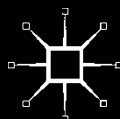


MINIMAL ENGLISH FOR A GLOBAL WORLD

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION USING FEWER WORDS



EDITED BY CLIFF GODDARD



Minimal English for a Global World

‘What should be an effective and equitable communication order for our world? The established pattern of global communication reflects a largely superseded world of national economies contained within secure territorial boundaries, and validated by authorised national cultures. These stabilities of territory, economy and culture may always have been illusory but vast population mobility and widespread transnational connections today have seriously eroded the inherited pattern of global affairs. This important volume proposes a unique addition to the usual answers to this question: Minimal English, in addition multilingualism and English as a Lingua Franca. This volume is an important instalment in the conversation we must all have about how we talk to each other in our topsy-turvy world. It shows the unique contribution that intercultural semantic analysis can offer to discussions about global communication. Combining insights from diplomacy, law, science and medicine with intercultural and linguistic analysis reveals new angles and prospects to thinking about the emerging communication system.’

—Joseph Lo Bianco, *University of Melbourne, Australia*

‘This is a timely, important, and significant contribution to our knowledge of meaning and language. It is timely because everywhere, we are finding that differences of meaning are active even when people use the same scripts of the same language; it is important because the approach in the book offers clarity for understanding those differences (as well as the commonalities); it is significant because the more enhanced understanding we are able to develop in uses of language and its various meanings, constructive paths to social betterment can be cleared – not always followed, but cleared if possible. This is a fine book for linguists, anthropologists, communication scholars, interculturalists, and others interested in addressing and developing these issues.’

—Donal Carbaugh, *University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA*

Cliff Goddard
Editor

Minimal English for a Global World

Improved Communication Using
Fewer Words

palgrave
macmillan

Editor

Cliff Goddard

School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science

Griffith University

Brisbane, QLD, Australia

ISBN 978-3-319-62511-9

ISBN 978-3-319-62512-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-62512-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017952172

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Cover illustration: Vitalij Cerepok / EyeEm / Getty Images

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

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List of Contributors

David Christian (D.Phil. Oxford, 1974) is by training a historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, but since the 1980s he has become interested in World History at very large scales, or “Big History”. He taught at Macquarie University in Sydney from 1975 to 2000 before taking a position at San Diego State University in 2001. In January 2009 he returned to take up a position at Macquarie University. He was founding President of the International Big History Association and is co-founder, with Bill Gates, of the Big History Project, which has built a free on-line high school syllabus in big history. He is Director of Macquarie University’s Big History Institute.

Nicholas Farrelly is a Fellow in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University and Director of the ANU Myanmar Research Centre. His academic specialty is the interaction of culture, politics, and security in Southeast Asia. On these topics he wrote masters and doctoral theses at the University of Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. In 2006 Nicholas co-founded New Mandala, which has grown to become a prominent website on Southeast Asian affairs. He holds an Australian Research Council fellowship for a study of political culture during Myanmar’s ongoing transformation.

Cliff Goddard is Professor of Linguistics at Griffith University. He is a proponent of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach to semantics and its sister theory, the cultural scripts approach to pragmatics. He is also interested in language description and linguistic typology. His publications include the edited volumes *Ethnopragmatics* (2006, Mouton de Gruyter) and *Cross-Linguistic*

Semantics (2008, Benjamins), the textbook *Semantic Analysis* (2nd ed., 2011 OUP), and *Words and Meanings: Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages and Cultures* (co-authored with Anna Wierzbicka; OUP 2014).

William Maley is Professor of Diplomacy, Asia Pacific College of Diplomacy, the Australian National University, and has been a visiting professor at the Russian Diplomatic Academy and a visiting research fellow at the Refugee Studies Program at Oxford University. He is author of *Rescuing Afghanistan* (2006) and *The Afghanistan Wars* (2009), and most recently has co-edited *Reconstructing Afghanistan: Civil-Military Experiences in Comparative Perspective* (2015) and *Theorising the Responsibility to Protect* (2015).

Maria Giulia Marini is an epidemiologist and counsellor. Her education combined a classic humanistic background with scientific studies in chemistry and pharmacology. In her early professional life she worked in the private sector, in medical research and health-care organization, and later, in consultancy and health education. She is a Professor of Narrative Medicine at Hunimed (Humanitas University), Milan, Italy, and Director of the Health Care Area at Fondazione Istud in Milan. Marini is author of *Narrative Medicine: Bridging the Gap between Evidence-Based Care and Medical Humanities* (2016 Springer).

