

A note on Apresjan's concept of 'Polish school of semantics'. With an Appendix

Abstract

The author comments on Apresjan's label 'Polish school of semantics' and finds it inadequate to reality. He points out that what Apresjan was in fact interested in, i.e. Wierzbicka's scholarly output, belongs almost exclusively to what can be and is called „natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) framework” which forms the theoretical basis of a school of semantics whose centre is in Australia (the leading personalities are Wierzbicka and Goddard). It would be hard to find, in accordance with the reasonable criteria of the concept 'school in science', any clear referent of the label 'Polish school of semantics'. The author also presents some reminiscences about his own and Wierzbicka's work in the sixties, as well as about their collaboration with Russian linguists.

In the Appendix the author's unpublished article on semantic analysis (in Russian) written by him in 1963/1964 is reproduced and briefly commented upon (foremost from the angle of the relationship between it and certain later works pertaining to the problems subsequently raised and the solutions offered by Wierzbicka).

In one of his articles published more than 8 years ago (Apresjan 1994) Jurij Derenikovič has made a very lucid statement summarising the main tenets and programmatic (as well as long materialising in a vast spectrum of works) features of what he calls 'Moscow school of semantics'. This theoretical panorama does not yet make up the whole of Apresjan's presentation. One of the important components of his article is a comparison of the 'Moscow school' semantic research programme (primarily represented by Apresjan himself) with Wierzbicka's ideas and works in semantics.

I have no quarrel with whatever Jurij Derenikovič says about his own works, about his colleagues' contributions or about Wierzbicka's goals and achievements.

My brief remark which I think his article calls for touches upon a question of minor importance and of a *historical* character.

What I shall be concerned with is the applicability or otherwise of the term 'school (in science)' – at a general level and in relation to the facts accounted for by Apresjan in his article.

While there undoubtedly exists a large (perhaps one could aptly say: *very large*) group of linguists in Moscow (and more broadly, in Russia, but with an obvious predominance of the extremely productive scientific *milieu* in Moscow) who share a well organised body of views, substantive insights, research goals, methods and techniques, who, furthermore, have been engaged in a wide range of joint investigation and publication schemes within semantics, with a clear pattern of personal foci, and thus fully deserve to be called ‘a school in science’, viz. ‘a school of semantics’, nothing even remotely approximating this kind of situation has emerged, while clustering specifically around Wierzbicka, in Poland. What we have to do with in Poland is just the phenomenon of a very strong influence Wierzbicka’s works exert on a number of scholars or researchers of both older and younger generations. But this is no different from what one can observe in Russia as well as in certain linguistic circles throughout the world.

One might ask: is there a ‘*Russian* school of Wierzbicka’s semantics’? And the answer would obviously be in the negative: Wierzbicka’s immense influence over Russian linguistics in no way amounts to what is *ordinarily* denoted by the label ‘school in science’. This applies to an even greater extent to the linguistic scene in Poland: even more so because the degree of concentration of linguistic work in Poland is far behind that characteristic of Russian linguistics. Wierzbicka considerably stimulates different linguistic circles in Poland (also, for example, those claiming allegiance to the „cognitivist framework”), but she would hardly identify any one of them as ‘her school of semantics’, let alone as ‘a Polish school of semantics’.

There is a real school of semantics (with the label *NSM* – coming from ‘natural semantic metalanguage’) led by Wierzbicka (the „second-in-command” is Cliff Goddard), but its site has been, for thirty years now, in Australia (although, admittedly, quite a few participants of the respective collective works are active elsewhere; e.g., Paweł Kornacki represents sinology and English studies in Warsaw). To name a school in science after the national origin of its leader would not only be an inordinary, but also a highly misleading step to make.

In view of all this I think Apresjan’s coinage ‘Polish school of semantics’ was less than adequate. Were there anything to be found to cover the phenomenon Apresjan really had in mind, one could think of the label ‘Wierzbicka’s school of thought’. This is because a ‘school of thought’ need not be represented by a ‘school in science’ within a given *milieu* (in our case, within Polish linguistics).

The best evidence that what I have said is true can be drawn from the text itself of Apresjan’s article. What he discusses there (while applying the label ‘Polish school of semantics’) are exclusively a number of works by one person, viz. by Anna Wierzbicka. I would ask, no doubt rhetorically: is it in harmony with the common usage to call a body of scientific output of a *single* scholar a ‘school in science’?

True enough, in Apresjan's Bibliography also my own name crops up (and I am a Pole, too). However, this insertion is just a way of superficially (and, I am sorry, ineffectively) avoiding the impression of a distinct incompatibility between, on the one hand, a description of *one* author, and on the other, the label 'school' as applied to the same thing. Such a maneuver is hardly a satisfactory saving step with regard to the use made of a label for which there is no sufficient ground (once again: I do not mean 'Wierzbicka's school of semantics' [which is a flourishing reality], but 'Polish school of semantics').

I have to emphasise that my remarks aim exclusively at putting the relevant *wordings* right – at putting them right from the point of view of historical truth and of the states of affairs mentioned in the foregoing part of this short note.

It has been stated at certain places (not only in Apresjan's article commented on above) that there was a link between Wierzbicka's and my own works, notably, between some works which belong to the early period of our activity, i.e. which go back to the sixties (in certain cases, to the first half of the sixties). I can only confirm the truth of this view. Later on, I discussed her important contributions at many places. In 2001 I published a rather comprehensive generalising assessment and interpretation of the fundamentals of her impressive linguistic enterprise (Bogusławski 2001; following a chapter in Bogusławski 1998). At an international conference in Moscow, 2001, I gave a talk conveying my methodological reflections concerning, to a very great extent, Apresjan's and Wierzbicka's work (Bogusławski 2002a).

In this connection, it may be of some interest to certain Readers to catch a glimpse of my article of 1963/1964 (written in Moscow) which I submitted to *Voprosy jazykoznani-ja* in 1964 and which has never been published (it had not been accepted by the journal for publication; needless to say, at present it can only be looked upon as a piece of historical documentation). One of the few readers of the article was Anna Wierzbicka (most probably, in 1965). Interestingly enough, these beginnings of our collaboration in the years that followed, a collaboration which was vital to my own development, coincided in time with the "new wave" of semantic research in Russia for which such events were significant as the linguistic conference at the Thorez Institute of Foreign Languages (1964) or the publication of the famous 8th issue of *Mašinnyj perevod i prikladnaja lingvistika* (1964). Soon afterwards, Anna Wierzbicka came to Moscow for a one year scholarly sojourn issuing, among other things, in her enduring friendship and cooperation with a number of leading Russian linguists.

I have asked the Editor of *Lingua Posnaniensis*, Professor Bańcerowski, to kindly allow me to reproduce my article just mentioned in the Appendix.