
THE UNIVERSAL CATEGORIES OF PRAXEOLOGY IN LIGHT OF NATURAL SEMANTIC METALANGUAGE THEORY

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1. Introduction

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE is to reflect upon a particular thread in the history of the Austrian school, and through this retrospection to look closer into the conceptual foundations of praxeology. The thread originated in the debate in the 1980s over the usefulness of hermeneutics within economics. The very idea was heavily criticized by scholars such as David Gordon (Gordon 1986), Hans-Hermann Hoppe (Hoppe 1989), and Murray Rothbard (Rothbard 1989). Although the debate can be considered closed, we hear its echoes from time to time (Storr 2011). This paper, by addressing key concepts of the debate, is intended to serve as a modest addendum, but more importantly will examine the cognitive foundations of praxeology by employing the linguistic theory called natural semantic metalanguage.

To narrow the scope of this paper, the version of hermeneutics I consider here is its radical and contemporary—or, more precisely, postmodern—version. This kind of hermeneutics is typically associated with

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CITATION INFORMATION FOR THIS ARTICLE:

Paweł Dziędziul. 2017. "The Universal Categories of Praxeology in Light of Natural Semantic Metalanguage Theory." *Libertarian Papers*. 9 (2): 249-276. ONLINE AT: libertarianpapers.org. THIS ARTICLE IS subject to a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (creativecommons.org/licenses).

Martin Heidegger and deconstructionists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. This version sees any act of pursuing objective truth as naïve. It perceives human beings as profoundly determined by their subjective impressions, views, feelings, and constant contextual—for example, historical or social—entanglement. Hence this academic and literary trend, by marginalizing—if not outright rejecting—the role of logic and objectivism, is often linked with radical forms of relativism and irrationalism. Most important for the purpose of this article, hermeneutics of this sort rejects the possibility that an intellectual common ground exists that could form a basis for intersubjective thought and communication (Rorty 1979: 318). Therefore, in this perspective, there is no common language and no common rationality. As Rorty has put it, the only rational step for a hermeneutician to take is to refrain from any sort of objective epistemology (Rorty 1979: 318). This movement had its avatars not only in language studies, where unsurprisingly the idea of relativism had a strong hearing, but also in economics (McCloskey 1985; Lavoie 1990).

It is not a trivial or simple task to situate relativism within irrational philosophy. Linguistic studies that examined different ethnic languages, and developments in analytic philosophy that led to and reinforced the idea that languages are incommensurable were empirically motivated (Sapir 1929¹; Whorf 1982) and upheld a high level of logical strictness and clarity (Quine 1989). Studies of this sort were intelligible, while later works within hermeneutics were criticized for being unintelligible (Gordon 1986). The features of such linguistic studies that led to relativism without a doubt laid the ground for hermeneutics. However, precursors of contemporary hermeneutics can be found even before the advent of relativism in linguistic studies. Rothbard traced hermeneutics' origins back to Karl Marx (Rothbard 1989: 47), who, in his eyes, was one of the greatest hermeneuticians (Rothbard 1989: 49).²

¹ It is worth noting that Sapir was not as radical in his relativistic vision of language as Whorf was.

² Some intellectual circles that can be regarded as rooted largely in Marxism do not share such a deterministic perspective on language. For example, in the *Humanist Manifesto*, we read: “Science has become a universal language, speaking to all men and women no matter what their cultural backgrounds” (Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism: 12).

To examine relativism, one of the key components of hermeneutics,³ the following definition formulated by the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper will prove useful. Relativism is a “doctrine that truth is relative to our intellectual background, which is supposed to determine somehow the framework within which we are able to think; that truth may change from one framework to another... and, in particular, the doctrine of impossibility of mutual understanding between different cultures, generations, or historical periods—even within science, even within physics” (Popper 1994: 33).

This definition, however unsympathetic toward the idea, is somewhat precise and explains why the students of Ludwig von Mises—at least Gordon, Hoppe, and Rothbard—had to oppose it so decisively. The works of the proponents of the Austrian school can be considered crucial in the debate about socialism. However, their contributions regarding the methodological foundations of praxeology, can also be regarded as crucial—as counterweights to relativistic philosophical concepts. The praxeological school, as it is sometimes called, has placed at the center of its ponderings universal economic laws based on analysis taking human choice or action as an “ultimate given” (Mises 1949: 17).

Mises, for example, in his book *Human Action*, questioned the foundations of the Marxist view of polylogism: the idea that the structure of one’s mind is based on the social class an individual comes from (Mises 1949: 77–84). In the Austrian perspective, and that of common sense, external reality is taken for granted and human action as a part of it. Both can be scientifically examined as they have a rational structure. Mises moreover argued that praxeology is the method that should be applied in economic studies as it provides a logical apparatus for examining human choice and action in a nonrelative way. This is due to the fact that praxeological theorems are deduced logically from apodictically true axioms. Furthermore, the contemporary libertarian philosopher Hans-Hermann Hoppe used the basic assumptions of the study of human action to form a foundation for ethics. Hoppe, in his “argumentation ethics” (1988, 1993: 345), employed the same praxeological method and pointed to the unique capacity of *homo sapiens* to produce an argument in order to derive irrefutable, apodictically true axioms of argumentation. Such axioms can be aimed at relativism (1989: 184, 185), and through this front also at hermeneutics.

³ To illustrate Rothbard’s negative attitude toward hermeneutics, it suffices to mention that he characterized this idea as the sum of nihilism, relativism, and solipsism (Rothbard, 1989: 46).

From a cognitive standpoint, for the existence of universal truths and economic laws it is essential that some categories that human beings possess are universal. As extreme forms of relativism often undermine the foundations of rationality (Rorty 1979: 318), the a priori, apodictically true basis of a deductive study of the logic of human action demands categories that are intersubjectively communicable, that—regardless of their conceptual schema, and class or cultural origins—can carry meaning in a rational discourse.⁴ Categories of this sort should also be innate—embroided in human nature. Thus, praxeology, like other theories based on the premise of purposeful human behavior (such as the above-mentioned argumentation ethics), needs all languages to have a common ground. In other words, to be successful and efficient, and an agent in the strict sense of the term, a person must be able to conceptualize action itself. Language, as linguists often describe it, is a window to our mind, which means that studying this basic human faculty is one of the best ways to study cognition. Therefore, it will serve as a means to examine the praxeological categories in further sections of this paper.