Annabelle Mooney is a Reader in Sociolinguistics at the University of Roehampton. Her most recent books are *Human Rights and the Body: Hidden in Plain Sight* (2014 Ashgate) and *Language and Law* (2014 Palgrave). Her research interests also include globalization, media studies, and gender studies. With Betsy Evans, she is co-author of *Language, Society and Power* (4th edn, 2015 Routledge). She is researching the language of money.

Bert Peeters is an honorary associate professor at the Australian National University, Canberra, and an adjunct associate professor at Griffith University, Brisbane. He previously held appointments at the University of Tasmania and Macquarie University. His main research interests are in the areas of French linguistics, intercultural communication, and language and cultural values. Publications include *The Lexicon-Encyclopedia Interface* (ed., 2000); *Semantic Primes and Universal Grammar* (ed., 2006); *Tu ou vous: l'embarras du choix* (ed. with N.Ramière, 2009); *Cross-culturally Speaking, Speaking Cross-culturally* (ed. with K.Mullan and C.Béal, 2013); and *Language and Cultural Values: Adventures in Applied Ethnolinguistics* (ed., 2015).

Juhana Torkki holds a PhD in theology. He is a well-known author of popular books in Finnish on rhetoric and communication. His work consists of solving people's everyday problems in communication. He gives personal training in public speaking, as well as coaching organizations in clearer communication.

Ulla Vanhatalo is a visiting lecturer at the University of Helsinki, the Department of Modern Languages. She is interested in the methodology of lexical semantics, especially questionnaire-based studies (PhD at University of Helsinki, Finland) and Natural Semantic Metalanguage. Besides academic research, she has applied methods of semantic analysis to everyday situations.

Michael Wesley is Professor of International Affairs and Director of the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. His career has spanned academia (previous appointments at UNSW, Griffith University, University of Hong Kong, Sun Yat-sen University, and University of Sydney), government (as Assistant Director General for Transnational Issues at the Office of National Assessments), and think tanks (as Executive Director of the Lowy Institute for International Policy and a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution). His most recent book, *There Goes the Neighbourhood: Australia and the Rise of Asia*, won the 2011 John Button Prize for the best writing on Australian public policy.

Anna Wierzbicka born and educated in Poland, is Professor of Linguistics at the Australian National University. Together with Cliff Goddard, Wierzbicka created the "Natural Semantic Metalanguage", based on empirical cross-linguistic investigations, which can serve as a basis for comparing meanings across languages and cultures. Her latest books are *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language* (2014 OUP) and (with Cliff Goddard) *Words and Meanings: Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages, and Cultures* (2014 OUP).

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1

Introduction

Cliff Goddard

There are a great many books, conferences, articles, and the like on the topic of “Global English”. This book, however, is unique in linking the theme of Global English with that of Minimal English as a tool for achieving better intercultural understanding and clearer thinking. Although the idea of Minimal English, that is, an identifiable core of simple, cross-translatable English words, comes from linguists, many of the contributors to this book are not linguists. They are experts and specialists from the fields of diplomacy and international relations, ethics and law, science education, public communication, and medicine, all of whom are entering into an interdisciplinary dialogue with outward-looking linguists. The reader will find a variety of different voices and styles, reflecting different fields and vantage points of the contributors. The chapters, many of them beautifully written, tell us not only about the potential for Minimal English in their respective fields but are richly informative about those fields themselves. Not that these chapters deal in

C. Goddard (✉)
Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

generalities. One of their most appealing aspects is that the authors use concrete case studies.

But what is Minimal English, and how does it relate to ordinary English and to Global English, that is, English as a global lingua franca? The concept of Minimal English was first proposed by Anna Wierzbicka (2014: Ch 14), as a radically reduced “mini English” which can provide “a common auxiliary inter-language for speakers of different languages, and as a global means for clarifying, elucidating, storing and comparing ideas” (p. 194). This idea is taken up in Chap. 2, by Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka. Aside from arguing for the benefits of using cross-translatable words, they stress that Minimal English is intended not to replace or supplant ordinary English, but to add to its effectiveness as a global tool for communication and discourse. The linguistic research and knowledge base underlying it is dealt with in Chap. 3 by Cliff Goddard, “Minimal English: The Science Behind It”. Most of the subsequent chapters include texts written in Minimal English, some of them lengthy.

The next two chapters take us into the world of diplomacy and international relations, where communication is often a sensitive and tricky business. William Maley’s Chap. 4 illustrates the pitfalls and complexities of diplomatic communication, particularly in crisis situations, while in Chap. 5 Nicholas Farrelly and Michael Wesley discuss the roles of English in international relations, with a particular focus on ASEAN and on China–US relations. These authors see real value in having an auxiliary form of simple cross-translatable English at hand.

