A month ago, I travelled from a summery Canberra to a snowbound Warsaw, to receive, at a ceremony at the Royal Castle, an award from the Polish Science Foundation, known in Poland informally as ‘the Polish Nobel’ (in the plural, ‘Polskie Noble’, see the picture). I was one of three laureates for 2010: one received the prize for the field of exact sciences (in his case, chemistry), one for biological and medical sciences, and one (myself, a linguist) for humanities and social sciences.

The award, which attracts a great deal of media interest, reflects the high prestige that ‘nauka’ (a word translated into English as ‘science’) has in Poland. But it also reflects something else: the non-equivalence of the Polish word nauka and the English word science, and the different vision of human knowledge in Poland and in English-speaking countries like Australia. If Australia had an institution called the ‘Australian Science Foundation’, such a Foundation would be unlikely to award a prize ‘for the humanities’ (or even ‘the social sciences’). This raises a number of questions, including these two: what is ‘science’? And what are ‘the humanities’?

One thing seems clear: in English, ‘the humanities’ are not part of ‘science’, on a par with fields like chemistry and biology, whereas in Polish, they are part of ‘nauka’.

THE DIFFERENT STATUS OF ‘SCIENCE’ AND ‘THE HUMANITIES’ IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

In English-speaking countries it is assumed that ‘everyone knows’ what ‘science’ is: the word science is part and parcel of ordinary, colloquial English. The same is not true, however, of the humanities. Judging by the data from the database Cobuild, Bank of English, the word humanities is not common in contemporary English, and in spoken English it is quite rare: clearly, it belongs to a specialised, academic register of English. It is not surprising, therefore, that many speakers of English have no clear idea of what this word really means.
Admittedly, the phrase *the social sciences* is not part of colloquial English either, but most people would take it (and rightly so) to be some kind of extension from *science*, modified by the adjective *social*. It is likely, therefore, that the phrase *social sciences* would not appear to many speakers of English as puzzling or incomprehensible, and that the association with *science* would lend the phrase some of this word’s prestigious glow. This is not the case, however, with *the humanities*.

It is particularly important, therefore, that the meaning of the phrase *the humanities* should be explained – both to various decision-making bodies and to the general public. Without some such explanations, it might not be clear to many people why *the humanities* should have a claim on any institutional space – or on the public purse – in countries like Australia. For example, it could be asked: why should the Australian Research Council be as ready to fund research projects in *the humanities* as those in *‘science’* and in *‘the social sciences’*? What can *‘the humanities’* contribute to human knowledge and human understanding that neither *‘science’* nor *‘the social sciences’* can?

**‘SCIENCE’ – A CONCEPTUAL ARTEFACT OF MODERN ENGLISH**

The English word *science*, which excludes not only *‘the humanities’* but also logic and even mathematics, does not have exact equivalents in other European languages, let alone languages further afield, and is saturated, so to speak, with ‘British empiricism’. For example, the German word *Wissenschaft* (from *wissen* ‘to know’), like the Polish *nauka*, embraces all systematic research, and its two branches – *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* (from *Natur* ‘nature’ and *Geist* ‘mind, spirit’) – do not privilege empirical, sense-derived knowledge over any other kind.

But in English, knowledge based on ‘experience’ (derived from the senses) achieved such great prestige, and such a privileged status in the edifice of human knowledge, that it shaped the modern concept of *‘science’* itself. Consequently, in the conceptualisation of knowledge embedded in modern English, there is no category of *‘science’* or *‘sciences’* which would include both *‘natural sciences’* and *‘the humanities’*.

The modern English concept of *‘science’* focuses on empirical and objectively verifiable knowledge about *‘things’*. The expression *social sciences*, restricted, by and large, to the academic register, purports to extend the empirical method and the requirement of verifiability to the study of *‘people’* rather than *‘things’*, but *‘people’* studied as groups rather than individuals. The prestige of *‘social sciences’* derives from their purported analogy with *‘science’*.

**THE ROOTS OF THE CONCEPT OF ‘THE HUMANITIES’ IN THE THOUGHT OF GIAMBATTISTA VICO**

The concept of *‘the humanities’*, in contrast to that of *‘the social sciences’*, evokes a field of inquiry which is fundamentally different from *‘science’* and which has its own goals and its own methods.

The subject matter of *‘the humanities’* is *‘people’* – not necessarily groups of people – and the definition which will be developed here (in deliberately simplified language) reflects the assumption inherent in this concept that *‘it is good if people can know things of many kinds about people’*. It will also include the assumption that people can only gain access to that knowledge if some people (those engaged in the pursuit of *‘the humanities’*) do some things for a long time to seek that knowledge and if they do it in ways different from those in which those who study *‘things’* rather than people can pursue their studies.

