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**Review of Carsten Levisen. 2024. *Postcolonial Semantics:
Meaning and Metalanguage in a Multipolar World.*
Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter**

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Postcolonial semantics is a relatively new branch of linguistics that studies meaning in places that were formerly colonized. It explores the meanings of concepts, inter alia, that were introduced through Euro-colonialism and those that emerged because of it. Levisen's book *Postcolonial Semantics* is the first book to offer a meaning-centered and cultural-insider approach to postcolonial linguistics. Using this approach, Levisen explores Bislama, a Pacific language. While previous studies have investigated different aspects of this language (e.g., Crowley 2004a, 2004b), Levisen's is the first book to investigate part of the Bislama universe of meaning and present findings that can easily be verified by the average native Bislama speaker.

Chapter 1 is an introduction. It starts by defining the term 'postcolonial semantics' and moves on to introduce the research setting. Levisen investigates Bislama, the national language of Vanuatu, an archipelagic country in the Pacific Ocean that was colonized by Britain and France and gained independence in 1980. Bislama is a creole whose words are predominantly of English origin. Levisen also introduces his empirical framework through which he approaches meaning in Bislama. This framework rests on semantic socialization, consultation, and observation.

Chapter 2 sheds light on the centrality of meanings and that of metalanguage. For Levisen, semantics is all about studying meanings, which he regards as conceptual constructs that are based on prototypical scenarios. To study these meanings, especially across linguacultures (ways of speaking and ways of living),

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semanticists need a metalanguage that unpacks these meanings while avoiding Anglo- and Eurocentrism. The metalanguage that Levisen proposes and uses throughout his book is the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). This metalanguage uses, *inter alia*, 65 concepts that are simple (cannot be defined using simpler terms) and universal (have exact equivalents in all languages). As the book investigates meanings in Bislama, Levisen presents a list of the exact equivalents of these 65 concepts in this language.

Chapter 3 studies the popular representation of ‘places’ and ‘people in places’ in the Bislama discourse. More specifically, it investigates the meanings of *graon* ‘land/home,’ *aelan* ‘(home) island,’ *kantri* ‘country,’ and *paradaes* ‘Paradise.’ For each concept, Levisen presents an explication (a definition using simple, universal concepts). In addition, he compares them to their English counterparts and also presents an explication of English *country* and *Paradise*.

Chapter 4 starts by discussing Anglo metalinguistics, and it particularly looks into and explicates the meanings of the English words and phrases *English*, *dialect of English*, and *variety of English*. It then moves on to discuss Ni-Vanuatu metalinguistics, and it analyzes and explicates the following terms: *lanwis* ‘island vernacular,’ two meanings of the word *Bislama*, *inglis* ‘English,’ *franis* ‘French,’ and *ekspensif inglis* ‘lit. expensive English.’

In Chapter 5, Levisen investigates the semantics of social categories in Vanuatu. By ‘social categories’ is meant how different groups of people are referred to in a certain place, whether these groups live or are related to that place or not. Levisen analyzes and explicates 23 such categories. It is no wonder then that this chapter is the longest (49 pages) and has the word *dictionary* in its title: “Postcolonial lexicography: A dictionary of social words and worlds.” Among the categories investigated are *ol bubu* ‘ancestors,’ *ol brata mo ol sista* ‘lit. brothers and sisters’ (which are used as kinship and friendship terms), and *ol blakman mo ol waetman* ‘lit. black and white people.’

Chapter 6 advocates the importance of using cross-translatable concepts when describing how people in different cultures talk about how they feel. Using simple, universal concepts, Levisen discusses the pragmatics of *sakem swea* ‘lit. throwing insults’ in Bislama and provides four cultural scripts (short texts describing cultural norms and practices) for *sakem swea*. He also investigates the meanings of some words from this category and explicates one of them, namely *dipskin* ‘lit. thick skin.’ Furthermore, he explores the semantics of *faea i ded* ‘lit. dead fire’ and the two anger-like feelings *kros* (etymon: cross) and *les* (etymon: lazy), and the word *sore* (etymon: sorry), and ends the chapter by explicating the music-driven category *aire* (etymon: Jamaican *irie*). Compared to English, Bislama gives more prominence to expressive conceptualizations of feelings than to descriptive ones.