Chapters 6 and 7 are, broadly speaking, about ethics, values, and law. Anna Wierzbicka proposes a “Charter of Global Ethic” written entirely in Minimal English, and discusses the great advantages of freeing international discourse in this area from Anglocentric orientations that are hiding, often unnoticed, in untranslatable Anglo-English words. In her Chap. 7, Annabelle Mooney uses Minimal English to tease out the core elements of the concepts of “torture” and “cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment” in international law.

Minimal English clearly has important potential applications in education. In their respective Chaps. 8 and 9, Anna Wierzbicka and David Christian

explore how Minimal English can contribute to science education and to Big History. Anna Wierzbicka takes as her case study the story of changing ideas about the universe, from Ptolemy, through Copernicus, Galileo, and into modern times. How can this canonical science story, she asks, be captured and taught to children “through words that children can understand”. In Chap. 9, David Christian, the founder of the Big History movement (which, broadly speaking, seeks to tell the shared history of humanity in the context of the universe), discusses the need for origin stories and the challenge of casting such stories into language which is both precise and accessible.

The final pair of chapters are only loosely connected in terms of subject matter, but both are concerned with in-progress applications of Minimal languages—not Minimal English as such, but its parallels in other languages, such as Finnish, Italian, and French. Chapter 10, by Ulla Vanhatalo and Juhana Torkki, relates how the authors have popularized in Finland the idea of improving communication using the semantic primes of Finnish, the “65 words” method. The final chapter, Chap. 11, is about health communication, specifically, efforts being made in the “narrative medicine” approach to improve communication between patients and doctors and to give patients a stronger voice. The authors are linguist Bert Peeters and narrative medicine expert Maria Giulia Marini.

Clearly each of the chapters can deal with only a small cross-section of the issues in their respective fields, but cumulatively they show the enormous potential for Minimal English to make a difference in the world.

It goes without saying that there is much which is not included, or even touched on, in this book, including the applications of Minimal English in language teaching and language learning, in higher education, in linguistic fieldwork, and in counselling, mediation, and therapy. All going well, there will be time and opportunity for these topics in future books, conferences and websites.

Acknowledgements The ANU Centre for Humanities provided valuable support for 2015 Symposium “Global English, Minimal English”, held at Australian National University.

Reference

Wierzbicka, Anna. 2014. *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language*. New York: Oxford University Press.

2

Minimal English and How It Can Add to Global English

Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka

2.1 Why Minimal English?

The global spread of English is now something that concerns millions of people, in fact, mega-millions, and it creates challenges that, we believe, cross-linguistic semantics has something useful to say about. One of the goals of this book is to bring the experience of cross-linguistic semantics, that is, the study of meaning across languages, into the public arena and to discuss ways in which it can be helpful in fostering clarity in intercultural communication. Underlying it is the idea that Global English is not an unmixed blessing as far as intercultural understanding is concerned. Yes, Global English facilitates international and intercultural communication—but it can also create an impression that effective intercultural understanding is occurring when in fact it is not. In his

C. Goddard (✉)

School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science, Griffith University,
Brisbane, QLD, Australia

A. Wierzbicka

Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, Australia

Cultures in Conversation, Carbaugh (2005: xxii–xxiii) referred to difficulties like these as ‘invisible misunderstandings’ (cf. Peeters forthcoming/2018). This book explores ways in which the use of Minimal English can improve intercultural communication and cross-linguistic understanding in the era of Global English.

2.2 What Is Minimal English?

Minimal English is an application and extension of several decades of research by linguists in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach to meaning and language. Among linguists, the NSM approach is well known for its claim to have discovered the fundamental meaning elements of all languages, known as semantic primes, and for producing a large body of studies into how meanings are expressed differently through the words and grammars of different languages (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014; more detail is given in Chap. 3, this volume). It is also—so far—the only comprehensive approach to linguistic description that takes an explicit stand against Anglocentrism (Wierzbicka 2014). But although based on extensive research by linguists working in the NSM approach, Minimal English is not NSM. It is very different in its purpose and, correspondingly, its composition.

Minimal English is intended for use by non-specialists, and for a wide and open-ended range of functions. It is the result of taking NSM research ‘out of the lab’, so to speak, and into the wider world—not as the sole language of communication, but as an auxiliary or supplementary language. Minimal English is a tool that can help people put their thoughts into words in a way that makes it easier to discuss them across a language barrier. (Actually, a better metaphor is that Minimal English offers a way of going ‘under’ a language barrier.) Minimal English also helps one to think more clearly. With fewer words to choose from, one is forced to focus on the essential things that one wants to say, without getting distracted by all the available lexical options or being tempted into vague and woolly phrasing. In a Minimal English text, every word matters, every word counts. This helps counter the vagueness that often comes with an ‘inflated style’, in which, as George Orwell (1946) once

put it: 'A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outline and covering up all the details'.