The fundamental distinction between studying things and studying people was introduced into European thought by the Italian eighteenth-century philosopher Giambattista Vico. Although modern English has since developed its own ways of categorising knowledge, with its own concepts of *‘science’*, *‘social sciences’* and *‘the humanities’*, Vico’s basic idea lives on in the modern English concept of *‘the humanities’* (as it does in the German concept of *‘Geisteswissenschaften’*, the Polish concept of *nauki* (plural) *humanistyczne* and in other comparable concepts in other European languages).
Essentially, the idea is that people can know things of many kinds about people in a way they can’t know things about anything else (for example, rocks, plants, or stars), and that it is extremely important for people to know things of these kinds about people. Furthermore, people can know things of these kinds about people imaginatively, ‘from inside’, and they can have a better understanding of them than they can ever have of the ‘natural world’ (the world of ‘things’).

To study people in the way one can study ‘things’ would mean (according to Vico) ‘to ignore the distinction between human beings and non-human nature, between material objects and mental or emotional life’. According to Vico, it is difficult but vitally important for people to pursue knowledge about people that is different in kind from knowledge about the external world. Knowledge about animals, or plants, or things, derives from sense perception, and it cannot be compared to the intimate knowledge that we can have about ourselves and the things that we have created.

Taking this contrast between the knowledge of the external world and the knowledge of people as human beings as his point of departure, Vico set out his vision of the ‘Scienza nuova’ – a phrase whose rendering as ‘the new science’ can be misleading to English readers, given that in contemporary English the word science means something quite different from what scienza meant for Vico, and indeed, from what science meant in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English. Vico’s scienza nuova was not some extension of science (conceived of in the sense in which this term is used in modern English, that is, roughly, as the empirical study of the external world), but a different kind of knowledge which includes a perspective ‘from within’ the subject matter. To quote Isaiah Berlin’s rendition of Vico’s thought:

In the case of the external world the naturalists are right: all that we know are followed by what acts, but also why; not only whether, but also why persons in this or that mental or emotional state are or are not likely to behave in a given fashion, what is, or what would be, rational or desirable or right for them to do, how and why they decide between various courses of action, and so on. In short, we judge human activity in terms of purposes, motives, acts of will, decisions, doubts, hesitations, thoughts, hopes, fears, desires, and so forth; these are among the ways in which we distinguish human beings from the rest of nature.

Such thinking about human beings can lead to ‘true knowledge’ no less than what ‘the naturalists do’ – in a sense, (Vico held), even more so:

If, following Descartes’ rigorous rule, we allowed only that to be true knowledge which could be established by physics or other natural sciences, we should be confined to behaviourist tests, namely the uncritical assimilation of the human world to the non-human – the restriction of our knowledge.
to those characteristics of men which they share with the non-human world; and consequently the attempt to explain human behaviour in non-human terms, as some behaviourists and extreme materialists, both ancient and modern, inspired by the vision (or mirage) of a single, integrated, natural science of all there is, have urged us to do. It may be that a good deal more can be said in such purely ‘physicalist’ language than its opponents have, at times, thought possible; but certainly not enough. For we should find ourselves debarred by such self-imposed austerity from saying or thinking some of the most natural and indispensable things that men constantly say or think about other human beings. The reason is not far to seek: men can think of others only as being like themselves.7

Vico concluded that, as Berlin puts it, ‘Descartes is the great deceiver, whose emphasis on knowledge of the external world as the paradigm of all knowledge has set philosophy on a false path’.8 Although the concept of ‘the humanities’ as we know it from present-day English is not simply modelled on Vico’s ideas, it is to a large extent informed by them, and we can find in these ideas extremely valuable clues for defining it.

For Vico the intimate knowledge of human beings, which is the proper aim of, as we might say today, ‘the humanities’, is inextricably linked with the question of language. As Claudio Véliz (1994) puts it in his retelling of Vico’s ideas, ‘The crucial Vichian argument rests on the primordial character of language. Immensely more important than all other human artefacts, signs, symbols, and institutions, language is the definitive element in culture’.9 It is also the one that ‘portrays most tellingly the modalities and transformations of the social ambit’10 and the ‘modifications of our human mind’.11

In addition, the understanding and interpretation of human conduct and behaviour cannot be strictly separated from moral judgment (‘in the case of human behaviour we can surely ask […] what is, or what would be rational or desirable or right from them to do’, as Berlin puts it).12 ‘Natural sciences’ are widely taken to be value-free (and ‘social sciences’ tend to imitate ‘science’ in this regard). ‘The humanities’, on the other hand, do not aspire to be value-free. Thus, when a historian, Martin Malia, writes (with reference to the historiographies of Stalinism and Nazism) that ‘moral judgments are […] intrinsic to all historical understanding’, he is placing history in the context of ‘the humanities’ rather than ‘the social sciences’.13 This link with values and moral judgment, too, needs to be taken into account in the full definition of ‘the humanities’.

