

NATURAL SEMANTIC METALANGUAGE IN ENGLISH– INDONESIAN TRANSLATION: A CROSS-LINGUISTIC SEMANTIC CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This study explores the application of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) in translating English lexical items into Indonesian. NSM provides a framework for analyzing meaning using universal semantic primes, allowing for precise cross-linguistic comparison. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this research examines selected English verbs (*provide, inform, give, tell*) and adjectives (*smart, clever, intelligent*) alongside their Indonesian equivalents (*menyediakan, memberi, memberi tahu, pintar, cerdas, pandai*). The analysis demonstrates that translation equivalence is rarely one-to-one, as Indonesian lexical items encode additional semantic distinctions such as intentionality, temporality, and cognitive evaluation. The findings confirm that NSM is an effective tool for uncovering semantic nuances and improving translation accuracy. This study contributes to translation studies and cross-cultural semantics by highlighting how meaning is structured differently across languages.

Keywords – NSM, Translation, Semantic, Meaning, Languages

Introduction

Translation is not merely a process of substituting words from one language into another; it involves transferring meaning across different linguistic and cultural systems. One major issue in English–Indonesian translation is **semantic non-equivalence**, where a single English word corresponds to multiple Indonesian expressions with subtle differences in meaning. For instance, the English verb *provide* may be translated as *memberi*, *menyediakan*, or *menyajikan*, depending on context. Similarly, the adjective *smart* can be rendered as *pintar*, *cerdas*, or *pandai*. These variations reflect deeper semantic structures that are not immediately visible at the surface level. Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), developed by Anna Wierzbicka and further expanded by Cliff Goddard, offers a solution to this problem. NSM proposes that all meanings can be explained using a set of universal semantic primes such as *I, YOU, DO, SAY, THINK, GOOD*, and *BAD*. These primes exist in all languages and allow for culturally neutral semantic descriptions.

This study aims to:

1. Analyze how English lexical items are translated into Indonesian
2. Identify semantic differences using NSM explications
3. Demonstrate how NSM improves translation accuracy

Literature Review

1 Natural Semantic Metalanguage Theory

NSM is based on the idea that all complex meanings can be broken down into simpler, universal components. According to Wierzbicka (1996), semantic primes are:

- Universal across languages
- Indivisible
- Intuitively understandable

Examples include:

- Substantives: *I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING*
- Verbs: *DO, HAPPEN, SAY, THINK*
- Evaluators: *GOOD, BAD*

These primes combine into **semantic molecules**, forming structured meaning representations.

2 NSM in Translation Studies

NSM has been widely applied in translation studies because it:

- Avoids circular definitions
- Clarifies polysemy
- Reveals cultural meaning differences

Previous studies show that Indonesian has rich lexical distinctions, particularly in:

- verbs of giving
- cognitive adjectives
- speech act verbs

3 English vs Indonesian Semantic Structure

English tends to:

- Use **fewer, more general words**
- Rely heavily on context

Indonesian tends to:

- Use **more specific lexical distinctions**
- Encode nuance directly in vocabulary

This difference makes NSM especially useful for English–Indonesian translation)

Methodology

1 Research Design

This research adopts a **qualitative descriptive method**, focusing on semantic analysis rather than statistical measurement.

2 Data Selection

The data consists of:

English verbs:

- provide
- give
- inform
- tell

English adjectives:

- smart
- clever
- intelligent

Indonesian equivalents:

- menyediakan
- memberi
- memberi tahu
- mengatakan
- pintar
- cerdas
- pandai

3 Analytical Framework

The analysis follows these steps:

1. Identify lexical correspondences
2. Construct NSM explications
3. Compare semantic structures
4. Interpret differences

Finding and Discussion

1 Verbs of Giving: “Provide” vs Indonesian Equivalents

English: *provide*

NSM Explication

someone X does something

because X wants someone Y to have something
X thinks: Y needs this
because of this, Y can have it

Indonesian Variants

menyediakan

someone X does something before
X does this because X thinks someone Y will need something
because of this, Y can have it later

memberi

someone X does something to Y
because X wants Y to have something now

Discussion

- *menyediakan* encodes **anticipation and preparation**
- *memberi* encodes **immediate transfer**

This shows that Indonesian distinguishes **time orientation**, which English does not explicitly encode.

2 Speech Act Verbs: “Inform” vs “Tell”

English: *inform*

X says something to Y
X knows this is true
X wants Y to know it
X thinks this is important

English: *tell*

X says something to Y
X wants Y to know something

Indonesian Equivalents

memberi tahu

X says something to Y
because X wants Y to know something

mengatakan

X says something
X says it to someone

Discussion

- *inform* implies **formality and importance**
- *tell* is **neutral**
- *memberi tahu* covers both but lacks explicit formality distinction

Thus, translation may lose **pragmatic nuance**.

3 Cognitive Adjectives: “Smart”, “Clever”, “Intelligent”

English: *smart*

someone can think well
this someone can do many things well

English: *clever*

someone can think well
this someone can think quickly
sometimes this someone does unexpected things

English: *intelligent*

someone can think very well
this someone understands many things

Indonesian Equivalents

pintar

someone can think well
this someone learned many things

cerdas

someone can think very well
this someone understands things quickly

pandai

someone can do something very well
this someone learned how to do it

Discussion

- *pintar* = general intelligence (often learned)

- *cerdas* = high-level cognitive ability (innate + analytical)
- *pandai* = skill-based competence

Indonesian distinguishes:

- **knowledge-based intelligence**
- **processing speed**
- **practical skill**

English compresses these into fewer categories.

4 Cultural and Semantic Implications

The analysis reveals three key differences:

1. Temporal Encoding

Indonesian verbs often encode **time (before vs now)** explicitly.

2. Intentionality

Indonesian distinguishes whether an action is:

- planned (*menyediakan*)
- spontaneous (*memberi*)

3. Cognitive Nuance

Indonesian adjectives differentiate:

- learned vs innate intelligence
- theoretical vs practical ability

5. Implications for Translation

1 Practical Implications

Translators should:

- Avoid direct word-for-word translation
- Consider semantic components
- Use context to choose appropriate equivalents

2 Theoretical Implications

NSM:

- Provides a universal analytical framework
- Bridges linguistic and cultural gaps
- Enhances semantic precision

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that:

1. English–Indonesian translation involves **complex semantic mapping**
2. NSM effectively reveals **hidden meaning structures**
3. Indonesian encodes **finer semantic distinctions** than English

Therefore, NSM is a valuable tool for:

- translation studies
- semantic analysis
- cross-cultural communication

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