A person who studies language must accept that some things should be considered culture-specific. However, behind the main claim of this article is the fundamental claim of Natural Semantic Metalanguage theory (NSM): certain universal concepts and the many relationships among them do in fact exist in all languages and cultures. The main idea examined here is that NSM theory can serve as a comprehensive and empirically testable (Goddard 2008: 1)⁵ linguistic system that supports the cognitive foundations of praxeology. Languages, like reality and human action, have a shared rational structure. Simultaneously, it is hard to believe that without the existence of purposeful human action, especially as described by praxeology, a natural semantic metalanguage could exist. In that sense, praxeology and language come together as a basis of human nature.

⁴ Hoppe explicitly names as the main thinkers working in such a framework Mises and Rothbard (Hoppe 1989: 186).

⁵ As a strong argument for a priori concepts relevant for human action, note the vast number of languages tested under the NSM assumptions, including “Ewe (Nigrokongian family, West Africa), Mandarin Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Australian languages such as Yankunytjatjara, Arrante, and Kayrdild, three Misumalpan languages of Nicaragua, the Austronesian languages Acehnese (Indonesia), Longgu (Salomon Islands), Samoan, and Mangap-Mbula (New Guinea), the Papuan language Kalam, and French as well as English” (Wierzbicka, 1996: 14).

I will proceed from an outline of NSM theory by inspecting selected elementary units, based on the works of Anna Wierzbicka, that correspond isomorphically with the categories necessary for praxeology. As will become apparent, it is highly unlikely that the association of prime and universal units of NSM theory with the logic and structure of human action is merely circumstantial. We can even partially attribute the Austrian school's theoretical success, as well as its successes against hermeneutics, to the fact that it has used categories that correspond to such prime and universal units. As I will show, NSM theory, as a standardized and disciplined system (Goddard 2008: 1), allows us to express the conceptual foundations of the a priori study of human action and may be regarded as empirically substantiating it.

2. The Background and Methodology of NSM Theory

To briefly give the historical context of NSM theory: Prior to it, studies of language were often conducted in isolation from semantics. This was the result of a desire by linguists to move closer to other disciplines of science in the strict, methodological sense of the word. There were many reasons for this desire, from an aversion to the concept of mentalism in the behavioral perspectives, to Leonard Bloomfield's view that there are no strict criteria for defining meaning, to Noam Chomsky's "syntactic fundamentalism" (Wierzbicka 1996: 3–7). In university curricula, the "linguistics without meaning" approach dominated, and its supremacy, to some extent, can be perceived as a kind of anomaly. All these factors contributed to the image that semantics is "the weak point of language study" (Wierzbicka 1996: 9).

The problem of vagueness and arbitrariness in semantic analysis was tackled by the Polish linguist Andrzej Boguslawski, who proposed recognizing the existence of universal foundations of the meaning of words (Wierzbicka 1996: 13). Prior to that proposal, sciences such as sociology and linguistics had no theoretical apparatus that would allow them to approach the cultural dimension of human activity from a neutral ground. Most analyses—for example, in comparative studies—were conducted within one cultural sphere, which made the investigations specific to one particular social reality. Furthermore, constructing dictionaries poses two additional problems. First, any attempt at defining the meaning of a word needs to face the challenge of *regressus ad infinitum*. Defining, by its very nature, is an open procedure: to define a word, we use other words, which again require definitions. Thus, a dictionary in its entirety is entangled with another problem: *circulus in definiendo* (Wierzbicka 1996: 11). Linguistic literature gives many instances of such defective situations. For example, when it comes to words such as *burn* and *fire* one may encounter dictionary entries such as the

following. Under *burn*, we find “kindling and maintaining a fire to warm the interior; for cooking, baking, etc.”; under *fire*, we find “the phenomenon of heat and light associated with the burning of objects, seen in the form of flame and embers” (Tabakowska 2001: 182, 183; author’s translation).⁶

Everything becomes even more complicated if one looks at language as a structure in which various concepts are linked together to form a vast network. Such relationships may form distinct conceptual grids, which could make different tongues incommensurable. Consequently, if all languages are different in this way, there cannot be a neutral analytic perspective. This leads to the already-mentioned problem of ethnocentrism. If one describes particular characteristics of a certain language using terms drawn from another, the account will be skewed. For example, in the English language, to describe the upper limbs of a human being we can use words such as *hand* and *arm*. Polish possesses however a lexical element, *ręka*, that refers to upper limbs but has a colloquial, vaguer meaning that does not specify to which part of the limb it refers (Tabakowska 2001: 183). This fact precludes using this element in descriptions of English words, and by the same token poses a considerable problem when translating it into English, as English does not possess a direct equivalent.

Similar reasoning can be found in the works of philosophers of language such as Alasdair MacIntyre.⁷ MacIntyre shows that facts such as the one presented above not only imply languages are incommensurable but also, in consequence, that ethical discussions are futile and obsolete. This is

⁶ In many cases, the problem of circularity is more intricate than defining *A* by *B* and *B* by *A*:

Typically, ... vicious circles are like huge webs enveloping whole extended families of words, or like gigantic tentacles extending throughout the pages of a dictionary. For example, *A* is defined via *B*, *B* via *C*, and *C* via *A*; or *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, *E*, and *F* are defined via one another—in circles, cross-circles, and all imaginable sorts of combinations and patterns (for example, *A* via *B* and *D*; *B* via *D*, *E* and *F*; *D* via *A*, *B*, and *C*, *C* via *A* and *B* and so on). (Wierzbicka, 1996: 276)

This problem affects pretty much all dictionaries including Oxford dictionaries (Wierzbicka, 1996: 274).

⁷ MacIntyre’s stance on justice and rationality can be outlined as follows:

So rationality itself, whether theoretical or practical, is a concept with a history: indeed, since there are also a diversity of traditions of enquiry, with histories, there are, so it will turn out, rationalities rather than rationality, just as it will also turn out that there are justices rather than justice. (MacIntyre, 1988: 9)

because people engaged in such discussions refer to criteria and parameters present in their own worldview that have a specific conceptual structure. This structure, however, is not accessible to their adversaries, which makes the very idea of true argumentation hopeless. By acknowledging the seriousness of this issue and other convincing arguments by MacIntyre pointing to the fact that one learns how to act morally while being submerged in a community whose language and values form his or her judgment, NSM theory may shed more light on matters of language, rationality, and, perhaps, morality as well.

It is essential therefore to find a common ground for all languages that will make comparison possible: a true *tertium comparationis* (Wierzbicka 1996: 16). As mainstream relativistic representatives such as Rorty recognize, the existence of grounds common to all cultures and languages would be the foundation of a rational epistemology (Rorty 1979: 326). As Hoppe indicates, the assumption of no such common ground is at the very root of the philosophy of relativism (Hoppe 1989: 180). One way to solve all these problems is to find a set of atomic units that are universal to all cultures and languages: units so simple they will not require defining.

