Short Papers

SARAH BIGI*

FOCUS ON CULTURAL KEYWORDS

It is common today to find the notion of *keyword* used in various research domains and for different purposes, from computer science to cultural studies, linguistic anthropology and argumentation. This use is so widespread that the notion itself is often taken for granted, also because it is easily understood at an intuitive level. Nonetheless it seems important to try to define the notion of keyword and give some criteria for the discovery of keywords in texts. In this article keywords will be looked at from a cultural point of view, reconstructing three main research perspectives on the subject. In these studies keywords are used as tools that can give insights into cultures, societies or historical periods. A review of these studies will enable us to retrace a general definition of cultural keywords, to find some indications as to how they can be recovered and analysed in texts, and to outline some further lines of research.

Keywords: intercultural communication, text analysis, keywords.

* Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan; sarah.bigi@unicatt.it

1. Introduction

In recent years it has become quite common to find the notion of *key-word* used in different contexts, in different ways and for various purposes. Usually it is associated with the process of information retrieval or indexing but these are not the only domains in which it is used. In fact there is also a widespread use of keywords as tools to study cultures, communities, societies, disciplines, historical periods or controversial topics. This approach to keywords is cross-disciplinary and rests almost always on a general preoccupation with understanding cultures. Thus I will call keywords used in this perspective *cultural keywords*[1].

If compared to the use of keywords made in the computer science (which I will call *computer keywords*), cultural keywords do not differ from them for the role they play (which is always information retrieval, in a broad sense), but for the nature of the object they help to analyse and for the variety of methodologies that are used to achieve this analysis.

Computer keywords are quite univocally understood as the means to achieve the retrieval of pieces of information from a large amount of data[2].

Speaking of cultural keywords the situation is a bit more complicated. In a somewhat broader sense their function is still that of retrieving information, but from a "database" that corresponds to a culture. This is the most problematic point that emerges from the studies conducted in this perspective because a culture can be approached and studied from different points of view: one could observe, for example, historical events, social structures, contexts of interaction, types of discourse, etc. So, depending on the perspective one approaches a culture from, if the object of inquiry changes, the methods change as well. This is why we find cul-

---

[1] The term *cultural keyword* is not used explicitly by all researchers who use or study them, but I will adopt it because it is useful to distinguish this particular use of keywords from the one that is made for example in the computer science or in other study fields.

[2] Even in this domain, though, it could be useful to distinguish three different levels: 1) keywords as conceived of in library science and computer science (it is the case of their use by research engines); 2) keywords as tools in corpus linguistics (used, for example, for concordances); 3) the use of corpus linguistics' techniques to study cultural keywords. In this sense, keywords as in number 2) become the tools to identify keywords as in number 3).

tural keywords at issue in disciplinary fields which can differ also considerably one from the other, and this is also why the methods used to extract information through keywords can be very different.

Nonetheless they do have one thing in common, and this is the reason why it is possible to consider them under the same "category": all these different approaches seem to be generated by a shared way of conceiving the relationship between language and reality. Following this approach, language is considered as "a mirror of reality", in other words a sort of a tool which is inherited by every human being from the community in which they are born and raised, and which constitutes the only way to interpret reality[3]. Thus language becomes the privileged dimension in which reality is accounted for by human beings in all of its different manifestations. In this perspective, certain words are chosen from the vocabulary of a language and analysed as keywords because they appear to reflect some major or specific features of certain cultures, communities or societies.

Still, the notion of cultural keyword appears to be at times quite fuzzy from the point of view of its discovery procedure in texts and its analysis.

In the following paragraphs three research traditions will be outlined, which together help sketch a more precise notion of cultural keywords. They will be represented by the works of Raymond Williams (1959; 1976), Anna Wierzbicka (1997) and Eddo Rigotti & Andrea Rocci (2002). Starting from similar premises with respect to the relationship between language and reality, the researchers in these traditions develop different methods and approaches to the study of culture through keywords depending on their field of research and object of analysis.[4]

---

[3] The first scholar to propose this view has been von Humboldt (1836). Following his line of research, two of the most famous names are those of Sapir (1958) and Whorf (1956).

