The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach is known for its use of reductive paraphrase as a mode of lexical-semantic analysis and for its claim to have discovered an inventory of 65 irreducible semantic primes – analogous to "semantic atoms" – that are apparently universal in the world’s languages. It is less well known that many NSM explications rely crucially on “semantic molecules”, i.e. certain non-primitive meanings that function alongside semantic primes as building blocks of complex concepts. This talk overviews several aspects of the NSM theory of semantic molecules. It proposes explications for some likely universal semantic molecules, such as ‘hands’, ‘mouth’, ‘long’ , ‘round’, ‘water’, ‘sky’, and ‘sun’. It shows how successively more complex meanings can be built up by embedding molecules within molecules. Also considered is the important role played by non-universal molecules, of varying degrees of language-and-culture specificity, in the vocabulary structure. Reference: Goddard, Cliff and Wierzbicka, Anna. 2014. Words and Meanings. Lexical Semantics Across Domains, Languages and Cultures. Oxford: Oxford University Press.