Wierzbicka sees the origins of the concept of a system of basic units of meaning accessible to all people in Plato's idea of a language of human thought (Wierzbicka 1980: 1). In more recent literature, the idea of a *lingua mentalis* can be traced at least to seventeenth-century rationalist philosophers such as Descartes, Pascal, Antoine Arnauld, and Leibniz (Wierzbicka 1996: 12, 13). Leibniz in particular, according to Wierzbicka, deserves a special mention when it comes to developing the concept of a universal underlying structure of language (Wierzbicka 1980: 5). He supplemented the idea accepted by all the mentioned thinkers with the idea that there exists a set of meanings so clear that their understanding could not be better defined than just by using them alone. He called this elemental set of units "the alphabet of human thought" (Wierzbicka 1996: 13). In the twentieth century, the metaphysical project of Leibniz gained a conceptual and theoretical basis so it could join the realm of empirical theories in the form of natural semantic metalanguage theory (Wierzbicka 1996: 13).

For the process of defining concepts, Wierzbicka adopts after Aristotle the approach where one uses words simpler and clearer than those being defined. As an example of a violation of this rule, one may consider the following definition of the word *if*—namely, that it, "both in logic and natural language, is an implication" (Wierzbicka 1996: 9). To question this definition, it is enough to state that it would hardly allow a child to understand the meaning of *if*, as it uses terms of formal logic that are incomprehensible from the child's perspective (Wierzbicka 1996: 9, 10). In Wierzbicka's

understanding, a definition—in the sense relevant to linguistics—is an expression that “shows the meaning of the word, breaking it into its component parts” (Wierzbicka 1996: 238). Consequently, this perspective assumes the existence of elements that are indefinable, and furthermore that allow people to construct complex meanings (Wierzbicka 1996: 11, 12).

The idea of absolute particles of meaning, described by this theory, is revealed by the fact that these elementary units are indefinable not because they are considered elementary in a particular language system but because they are indefinable in any kind of human language system. In consequence, the set of such elementary units can be extracted from all languages. This being done, sets of such indefinable elements from different languages will overlap (Wierzbicka 1996: 13).

To sum up in a more precise manner, the theory proposed by Wierzbicka postulates the existence of a set of innate concepts common to all human languages. Such a semantic cognitive core can be used as a metalanguage allowing one to compare all languages and cultures (Wierzbicka 1996: 22; Goddard 2008: 3). This theory is therefore an attempt to construct a subset of universal lexical items constructed over the set of all concepts of all ethnic languages (Wierzbicka 1996: 15). In other words, NSM theory postulates that if all languages were treated as sets of symbols that express meanings, there would exist an elementary and undefinable set of symbols (universal units) that would be an intersection of all of languages (Wierzbicka 1996: 15). By combining these units to form compound concepts, it is possible to describe the internal structure of meaning of all other lexical units of all human languages.

It is worth noting that this theory, of elementary semantic units, is still culture sensitive. In a sense, it reflects the insights of several other seventeenth-century philosophers such as John Locke, Johann Gottfried Herder, and, above all, Wilhelm von Humboldt. They observed the abundance of structural and semantic differences between ethnic languages, which often reflect the habits and lifestyles of societies and nations (Tabakowska 2001: 176). According to Wierzbicka, human languages, despite the existence of universals, remain *sui generis*. Like the widespread existence of so-called embodied lexical concepts, the existence of a natural semantic metalanguage does not necessarily mean all tongues are equivalent (Wierzbicka 1996: 15, 16). Ergo, the theory assumes the presence of concepts in a particular culture that do not have direct equivalents in others. However, after extracting the elementary particles of meaning it is possible to look into the depths of idiomatic relationships and translate them into other languages.

The metalanguage is a kind of surrogate allowing the comparison of superficially different and unique elements that in their deep structure are compounds of identical particles. In plain words: it is not the meaning of a word that is truly unique, but the sequence of universal elements that stand behind the word. The mechanics of this theory therefore can be described by the term “reductive-paraphrase” (Goddard 2010: 61): “The theory presented here combines, in a sense, radical universalism with thoroughgoing relativism. It accepts the uniqueness of all language-and-culture systems, but posits a set of shared concepts, in terms of which differences between these systems can be assessed and understood; and it allows us to interpret the most idiosyncratic semantic structures as culture specific configurations of universal semantic primitives—that is, of innate human concepts” (Wierzbicka 1996: 16).

The intuitive basis for the existence of such a universal and innate conceptual system is the fact that individuals of various ethnic language backgrounds can clearly communicate with each other. The lack of such a system not only would methodologically condemn comparative studies to be made specific to one of the ethnic languages but also in turn might lead to solipsism (Wierzbicka 1996: 22).

The necessity of designing such a metalanguage was first triggered by interdisciplinary research on human emotions (Wierzbicka 1996, 1999). Wierzbicka many times over the years has posited the need to abandon the postmodern paradigm: “To move from ‘deconstruction’ to constructive rebuilding of the meta-language of the human sciences, we need to go beyond conceptual relativism and reach for linguistic universals (Wierzbicka 1996: 24).

NSM theory is a framework now being worked out in many countries, which makes it likely that its already well-developed empirical basis will continue to expand. Though this framework has not been universally accepted, it is a noteworthy approach with considerable longevity (having lasted over thirty-five years). It has produced a substantial output within the field of contemporary linguistics that has increasingly influenced other disciplines such as anthropology, cultural psychology, evolutionary psychology, and semiotics (Goddard 2008: 1, 2).

3. Primes and Universals

The number of elementary units of meaning has changed over the years. Originally, Anna Wierzbicka presented fourteen elements, which have withstood the test of time. Those units can be divided into ten categories, such as substantives, mental predicates, and the demonstrative pronoun

(Wierzbicka 1996: 35). In subsequent years, the number of lexical elementals increased to thirty-seven, later up to fifty-five (Wierzbicka 1996: 73) and then sixty-three (Goddard 2008: 1). These numbers fluctuate, but it can also be assumed that the power of the NSM set will not exceed one hundred items (Tabakowska 2001: 185). Wierzbicka, in a volume entitled *Semantics. Primes, and Universals*, essentially a textbook on NSM theory, gives the following outline containing elements of NSM that will serve as a baseline for further comparison with praxeological categories (Wierzbicka 1996: 35, 36, 73, 74):

