has been discussed many times in NSM literature. Rather than discuss it here *de novo*, I will simply quote the relevant passage from my 1992 book *Semantics, Culture and Cognition* (Wierzbicka 1992: 13–14), where I highlighted the problem of polysemy as an obstacle in any search for lexical universals (for further discussion, see Goddard 1995):

I have postulated ‘you’ and ‘I’ as universal semantic primitives, but what I mean by ‘you’ is ‘you SG’ (‘thou’) rather than ‘you PL’ or ‘you’ SG/PL’. Yet one doesn’t have to look further than modern English to find a language which doesn’t seem to have a word for ‘thou’. To maintain the claim that ‘thou’ is a lexical universal we would have to posit polysemy for the word *you*: (1) ‘you SG’, (2) ‘you PL’. Initially, this seems an unattractive solution,

but I think there are good reasons for accepting it. Polysemy is a fact of life, and basic, everyday words are particularly likely to be polysemous (cf. Zipf 1949). <...>

It goes without saying that polysemy must never be postulated lightly, and that it has always to be justified on language-internal grounds, but to reject polysemy in a dogmatic and a priori fashion is just as foolish as to postulate it without justification. In the case of the English word *you*, I think its polysemy can be justified on the basis of the distinction between the forms *yourself* and *yourselves*; the choice between *yourself* and *yourselves* is determined by the choice between *you* SG and *you* PL (“you must defend yourself” vs. “you must defend yourselves”) (Wierzbicka 1976).

### 7. Pronouns and people

In linguistic literature, pronouns they are usually discussed in terms of forms and “systems” rather than meanings and people. Unfortunately, Peter Müllhausler and Rom Harré’s wonderfully named book *Pronouns and People* (1990) is no exception in this regard. Thus, the authors write:

That third persons are either absent or merged with second persons is also characteristic of the development of Papuan languages as discussed by Laycock (1977) <...>. The systems identified by Laycock run from two-pronoun systems dividing the universe ‘solipsistically, into the speaker and everybody else’, this type being exemplified by the Trans-New Guinea Phylum language Morwap, to sixteen-pronoun systems with complex number and gender distinctions exemplified by Vanimo language (Sko Phylum) of Papua New Guinea.

This acknowledges that even Morwap – allegedly the language with “a minimum number of contrasts” (ibid: 80) – has a word for ‘I’, but at the same time it denies the presence of a word meaning ‘thou’ (you.sg.) in this language.

In making this claim about Morwap, the authors of *Pronouns and People* are relying on the data from Don Laycock’s fieldwork, which Laycock himself described as unreliable: “I should perhaps say that my data on the language is not of high reliability, in that I was working through Malay, a language I do not control well” (ibid: 36) In addition, Laycock comments: “I am not quite sure whether (...) *ka* is first singular only, and *sa* all the others, or whether (...) *ka* is first person, all numbers, and *so* is all other persons and numbers” (Ibid: 38)

Given Laycock’s uncertainty about his own data it is understandable that in his account of pronouns in Papuan languages presented in his book *The Papuan Languages of New Guinea*, William Foley (1986) decided to ignore Morwap. Nonetheless, Foley’s own account of Papuan pronouns also raises serious questions. To quote:

The simplest pronominal systems attested for any Papuan language are those of certain languages of the Chimbu family, such as Golin (Bunn 1974) and Salt-Yui <...>. To take Golin as an example, it has only two true pronouns: *na*, first person, undifferentiated for number, hence ‘I/we’, and *i*, second person, again indistinct for number, hence ‘you’. (Foley 1986)



When we consult Bunn’s *Golin Grammar*, however, we find that this statement is inaccurate. What Bunn (1974: 55) actually says is that “there are only two personal pronouns which are not compounds and they are *ná* ‘I/We’ and *i* ‘you’”. At the same time, Bunn provides a much fuller list of personal pronouns, which clearly do differentiate between ‘I’ and ‘we’ (as well as ‘we two’), and also, between ‘thou’ and ‘you-plural’ (as well as ‘you two’):