THE INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN BEINGS, WHICH IS THE PROPER AIM OF, AS WE MIGHT SAY TODAY, ‘THE HUMANITIES’, IS INEXTRICABLY LINKED WITH THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE.

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The definition and explanation of the concept of ‘the humanities’ to be presented here is based on the NSM approach, developed over many years by myself and my colleague Professor Cliff Goddard, and tested by many scholars in numerous publications over many domains.14 The acronym NSM stands for Natural Semantic Metalanguage — a mini-language which corresponds to the empirically discovered intersection (the common core) of all languages. This universal ‘mini-language’ can be used effectively for exploring and comparing the ways of thinking and categorising experience reflected in different languages of the world and different historical stages of the same language (for example, English).

To define (or ‘explicate’) the meaning of a word or expression in NSM means to explain it through simple and universal human concepts (‘semantic primes’) which do not require
further explanation themselves and which can be found as words (or word-like elements) in all languages. These concepts include, for example, do and happen, someone and something, and sixty or so others.  

In addition to semantic primes (‘atoms of meaning’), many NSM explications rely also, in a limited way, on ‘semantic molecules’, especially in the area of concrete vocabulary. In particular, body part concepts often function as semantic molecules in the meaning of verbs of physical activity, such as walk (‘legs’, ‘feet’), lick (‘tongue’) and bite (‘teeth’). In NSM explications, such molecules are marked with the symbol [m]. (Molecules are not necessary for explicating the humanities, but they are relevant to the explication of science.)

DEFINING ‘THE HUMANITIES’

As a first approximation, one could say that the concept of ‘the humanities’ focuses on studying human experience, ways of thinking and ways of feeling. The approach to this study is fundamentally different from that of ‘science’ in that it seeks empathetic understanding and does not seek to measure anything. If measurements are used in ‘the humanities’ at all, they can have only a secondary, auxiliary role: neither empathetic understanding nor self-understanding can be based on measurements.

Seeking now to describe the subject matter of ‘the humanities’ more fully (but still informally), we could say that it embraces themes like the following ones: what can happen to people and what people can do; possible ways of thinking, ways of feeling, and ways of speaking; possible motives and possible values.

The words can and possible are important here and they highlight the non-empirical and imaginative character of research in ‘the humanities’. They also highlight the double focus of ‘the humanities’: on ‘humanity’ as a whole and on individual (though culturally embedded) human beings in all their immense diversity. Studies in ‘the humanities’ can tell us what kinds of things can happen to people, what people can do and why they can want to do things of some kinds; how a person can think and feel and what he or she can hold as good and commendable.

Drawing on Vico’s insights and using the mini-language of universal human concepts, we can propose the following (partial) explication of the expression the humanities:

a. some people do some things for a long time because they think like this:

b. ‘it is good if people can know things of many kinds about people

c. it is good if people can know what kinds of things can happen to someone

it is good if people can know how someone can feel when these things happen

d. it is good if people can know how someone can think about things of many kinds

it is good if people can know how someone can feel when this someone thinks about these things

e. it is good if people can know what kinds of things someone can say with words

it is good if people can know how someone can say these things with words

f. it is good if people can know what kinds of things someone can do

it is good if people can know why someone can want to do these things

it is good if people can know about some things that it is good if someone does these things

it is good if people can know about some other things that it is bad if someone does these things

it is good if people can think about things like this

h. it is good if people can know how someone can live

it is good if people can think about this’
As this (partial) explication shows, the scope of the subject matter of ‘the humanities’ is very broad. It embraces things that happen to people, things that people do, and things that people say, as well as people’s thoughts, emotions, motivations, and values. The broad scope of the subject matter of ‘the humanities’ explains why fields as different as history, biography, literature, philology, linguistics, classics, philosophy and religious studies can all be seen (and can see themselves) as part of ‘the humanities’.

Some of these fields can also see themselves as part of ‘the social sciences’, or at least as having one foot in ‘the social sciences’ and one in ‘the humanities’. Such overlaps are possible because the concept of ‘the humanities’ refers not only to a particular subject matter but also to method and approach. As the full explication shows, the approach envisaged by ‘the humanities’ is different – fundamentally different – from that of ‘science’, and consequently, from that of ‘the social sciences’, which seek to emulate the approach of ‘science’.