In principle, the idea behind Minimal English is simple: to draw on linguistic research so as to speak in universal, near-universal, or widely known words using simple grammatical patterns that are known to be easily transposable into other languages (and conversely, to steer clear of known zones of lexical and grammatical trouble). This might sound like the familiar advice to 'Use plain language', and in a sense it is—but what is impressionistically 'plain' in English isn't necessarily either simple or universal. For example, the words *wrong*, *fair*, *friendly*, and *fact* sound pretty plain and simple to most English speakers, but they lack equivalents in very many languages. Likewise, in the area of grammar, a sentence like *We have to do something about it* sounds as if it uses a very simple sentence pattern, but there are many languages of the world into which it cannot be rendered without substantial rewording or grammatical rearrangement (see Chap. 2). Hence the value of the Minimal English project: it provides informed guidelines and guidance, based on linguistic research, about how to say important things in a clear and translatable way.

Needless to say, in the world of scholarship there are several research traditions, especially in the ethnography of communication, intercultural communication studies, hermeneutics, ethno linguistics, and some strands of discourse studies, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics, which recognize that communication is deeply 'culturally shaped' (cf., e.g. Hymes 1968; Carbaugh 2005, 2017; Underhill 2012; Sharifian 2011). Issues of (non)translatability, the importance of cultural words, and the possibility of cross-cultural misunderstanding (even within a 'common language') are common themes in these research literatures. Across an even broader ranges of fields, there are numbers of scholars who recognize the dangers of Anglocentrism (see the review in Wierzbicka 2014: Chaps. 15–18). The question is: What to do about it? Minimal English offers a new analytical tool and a new medium for practitioners in intercultural education.

Briefly, the starting vocabulary of Minimal English consists of (i) semantic primes and some associated grammatical words, (ii) words with special importance as semantic building blocks in other concepts, either

in all or most languages, and (iii) other useful words that are known to be either more or less cross-translatable or more or less unavoidable in many contexts of modern, international discourse, for example, *sea*, *book*, *buy*, *country*, *government*, and *number*. If any of them are unfamiliar in a given context, they may have to be explained, sufficiently for the purpose at hand, as they are introduced into the discourse. Altogether, we are looking at a core Minimal English lexicon of about 250 words, plus guidelines for how it can be expanded to meet the needs of particular situations.

2.3 Minimal English, Anglo English, Global English

The notion of Minimal English is contrastive. It presupposes a distinction between several forms of English: Global English, which is anchored in Anglo English, as opposed to Minimal English. Global English has been shaped by the history and culture of one particular part of the world, and still bears the imprints of its origins. Minimal English is derived from English, but being radically reduced, it can match the shared core of all languages. It has been built not only by systematic reduction of English but also by decades of empirical cross-linguistic investigations, aimed at identifying that common core; see Chap. 3. Accordingly, Minimal English is not another simplified version of English analogous to Ogden's (1930) 'Basic English' or Jean-Paul Nerrière's (2004) 'Globish'. Both of these versions of simplified English were pruned for practical purposes, but they were not reduced to the bare essentials, nor were they devised with cross-translatability in mind. In fact Ogden and Nerrière were not looking at English from a cross-linguistic perspective at all. Ogden's (1930) 850-word Basic included many quintessentially Anglo-English words that lack equivalents in other languages, including *experience*, *organisation*, *suggestion*, *humour*, *competition*, and *fiction*. Globish's 1500 words include hundreds of untranslatable English words, including *fair*, *right*, *wrong*, *mind*, *evidence*, and *experience*. See Sect. 6 for more detail.

Given its skeletal lexicon, Minimal English cannot of course be an all-purpose practical global means of communication. It can be, however, a global minimal lingua franca for the elucidation of ideas and explanation

of meanings—not only in scholarship but also in international relations, politics, business, law, ethics, education, and indeed in any context where it is important to explain precisely what one means.

In his introduction to a volume entitled *Universals of Human Thought*, philosopher Ernest Gellner (1981) wrote: ‘Unconvertible currencies are not suitable for trade’. A key characteristic of Minimal English is that (unlike Ogden’s Basic or any other reduced form of English) it is fully convertible.

By contrasting Global English with Minimal English, we are not aiming at attaining some theoretical conceptual purity but at putting into practical use empirical findings about concepts that, evidence suggests, recur in a verifiable lexical form, in languages from all the continents of our planet. We are aiming to promote human understanding that can be shared globally, through simple words of intelligible, ordinary English. In an absolute sense, Minimal English has no privileged status: Minimal Spanish, Minimal Chinese, or Minimal Arabic would do just as well. But whether we like it or not, from a practical point of view Minimal English can be a particularly useful tool in the twenty-first century’s globalizing world.

