**150 SENTENCES FOR IDENTIFYING NSM SEMANTIC PRIMES IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES**

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This list can be used to help identify semantic primes in any language. It is also a useful way to get a sample of the core grammar of a language.

The current list (v7) is the latest in a line that goes back to the *Semantic and Lexical Universals* project (Goddard and Wierzbicka eds., 1994). Many people have contributed to the gradual improvement of the list. Further suggestions and trouble-shooting observations are most welcome [hello@nsm-approach.net](mailto:hello@nsm-approach.net).

We have tried to give sentences that are likely to be fairly ordinary in most cultural settings. They can be used in a variety of ways. For example, one can use them in direct elicitation, embed them in mini-narratives or scenarios as stimuli or prompts for informants, or look for comparable examples in natural texts.

The list is divided into sections but there is a great deal of overlap between the sections. Some sentences are composed exclusively in primes, while others include complex words which may need to be adjusted to suit the cultural context.

When identifying words for semantic primes one has to be aware of three potential complications: polysemy, allolexy, and portmanteau expressions. Polysemy occurs when, for example, two semantic primes are expressed by the same word form, with each meaning appearing unambiguously in certain grammatical frames. Allolexy is when there are two or more words (allolexes) for a single semantic prime, each used in a different context, e.g. ‘other’ and ‘else’ in English. As for portmanteau expressions, this refers to the situation in which a combination of primes, e.g. ‘like this’ or ‘a long time before’, is expressed as a single word.

# SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY

Many other examples occur throughout. In addition to SOMEONE and SOMETHING, the question-forms WHO and WHAT are included because they can help identify the intended meaning. In some languages, expressions like ‘one person’ may be used instead of SOMEONE in some contexts.

1. WHO did it?
2. SOMEONE took (ate, broke, etc.) it. I don’t know WHO.
3. WHAT happened?
4. I did SOMETHING bad.
5. WHAT is this?
6. This THING is big/small.
7. They are good PEOPLE.
8. Many PEOPLE don’t know this.
9. Sometimes bad things happen to (good) PEOPLE.
10. The BODY of a man is not like the BODY of a woman.

# HAVE PARTS, KINDS

Sometimes the word for THING(S) can also express “parts”. Sometimes predicate expressions like ‘be two’ or ‘be many’ can express HAVE TWO PARTS or HAVE MANY PARTS.

1. People’s bodies have many PARTS. Some (of them) are inside the body.
2. This thing (e.g. knife, axe) has two PARTS, one is sharp, the other is not sharp.
3. This thing has many small PARTS.
4. There are two/many KINDS of fish (bird, nut, etc.).
5. [following (14)] This KIND is good to eat. This (other) KIND is not good to eat.
6. Two KINDS of people live here.

# THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE

These primes can have plural or gender-marked allolexes. In some languages, the prime THIS will have a special variant when used as a substantive, as in (17) and (18).

1. THIS is good/bad.
2. THIS is a big/small basket (knife, bowl, etc.).
3. THESE people; all THESE people.
4. I saw THE SAME man/woman (or: THE SAME people) the day after.
5. It happened at THE SAME place/time, not at ANOTHER place/time.
6. She did/said THE SAME (the same thing).
7. Someone ELSE did it.

# ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY~MUCH, LITTLE~FEW

# These primes can have plural or gender-marked allolexes. In (36) and (37), EVERYONE and EVERYTHING are English portmanteau expressions with ALL.

1. HOW MANY children does she have?
2. She has ONE child (TWO/MANY children).
3. HOW MUCH water is there (in that well, bowl, etc.)?
4. MANY (or: not MANY) people live here.
5. (There were MANY people there.) After that, ONE/TWO (of them) left.
6. SOME of these lemons (potatoes, yams, etc.) are good, SOME are rotten.
7. In SOME places there are lots of fish (rabbits, birds, etc.).
8. There is MUCH (a lot of) water everywhere.
9. There is very LITTLE water here.
10. Very FEW people know this.
11. MANY of them went to the east, SOME went to the west.
12. ALL his sons (daughters, etc.) are now married.
13. EVERYONE does this.
14. (From the top of the mountain) I could see EVERYTHING (below).

# GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL

BIG and SMALL are not listed separately but appear in many examples throughout. It is not expected that complex sentences with GOOD and BAD as in (40) will necessarily use the equivalent of ‘if’. In some languages, GOOD and BAD have adverbial allolexes, e.g. English ‘well’, as in (41) and (42).

1. GOOD people don’t do things like this.
2. This was GOOD/BAD for me.
3. It is GOOD/BAD if someone (or: people) does something like this.
4. I know this man (woman)/place WELL.
5. Some people can do this WELL, some people can’t.

# THINK, KNOW, WANT, DON’T WANT

# ‘Know (someone)’ is no longer regarded as a semantically primitive meaning.

1. What are you THINKING about?
2. I THOUGHT about it for a long time.
3. They THINK something bad about me.
4. At that moment, I THOUGHT: “It’s true”.
5. I THOUGHT like this: “ – – ”
6. (Where is he now?) I don’t KNOW. Maybe Mary KNOWS.
7. He KNOWS much (a lot) about things like this.
8. (She left yesterday). I KNOW.
9. I didn’t KNOW this before.
10. I WANT (DON’T WANT) you to do it.
11. I WANT (DON’T WANT) this to happen.

# FEEL, SEE, HEAR

In some languages, some of the FEEL sentences may involve portmanteau expressions.

1. When you see the stars, what do you FEEL?
2. When I swallow (something), I FEEL something in my throat.
3. At that time (then), I didn’t FEEL anything.
4. When I SAW it, I FELT something like never before.
5. I SAW something (a dog, bird, etc.) there.
6. I can’t SEE anything.
7. She was singing – I HEARD it.
8. I HEAR something (over there in the bushes).
9. I couldn’t HEAR it.

# SAY, WORDS, TRUE

1. ‘This is good’, I SAID.
2. What did he SAY?
3. He SAID something to her, but she didn’t hear it.
4. Many people SAID very bad things about him/her.
5. She SAID the same, but in other (i.e. different) WORDS.
6. In language X, the WORD for ‘dog’ (bird, tree, etc.) is ---.
7. If you say one more WORD, ....
8. That’s not TRUE.

# DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH

1. What did you DO then (after that)?
2. Those people DID something good for me.
3. People DO this with a knife (axe, stick, etc.).
4. (He didn’t do it on his own.) He DID it with someone else.
5. Something good/bad HAPPENED to this person (to me).
6. Something bad HAPPENED in that place.
7. (Look!) Something is MOVING over there.
8. Don’t MOVE! (e.g. while putting on a bandaid or removing headlice)
9. I couldn’t MOVE.
10. Something was TOUCHING my hand.
11. If something hard TOUCHES it, it can break (e.g. about an egg).

# THERE IS, (IS) MINE

1. THERE IS someone in the garden.
2. THERE IS/ARE no water/spiders here.
3. THERE ARE no ghosts (unicorns, dragons, etc.).
4. THERE ARE many kinds of nuts (bird, fish, etc.).
5. It’s MINE.
6. It’s not MINE. Whose is it?

# BE (SOMEWHERE~WITH SOMEONE), BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)

In many languages, including English, the same word is used to express both BE (SOMEWHERE~WITH SOMEONE) and BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING). In some languages, such “BE words” are not used in present tense or timeless contexts, but they are found in past contexts or in combination with WANT and CAN, as in examples (92) and (93).

1. I want to BE with my mother (grandfather, father, etc.).
2. This IS something big/small.
3. I don’t know what this IS.
4. At that time, I WAS a child. I’m not a child anymore.
5. She wants to BE a bird (e.g. about a day-dreaming child).
6. That man can’t BE her father. (He is too old.)

# LIVE, DIE

Note the expression ‘LIVE with’, as in (96). There are other examples of semantic prime LIVE in (16), (105), and (129).

1. [In story of olden days] These people LIVED for a long time.
2. Turtles (horses, whales, etc.) LIVE for a long time.
3. We all LIVE with other people.
4. Fish LIVE in the sea.
5. All people DIE.
6. These people DIED a long time ago.