[4] One of the shared premises of these approaches is the idea that words have a "power" of some kind. This idea is not always expressed explicitly or thoroughly by the authors but it is constantly assumed by them and seems to be important in order to better understand their interest in such peculiar words as are keywords. This "power" of words more precisely seems to derive from the concepts words are linked to, and also from certain connotations associated to these concepts, along with lexicalized inferences, which give these concepts relevant roles within conceptual networks of associations shared within a culture. An issue which can be reconducted to this discussion point is adressed by Rigotti and Rocci, when making the distinction between the denotation of words and the endoxa they refer to, see par. 4.

Assuming that all share the common aim of obtaining relevant insights into cultures through the study of keywords, for each of them I will focus on how they characterize keywords in order to arrive at a clearer perspective on this notion.

2. Cultural keywords

Thinking of keywords, perhaps the most famous name is that of Raymond Williams. His work, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* is still one of the most cited books in studies that make use of the notion of keyword. In fact Williams had already hinted at keywords in a previous work, written some twenty years earlier, *Culture and Society*.

In the Introduction to *Culture and Society* (1959: xiii-xx), he explains that he has observed the presence of a number of words which, having entered the English vocabulary between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, had acquired in his time a particular importance. According to Williams, there is a pattern of change in these words, which can be used as a map that mirrors the changes occurred in life and thought in the same period of time. He lists five words as the "key points" from which this map can be drawn: *industry*, *democracy*, *class*, *art* and *culture*. He considers the importance of these five words to be obvious and claims that the changes in their use reflect changes in the way people thought of common life in those years[5].

It is important to note that his main preoccupation is with the word *culture*, the one he considers to be central in the map of change he is drawing. In fact, his work is actually an inquiry into the meanings of the word *culture*, considered in its relations to the general changes occurred in English society after the Industrial Revolution and the process of democratisation.

In this respect, it is interesting to observe how he considers language. On the one hand he considers it to be the domain in which reality is accounted for by human beings[6], on the other hand he thinks people

---

[5] In particular Williams focuses his attention on the way changes in the use of these words shed light on new relationships between institutions and society.
[6] As he declares in the Introduction to *Culture and Society*: "The changes in their use [of the five key words], at this critical period, bear witness to a general change in our characteristic ways of thinking about our common life [...]." (1959: xiii)

should not take meanings for granted but, having received them, always compare them with experience (1959: 297)[7].

Starting from these premises, the conclusions Williams draws are important especially to understand the following applications of his ideas and methods.

First of all, after mapping the changes in culture and society, he offers his own interpretation of culture in general and of English culture after the changes occurred at the end of the eighteenth century. Williams' personal idea of culture is not expressed in a single definition but has to be retraced throughout his work: the development in the meaning of the word *culture* records the complex of reactions to changes in social, economic and political life occurred between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century (1959: xvii); the word *culture* itself indicates also a whole way of life (1959: xviii; 325); it is a process (1959: 295); at the roots of a common culture is solidarity, as the only possible element of stabilization, posing the problem of "achieving diversity without creating separation" (1959: 333-334); while it is being lived, it is always partly unknown and unrealized (1959: 334); it is unplannable (1959: 335). Williams observes that culture in England is considered to be as something which only few people share and the so-called masses cannot understand and appreciate. After analysing the meaning of the word *mass* and of its derivatives, he concludes that "the idea of the masses and the technique of observing certain aspects of mass-behaviour [...] formed the natural ideology of those who sought to control the new system and to profit by it. To the degree that we reject this kind of exploita-

---

[7] The suggestion not to take meanings for granted implies the recognition of the role played by tradition in offering the individual certain categories expressed by language, through which reality can be interpreted and understood. It is also possible though to detect in it a covert criticism towards the cultural "canon" passed on by tradition, which in some following lines is explicitly seen as the expression of a preceding ruling class, and for this reason should not be taken as absolute but should be questioned and renewed. This point of view is made explicit in his other most famous work, *Keywords*: "This is [...] an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical [...]: not a *tradition* to be learned, nor a *consensus* to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is 'our language', has a natural authority; but as a shaping and reshaping [...]: a vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history." (1976: 21-22)

tion, we shall reject its ideology, and seek a new definition of communication."(1959: 312). The problem he is hinting at in this passage is one of communication between social classes, in particular of the communication of culture, which he thinks is not being communicated to the lower classes (identified with the working classes), but also is not being considered as culture when coming from the lower classes themselves. Regarding communication, Williams hints at some interesting aspects, though he does not develop them thoroughly: the link between language and culture (1959: 320), between language, culture and tradition (1959: 321-322), between communication and community in the perspective of a common culture (1959: 313), and finally the relation between a society and its common values (1959: 328).