<i>ná yasu</i>	– ‘we two’
<i>i yasu</i>	– ‘you two’
<i>yasu</i>	– ‘they two’
<i>ná ibál kobe</i>	– ‘we’
<i>i ibál kobe</i>	– ‘you (plural)’
<i>ibál kobe</i>	– ‘they’

(As Bunn notes, *yasu* is formed from *yál* ‘man’ and *su* ‘two’.) Importantly, Bunn also records that the distinction between ‘I’ and ‘we’, and ‘thou’ and ‘you (Plural)’ is also made overtly in the reflexive pronouns, for example:

<i>ná inán</i>	‘myself’
<i>ná ibál kobe inán</i>	‘we ourselves’

Presumably, when Foley says that Golin has only two “true pronouns” he means that it has only two forms which are morphologically simple. But it is unclear why compounds should not be regarded as true pronouns, and in any case, the conceptual distinctions between ‘I’ and ‘we’ (as well as ‘we two’) and ‘thou’ and ‘you (plural)’ (as well as ‘you two’) are evidently there. This means that Golin does have words for ‘I’ and ‘thou’.

Accordingly, Foley’s description of the Golin word *ná*, as “first person, undifferentiated for number, hence ‘I/we’”, and of the Golin word *i* as “second person, again indistinct for number, hence ‘you’”, cannot be accepted at face value. The Golin word *i* cannot be “indistinct for number” any more than the English word *you* is. The Golin word *ná* does not mean ‘I/we’, but simply ‘I’, and the Golin word *i* does not mean *you* (singular or plural) but simply ‘thou’ (you singular). As for the corresponding duals and plurals, their core meanings can be stated as follows (Bunn doesn’t make it clear whether ‘thou’ is excluded from the meanings glossed as “we” or not):

<i>ná yasu</i> (glossed by Bunn as ‘we two’) –	two people, I am one of these people (thou are not one of these people)
<i>i yasu</i> (glossed by Bunn as “you two”)	two people, thou are one of these people (I am not one of these people)
<i>ná ibál kobe</i> (glossed by Bunn as “we”)	some people, I am one of these people (thou are not one of these people)
<i>i ibál kobe</i> (glossed by Bunn as “you (plural)”)	some people, thou are one of these people (I am not one of these people)

The situation in Golin is in fact quite similar to that in the Melanesian creole Tok Pisin (cf. Foley 1986: 67) and in other English-based creoles, where the semantic relationship between ‘I’ and ‘thou’ and the corresponding duals and plurals is also morphologically transparent. (The suffix *-pela* derives, etymologically, from the English word *fellow*, and *mi*, *yu* and *tu*, from the English words *me*, *you*, and *two*):

*mi* ‘I’, *yu* ‘thou’

*mitupela*

‘two people, I am one of these people, thou are one of these people’

*mipela*

‘some people, I am one of these people, thou are not one of these people’

*yutupela*

‘two people, thou are one of these people, I am not one of these people’

Discussing Papuan languages in general, Foley (1986: 67) writes: “Papuan languages are especially interesting in their pronoun systems because many of them exhibit restricted, abbreviated systems not commonly found elsewhere.” A close examination of the Papuan data, however, confirms, rather than undermines, the universality of ‘I’ and ‘thou’. The pronominal systems found in these languages may be unusual from a formal (morphological) point of view, but from a semantic point of view, they conform to the generalisation that ‘I’ and ‘thou’ are essential elements of “Basic Human”.

The title of the book *Pronouns and People* is inspired, because pronouns can tell us a lot about people, and especially, about how people think about themselves and others. Arguably, the most important lesson that pronouns can teach us is that in thinking about people, speakers of all languages make two fundamental distinctions: One distinction separates the “conversational pair” (I and you) from those people who (in a given situation) are thought of as “other people” (i.e., people other than) the “conversational pair”. The other distinction is that between ‘me’ and ‘you’ (thou) – the two poles defining the basic human act of interpersonal communication: “I want to say something to you, you can say something to me”.