“substantives”	I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE
“determiners”	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
“quantifiers”	ONE, TWO, MANY (MUCH), ALL
“determiner/quantifier”	SOME
“augmentor”	MORE
“mental predicates”	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
“non-mental predicates”	MOVE, THERE IS, (BE) ALIVE
“space”	FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, HERE, WHERE, UNDER, ABOVE
“speech”	SAY
“actions and events”	DO, HAPPEN
“evaluators”	GOOD, BAD
“descriptors”	BIG, SMALL
“time”	WHEN, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG (TIME), A SHORT (TIME); NOW
“partonomy and taxonomy”	PART (OF), KIND (OF)
“metapredicates”	NOT, CAN, VERY
“intercausal links”	IF, BECAUSE, LIKE
“imagination, possibility”	IF... WOULD, MAYBE
“words”	WORD

This palette of elementary units of meaning, during the development of the theory, was later supplemented by the following (Goddard 2008: 34):

“substantives”	BODY
“relational substantives”	KIND, PART
“speech”	TRUTH
“movement, contact”	MOVE, TOUCH

“location, existence”	BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS,
“possession, specification”	HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
“life and death”	LIVE, DIE
“time”	MOMENT, FOR SOME TIME
“similarity”	LIKE

The simplicity of the listed units may make them seem trivial; however, compounding these particles of meaning leads to an increase in semantic complexity. For example, one cannot understand the concept of “promise” or “denounce” without having at one’s disposal the elementary unit of meaning, which is “say” (Wierzbicka 1996: 10). Therefore, the nontrivial elements of language are in fact compounds of elementary units of meaning.

To provide an example of how to use such universal particles of meaning, Wierzbicka gives the definition of an idiosyncratic Polish word, *szczęśliwy*, which, similarly to words in other Slavonic languages, differs from its English “equivalent”: *happy* (the German and French equivalents have similar characteristics to the Polish example). The Polish linguist provides the following definitions, here presented with tags (*D*) and (*D'*), showing the subtle differences between the lexical units. In her words (Wierzbicka 1996: 215):

(*D*) *X* feels happy. =

X feels something

sometimes a person⁸ thinks something like this:

something good happened to me

I wanted this

I don’t want anything more now

because of this, this person feels something good

X feels like this

⁸ The existence of the unit “person” within the set (*D*) may seem not to meet the expectation that all elements of (*D*) are strings constructed over the set (*NSM*). Nevertheless, “a person” in this sense is equivalent to the unit “someone,” and does not imply such other philosophical characteristics as in, for example, the Christian tradition of thought. Its usage may be compared to the possibility of substituting the unit “I” with the unit “me,” for the needs of grammatic cohesion of particular definitions. Within the framework of NSM theory, this process is called *allobexy*.

(D') X feels *szczęśliwy* (*glücklich*, *heureux*, etc.). =

X feels something

sometimes a person thinks something like this:

something good happened to me

I wanted this

everything is good now

I don't want anything more now

because of this, this person feels something good

X feels like this

Most important from the perspective of this article, is the thesis that many of the NSM particles either coincide with the categories of praxeology (up to isomorphism) or create compound elements that can be used to utter the concepts of universal laws of human action, as in the example provided above. The following praxeological references for the NSM units come from Ludwig von Mises's *Human Action* and will be occasionally supplemented by the works of Hoppe. One can provide multiple types of ordering for the discussed lexical units. In many ways, it may seem that because of the nature of praxeology, the description should start from the very phenomena of action. However, since each complex system, even a formal system, can be axiomatized in numerous ways, modern formal sciences do not attach much importance to the order of theorems derived from it. The preference of one specification over another is often only of aesthetic significance. Therefore, to clearly present universal lexical units in relation to praxeological categories, a self-regarding perspective will be adopted as it allows opening the inquiry with a prerequisite for any action. This perspective is also prevalent in many cognitive studies, especially considering language.

3.1 Mental Predicates "Feel," "Think," and "Want"

In praxeology, it is assumed that the source of all human action is discomfort, in the broadest sense of the word (Mises 1949: 13, 14). Action therefore aims to remove any type of discomfort. A person living in a perfect world, where all needs were satisfied, would not be motivated to act. Full satisfaction would result in complete inactivity. In the imperfect world in which human beings live, however, a lack of action should also be recognized as an action (Mises 1949: 13) as it allows us to determine, for example, that a person prefers resting over doing something. If someone is doing work, it

means the discomfort experienced during labor is less than the discomfort caused by inactivity.

In the context of praxeology as a study of purposeful behavior, to be able to recognize the state of discomfort a human being has to possess the universal unit of meaning “feel.” From the perspective of NSM theory, the conceptual background of mental predicates is constructed on a belief in the existence of a basic folk psychology shared by all cultures (Wierzbicka 1996: 48). According to Wierzbicka, there is plenty of evidence for an innate and universal “theory of mind” that is reflected in the category of mental predicates (Wierzbicka 1996: 48). However, certain works suggest that the concept “feel” does not exist independently in all languages but is a component of a more general category of the predicate “think.” From the perspective of the study of purposeful action, it would be rather surprising if language, one of the tools allowing conscious and reflective thought, were deprived of the mental predicate “think.” Deeper studies of semantics indicate though that both discussed units operate separately (Wierzbicka 1995: 445–50). The concept of “discomfort” can therefore be described as a combination of two universal units, the mental predicate “feel” and the evaluator “bad”; and the concept of reflecting on the source of discomfort can be reproduced by the unit “think.”

Certainly, these categories can be shaped culturally. Most notably, ideas associated with feelings are subject to social factors, and at the level of different languages one can find various taxonomies of emotions. However, for all those distinct conceptual grids of different mother tongues, the main hypothesis of NSM states that there is a common and universal foundation in the form of the elementary unit “feel” (Wierzbicka 1996: 48, 49). This particle of meaning cannot be split into simpler counterparts, but it can create compound ones that do vary in different ethnic languages.

Furthermore, on the theme of human action, as indicated by Mises, “the ultimate end of action is always the satisfaction of some desires of the acting man” (Mises 1949: 18). Since, in praxeological terms, every action is rational (in contrast to involuntary reactions; see Mises 1949: 16, 18), people have a desire to change the unsatisfactory state of affairs. To put this differently, “we may say that action is the manifestation of a man’s will”

⁹ In his body of work, Murray Rothbard provided a different, positive understanding of the source of action based on the idea of satisfaction vis-à-vis discomfort (Rothbard 2009: 3-8). This view, as with most if not all of Rothbard’s modifications, is still compatible with NSM theory, though it would require the substitution of the evaluator “bad” with “good,” etc.

(Mises 1949: 13). Human beings are equipped with a universal concept “want,” which, just like the concept “think” (as was already clear for Descartes), is indivisible and undefinable (Wierzbicka 1996: 48). In addition, “preliminary evidence suggests ... that patterns such as ‘I want to do something’, ‘I know this’, ... are universal (that is, attestable in all languages)” (Wierzbicka 1996: 22).