As already noted, one key feature of the explication of the humanities which distinguishes it from that of science is the use of the word can in most of the components. According to the concept behind the word humanities, it is good for people to know how someone can think, feel, speak, live, what kinds of things can happen to someone, and what kinds of things someone can do. This use of the modal can makes the concept of ‘the humanities’ unempirical: people can’t study empirically how someone can think, feel, speak, or live. This ‘can’ points to a necessary effort of the imagination, which cannot be fully replicated and empirically verified.

Furthermore, the definition of ‘the humanities’ outlined here is not exclusively focused on knowledge: as components g. and h. indicate, ‘the humanities’ seek also to provide opportunities for people to think about how someone can live, and whether it is good or not good for people to do things of some kinds. This is not something open to empirical verification either.

The appeal to the imagination inherent in the recurring ‘can’ links work in ‘the humanities’ in some ways to the work involved in creative arts. It also connects with the component ‘if these people do these things very well’, which is included in the full explication of ‘the humanities’ and which is absent from the explication of science: science is not conceived of as cognate to art and the two words (science and art) can be contrasted. The word humanities, on the other hand, is normally not contrasted with the word art. This is due, I suggest, not only to the avowedly non-empirical character of ‘the humanities’ and to its conceptual link with creative imagination, but also to its implication...
understanding other people. A social scientist seeks knowledge (of some kinds) about ‘people’, but not about ‘other people’. The phrase other people makes room, as it were, for the person of the researcher, for this person’s empathetic understanding of other human beings. This points to a pursuit of intersubjective rather than purely ‘objective’ knowledge and understanding, which again sets ‘the humanities’ apart from ‘science’ and ‘the social sciences’.

Vico’s concern for the self-understanding of the ‘agent’ chimes with another feature of the explication presented here (in addition to ‘other people’), namely, with its focus on ‘someone’ (in the singular) rather than ‘people’ (in the plural) as the primary object of interest.

Generally speaking, ‘science’ studies classes of things rather than individual objects, and ‘social sciences’ focus on populations and societies. ‘The humanities’, on the other hand, have a double focus. On the one hand, they are interested in ‘people’ in general and they are predicated on the assumption that ‘it is good if people can know things of many kinds about people’. On the other hand, however, they are interested in individual human beings – not necessarily in specific individuals as such but in the whole range of human experience, human pursuits, emotions, values, ways of thinking and ways of living. Thus, the purpose of ‘the humanities’ is not to study particular societies or to compare societies across places and times, but rather, to understand ‘human beings’.

DEFINING ‘SCIENCE’ AND CONCEPTS LIKE ‘WISSENSCHAFT’

The meaning of science has changed considerably in the course of the last two centuries. This change has to do both with the scope and the methodology of what can be described as ‘science’ now and what could be so described two centuries ago.

For example, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, in his Essays on the Intellectual Power of Man, published in 1785, referred to both mathematics and the study of what he called ‘the operations of the mind’ as ‘sciences’.18

Thus, for Reid, science referred to, roughly speaking, any systematic and rigorous pursuit of knowledge. What he called ‘natural philosophy’, and what we might call today empirical study of natural phenomena, was for Reid an important branch of ‘science’, but only one branch among many. In present-day English, however, what for Reid was a branch of ‘science’ has become simply ‘science’, and the other branches have found themselves outside the scope of ‘science’ as the word is now commonly understood. This is particularly clear in the way the derived words scientific and scientist are now used.

Science (partial explication)

a. some people do some things for a long time because they think like this:

b. ‘it is good if people can know many things about things of many kinds

c. it is good if they can know these things well

d. it is good if people can know these things like someone can know some things about something when it is like this:

e. this someone can see this something

f. this someone’s hands[\(M\)] can touch this something

g. this someone can say some things about this something with some number[\(N\)] words

h. often, when these people do these things, they do some things to some things

i. they do these things not like other people do things to many things

Key features of ‘science’ as presented in this explication include a focus on knowing many things about ‘things’ (rather than ‘people’), and knowing them well, in components (b) and (c), an experimental basis (not simply ‘doing things’ but ‘doing things to some things’ in (h), an empirical orientation (relying on evidence such as that provided by ‘the eye and the hand’) in (e) and (f), and an emphasis on numbers and measurements (component g). In addition, the references to seeing, touching and ‘number words’ imply a kind of verifiable knowledge, accessible, in principle, to anyone through clear procedures based on seeing, touching, and measurements.

