

An Analysis of 'whinging', 'dobbing' and 'mateship' in Australian Contemporary Culture

Yanyan Wang

The Australian National University

Abstract

Every language has its language-specific concepts and each culture has its culture-specific values. A way to understand the culture is to understand the central concepts. To understand the concept, a thorough analysis of cultural key words is one of the methods. The words *whinge* and *dob in* are Australian cultural key words discussed by Wierzbicka (1997). But what cultural value do they reflect? And what role do they play in Australian contemporary culture? This short article undertakes a semantic analysis of these two words using the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) framework to demonstrate the Australian culture-specific value of *mateship*. At the same time the article gives some insights into the role the two words play as cultural norms, people's attitude and socialisation of children.

1. Introduction

The article starts the discussion with the following narrative.

At the dinner table, I asked my 6 year-old boy, who is attending kindergarten, what he had learned in school. He happily told me that they learned how to deal with bullies. My son used his five fingers of his right hands and said: "First, talk friendly, second, talk firmly, third, ignore, fourth, walk away, and.....". Before he finished, my nephew, who is an 18 year-old Chinese boy, said: "Report to the teacher". My son burst into tears and said: "No, not report to the teacher. I don't like the word 'report'. It doesn't sound nice". From my son's reaction to the word *report* I can see that the concept of "report" is different from my Chinese nephew to my son. For a Chinese the word *report* is just to tell something to somebody, but *report* to an Australian child in this context is not just to tell somebody something. It is "dobbing in", which is a big offence, not at all encouraged in Australian culture. This incident reminds me of another situation in China. If one asks a primary school child the question "What do you do if someone in school bullies you or does a bad thing to you?", 90% of the answers will be "Go to report to the teacher." "Talk friendly, talk firmly, ignore and

walk away' are not part of the main attitude in dealing with bullies in China. "Dobbing in" in China is not as offensive as in Australia. Then, what is the cultural significance of "dobbing in" in Australia?

Anne Wierzbicka - in her book *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words* (1997) did a semantic analysis of the words "dobbing" and "whinging". And in 2001 she briefly explained why words as "whinging" and "dobbing in" are of cultural significance in her article "Australian Culture and Australian English: A Response to William Ramson". She claimed that as long as words like *dob in* and *whinge* are widely used, they show that the 'anti-dobbing' and 'anti-whinging' script continue to play a role in the way many Australians think and live (2001: 207). In this short article I will briefly trace these two words and use the semantic analytical framework of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) to show how these concepts are part of the contemporary Australian culture value of "mateship" and the role they play in cultural norms, people's attitude, value and socialisation of children.

NSM and Culture Script

NSM stands for Natural Semantic Metalanguage, the tool to unpack the semantic meaning originated by Anne Wierzbicka (1974, 1985, 1992, 1999). This theory is based on two fundamental assumptions. First, every language has an irreducible core of terms, which conform all complex thoughts and utterances. Secondly, the irreducible cores of all natural languages match one another, reflecting the irreducible core of human thought. NSM suggests that there are sixty or so universal conceptual primes from all languages. Linguistic evidences suggest that these sixty or so words do match across languages and can be used as conceptual lingua franca, which allows us to explain meanings and norms "from a native's point of view" to make them intelligible to cultural outsiders (Wierzbicka 2004:32)

The current proposed primes can be presented, using their English exponents, in the Table below:

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE, SOMETHING/THING, BODY
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY/MUCH
Evaluators:	GOOD, BAD

Descriptors:	BIG, SMALL, (LONG)
Intensifier:	VERY
Mental predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORD, TRUE
Actions, events and movement:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence and possession:	THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Time:	WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space:	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW; FAR, NEAR; SIDE, INSIDE; TOUCHING
"Logical" concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Augmentor:	MORE
Taxonomy, partonomy:	KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity:	LIKE