### 8. “You and I” as a “conversational pair”

In his paper “The second person is rightly so called” Joseph Greenberg (1993: 15) coined the phrase “the conversational pair” (in my view both clearer and more elegant than the common technical phrase “speech act participants”, let alone “SPA”). In drawing attention to the special status of the “conversational pair” among pronouns, Greenberg was clearly following in the footsteps of Martin Buber’s classic *I and Thou*. Unfortunately, instead of drawing explicitly on Buber and building on his insights Greenberg fell under the sway of Bertrand Russell (whom he quotes with admiration), and didn’t seem to fully appreciate the

uniqueness of the relationship between ‘I’ and ‘you (sg)’ as members of that primordial conversational pair.

I shall first consider the opposition between the first person, on the one hand, and the second and third person, on the other. This might be characterized as the distinction between the ego and the non-ego. In fact the various typological properties which help to confirm this opposition fall quite easily into two types: those having to do with the uniqueness of the ego and those having to do with the common properties of the two non-first persons. (Greenberg 1993: 15)

Greenberg’s emphasis on the “uniqueness of the ego” is of course welcome. The same cannot be said, however, of his distinction between “the ego and the non-ego”, which subsumes ‘thou’ under one umbrella with ‘he’ and ‘she’ and ignores the uniqueness of ‘thou’ and its intimate relationship with ‘I’. Thus, of ‘I’ (“the ego”) Greenberg wrote:

The ego has two linguistically relevant peculiarities. It is unique and unlike the second or third person it has no true plural. Even the ‘chorus we’ is not really a plural of the first person. Each person uttering it, whether the utterance is preconcerted or not, is referring to himself or herself plus others.

One can only agree with what Greenberg says here about ‘ego’, but not with what he says of the “second person”: as a little focused reflection must show, ‘thou’ has no “true plural” any more than ‘I’ does. If one person says “we” when speaking on behalf of a group, then the core meaning conveyed is indeed “some people, I am one of these people” (cf. Goddard 1995). If someone addresses one person as a representative of a group, then the core meaning of *you* is, roughly, ‘you plus others’, and more precisely, “some people, you are one of these people”. In the case of a “chorus *we*”, each person uttering it is referring to himself or herself as ‘I’. In the case of a group being addressed, each member of the group is being addressed as “thou”.

The precise semantics of ‘you plural’ and of comparable words in other languages require further investigation but the main point seems clear: if ‘I’ is, inherently, individual (‘singular’), so is “thou”. This makes the primordial conversational pair fundamentally different from the so-called “third person” – a point to which Martin Buber devoted a whole book, and to which I will return below. Before doing so, however, I want to discuss briefly the second claim made by Greenberg – in my view, wrongly – about ‘I’ (‘the ego’):

The second relevant characteristic of the ego is that it is the primary reference point for deixis, in the broad sense in which certain terms such as the pronouns *here*, *there*, *then*, and *now* shift their denotation depending on the utterance. The existence of such terms has been recognized, probably independently, both by linguists and philosophers. They are often called shifters, following Jespersen and Jakobson. The philosopher Russell, to my mind, showed real insight in employing the term ‘egocentric particulars’. He states (Russell 1948: 69) that “there are a number of words of the sort that I call ‘egocentric’

which differ in meaning according to the speaker and his position in time and space. Among those the simple ones are learned ostensively, for instance ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘here’, ‘now’.”

Greenberg appears to accept Jespersen’s and Jakobson’s idea that the words ‘I’ and ‘you’ are “shifters”, and also, Bertrand Russell’s idea that they are learned by ostension, that is, by pointing. But the two ideas are profoundly at odds with one another: a concept whose reference shifts from one person to another cannot be learned by pointing with one’s finger at one particular person. A child can learn by ostension who the words “Mummy” and “Daddy” stand for (because they are used in a predictable way) but not who the words ‘I’ and ‘you’ stand for (because they can be spoken by different people and to different people).