From the perspective of praxeology, it becomes apparent that there exists a necessity for a category that would help to recognize an unsatisfactory state of affairs, as well as a category that would denote the will to change it. Especially within frameworks that postulate that human language initially served purposes that were mental/computational and not communicational/expressive (Chomsky 1995, 2002), the capability of recognizing a discomfort would serve no purpose, except maybe to generate further levels of suffering. However, with the possibility of identifying unacceptable conditions and the aptitude of compounding other concepts, one can anticipate and recognize options and plan actions that will render the likelihood of modifying the unsatisfactory state of affairs. This directly leads to the next group of primes and universals.

3.2 Metapredicate “Can” and the Element “Maybe”

Mises states, “To make a man act, uneasiness and the image of a more satisfactory state alone are not sufficient. A third condition is required: the expectation that purposeful behaviour has the power to remove or to at least to alleviate the felt uneasiness. In the absence of this condition no action is feasible. Man must yield to the inevitable. He must submit to destiny” (Mises 1949: 14). Elsewhere we read, “Human action is purposeful behaviour. Or we may say: Action is will put into operation and transformed into an agency, is aiming at ends and goals, is the ego’s meaningful response to stimuli and to the conditions of its environment, is a person’s conscious adjustment to the state of the universe that determines his life. Such paraphrases may clarify the definition given and prevent possible misinterpretations. But the definition is adequate and does not need complement or commentary” (Mises 1949: 11).

From the above quotations, it is obvious that for praxeology the metapredicates “can” and “maybe” must exist. Wierzbicka proposes to distinguish these units even though their meanings partially overlap. We can show the existence of one physical form of a word (a sound or sets of sounds such as consonants, vowels, and syllables) that contains two distinct concepts by using Wierzbicka’s following sentence (1996: 103) from the Polish language (supplemented with clarifying indicators):

Ona nie może tego zrobić, może ktoś inny może.
 she Neg can this do, maybe someone else can
 ‘she can’t do this; maybe someone else can’

The word *może* is used here in two distinct meanings. In the first clause, it means “can,” and in the second it means “maybe.” Furthermore, though there is no other way to convey the meaning “can” in the Polish language, still the two meanings are clearly distinct.

Though linguists may ponder why such units exist, in the light of praxeology again their presence does not come as a surprise. Had it not been for the possibility of influencing one’s condition, the existence of units such as “can” and “maybe” would serve no purpose. Without those concepts, a human being could not consider the possibility of changing anything, and would either have to rely on automatic reactions or, as Mises adequately puts it, fully submit to destiny.

3.3 Substantives: “I,” “You,” “Someone,” “Something,” “People”

To meet their ends, people use certain means. Means are things that can be used to achieve a particular purpose. The world is composed of specific objects, and these objects can become the means of any plan that has been concocted by any operating individual who recognizes the occasion altering his position. Objects of the material world, which are examined by sciences such as physics, gain their praxeological dimension only when they find themselves in the orbit of interest of *homo agens*—the human being that deems them a potential tool. A means is therefore any object considered as one (Mises 1949: 92). Consequently, for the theory of action one needs categories that describe those who act and the means by which they act.

In terms of cognitive science, the basis for planning and action is the self-centered perspective that, in NSM theory, is represented by substantives such as “I,” “you,” “somebody,” “something,” and “people.” As indicated by Wierzbicka, there are no documented languages without pronouns, in particular those denoting “I” and “you” (Wierzbicka 1996: 36). Although there are quite idiosyncratic cultural scripts when it comes to referencing people (e.g., in the Thai language, there is a significant self-diminution on the part of the speaker when he addresses another person), one should not confuse pragmatic complexity with semantic complexity (Wierzbicka 1996: 37).

According to NSM theory, language also provides a means of differentiating between those who act and their tools. Namely, one must regard questions such as “What is it?” and “Who is it?” as universal. This is a

part of the fundamental capability of categorization, the distinction between “who” and “what,” “person” and “thing” (Wierzbicka 1996: 38). Additionally, research based on individuals with brain damage shows that concepts of “what” and “where” are separate, as they may be affected by injuries independently (Jones 1999: 560). In English, the partial equivalents of *someone* and *something* (by the shared counterpart ‘some’) may suggest the potential for factorization when it comes to those elementary units, but this is only a morphological artefact bearing no semantic significance. There is also little weight behind the argument of reducing *someone* and *something* to *entity*. In this reduction, the natural elements for ethnic languages would be only replaced by an artificially sounding and etymologically alien substitute (Wierzbicka 1996: 39).

Furthermore, in all languages there is also a distinction between the general concept of “someone” and its plural form, “people.” The latter, as Wierzbicka points out, is inherently “plural” and may concern only human beings (as opposed to, e.g., deities) (Wierzbicka 1996: 40). A characteristic feature of this element is that the plural unit has a distinct phonetic structure from its singular equivalent.

When it comes to means of action, as was already mentioned, physical objects apart from their physical properties gain new dimensions—that is, properties that constitute their usability in the eyes of an actor. Hence, anything that becomes a tool in the hands of an agent becomes something more than just an objective fact—both literally and figuratively.¹⁰ In other words, “It is of primary importance to realize that parts of the external world become means only through the operation of the human mind and its offshoot, human action” (Mises 1949: 92). Objects perceived as instruments, therefore, gain their value in the minds of actors based on their utility. Humans, fallible beings as they are, may misjudge the usefulness of certain items, or change their perception of them, leading to a loss of value of particular types of means over others. Thus, the properties of means of action gain their sociological—and, to a certain degree, cultural—aspect.

After assuming that substantives are irreducible, it is possible to use them to define many other concepts of an anthropological character and

¹⁰ Friedrich A. Hayek, although critical of praxeology in his work, shared with Mises this attitude regarding the nature of means of action. Frequently, he made methodological distinctions between the social and natural sciences. Social sciences, in the narrow sense, deal with the explanation of personal impressions, or cultural constructs. Clearly, those do not have to be constituted by objective facts, though they may be opinions arising from the facts (Hayek 1955: 26, 27).

bridge the gap between the social and physical sciences. By means of universal units of meaning such as “someone” and “people,” it is possible to create an objective (i.e., not culturally dependent) description of many aspects of material artefacts that have an anthropological character, such as words relating to social life (e.g., *society, tribe, family, or committee*) and also to feelings (*shame, embarrassment, pride*), language (*language, dialect, slang*), and many other concepts semantically related to “people” (Wierzbicka 1996: 41). As indicated by Wierzbicka,

For example, every language has a large number of words referring to ‘cultural kinds’..., that is, to human artefacts, such as for example, *cup, bottle, boomerang, chair*, and so on. All these words make reference (in their semantic structure) to people because they designate objects ‘made by people’, ‘used by people’ and physically defined with reference to the human body. (For example, cups are made by people, for people to drink from; they are made in such a way that people can hold them in one hand, and so on). (Wierzbicka 1996: 40)

It seems that the distance created by methodological dualism between the natural and social sciences can, in some ways, be reduced by NSM theory—at least when it comes to factors concerning cultural constructs. They can be presented in a universal framework that can partially render those aspects of human activity closer to objective descriptions present in other fields of scientific research.