We are not, of course, proposing that a ban should be placed on complex Anglo-English concepts in scholarship, international discourse, and in education. That would not only be impractical but also counterproductive. There are tremendous advantages that come from having English as a global lingua franca. What we propose is that—in some contexts—it would be useful to problematize and denaturalize such English concepts and to try to think ‘outside English’. When this needs to be done, Minimal English is a valuable tool.

2.4 Examples of Minimal English

What would this look like in practice? Here are three short examples ‘sampled’ from the later chapters in this book. In Chap. 6, Anna Wierzbicka makes the case that discourse about values and ethics is best carried out in terms that are cross-translatable and not invested from the beginning with a viewpoint which is tied to any particular language. She

proposes to distil key ethical ideas from the Christian, Buddhist, and humanist traditions into a ‘Charter of Global Ethic’ composed in Minimal English. To illustrate only from the negative side of the lexicon, this means avoiding both ‘high’ English words like *violence*, *racism*, and *prejudice* and Plain English words like *murder*, *rape*, and *hatred*.¹ We have extracted two of Wierzbicka’s 24 proposed principles, from the section titled ‘Bad ways of thinking about people’.

[A1] (Charter, item 5)

It is very bad if people think like this about some people:

“People of this kind are not like other people, they are below other people.”

[A2] (Charter, item 8)

It is very bad if people think like this about people:

“People of many kinds live on Earth, people of some of these kinds are bad people”

These two mini-texts are phrased exclusively in semantic primes. Other items in the proposed Charter use some Minimal English words which are not semantic primes, such as ‘kill’ (‘it is very bad if people want to kill other people’) and ‘men’, ‘women’, and ‘children’.

To show a more complex ethics text, we can look at the last of Wierzbicka’s proposed principles, labelled here [A3]. Note the expression ‘(on) the Earth’, a pivotal term for global consciousness.

[A3] (Charter item 24)

It is good if people think like this about the Earth: “Many people live on Earth now, many other people will live on Earth after. Very bad things can happen to these other people if people do some bad things on Earth now. I don’t want these bad things to happen to these other people. Because of this, I don’t want to do these things.”

Turning from ethics to international relations and diplomacy, in Chap. 5 Nicholas Farrelly and Michael Wesley argue that Minimal English can contribute to meeting sometimes unrecognized communication problems in international affairs. Noting that assumed or apparent proficiency

in English is not always straightforward, they contend that a measure of simplification and codification of language can assist in the conduct of foreign relations. 'Success does not always require elegance', they write, 'but is built on the need to get words to carry their meanings across cultural boundaries'. They argue that even high-level diplomats can go astray by overlooking semantic nuances and cultural assumptions embedded in complex Anglo-English vocabulary. They illustrate with an extended study of calls from the US Bush administration in 2005 for China to become a 'responsible stakeholder in the international system'.

Their treatment is complex and cannot be summarized here, but we have extracted two mini-texts that show how Minimal English can be brought to bear to help clarify complex ideas such as 'international system' and the special responsibilities of major countries in international relations. Some readers might find these wordings embarrassingly 'simplistic'. If so, he or she is invited to experiment with other ways of putting the same basic ideas into words while avoiding expressions such as 'system', 'interests', 'mutual benefit', and 'responsibility', all of which are untranslatable into most languages of the world.

[B1] "International system"

Many countries on Earth are parts of one big something. If some of these countries do some things, this can be very good for all these countries. If some of these countries don't do some things, this can be very bad for all these countries.

[B2] "Big countries"

Some countries are not like many other countries because they are very big countries. America is one of these countries. China is one of these countries. [...] it is good if a big country thinks like this at many times: "I am part of something, many other countries are parts of this something. I am a big part of this something. Because of this, if I do some things, this can be very bad for all these countries. Because of this I don't want to do these things."

Obviously, expressions such as 'countries' and 'on Earth' are crucial anchor points for the discourse, as are names such as 'America' and 'China', but it is also notable how much can be done with simple words

and expressions such as ‘parts of one big something’ and ‘this can be very good (or: very bad) for all these countries’.

In Chaps. 8 and 9, Anna Wierzbicka and David Christian discuss whether and to what extent Minimal English can capture ‘big ideas’ for the purpose of history and science education. The following is an extract from a lengthy Minimal English text, presented in Chap. 8, telling how Western ideas about the Universe have developed over the centuries from Ptolemy, Copernicus, Galileo, and into modern times. Much of the material it covers is found in school textbooks as part of the canonical narrative of Western science. The extract in [C1] describes the importance of the telescope.