As Martin Buber puts it, “he” and “she” can be grounded in space, but ‘I’ and ‘you’ can’t. They can only be grounded in eye contact (or, in exceptional cases, touch contact) between two people who are both using ‘I’ and ‘you’ in the same encounter. When the child grasps that ‘you’ addressed to her by her mummy can be “shifted” and used in the reverse direction, and that her mummy’s “I” can also be used in the reverse direction (to refer to the child herself), then, and only then, the true meanings of ‘you’ and ‘I’ have been acquired. Before that, a child may learn the **words** ‘I’ and ‘you’, by ostension, treating them as labels for particular people (perhaps ‘I’ for Mummy and ‘you’ for the child), but this is before the **concepts** ‘I’ and ‘you’ are acquired.

When one reflects on the notion of a “conversational pair” and on the idea that the concepts ‘I’ and ‘thou (you)’ are acquired as a pair, one can appreciate the importance of eye contact between the two members of the pair for a reversible “I – you” relation to be built. An interlocking gaze is possible only between two people, not three or more, and it seems clear that this gaze is an important factor in the child’s grasping the concept of ‘thou’.

### **9. The emergence of the concept ‘YOU’[THOU] in young children**

How exactly can mutual gaze lead to the emergence of the concept ‘you’? By itself, it could not – if this concept were not already there, in the initial stock of innate, unlearned concepts that, according to the developmental psychologist Susan Carey (2009: 12) ‘any theory of conceptual development must specify’. On this point, one can only agree with Buber: that the concept of ‘thou’ is, in a sense, inborn, as is also the concept of ‘I’. But to bring these concepts to the surface of one’s consciousness one must be able to ‘operationalise’ them, as it were, in interpersonal encounters, in which the use of the words *you* and *I* can be coordinated with mutual eye contact.

In his path-breaking little book *Acts of Meaning* (1990: 72) psychologist Jerome Bruner wrote: “How we ‘enter language’ must rest upon a selective set of pre-linguistic ‘readiness for meaning’. That is to say, there are certain classes of meaning to which human beings are innately tuned and for which they actively search”. When one observes how avidly very young babies seek eye contact, one

can hardly doubt that this “pre-linguistic readiness of meaning” applies pre-eminently to the concepts ‘thou’ and ‘I’.

It is worth noting, though, that babies can enter communicative interaction with other persons at a very early stage. Especially, of course, with their mothers, but also with other babies, as these two photos of my twin grandsons John and Benedict, taken when they were three months old, clearly show.



I am not suggesting that three-months old babies have a full-fledged concept of ‘I’ (and ‘thou’) at their disposal, but rather that they have what Bruner calls ‘pre-linguistic readiness for meaning’ in relation to ‘you’ and ‘I’.

There is of course plenty of evidence showing that some meanings seemingly including the concept of ‘I’- such as ‘I want’, and ‘I don’t want’ – appear very

early in the child's cognitive and communicative repertoire, long before the child can say, and understand, words as tricky as 'you' and 'I'. There can be little doubt, however, that those early meanings ("I-want", "I-don't-want") seemingly including 'I' are in fact holophrastic, that is, function as unanalysable units. To be able to conceptually separate 'I' from 'want' in the pre-linguistic 'I want', the child needs to grasp that somebody else, and in particular, one's partner in the communicative encounter ('you'), may also want something, and that what 'you' want may be different from what 'I' want.

Concept like 'ball' and 'cat' can be grounded in ostention, but before a child learns to apply them to many different balls and cats, and not to apply them, for example, to oranges or rabbits, she has to master not only the ideas of "this something" and "something like this" but also that of "something of one kind". 'You' and 'I', however, do not build on ostention ('this someone', 'someone like this'), and, needless to say, they do not generalise to "kinds of people". They can only build on the experience of being in direct contact with one particular person – by touch, and by what Buber calls visual touch, that is eye contact.