Finally, a theme present within the liberal/libertarian tradition of thought—an emphasis on the elements of the social unit over the idea of it as a whole—is also visible in NSM theory. The main thrust of that tradition’s opposition to other ways of thinking can be attributed to the opposition between elements of natural semantic metalanguage that lie in the very premise of a particular ideology. It all comes down to the priority of “I/someone” vs. “people,” and emphasis on the individual vs. the collective.

3.4 Actions and Events: “Do, “To Happen”

The category of action, as indicated by Hoppe, must be a priori when it comes to human beings (Hoppe 1989: 194). From the point of view of praxeology, all categories such as value, means, choice, preference, cost, profit, loss, time, and causality are implicitly included in the overall concept of an acting being. In other words, for the possibility of perceiving and interpreting those related phenomena, an individual must be equipped with the knowledge of what human action is in the first place (Hoppe 1989: 200).

The sphere of purposeful behavior is inextricably linked with language. Wierzbicka draws attention to that aspect of narrative in which the concept of an agent plays a key role. Notions such as “action” and “to happen,” “doing” and “happening” are further examples of universal elements corresponding to the nature of human language: “The future, too, is mostly talked about in terms of future events and actions: what happens to me (or to some other people)? What will I (or somebody else) do? Indeed, it is hard to imagine a language in which people couldn’t ask questions of this kind, and to my knowledge no such language has ever been reported” (Wierzbicka 1996: 50).

Wierzbicka also draws attention to empirical evidence showing that children quickly acquire a high level of proficiency when it comes to the usage of the word “do” (Wierzbicka 1996: 51). This renders a high likelihood of *homo sapiens* actively searching, within the linguistic stimuli that they are exposed to in early life, for an element inherent in the construction of their mind. A nativist perspective, like the one present in natural semantic metalanguage theory, lies very much in line with what praxeology as the science of purposeful behavior would imply. Having a conceptual carrier of the possibility of action would serve as a foreground for a human being to reflect on its structure. Additionally, from a social point of view, to be an efficient group of agents their members should possess the concept expressing the possibility of doing something. Therefore, the possession of the innate particle “do” would make human beings hardwired to act.

3.5 Time: “When,” “Before,” “After,” “A Long Time,” “A Short Time”

The *spiritus movens* of the Austrian school states: “He who acts distinguishes between the time before the action, the time absorbed by the action, and the time after the action has been finished. He cannot be neutral with regard to the lapse of time” (Mises 1949: 99). Thus, in terms of praxeology, concepts such as “change” and “possibility” must assume the existence of the concept of “time” (Mises 1949: 99). The vector determining the course of an action is always the future, and the future is the only possible object of any action. From a praxeological point of view, time is a means, a commodity, a limited resource. This forces any acting human being to treasure and save it—in other words, to economize.

The object of praxeological research is the action of a human being, not the psychological events leading to it. The theory of purposeful behavior is therefore also an objective theory, for it is not entangled in discussions about value assessment and human needs. It only aims at assigning ordinal, and not cardinal, numbers to the consequent actions.

One of the most important economic laws that helps to stratify the wants that govern human action is, according to Mises, that of time preference. To use Mises's words, a man "on the basis of such a scale... satisfies what is of higher value, i.e. his more urgent needs, and leaves unsatisfied what is of lower value, i.e. what is a less urgent want" (Mises 1949: 94). The observation of an acting person is therefore a way of describing their preference for some goods at the expense of others. Furthermore, the law of time preference states that people, *ceteris paribus*, prefer present over delayed consumption. If this were not so, it would be logically impossible to act. In this manner, high time preference means our desire to consume goods available here and now. Low time preference is our abstinence from consumption in order to increase it in the future. Factors that cause change in the structure of ordinal numbers and in consequence weaken time preference are the various goals motivating an individual toward saving—for example, the need to invest or the desire to raise children.¹¹

The category of "time" in linguistics was the focal point for over forty years, or maybe more, of the debate considering relativism. As Tabakowska points out, "The discovery of the grammatical systems of the languages from the New World... was a shock for Europeans" (Tabakowska 2001: 92; author's translation). Those findings contributed to several far-reaching conclusions about the relativistic nature of human speech. For example, Benjamin Lee Whorf stated, "After long and careful study and analysis, the Hopi language is seen to contain no words, grammatical forms, constructions, or expressions that refer directly to what we call 'time', or to past, or future, or to enduring or lasting" (Whorf in Wierzbicka 1996: 56).

Whorf denied the existence of universal foundations of the concepts of time and space (Whorf 1982: 57). However, his assertion did not stand the test of time. Much research from the 1980s shows that the concept of time in the Hopi language does not differ as much as was originally assumed (Wierzbicka 1996: 56).

Wierzbicka enumerates studies of other exotic languages, such as Kwaio, that indicate the existence of universal components of complex and precise descriptions of events embedded in their concept of time to coordinate intentions and actions (Wierzbicka 1996: 56). Of course, some cultures conceptualize time in a significantly different way than Europeans do. Some communities associate temporal relationships in reference to, for example, the angle of incidence of sunlight, or sounds produced by insects

¹¹ In spite of the fact that this law is based on subjective values, the incorporation of other elementary units, such as "feel" and "want," is required.

during different moments of the day or night. However, basic concepts such as “when,” “before,” and “after” are universal.

An important characteristic of human language is the clear distinction between constructions such as “Y happened after X” and “X happened before Y.” From a logical point of view, to express this relationship only one structure would suffice. This phenomenon, however, reflects the ability of human language to recognize and express different perspectives (Wierzbicka 1996: 57).

In the course of empirical testing of the NSM theory, it became clear that it is impossible to reduce all the categories of temporal units to “when,” “before,” and “after.” The structures of these components cannot express the concepts of duration and time lapse. Wierzbicka therefore proposes an additional set of temporal units: “a long time,” “a short time” (Goddard 2008: 33). The examination of those invariants is still underway, and it may result in unifying them with other units.

In addition to already-discussed deictic concepts such as “I” and “you,” human language possesses the concept of “now.” The existence of this concept makes it easy to analyze grammatical tenses—for example, in English—using simple phrases such as “now,” “before now,” and “after now,” and also “long before now” and the like (Wierzbicka 1996: 99, 100). All demonstrated units, in conjunction with other elements of NSM, are essential and can be easily applied when it comes to analyzing time preference.