As a consequence of these observations, Williams perceives the necessity for a common culture, meaning a culture open to contributions of any kind and corresponding to a whole way of life that presupposes common experiences (1959: 317; 334). He observes that the culture of his time is divided according to two very different ways of conceiving the nature of social relations: bourgeois culture, as equivalent to individualism, and working-class culture, as expressed in socialism, communism or cooperation. It is in a culture of the latter kind that Williams sees the possibility to construct a true common culture (1959: 325)[8]. Building from these theoretical assumptions, his most famous work, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, shows the notion of keyword used as a tool to conduct an "inquiry into a vocabulary". In other words, he lists and describes all the words he feels related to the concepts of *culture* and *society*, that is, all the words that contribute to describe the complex concepts that these two words refer to. In the choice of this list of words he relies mostly on his own perception and on the associations made between these words in contemporary discourse, a thing which he considers indicative of the way people think of the concepts of *culture* and

---

[8] Meaning by this the possibility to integrate both ways of conceiving the nature of social relationships: the bourgeois way and the working-class way. As he states: "[...] both this idea [the idea of service] and the individualist idea [corresponding to bourgeois way of life] can be sharply contrasted with the idea that we properly associate with the working class: an idea which, whether it is called communism, socialism or cooperation, regards society neither as neutral nor as protective, but as a positive means for all kinds of development, including individual development." (1959: 326).

society[9]. The definition he gives of the term *keyword* is the following: "[...] they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought." (1976: 13) He declares his work is one of historical semantics, where the emphasis on history is meant to shed light on the developments and interrelations of meanings (1976: 20)[10].

What we find in Williams is an intuitive conception of the notion of *keyword* that rests on his understanding of the potentiality of language in accounting for reality. From this starting point stems his attempt to develop a theoretical framework in which to exploit this potentiality to study society.

The theoretical framework he comes up with brings together the main preoccupation of the political movement of the New Left[11], in which Williams was one of the leading figures, and of the philosophical approaches of the Frankfurt School[12]: namely the preoccupation with the study of culture. In fact culture became the main object of study also in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which Williams founded with Richard Hoggart in 1964 in Birmingham.

I do not intend to discuss this framework thoroughly in this paper. What I would like to stress here is the way in which the notion of *keyword* is described in it. From this point of view actually the linguist is a bit disappointed because Williams does not give any suggestions as to how keywords could be analysed as tools to study cultures or societies starting from texts. Since the method to choose them rests entirely on a subjective

---

[9] "It is not a dictionary or glossary [...]. It is rather the record of an inquiry into a vocabulary: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as culture and society. [...] I began to see this experience as a problem of vocabulary in two senses: the available and developing meanings of known words, which needed to be set down; and the explicit but as often implicit connections which people were making, in what seemed to me, again and again, particular formations of meaning – ways not only of discussing but of seeing many of our central experiences. What I had then to do [...] was to analyse, as far as I could, some of the issues and problems that were inside the vocabulary, whether in single words or in habitual groupings." (1976: 13).

[10] It is interesting to note that Williams does not believe in the usefulness of his work to help solve conflicts derived from different perceptions or uses of the same words. All he is trying to achieve is, at best, an "extra edge of consciousness." (1976: 21).

[11] On the relations between the New Left and Cultural Studies, Dworkin (1997).

[12] On the Frankfurt School see Horkeimer- Adorno (1972); Wiggershaus (1994).

criterion, we are left with some open questions: how do we know if we are really choosing keywords in our analysis? And which is the way to analyse them that will offer the deepest insights in a culture or society?

These questions are not the result of an academic sophistication without consequences, but are justified by the massive use of Williams' method in many fields of study. An enormous number of works aiming at the description of various aspects of society has been published[13] and the majority of them take as a starting point Williams' work *Keywords*. One reason for this could be found in the great importance the CCCS has had in the domain of cultural studies, not only in Great Britain but all over the world. In fact, after the closing of the Centre in 2002, scholars who had studied there have spread in many different countries where they have continued their researches in the same spirit of the Centre. It is also important to remember the birth of a similar movement of studies in the United States, called Cultural Studies, one of the key figures of which is Stuart Hall, former director of the CCCS[14].