[C1] Galileo’s telescope

Galileo looked at the stars not like other people looked at them before. Because of this, he could see them well, not like people could see them before. When he was looking at them, he was holding something of one kind near his eyes. When someone holds something of this kind near the eyes, this someone can look at some places very far from the place where this someone is. A thing of this kind is called “a telescope.” When Galileo looked at the sky at night like this, he could see some places very far from the Earth well.

This passage uses no less than seven Minimal English words which are not semantic primes: ‘stars’, ‘look at’, ‘hold’, ‘eyes’, ‘be called’, ‘sky’, and ‘night’. Elsewhere in the same text, other non-primitive words like ‘the Sun’, ‘the Earth’, and ‘Moon’ are used, as one would expect. A fine point—but a notable one—is that the wording in lines 1–2 avoids the untranslatable ‘comparative construction’. It would have been easy to say that, using his telescope, Galileo could see the stars ‘better’ than other people before him, but some languages don’t have ‘comparative’ words like ‘better’ (‘bigger’, ‘faster’, etc.) The mini-text in [C1] also shows how ‘new’ words, such as ‘telescope’, can be introduced as necessary by using the Minimal English expression ‘is called’.

Jumping ahead in the ‘Universe’ passage discussed by Wierzbicka, the mini-text in [C2] tries to capture some pieces of astronomical common knowledge, derived from centuries of scientific inquiry.

[C2] Some pieces of modern astronomical “common knowledge”

Many people now know that it is like this: The Sun is a star. There are very many other stars like the Sun. [...] The stars are very very big things, these things are very very far from the Earth. They are not touching anything else, like the Sun is not touching anything else. None of them is near another one, none of them is near anything else, like the Sun is not near anything else.

Whether, and to what extent, scientific facts and narratives can be rendered in Minimal English, and how such texts can be used in primary and early secondary education, and in cross-cultural contexts, is debated, constructively and productively, by Christian and Wierzbicka.

2.5 The Vocabulary of Minimal English

This section outlines the vocabulary of Minimal English as we see it at the present time. First things first, as the saying goes, and when it comes to simple cross-translatable words, this means starting with the most basic meanings of all: semantic primes. They are listed in Table 2.1 below. For people who are seeing this list for the first time, it may be helpful to make a few observations. First, it includes words from all broad divisions of the lexicon: substantives (noun-like words and pronouns, including indefinites like ‘someone’ and ‘something’); the demonstrative ‘this’ and some other specifiers; some quantifying and descriptive words; words

Table 2.1 Semantic primes (English versions) grouped into 12 categories

1	I~me, you, someone, something~thing, people, body, kind, part
2	this, the same, other~else
3	one, two, much~many, little~few, some, all
4	good, bad, big, small
5	think, know, want, don’t want, feel, see, hear
6	say, words, true
7	do, happen, move
8	be (somewhere), there is, be (someone/something), (is) mine
9	live, die
10	time~when, now, before, after, a long time, a short time, for some time, moment
11	place~where, here, above, below, far, near, side, inside, touch
12	not, maybe, can, because, if, very, more, like

from the areas of time and place; ‘logical’ words like ‘if’, ‘can’, ‘because’, and ‘maybe’; and a fairly rich collection of verb-like words. The latter includes both experiential/subjective words (‘want’, ‘don’t want’, ‘think’, ‘know’, ‘feel’, ‘see’, ‘hear’), social (‘say’), and objective (‘happen’, ‘do’, ‘move’), as well as ‘live’ and ‘die’ and various stative verbs: ‘be (somewhere)’ [locational ‘be’], ‘be (someone/something)’ [specificational ‘be’], and ‘there is’ [existence]. On the other hand, the stock of semantic primes does not include many ‘concrete’ nouns (actually, ‘body’ is the only one) or verbs for physical activities or processes, and there are no words like ‘and’, ‘but’, or ‘or’ either.

There are 65 semantic primes, but because some of them occur in variant forms (allolexes) or are expressed in English phrasal expressions (such as ‘a long time’ and ‘don’t want’), the total number of words is greater than this. The primes also bring with them various grammatical words (also known to linguists as function words) associated with their combinatorial properties. For example:

‘in’, e.g. in this place, in the same place; in one moment

‘at’, e.g. at this time, at the same time; at this moment

‘of’, e.g. one of these people; one part of this thing; something of one kind

‘with’, e.g. do something with someone; live with someone; say something with words

‘about’, e.g. know about something; say something about someone

‘that’ (complementizer), e.g. I didn’t know that this can happen

‘to’ (complementizer), e.g. I want you to do something

‘it’ (dummy subject), e.g. it is good if ..., it is bad if ...