Buber's thinking, often expressed in a poetic and figurative language, is profound and powerful. To quote:

If *Thou* is said, the *I* of the combination *I-Thou* is said along with it. (Buber: 3)  
The primary word *I-Thou* establishes the world of relation. (Ibid: 6)  
I become through my relation to the *Thou*; or I become *I*, I say *Thou*. (ibid: 11)  
... the *I-Thou* relationship requires a mutual action which in fact embraces both the *I* and the *Thou*... (ibid: 125).

As philosopher Andrea Lailach-Hennrich (2011) puts it, following in Buber's footsteps, "The communicative relationship with another person, made possible by the capacity to take over this other person's perspective, can be seen as the ground for an interpersonal relation, without which there can be no awareness of oneself". (ibid: 234). Accordingly, a full understanding of the concept of 'I' must be anchored in earlier exchanges with someone else, a 'you' (thou). And a few more highly pertinent quotes from Lailach-Hennrich:

...to have a concept of one's own self (...) one must be able to take the perspective of other persons and to enter into communicative interaction with them [...] a person can only fully acquire a concept of oneself ('Selbstbegriff') in communication. (ibid: 235–237)

...psychological predicates would have no meaning if they could not be attributed to different persons ("Subjekten") regardless of the perspective". (Ibid: 233)

A ... an individual can only then apply psychological predicates to him or herself, when he or she can competently apply them to other persons (Ibid: 235). The ability to take ["hinnehmen"] the perspective of other persons is an essential prerequisite for the acquisition of the concept of oneself ["von sich"]. (Ibid: 235)

Creatures which neither have the ability to take on the perspective of others nor communicate with one another, cannot be creatures aware of themselves. (Ibid: 235)

This means that some acts of communication with someone else must occur before the concept of ‘I’ can be fully acquired, and also, that ‘I’ and ‘THOU’, must be, in some sense, acquired together. Echoes of Buber’s thinking can be clearly heard here. They can also be heard in the passage from Benveniste adduced at the outset of this paper, but not in the writings of Bertrand Russell or in the “Myth of language universals”.

One cannot help being struck by the absence of any dialogue with the humanistic thought of the past which at times could bring together scholars as different as Humboldt, Boas, Benveniste, Buber, and even Darwin, in those strands of modern linguistics which want to align themselves, above all, with the science of the brain, and seem prepared to sacrifice ‘you’ and ‘me’ at the altar of “Cognitive Science”.

## 10. Concluding Remarks

As I discussed in my 2021 paper ‘Semantic Primitives Fifty Years Later’ (Wierzbicka 2021), according to the encyclical of Pope Francis *Fratelli Tutti*, “In today’s world the sense of belonging to a single family is fading” (section 30). From this point of view, it seems particularly important to recognise that the principle of the psychological unity of all people on earth is not just a “pious” slogan (cf. Shweder & Sullivan 1990: 400) or a well-meaning declaration not based on evidence, but a truth supported by empirical findings; and that these findings can enhance our sense of belonging to a single family and a universal community of communication.

The current one-sided emphasis on the diversity of languages without acknowledgment of their fundamental unity undermines this truth about the unity of the human mind and of the “human race”. The emphasis that many influential linguists place today on linguistic diversity is such that the underlying conceptual unity of all languages tends not to be mentioned at all. When it is mentioned (which is very rare) it is done only in general terms, without any concrete examples. Typically, both in scholarly linguistic works and in publications for the general reader, numerous examples of astounding diversity are offered, without a single example of something that all languages share.

The message implicitly (if not explicitly) conveyed is that “the unity of the human mind” is only a pious slogan. There are no shared human concepts, there can be no “universal human community of communication”. The thing to do is to celebrate the diversity of languages, and not to seek what we humans share.

By contrast, the NSM approach, which was initiated by the publication of *Semantic Primitives* fifty years ago, has always seen the diversity of human languages as combined with, and undergirded by, a shared conceptual core, and has

sought to determine what that shared core was, regarding this search as a task of utmost importance (see Wierzbicka 2021).