There are many advantages of NSM in the study of language and culture. Firstly, the NSM makes possible the semantic explication (paraphrasing in a simpler language) from an insider's point of view. Secondly, the exact differences and connections between concepts, within or cross-culture can be clearly identified. This may be clearly done in "culture scrip", which is a form of descriptions of commonly held assumptions about what "people think" about social interaction. Thirdly, it allows the definition to be translated into different languages while culture is retained naturally. We can be assured that the explanations will be translatable across all languages with a minimum of distortion. So once the meaning is unpacked, the "cultural logic" is readily untangled (Ye 2001: 397). For example, the explications of the English word *patient* and Malay word *sabar* analysed by Goddard (2001) enable us to see the

fact that they share an important component of meaning. Both involve not giving in. The difference lies in that *patient* is in a more goal-oriented situation of “want something to happen” while *sabar* is a broader concept of “feeling soothing bad” (Goddard 2001:664).

2. Semantic analysis of “whinging” and “dobbing” in NSM

Every society has its own social norms, which are widely known and shared. One example is that most Australians assume that it is bad to whinge and it is bad to dob in. The norm of “discouraging of whinging and dobbing” affects the way most Australians think and behave.

First let’s have look at the definitions of “whinging” and “dobbing” from several dictionaries:

Definition of “whinging”:

Whinge: To complain, gripe; protest (A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms 1996: 413)

Whinge: If you say someone whinges, you mean that they complain about something unjustly or uselessly. (Australian Learners Dictionary: The first Australian Dictionary for Learners of English. 1997: 898)

Other definitions from online and people around are:

Whinge: complains a lot (whinging is similar to whining); complains continually; complain without doing anything about it; endlessly complain about something; complain or protest, especially in an annoying or persistent manner; to complain, especially about something which does not seem important.

Definition of “dobbing”:

- Dob: to inform upon, to incriminate. Usu with in (The Concise Australian National Dictionary 1989: 168)
- Dob in: To inform against, implicate, betray (A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms 1996: 246)
- Dob in: to inform in (the Australian Study Dictionary/Thesaurus 1995: 120)
- Dob in: a) If somebody dobs you in or dob on you, they betray you by telling somebody in authority that you have done something wrong. B) If somebody dobs

you in, they name you to do some unpleasant task. . (Australian Learners Dictionary: The first Australian Dictionary for Learners of English. 1997: 256)

Definitions from other sources are:

Dob in: inform on someone; betray, report someone to police, teacher; to tell on; to secretly tell someone in authority that someone else has done something wrong.

The definitions of "whinging" and "dobbing" above from *the Australian Learners Dictionary: The first Australian Dictionary for Learners of English*. 1997 are more informative and explicable. But still the words they use are not universal primes. That means the core of the concept is not delineated. Some words used in definition are English culture-specific such as "complain", "report" or "inform, which cannot show the core elements of "whinging" and "dobbing". The concepts of the "whinging" and "dobbing" can only be explicated in NSM so the culture can be naturally retained. "Whinging" is not just "complain" and "dobbing" is not just "inform" or "report". The definitions in all the dictionaries mentioned above do not give any account of the cultural aspects of the concepts of "whinging" and "dobbing". On the other hand, the NSM and culture script are able to unpack the semantic meaning and untangle the cultural significance of the concepts. This paper will have a brief look at the history of the two words and then use some sentences from *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*(1996) as data to analyse.

Never Whinging. Never dobbing

It has long been known in psychological circles that social bonding coincides with extreme hardship. The first group of the settlement in Australian were convicts. The hardships endured by convicts in Australian early history caused them to feel a great sense of reliance upon each other. The origin of "whinging" and "dobbing" is from the convict days, when in criminal circles dobbing was regarded as capital offence and whinging was seen as bad manner. The convicts' life was in danger all the time. The hard time united all these convicts. This tradition was reinforced and took roots in the Gold Rush and Bush life. As a result, running to someone in authority and pointing fingers was just not done in Australia. It is just not what Australian people do to complain. Australians choose to deal with things in a more up front kind of way. This has been Australian cultural model for child rearing too. As Quinn stated that (2002: 2) one kind of cultural model is a cultural solution to a task that members of a group must routinely perform, and that once invented, is transmitted from person to person and from generation to generation. From schoolkids to adults everybody in Australia

knows that "dobbing in" isn't Australia. To accommodate the feelings of others, they should not whinge. This anti-whinging and anti-dibbing result in the fact that Australians turn out to be more positive, self assured, happy. They believe that everything will turn out well. If one asks someone in Australia how they are going and the automatic reply will be "good, thanks". When Australians come across whinges, they generally give advice such as "no worries", "take it easy" and "it will be all right".