All these grammatical words are features of Minimal *English*, and do not, of course, map one-to-one to the Minimal versions of other languages. In Minimal Finnish, for example, only three of the grammatical functions listed above would be marked by separate words. All the others are expressed using case suffixes (Vanhatalo et al. 2014).

Variant forms (allolexes) of semantic primes and portmanteau expressions (in which a single word stands for a combination of several words) are also part of the core vocabulary of Minimal English. Some appear in

Table 2.1, indicated with ~ (e.g. the word *else* is an English variant of *other*). In addition, there are the following:

- 'a lot' (a variant of 'much-many')
- 'well' (an adverbial variant of 'good')
- 'as', 'such', 'way' (variants of 'like', or portmanteau of 'like' and 'this')
- 'during' (variant of 'for ...' about time periods)
- 'it' for 'this thing'
- 'these' (variant of 'this' used with a plural noun)
- 'he' or 'she' for 'this someone'; 'they' or 'them' for 'these people' or 'these things'
- 'both', 'every' (portmanteau words based on 'all')
- 'nothing', 'no-one', 'nowhere', 'anyone', 'anything', 'anywhere'
- 'sometimes', 'often', 'always', 'never'
- 'who', 'where', 'when', 'how', 'why' (not as questions, but in contexts like 'I don't know who, where, when, etc.')

Most of the semantic primes are grammatically quite versatile. *Say* and *do*, for example, can be used in constructions like the following, which, as far as we know, have equivalents in all languages:

- ... say something (good/bad) about something
- ... say something to someone
- ... say some words to someone

- ... do something to something
- ... do something good for someone, do something bad to someone
- ... do some things with some other people

It is not the case, however, that one can freely use a semantic prime in any way that English grammar allows. For example, the semantic prime 'do' *cannot* be grammatically extended with the word 'about', for example, in a sentence like 'I want to do something about it'. This is a perfectly normal way of speaking in full, ordinary English, but it does not have equivalents in other languages so it should not be used in Minimal English. Two other nonuniversal constructions that need to be avoided in Minimal

English are what grammarians call indirect speech (the ‘say that ...’ construction) and the comparable ‘think that ...’ construction. To ensure good translatability, it is better to use constructions such as the following:

He/she said: ‘X Y Z’

I think about it like this: ‘X Y Z’

Clearly, it takes a certain amount of time and practice to learn how to use the basic words and grammatical patterns of Minimal English.²

Despite the expressive power of semantic primes, more words are needed in Minimal English. The question is: How to choose them? Fortunately, NSM research has identified 60–80 words whose meanings, though semantically complex, appear to be universal or near-universal.³ The words listed in Table 2.2 are termed ‘semantic molecules’ because they play an important role alongside semantic primes, as building blocks in the composition of other, yet more complex concepts. For more background and explanation, see Chap. 3.

We would also nominate the words in Table 2.3 for inclusion in the Minimal English lexicon. They are a mixed bunch. Some of them appear

Table 2.2 Selection of proposed universal semantic molecules

hands, mouth, eyes, head, ears, nose, face, legs, teeth, fingers, breasts, skin, bones, blood	Body parts
long, round, flat, thin, hard, soft, sharp, smooth, heavy	Physical
be on something, at the top, at the bottom, in the middle, in front of, around	Spatial/physical
sky, the Earth, sun, moon, stars, ground, during the day, at night	Environmental
day	Times
water, fire	Fire and water
creature, grow, egg, tail, wings, feathers	Biological
children, men, women, be born, mother, father, wife, husband	Biosocial
wood, stone	Materials
know (someone), be called	‘Knowing’ and ‘naming’
hold, make, kill, breathe, sleep, sit, lie, stand, play, laugh, sing	‘Doing’

to be semantic molecules that are fairly widespread (though nowhere near universal) across the languages of the world. As such, they are ‘high value’ vocabulary items for Minimal English. Others are probably not semantic molecules but are nonetheless likely to be extremely useful ‘international words’ for talking about things that matter to people all around the world. Provided such words are approximately translatable, and do not smuggle in too much Anglo and/or Euro cultural bias (see next section), we see no harm in including them in Minimal English. Some of these, such as *government*, *plastic*, and *photo*, if they are present in a given language, are likely to be loans or other recently introduced words; the same applies even more forcefully to *science* and *the law*. Nevertheless, a case