As cross-linguistic investigations of the last fifty years show, despite the phenomenal diversity of human languages and cultures, a shared “alphabet of human thoughts” was not just a figment of Leibniz’ imagination. This is what makes us human: shared simple concepts, like PEOPLE, KNOW and THINK, SAY and WORDS, GOOD and BAD, TWO and MANY, and just as importantly, the complex but indispensable concept ‘we’. But there could be no ‘we’ without the prior concepts YOU and I.

### CODA

As I was finalizing this paper in the third week of March 2022 I received two emails which went to the heart of what this paper and my fifty-year pursuit of universal semantic primes are all about. One of these emails, which arrived on March 18, brought with it an article from the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, the first sentence of which reads: “The current catastrophe of humanity (*chelovechnost*) has become a challenge for religious consciousness”. For my purposes, the key word here is “humanity”, *chelovechnost*.

The other email, which came on March 16 (from a British pastor, Andrew Rowell), I will quote at some length. It starts with a question about the Polish linguist Andrzej Bogusławski who in the early 1960s posited the existence of what he called “indefinibilia”, that is, universal, non-arbitrary semantic primes. Referring to my 1980 book *Lingua Mentalis*, Rowell wrote:

I’m reading the Introduction in your *Lingua Mentalis* and I feel like I have found a buried treasure. Do you know how Professor Bogusławski became interested in the semantic primes? Did he think of the idea himself and then rediscover the tradition or did he discover the tradition first and take it up again? I feel as though this is an important story that should be told.

An hour later, responding to my questions, and referring to the whole NSM program and research community (in particular, the work of David Bullock), Rowell wrote:

My academic background was originally molecular biology... I know this does not seem very related but it was actually the information in DNA and how it works that fascinated me. I taught biology for some years then became interested in how information can be stored in relational databases.

Soon after this I felt called into the Christian pastoral ministry and during my training became fascinated by how language can be stored in databases. This triggered an interest in what is at the roots of language...what are the starting points...I became very frustrated with the circles in all the dictionaries...it seemed like they were hiding something very important!

I thought that if I set up a database where I disambiguated the important verb definitions in Wordnet I could use the high frequency of recurring small



circles of definitions to identify the primes (I did not call them that...I just called them the root verbs).

I discovered your work and NSM fairly recently when I was trying to find out if anyone had already done what I was trying to do.

I am interested in Christian apologetics and I am fascinated by the Apostle Paul's arguments in Romans 2 about how God has "written" his law on our hearts. I am interested in the connection between this and the foundations for language and logic.

The sentence from Apostle Paul's *Letter to the Romans* to which Rowell refers reads: "When the Gentiles who have not the law [Moses' law] do by nature what the law requires <...> they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts"<sup>3</sup> (Romans, 2: 14–15, RSV). The question to which Andrew Rowell draws our attention is this: in what language is the law that is "written on human hearts" formulated? My own answer to this question would be: it is written in Basic Human, humanity's shared conceptual language, the core of which is constituted by universal semantic primes.

But this is only the first question. The second, which we must also ask and which is closely related to the first, is this: *what* exactly is "written on human hearts"? The Apostle Paul might have given the answer: "the Ten Commandments". But, the Ten Commandments were formulated in Hebrew, not in Basic Human. So *what* "law", written on human hearts and shared by all humanity, are we able to formulate in Basic Human? Here is my tentative and incomplete proposal, with an emphasis on *chelovechnost*, that is, "humanity":

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<sup>3</sup> I am not suggesting that "law written on human hearts" as interpreted here will be generally regarded as "natural" or will be universally accepted. I think that St Paul appeals here to our common humanity and to our best moral intuitions, available to individuals in all cultures and societies. These intuitions may go against the grain of the dominant culture, and yet be available to every person living within that culture if they deeply and sincerely search their heart.

In an expanded version of the "law written on human hearts" (as I interpret it) I have included two extra lines:

1. It is bad if people want to kill some other people.
2. It is good if people want to do good things for their mother, for their father.