Whinging

- Old Misery Guts and Fuller whinged when I told them what we had to do. (Dal Stivens 1951 *Jimmy Brockett* P279)
- Even though I wasn't going home, I was alive and well. What did I have to whinge about? (John Beede 1965 *They Hosed Them Out* P178)
- That's a thing that gets me with sheilas: Whenever they start whinging they always try and make out how reasonable they are. (Henry Williams 1973 *My love had a Black Speed Stripe* P23)

Example 1 shows somebody starts doing this kind of thing when other people do something. Example 2 implies somebody does this kind of thing when they are not happy with their own situation. Example 3 shows that when somebody does this kind of thing they pretend they are not doing this kind of thing. From the three examples we notice "whinging" happens when somebody is not feeling good about something. We also notice that when somebody is not feeling good about himself or herself they do "whinge". The interesting finding is that the whinger will say something to other people like this: " I do this because I think other people don't know something." The whinger says this because he wants other people to know that he is not doing "whinging". So the analysis of "whinging" is that it is not just the speaker, but other people or (listeners) are more involved. "Whinging" is not solving any problem, only passing pain to other people.

I would like to propose the explications as:

X is whinging=

X says something like this:

" I don't feel good about something"

X does thing like this because:

- a. X feels bad about something (small)
- b. X thinks something bad will happen
- c. X has bad feelings after something bad happened.

When X does this thing

X may say something to other people like:

" I do this thing because I want you to know some other things, not because I want to do this thing"

After X does this thing

- a. other people don't feel good because of this
- b. other people will think: "It is not good to other people if the person does things like this."

Dobbing

- 'You said you'd go to the police and dob in unless he caught upThat's the story isn't it?' (Dudah Waten 1957 *Shares in Murder* P173)
- 'But you feel such a rat to tell on her. To dob her in.' (H. F. Brinsmead 1966 *Beat of the City* P144)
- Victoria's 'dob in a druggie' campaign has been hailed as an outstanding success by the Police Commissioner, Mr Doug Miller. (1986 *Australian* 11 Dec P3)

From the first and second examples we can notice that people have very negative attitude to "dobbing in". In example 1 "That's the story, isn't it" implies that speaker is not impressed with the decision of "go to the police to dob in". Example 2 " such a rat to tell on her" really shows the speaker's attitude to "dobbing in". Person who does bad things is called rat. In example 3 "dob in a druggie" is in quotation mark, to show "dobbing in" is not encouraged but "dob in a druggie" is recommended. Here the author uses "dobbing in" to have special function or purpose, which means if you dob in a druggie, you are doing good thing to your community. The finding is that when somebody does "dobbing", not only the person who is dobbed in will be in trouble, but also some other people feel very bad. The speaker and "he" in example 1 and the speaker and "her" in example 2 are affected if the "dobbing" happens.

The explication could be:

X dobs y in=

X says something like this:

"I want you know that Y did something bad"

X does this thing because :

- a. X thinks Y has done something bad
- b. X wants to say something about the bad thing to other people
- c. X thinks it is good that other people know the bad thing

After X does this thing:

- a. Y doesn't feel good because of this
- b. Other people don't feel good because of this
- c. Other people will think: "It is not good thing to other people if the person does this kind of thing"

I formed the explications by three components. First what X does. Secondly why X does this and thirdly what are the sequences of X's doing this. The common core of cultural scripts of the two words is "People think: it is not good to other people if the person does this kind of thing". The explications of these two words are all having the component of "consequence" of the actions. That is "other people don't feel good because of this". From the explication and the cultural scripts we can naturally feel that there is an underlined value of "mateship". "Whinging" means you are passing the pain to your mates. "Whinging" result in an unpleasant atmosphere to live in. "Dobbing in" means causing trouble for your mates. The atmosphere between you and other people is not pleasant after you dobbing in. "Dob in" can't be replaced by "report" or "inform", "whinge" can't be replaced by "complain" because "report" or "inform" and "complain" do not carry the cultural colour. They do not have the component of "other people don't feel good because of this".