From the point of view of the logic and structure of human action, it is, therefore, a matter of necessity that human beings should possess a complex system of encapsulating and expressing the intricacies of time. At least the lack thereof would be quite astounding and would probably render actions less effective.

3.6 Sentence Compounds, Imagination, and Possibility: “If,” “Because,” “If...Would,” “Can”

Often in the field of economics, the notion of causality is replaced in favor of, for example, the concept of function. The basis for action, however, is the ability to explore cause-and-effect relationships. As Mises points out: “The category means and ends presupposes the category cause and effect” (Mises 1949: 22). Without the predisposition to discover the regularities governing reality, just as without the possibility to influence reality, one could not act rationally. As with the category of action, the category of causality must be a priori (Hoppe 1989: 194). In this sense, from a praxeological point

of view, it seems necessary for the language of human thought to cover expressions associated with causative relations. Within NSM theory are categories that enable us to recognize the idea of causality. Wierzbicka mentions two subtypes. The first set of units—"if," "because," and "like"—has been solidly tested, while intensive work on the second set—"if... would" and "can"—is still underway.

Just as in logic, the conditional sentences of ethnic languages can be defined in the light of truth conditions—namely, "If p , then q ." Therefore, languages can express the idea of material implication and typical relationships of cause and effect, between the predecessor and successor (Wierzbicka 1996: 69). In contrast to formal languages, though, the concept of "if" in ethnic languages seems to have a broader meaning and cannot be reduced to logical implication. Wierzbicka gives an example of a sentence that shows this phenomenon: "If he invites me to dinner I will not go" (Wierzbicka 1996: 56). This sentence does not convey the direct relationship of cause and effect. The potential function of this concept must therefore be wider, but it remains elementary and undefinable—at least by the means of reductive paraphrase.

Not all causal meanings necessary for human language can be expressed through the unit "if" discussed above. According to Wierzbicka, it is essential also to introduce the element "if... would," which makes possible the encapsulation of unrealistic events. This phenomenon can be demonstrated by the inequivalence of the following examples: "If I were you I wouldn't do it" \neq "If I am you I will not do it" (Wierzbicka 1996: 102).

Another universal unit associated with the idea of causality is the element "because." As Wierzbicka points out: "Data from language acquisition, as well as from cross-cultural semantics, are consistent with Kant's view. The finding that, apparently, all languages have a lexical exponent of causation (whether it is a conjunction like because, a noun like cause, or an 'ablative' suffix) is particularly significant in this regard" (Wierzbicka 1996: 70). Studies of the language of children also indicate that they absorb such structures very quickly (Wierzbicka 1996: 102), which might be interpreted as an argument for the innate nature of those concepts.

Philosophical categories of the necessary and universal idea of the interdependence of phenomena, so important for the Austrian school of economics (see Hoppe 1989), again goes in line with the same attitude toward causality as Wierzbicka's. She states: "But while the results of studies such as Bloom... do indeed appear to support the view of Searle... and others that 'we discover causality by experiencing it through our actions and perceptions'..., this is fully consistent with Kant's view that causality is an

innate form of human perception of the world. It is also consistent with the view that causality (or, more precisely, the notion of “because”) is a simple concept, rooted in our subjective experience of ‘wanting’ and ‘doing’, and not in any theoretical speculations about “might-have-beens” (Wierzbicka 1996: 71; citations redacted).

The enumeration of units relating to the idea of possibility presented in the title of this section needs some clarification. The universal particle “can,” like elements of this category, is different from its seemingly identical counterpart within the category of metapredicates. Words of particular languages that stand for universal concepts may have two different meanings (e.g., *bear* the animal vs. the verb *to bear*). English is idiosyncratic in that the verb *can* lacks an infinitive form. This is not the case for other languages. For example, Polish has two distinct words to express the two different ideas of “can” as an action and “can” as a possibility.

3.7 *Determiners (“This,” “The Same,” “Other”) and Quantifiers (“One,” “Two,” “Many”)*

A person, for obvious reasons, cannot achieve different goals at the same time, especially if his or her objectives are contradictory. By acting we make choices. To encapsulate and organize means and ends, praxeology uses the law of marginal utility and its derivatives. Marginal utility stands for the change in utility because of consumption. *Utility* in the sense here discussed is the capacity of a particular good or service to take away discomfort. Each additional unit of a consumed good gives less satisfaction than the previous one (diminishing marginal utility) and, therefore, is less valuable in the eyes of the actor. Additionally, satisfaction is defined as being asymptotic, which means that consumption can only reduce the discomfort. Based on such concepts, we can say that there exists a line between a situation where a unit of a homogeneous type of good with quantity of n can be used, and a situation with supply equal to $n-1$ in which there would be no action (Mises 1949: 119–24).

Along with already-discussed elements necessary from the perspective of the law of marginal utility, other particles of NSM theory are essential—for example, those that enable us to classify goods of the same type and to differentiate them. For this purpose, we can enumerate units such as “this,” “the same,” and “other.” Determiners of this type occur in all languages (Wierzbicka 1996: 42). Clearly, this goes hand in hand with Hoppe’s claims. Hoppe states that “sameness” is a universal epistemological category in that one could not even say anything, for instance about actions, without the

notion of something being an instance of some particular type of thing” (Hoppe 1989: 213).

Equally important for the law of marginal utility is not only the existence of categories such as “the same,” which correspond to the logical relationship of identity, but the lack thereof, as represented by the concept “other.” All the evidence indicates that these categories exist universally. This can be illustrated by sentences such as “It was not the same fish, but it was the same kind of fish” (Wierzbicka 1996: 42). Worth mentioning is that Wierzbicka, in place of the negated identity (e.g., the combination of the universal particle “not” with the element “this”), proposes to add a separate category (“other”). This is because the phrase “I and two other people” is impossible to be reduced to the concept of ‘the same’ and its negation” (Wierzbicka 1996: 42).

The last set of units presented in this example consists of “one,” “two,” and “many.” Extensive empirical studies indicate that all languages have at least those three quantifiers (Wierzbicka 1996: 44). The plural category is based on the concept of “one” and its conjunction with the unit “more” (Wierzbicka 1996: 44). When it comes to even numbers of parts of the body (legs, hands, eyes, etc.) it is impossible to imagine the lack of the universal element “two.” As for the category “much,” it should be noted that although there exists a corresponding word to the English word *many* in all languages, that fact does not necessarily mean its discontinuity is universal. Such a counterexample occurs in Polish, where elements that are countable and uncountable can be expressed with the help of the same element (Wierzbicka 1996: 44).