It is of course impossible to know for sure whether St Paul saw the content of these two extra lines as moral intuitions available to all people (**even** without Revelation). I can only say that they are both supported by the Ten Commandments. My friend James Franklin, a philosopher and a mathematician, has commented on the expanded version as follows: "I guess St Paul doesn't say 'Thou shalt not kill' is part of the content of law written in the heart, but I suppose it is reasonable to say that would be central to it." (personal email, March 31, 2022)

I would add that a Christian commentator might want to go further than what the expanded version says, and to say, like my friend Mark Durie, a linguist and a theologian (personal email, March 23, 2022):

- Is not 'basic human' a gift from the creator to human beings?
- Is there not a universal ethical sensibility, expressible in all languages, and known by all people, which can be expressed simply in 'basic human'?
- Do not these two truths mean that the calling to fully embrace our humanity leads us to acknowledge our creator? (...)

But one doesn't need to be a Christian to accept the middle one of the three points above.

We can know that in his Letter to the Romans (2:14–15, RSV) the Apostle Paul says this:

“When Gentiles who have not the law, do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.

They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears the witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them.”

We can think about it like this:

when Paul said these words, he wanted to say something like this:

“something in me says: don’t do bad things, do good things

at the same time, something in me says:

‘it is bad if people want to do bad things to some other people

it is good if people want to do good things for some other people”

In a way, this is a distillation of what I proposed in my 2018 paper “Charter of global ethics” (in Goddard ed. *Minimal English for a Global World*). Assuming that this is on the right track, the key semantic primes on which the “law written on people’s hearts” (as interpreted here) relies include GOOD and BAD, DO and NOT, PEOPLE and OTHER; they also include ME and YOU – indispensable building blocks of human ethics, understanding and communication.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting in this connection that autistic children are known to tend to start using ‘you’ late, and also to have persistent difficulties with sustained eye contact (Tanaka & Sung 2016, Hadjikhani et al. 2017, Moriuchi & Jones 2017, Shield & Tager-Flusberg 2015, Lee & Chiat 1994, Naigles 2016). Blind people can no doubt develop the concept of ‘you’ through touch alone. But observations of young autistic children point to both difficulties with eye contact and with the use of the pronouns “I” and “you” and suggest an interconnection between the two.

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**Bionote:**

**Anna WIERZBICKA** is Professor of Linguistics (Emerita) in the School of Literature, Languages, and Linguistics at Australian National University. Her work spans a number of disciplines, including cognitive science, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and religious studies as well as linguistics, and has been published in many journals across all these disciplines. She is an author of over twenty books. Her latest books are *What Christians Believe: The Story of God and People in Minimal English* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2019), and *Vo Chto Veryat Khristiane: Istoriya Boga i Lyudei* [What Christians Believe: The Story of God and People]. Moscow, YaSK Publishers, 2021). Professor Wierzbicka is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the Australian Academy of Social Sciences, the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences. She is the winner of the International Dobrushin Prize for 2010 and of the Polish Science Foundation's 2010 prize for the humanities and social sciences.

*e-mail*: [anna.wierzbicka@anu.edu.au](mailto:anna.wierzbicka@anu.edu.au)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6074-7865>

**Сведения об авторе:**

**Анна ВЕЖБИЦКАЯ** – известный лингвист, профессор (эмерит) Института литературы, языков и лингвистики Австралийского национального университета. Помимо лингвистики ее научные интересы охватывают целый ряд дисциплин, включая когнитологию, антропологию, психологию, философию и религиоведение. Ею опубликовано большое количество статей в журналах по данным направлениям, а также более двадцати книг. Среди последних – “What Christians Believe: The Story of God and People in Minimal English” (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) и «Во что верят христиане: История бога и людей» (Москва: ЯСК. 2021). Профессор Вежбицкая является членом Австралийской академии гуманитарных наук, Австралийской академии общественных наук, Российской академии наук, Польской академии знаний, лауреатом Международной премии им. Добрушина (2010) и премии Польского научного фонда (2010).

*e-mail*: [anna.wierzbicka@anu.edu.au](mailto:anna.wierzbicka@anu.edu.au)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6074-7865>