This brief analysis provides a basis for understanding why my little son was so upset when my nephew used the word "report to the teacher". I work out that "talk

friendly”, “talk firmly”, “ignore” and “walk away” are all fare-go among the mates to the issue of bully, but “dob in” is a crime among the mates.

3. The Australian Culture-specific value of “mateship”

Australians love their mates. There is no doubt that linguistically, the word ‘mate’ is strongly distinguished in the Australian Language. It embodies equality, obligation and solidarity. It is known that ‘mate’ as an English word is used and has been used for centuries by the working class in English. What makes Australian ‘mate’ usage distinct is the fact that it is used equally by all layers of society. From farmers to politicians every Australian male uses the word “mate” every day of their life. Certain groups of female use “mate” as well. From convict days, especially during the Gold Rush, Australian mateship became central to the national character. The term “mateship” took its root among the gold diggers. And soon it came to cities. In California Gold Rush the term “partner” formed a contrast to the term “mate” in Australia. “Partner” reflects the value of small business while “mate” suggests the value of collectivity and obligation. Even in 1999 Minister Howard wanted to put “mateship” in the draft of his preamble to a proposed new constitution. John Howard actually means the Australianness when he speaks of “mateship”.

Does “mateship” mean, “friendship” or “companionship”? Does it add anything at all to the semantics of what is being said? The definitions from dictionaries are:

- Mateship: the bond between partners; comradeship as an ideal. (*The Australian Study Dictionary/Thesaurus*. 1995: 240)
- Mateship: The fellowship implied in mate. (*A dictionary of Australian colloquialisms*. 1996:246)
- Mateship: Spec. use of *mateship* the condition of being a mate, companionship : the bond between equal partner or close friends; comradeship; comradeship as an ideal. (*The Concise Australian National Dictionary*. 1998: 331)

Henry Lawson praised “mateship” as ‘The greatest pleasure I have ever known is when my eyes meet the eyes of a mate over the top of two foaming glasses of beer.’ ‘When our ideal of “mateship is realised, the monopolist will not be able to hold the land from us.’ (*A dictionary of Australian colloquialisms*.1996: 126).

I would propose the explication as:

Mateship =

People think:

- a. You can't see the thing. You can feel the thing
- b. It is good to have this thing.
- c. If you have this thing you will feel good.
- d. Because of having this thing you want to do good things to other people
- e. You want to have this thing for very long
- f. You will not do bad things to this thing
- g. Because of this thing you will not do bad thing to other people
- h. This thing is a part of you

"Companionship" and "friendship" do not convey the same message as "mateship". For example, "He's my mate", "We're mates" or "He's my best mate" are common utterances. However, as with all translations, something is lost when 'friend' or comrade" replaces "mate". Concepts such as "mate", "friend", and "comrade" are very complex, and each such concept constitutes a unique in different languages, but the configuration as a whole is often unique (Wierzbicka 1997: 118). The unique of "mateship" can be seen from the unique configuration: equality, solidarity and mutual support. There is no same concept for Australian English "mateship" in American English and British English. It is, as "whinging" and "dobbing", Australian culture-specific concept. Australians do not accept "whinging and dobbing" because of "mateship". Anti-whinging and anti-dobbing attitude reinforced the cultural value of "mateship".

4. Conclusion

British English, American English and Australian English are all English. But regional vocabulary like Australian English is not just an addition to the vocabulary to British English. Australian expressions are Australian culture-specific. 'Whinging' is not just complain, and "dobbing" is not just report or tell on. They reflect Australian history and culture. They embody the unique Australian value of "mateship" which is widely spread from school kids to politicians in Australian. Other English speaking countries have no equivalent concepts to these words. "Comrade", "friend" "fellow" are not able to replace "mate". Translating Australian culture-specific words or expressions such

as “whinging” and “dobbing” can be undertaken but using NSM. This article shows that NSM analysis of the Australian key words “whinging”, “dobbing” and “mateship” give us a better understanding of Australian culture.

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