3.8 Space: “Where,” “Under,” “Above,” “Far,” “Near,” “Side,” “Inside,” and “Here”

From the point of view of praxeology, human actions are objectively perceived events not only in time but also in space. The existence of adequate concepts regarding a spatial sense of orientation allows the intersubjective and objective defining of boundaries—for example, those of private property (Hoppe 2015: 10, 11).

Yet again, it is possible to construct a symmetry between any ethnic language and the language of the Austrian theory of human action. Human action as a matter of fact implies a need for the existence of units such as “where,” “under,” “above,” “far,” “near,” “side,” “inside,” and “here.” The concept “where” is universal, and at the same time it is different from the concept “when” and can concern only the place in which something is located. Regarding the units “above” and “under,” Wierzbicka elaborates:

“As for ABOVE and UNDER, they present the same apparent redundancy as AFTER and BEFORE do, for if A is above B then B must be under A. By itself, this redundancy would not be a reason for not positing them both as primitives: since human minds are not disembodied computers..., our conceptualization of the world reflects our ‘embodiment’, and also our position on the ground: since we normally walk with the head up, the contrast between ABOVE and UNDER may not be conceived of as reversible” (Wierzbicka 1996: 58).

Consequently, the other units mentioned in the subtitle of this section follow the same pattern. It is hard to believe, especially considering the close ties between language, thought, and body, that the distinction between sides (left and right, or this side and the other) would not be universal. Yet again, the idea of paraphrasing a concept of this sort by simpler means than by the use of the unit “side” seems implausible. Therefore, this unit, just like fully intuitive units such as “inside” and “here,” should be considered primitive, in the sense that it lacks a simpler definition than what it represents by itself.

4. Conclusion

The presentation of praxeological categories conducted in this article is only preliminary. The number of elemental units of meaning selected has also been limited to those that can be perceived as prototypical for the study of human action, and this presentation should not be considered as a comprehensive study of both. Describing all the necessary units and the relations between them from the perspective of the language of praxeology would require a vast monograph. Also, the problem of resonance (the unique sensation a language user experiences due to the correlation of an element with other elements of the system, as is the case in the Australian language Yankunytjatjara, where one word expresses both FEEL and “stomach”) has been entirely omitted (Wierzbicka 1996: 30). The intention of this article is merely to present a useful, empirically grounded linguistic instrument that corresponds with the praxeological categories and ideas present within the works of Austrian economists.

To define the relation between the two branches of science—NSM theory and praxeology—one may say that they share the same pre-existing factor: human nature and its place in reality. However, the latter branch studies purposeful behavior whereas the former reaches to the foundations of our minds. Nonetheless, both share a common ground, and because of the deductive characteristic of the methods applied they are inexorably linked together methodologically.

The idea of a natural semantic metalanguage expresses the cognitive foundation of praxeology. It is also in line with the Austrian school's recognition of innate concepts that not only constitute the idea of human action (Gordon 1986) but also perceive language as a common ground connecting all people, enabling intersubjective communication, and inherently assuming the existence of an objective reality (Hoppe 1989: 182, 183). Concurrently, the elemental particles of meaning, the primes and universals of the natural semantic metalanguage, just like the axioms of logic of human action, can be *more geometrico* extrapolated infinitely to increasingly more complex situations and problems. The science of human action is based upon logical deduction from self-evident axioms. Those axioms are self-evident to humans because they are formed largely on the basis of cognitively irreducible, elementary particles of meaning—namely, NSM primes and universals. Hence, the success of the praxeological approach vis-à-vis hermeneutical methods can be credited to its superior clarity and logical composure.

Apart from the discussion of how much the prerogatives of the state can be reduced, the theories being formed under the banner of the Austrian school will perhaps still be involved in an interminable debate with relativism. The existence of an elaborate debate surrounding the latter philosophical approach seems to speak against it. Within the Austrian school, one can observe various attitudes toward radical relativism, hermeneutics, and similar ideas. Rothbard, for example, showed a high degree of contempt, and refused to treat them seriously. In his view, those philosophical ideas received more attention than they deserve (Rothbard 1989: 54). Hoppe, on the other hand, focuses on demonstrating the apparent incoherence in the very principles of those concepts (Hoppe 1989: 179–214). His idea of “argumentation ethics”¹² is still an underappreciated insight in the discussion about whether ethical dilemmas are insolvable (cf. Macintyre 1981). According to Hoppe: “It is demonstrably false that ethics is not a science, and that no universal principles of justice exist nor any ‘true’ (non-arbitrary) criterion for distinguishing moral progress from decline. And it is likewise demonstrably false that no universal and invariant laws of human action and interaction

¹² Interestingly, a prominent thinker at the other extreme of political/economic debate, Noam Chomsky, also advocates in one of his recent books (*What Kind of Creatures Are We?*), based on genetic endowment, the universal foundations of not only human language and nature but also ethics (Chomsky 2016). He also surprisingly hinted that there exists a ground for discussion between left- and right-wing libertarianism (Chomsky 2016: 54), which seems promising, especially considering his former open hostility to some libertarian ideas.

exist, i.e., no laws of what is and is not possible and of what can and cannot be successfully done in human affairs, and no non-arbitrary criterion of judging actions as correct and successful or incorrect and faulty solutions to a given problem or purpose” (Hoppe 2015: 15).

As far as language goes, it seems as if “the indefinable concepts—the primitives—are the fundament on which the semantic system of a language is built; if this fundament were in each case different, speakers of different languages would be imprisoned in different and incommensurable conceptual systems, without any possibility of ever reaching anyone outside one’s own prison” (Wierzbicka 1996: 14). This counterfactual is contrary to common sense, as indicated by Hoppe, and falsified by our experience, as pointed out by Wierzbicka (Wierzbicka 1996: 14). Fortunately, the development of empirical research in the field of linguistics has weakened the influence of the idea of relativism. As indicated by Goddard and Wierzbicka, “It should be emphasized that the radical versions of the theories of linguistic relativism or linguistic determinism, i.e. the idea that linguistic categories strictly determine thoughts, enjoy little popularity today and many researchers have adopted a more realistic version of the theory of relativity, i.e. that language affects thinking” (Wierzbicka and Goddard in Tabakowska 2001: 200; author’s translation).

The comparison between language and economics, the main premise of this article, is not new within the realm of the Austrian school in a broader sense. Both are regarded as prime examples of spontaneous order in Hayek (1955: 39, 40), just to name the most notable linking. It should be no surprise that within this intellectual circle—which at its foundation upholds liberty—the idea of controlling, or even tampering with, both of those aspects of human nature has prompted a high level of resistance.

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