# TIME~WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT

Sentences (103) and (104) involve common portmanteau expressions (‘often, ‘sometimes’, ‘always’). Note that BEFORE and AFTER may have adverbial, rather than adpositional, syntax.

1. When did you do it? I did it WHEN everyone was asleep.
2. I don’t know WHEN it happened.
3. At the same TIME, something happened to me.
4. I OFTEN drink coffee in the morning, but SOMETIMES I drink tea.
5. This dog ALWAYS barks at night.
6. We can’t live NOW like we lived BEFORE.
7. It happened BEFORE/AFTER.
8. John was born BEFORE/AFTER Harry (was born).
9. This happened A LONG TIME ago.
10. She slept FOR A LONG TIME/FOR A SHORT TIME.
11. She thought about it FOR SOME TIME.
12. SOME TIME later/after, it happened again.
13. John was only there FOR A SHORT TIME, but Mary was there FOR A LONG TIME.
14. It happened IN ONE MOMENT.
15. AT ONE MOMENT it was there. The next MOMENT it wasn’t there.

# PLACE~WHERE, HERE, NEAR, FAR, ABOVE, BELOW, ON (THIS) SIDE, INSIDE

# There may be several words for positional relationships like ABOVE and BELOW, cf. English *below, under, beneath, underneath.* Try to find one which is purely about relative position, without implying anything about visibility or “covering”.

1. WHERE is he now?
2. It didn’t happen HERE. It happened SOMEWHERE else (in another PLACE).
3. Is it FAR from here?
4. The stars are FAR above the earth.
5. Was Fred standing (sitting, etc.) NEAR John?
6. The house (camp, etc.) is NEAR the river.
7. This thing is ABOVE/BELOW this other thing.
8. The head is ABOVE other parts of the body.
9. The feet are BELOW other parts of the body.
10. John is now [standing/sitting] on this SIDE (of me).
11. They live on the other SIDE of the river (mountain, etc.)
12. There were people standing on both SIDES of the road.
13. There were houses (trees, etc.) on all SIDES.
14. There is an insect INSIDE this [e.g. walnut].
15. This cave is very big — lots of people could live INSIDE (it).

# NOT, BECAUSE, IF, MAYBE, CAN

NOT is not listed separately but appears in numerous examples throughout. Many languages, including English, have allolexes or portmanteau forms for it, cf. English allolex *don’t* and portmanteau *can’t*. Other examples of semantic prime IF are in sentences (69) and (81). In some languages, the exponent of CAN is not used in sentences about “skills” or “abilities”, e.g. ‘I can swim’.

1. There was a lot of noise (shouting, etc.). BECAUSE of this, I couldn’t sleep.
2. Why are you crying? BECAUSE he hit me.
3. IF you do this, people CAN say something bad about you.
4. MAYBE he will come tomorrow, MAYBE he won’t (come tomorrow).
5. I can’t do it now, MAYBE I can do it later.
6. Bad things CAN happen to everyone/good people.
7. I CAN’T move.
8. I CAN’T not do this.

# VERY, MORE

In sentence (140), the English expression ‘very much’ is an allolex of VERY, not a combination of two primes. In some languages, e.g. Spanish and French, the word for MUCH can be an allolex of VERY in this context. Note also that the prime MORE often has two or more allolexes.

1. It is VERY good/bad/big/small.
2. This place [e.g. Gundaroo] is VERY far from here.
3. I VERY much want to do this.
4. MORE! (e.g. from a child that wants more food)
5. (I don’t know much about it.) I want to know MORE.
6. I want to see MORE.
7. I want one MORE.

# LIKE

There are many examples of LIKE in other sections. Note that portmanteau expressions are common for the combination ‘like this’.

1. This child is not LIKE other children.
2. This is LIKE lilac (or: any plant), but it is not lilac.
3. At a time LIKE this; in a place LIKE this.
4. He did it (sang, danced, etc.) LIKE this: ...
5. It happened LIKE this: ...
6. She sang LIKE this: —— [to demonstrate loudness, pitch, voice quality, etc.]