In Chapter 7, Levisen presents his cultural and critical theory of ortholexy. By the word *ortholexy* he means the study of good and bad words; this study is conducted from the lens of native speakers of the target linguaculture. He analyzes and explicates the English word *taboo*, as well as the Bislama words *rabis* (etymon:

rubbish) and *stret* (etymon: straight), which refer to doing bad and good things, respectively. He also discusses and provides a cultural script for the Bislama concept of *sakem toktok* ‘throwing words’ and that of *nakaema*. Regarding *nakaema*, Levisen demonstrates how rendering it as ‘black magic’ does not reflect its true meaning. He ends this chapter by throwing light on the semantics of the Bislama value of *rispek hemi honorabel* ‘respect is honorable.’

Chapter 8 is the conclusion. Here, the author lists and discusses the different contributions of his findings to different fields. His book contributes to postcolonial linguistics, cognitive and cultural semantics, creole studies and world Englishes, Bislama and urban Pacific studies, and linguistic worldview studies.

The originality of this book lies in its providing a new framework. This framework paves the road for studying cognitive semantics and postcolonial linguistics, and it demonstrates how this road can be taken. Levisen takes his readers on a journey into the Bislama linguaculture and helps them see and experience the ways of speaking and living in the capital of Vanuatu as locals there see them and experience them. I hypothesize that most readers might know very little (if any) about Vanuatu and Bislama. For them, as it was for the present reviewer, Levisen’s book will be an eye-opener in two respects. First, it will introduce them to a new place, language, and culture. Second, it will do so through the lens of Bislama speakers. Almost any book about a certain linguaculture will do the first task, but rarely can one find such a book that also does the second task.

Levisen succeeds in his endeavor because his research and analysis are grounded in an approach that employs simple, universal concepts (Goddard 2021, Goddard & Wierzbicka 1994, 2002, 2014, Peeters 2006, Wierzbicka 2021). When he describes a certain aspect of the Bislama linguaculture using these concepts, his description can be read to/by native Bislama speakers, and the claims he makes about their linguaculture can be verified by them. A description that uses concepts that do not have exact equivalents in Bislama will be very difficult or impossible to verify.

Levisen’s book is enriching in yet another respect. It gives its readers the opportunity to question their own ways of viewing and understanding the world around them, especially other languages and cultures. Without proper education, most people would tend to judge other languages and cultures from the prism of their own language and culture. This ethnocentrism prevents these people from seeing reality as it is. With a world that has turned into a global village, people need to read books like Levisen’s.

This book is also enriching in terms of language acquisition and/or learning. To many people, learning or acquiring a new language is highly desirable. Readers of Levisen’s book can find themselves acquiring/learning some of the basics of the vocabulary and grammar of Bislama, although the book’s aim is not to teach this language. This is because Levisen provides the explications of the target Bislama concepts and the cultural scripts in both English and Bislama. The ability to read and relatively understand the texts in Bislama stems from two factors. The first is

because most words in Bislama are originally from English. The second is because all the explications use the Bislama exponents of the 65 simple, universal terms mentioned above. By coming across these simple words repeatedly, readers find themselves committing them to memory almost effortlessly.

If the publisher, de Gruyter, were to consider a second edition of this book, a possible change could be simplifying the academic language of the book to make it more accessible to a general audience. For example, Levisen uses technical words that are highly academic, such as *etic*, *emic*, and *cryptodiversity*. Although he explains their meanings clearly, readers can stumble over them. He uses the word *etic*, for instance, 62 times in the body of the book (excluding the Table of Contents and references). Since this word is not commonly used even in academic discourse, readers (including experts in the field) may find themselves needing to mentally translate it into simpler terms, and this can be distracting.

In addition, it would be insightful to add to the appendix the origin of some of the Bislama exponents (exact equivalents) of the 65 semantic primes. The origin of some of the exponents is straightforward, like *mi* ‘I’ and *yu* ‘you.’ The origin of others, like *hemia* ‘there is,’ is not. Having said that, it is worth noting that Levisen provides information about the etymology of almost all the complex Bislama terms he analyzes and explicates.

Postcolonial Semantics is a book worth reading and learning from. It broadens the horizons of its readers and helps them grow more aware of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences. This, in turn, helps in diminishing ethnocentrism.

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