Endangered concepts: The challenge for linguistic fieldworkers

Field linguistics, and the whole project of language documentation, is committed to capturing and preserving, as far as possible, indigenous systems of cognition and knowledge; yet many linguists are reluctant to face the fact that indigenous perspectives cannot be faithfully portrayed using complex English-specific (often Latinate) vocabulary. In this talk, which is based on joint work with Anna Wierzbicka, I set out to show how the techniques of NSM semantics, based on lexical universals, can be applied in linguistic fieldwork. Adding these techniques to the fieldworker's toolkit, I argue, can improve cross-linguistic understanding between linguists and native speaker consultants and enable conceptually authentic explications of "endangered concepts".