Table 2.3 Some nonuniversal but useful words for Minimal English

hungry, brain, heart	Body
river, mountain, desert, sea, island, jungle/forest	Environmental
rain, wind, snow, ice, air	
flood, storm, drought, earthquake	
east, west, north, south	
bird, fish, tree, seeds, grass, mosquitoes, flies, snake	Biological
dog, cat, horse, cow, pig (camel, buffalo, moose, etc.)	
family	Biosocial
month, week, clock, hour, second	Times
house, village, city, school, hospital	Places
teacher, doctor, nurse, soldier	Professions
country, government, capital, border, flag, passport, vote	‘Country’
science, the law, health, education, sport	‘Fields’
meat, rice, wheat, corn (yams, etc.), flour, salt, sugar, sweet	Food
knife, key, gun, bomb, medicines	‘Tools’
paper, iron, metal, glass, leather, wool, cloth	‘Materials’
Thread, gold, rubber, plastic, oil, coal, petrol	
car, bicycle, plane, boat, train, road, wheel, wire, engine	Technology and transport
pipe, telephone, television, radio, phone	
read, write, book, photo, newspaper, film	Literacy and media
money, God, war, poison, music	Other: nouns
go/went, eat, drink, take (someone somewhere), burn, buy/pay, learn	Other: verbs
clean	Other: adjectives

can be made that these are useful words for Minimal English if it is to be a practical aide to intercultural communication here and now, in the context of Global English.

Finally we would like to say that it is not necessarily problematical to introduce, into local versions of Minimal English, various locally important words for natural kinds and ‘concrete’ things. For example, in the Pacific it would not necessarily create any problems to add the word ‘kava’ or ‘betel nut’; in the Arctic it would not create problems to add the word ‘seal’. It is important, however, to be wary of abstract words. As John Locke (1959[1690] Book III. V, §8) already understood a long time ago, if we ‘exactly compare different languages, we shall find that though they have words which in translations and dictionaries are supposed to answer one another, yet there is scarce one of ten amongst the names of complex ideas that stands for the same precise idea, which the word does that in dictionaries it is rendered by’. And particularly so in the case of ‘abstract and compounded ideas, such as are the greatest part of those which make up moral discourses’.

2.6 How Is Minimal English Different from Basic English and Plain English?

For many people, the idea of Minimal English may bring to mind Basic English. This was a controlled and radically simplified form of English that was promoted as an international auxiliary language in the 1930s and 1940s. It was devised largely by Charles Kay Ogden, a Cambridge professor and prominent philosopher of language. He was co-author, together with his associate I.A. Richards, of the influential book *The Meaning of Meaning* (Ogden and Richards 1923), from which the concept of the ‘semiotic triangle’ (originally called the ‘triangle of reference’) originates. As mentioned earlier, Basic—which began life as an acronym for British American Scientific International Commercial (English)—had a core of 850 words and a standardized grammar that supposedly ‘covered everything necessary for everyday purposes’. In its heyday, Basic was widely discussed in public, intellectual, and pedagogical circles.

Although the Basic project came in for serious criticism and lost momentum in the 1950s, it has had a strong influence on the teaching of beginner's vocabulary in English language teaching. Even today, the 850-word list forms part of Wikipedia's Simple English and the starting vocabulary of the Berlitz English Language School (a commercial language education company); and it is said to be especially influential in English language teaching in Asia.⁴

Because it seems inevitable that comparisons will be drawn between Minimal English and Basic, it is instructive to briefly compare and contrast them. The differences are actually enormous, in nearly every dimension: structure (words and grammar), intended range of functions, and in 'spirit'.

So far as words are concerned, as mentioned in Sect. 3, cross-translatability played no part at all in Ogden's thinking, and Basic included a great many words that lack equivalents in other languages. A handful of examples were mentioned earlier. A larger, still partial, sample reads as follows. It is given in two sections, titled Things and Qualities, which are categories used in the Basic system.

- Things: *agreement, answer, authority, control, desire, experience, industry, organisation, suggestion, humour, business, competition, distribution, fiction, love, manager, mass, motion, observation, ornament, process, power, representative, request, secretary, self, sense, society, structure, system, waste...*
- Qualities: *chemical, general, natural, medical, parallel, political, probable, responsible, right, private, serious, violent...*

Looking over the list of Things, the reader may well wonder at the number of 'abstract' nouns. A core feature of Basic is that almost all verbs are eliminated by rephrasing in terms of nouns, supported by a small set of multifunctional verbs, which Ogden terms 'operators'. Consequently, there are a large number of nouns, 650 in fact, and a very small number of operators. The verbal operators are *come, get, give, go, keep, let, make, seem, take, be, do, have, say, see, send, may, and will*.

The following examples show the phrasing style of Basic (pp. 49, 57, 8, 157):⁵