The explication does not refer explicitly to ‘natural phenomena’ or to ‘the external
world’, but restricts science’s goals to providing knowledge ‘about things’ (rather than people). This is further narrowed, by implication, by the references to the empirical method (ultimately based on the senses, such as seeing and touching). The reference to ‘doing many things to some things’, too, evokes laboratory research and the like, where scientists manipulate ‘things’ of certain kinds, in order to obtain knowledge of a kind that can be derived from such experimental approaches. There is also a reference here to people knowing ‘things of some kinds’ well: the scope of science may be limited (e.g., it excludes intimate knowledge about people’s thoughts, feelings and experiences), but at least the knowledge provided by it is expected to be well established and clearly articulated.

In all these respects, the present-day meaning of science is different from, for example, that of the German Wissenschaft, the French science or the Polish nauka, as shown in the following explication:

Wissenschaft
a. some people do many things for a long time because they think like this:
   b. ‘it is good if people can know many things about things of many kinds
   c. it is good if they can know these things well’
   d. these people do these things not like other people do many things

Component (b) shows that those pursuing ‘Wissenschaft’ aim at comprehensive knowledge extending over many domains.

CONCLUSION

There is no reference here to pursuing knowledge through ‘doing things to some things’ (as in experimental science). Furthermore, while there are references to a high standard of knowledge (in c) and to a special approach and method (in d), there is no reference to empirical investigations like those relying on the proverbial ‘eye and hand’ in the tradition of the great seventeenth-century experimental scientists (as we would call them now) like Robert Boyle, Robert Hooke, Isaac Newton, and the Royal Society of London in general. 19

There is a pressure on speakers of English to regard ‘natural sciences’ as the paradigm of all knowledge – at least all knowledge that modern societies should value and pursue. As we have seen, the Italian Vico held the Frenchman Descartes responsible for the undue absolutisation of that particular paradigm. In fact, however, neither Italian nor French (nor other European languages) have absorbed this absolutisation in the way English has. The semantic change that the English word science underwent in the last two centuries or so makes empirically-based knowledge of the external world seem central to all human knowledge, and self-evidently so.

Of course speakers of English are not at the mercy of their language and many of them can recognise the value, and the need for, intellectual pursuits aiming at kinds of knowledge different from ‘scientific knowledge of the external world’. But the pressure of modern English suggests to them, in a subtle and insidious way, that really, there is no knowledge like ‘scientific knowledge’, and that if one wants to focus on ‘people’ rather than ‘things’ one should at least model one’s endeavours on those of the ‘scientists’, and to try to practice ‘social science’, ‘cognitive science’, or some other ‘science’. Equally, there is pressure on funding bodies like the Australian Research Council and on government policy frameworks like the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative to see excellence in research and scholarship through the prism of the priorities and expectations of ‘science’, in the modern English sense of the word.
It is important, therefore, for those working in ‘the humanities’ to explain their priorities and expectations to their colleagues in ‘science’ and to society at large. It is also important for linguists to draw attention to the historically-shaped semantic peculiarities of the modern English words _science_, _sciences_, _scientific_ and _scientists_ – peculiarities which may sometimes prevent speakers of modern English from making up their own minds about the kinds of knowledge necessary for human beings and their societies to flourish.

Anna Wierzbicka FAHA, FASSA, born and educated in Poland, is Professor of Linguistics at the Australian National University. She is a Fellow of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, and holds Honorary Doctorates from Marie Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland (2004) and Warsaw University, Poland (2006). In 2010 she won both the Dobrushin Prize (established in Russia in honour of the Russian mathematician Roland Lvovich Dobrushin) and the Polish Science Foundation’s prize for the humanities and social sciences. Together with her Australian colleague Cliff Goddard FAHA, Wierzbicka created the ‘Natural Semantic Metalanguage’, based on the empirically established intersection of all sampled natural languages (see Goddard and Wierzbicka, eds., 2002, _Meaning and Universal Grammar_, Amsterdam: John Benjamins).

1. This is a shorter version of an article published in _Culture & Psychology_ (Anna Wierzbicka, ‘Defining “the humanities”’, in press, 2011).
6. Ibid., p. 22.
7. Ibid., p. 23.
8. Ibid., p. 25.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Berlin, p. 22
16. The full list of empirically established universal human concepts includes 64 elements: I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, BODY KIND, PART THIS, THE SAME, OTHER, ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH, LITTLE, GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL, KNOW, THINK, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR, SAY, WORDS, TRUE, DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH, BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING), LIVE, DIE, WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT.
17. A full explication of ‘the humanities’ can be found in the longer version of this article, published in _Culture & Psychology._