3. Describing the semantics of keywords

Anna Wierzbicka is one of the most productive contemporary scholars in the study and listing of cultural keywords. In this paper I will focus mainly on her contribution in the book, *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words*[15]. It is here that Wierzbicka offers an interesting application of her previous foundational researches in semantics, from Wierzbicka (1972) to Wierzbicka (1996), and gives the basis for her following studies, namely the ones she is recently carrying out on cultural scripts[16].

Her starting point is that if Sapir's assumption about the link between languages and cultures is correct, then it is reasonable to try and study

---

[13] The number of studies conducted following the method suggested by Williams is enormous and it would be impossible to account for all of them. Nonetheless even a very small sample of this sort of researches can give the idea of the variety of domains in which Williams' analysis has been applied: Martin (1998); Grover (1991); Emanuel & Emanuel (1996); Sapiro (1999).

[14] On the story of the CCCS in Birmingham, its theoretical foundations and the movement of Cultural Studies, see: Hoggart (1958); Schulman (1993); Carnie (2003); Reed (2001); Hall (1991).

[15] Wierzbicka (1997).

[16] Wierzbicka (2002); Wierzbicka (2004).

cultures through languages, but then it becomes of paramount importance to have the proper tools to study languages. According to Wierzbicka it is especially in the field of semantics that the scholar will find useful elements for this kind of research (1997: 1), and it is precisely in this sense that the goal of the book is to replace vague generalizations about cultural values with "careful systematic analysis of words' meanings and to replace [...] impressions with evidence based on sound methodology." (1997: 2) Regarding the relationship between language and culture, it is clear to Wierzbicka that language both shapes and reflects reality. In this sense culture-specific words can be viewed as tools that witness a community's past experiences and help perpetuate certain patterns of thought and ways of life; on the other hand it is not possible to say that individuals' ways of thinking are completely determined by the categories provided by their native language, even though they surely are influenced by them (1997: 5)[17].

The question is then: how do words attest cultural reality? Frequency is taken into consideration by Wierzbicka though mainly as a way to verify the hypothesis for some words to express concepts with a particular salience in one culture or another. But frequency is not everything; it can't be taken as a trustworthy method if it is not accompanied by a serious analysis of meaning (1997: 15). Following this observation is the focus on keywords as another important principle linking vocabulary and culture. According to the definition given by Wierzbicka, keywords are "words that are particularly important and revealing in a given culture. [...] there is no finite set of such words in a language and there is no 'objective discovery procedure' for identifying them." Evidence[18] is necessary to claim that a word is a keyword but a discovery procedure is not seen as indispensable[19]. In fact, Wierzbicka says, it is more important to be able to give significant insights in a culture through a serious analysis of certain words than to prove in advance that those words are in fact

---

[17] On the same issue, while Williams takes a sociological perspective, Wierzbicka considers it from a more anthropological and linguistic point of view.

[18] Evidence is procured by finding cases in which the words considered to be keywords are collocated in particularly important and meaningful texts for a given culture. Again the criterion for this selection is widely subjective.

[19] Also in Williams there was no need for a discovery procedure. In fact his way of choosing keywords rests almost entirely on a subjective criterion.

keywords in that culture (1997: 15-16). Wierzbicka's approach to key-words is to consider them as focal points that organize entire cultural domains; somewhat similarly to the function Williams attributed to the word *culture* in his own study of English society through keywords.

It is at this point that Wierzbicka notes that the idea of studying cul-tures through their keywords could be attacked by either questioning the notion of *keyword* or of *culture*. She decides to focus on the latter of the two, and declares what idea of culture she adheres to: "[…] a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inher-ited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and atti-tudes toward life." (Geertz 1979: 89)[20] At this point it is clear that lan-guage can be considered as a proper way to study cultures exactly because it is the privileged means for the transmission of this pattern of meanings. The conclusions Wierzbicka draws from this reasoning are that only lin-guistic semantics provides a rigorous methodology for decoding the meanings of words, which are the elements that provide evidence for cul-tural norms and shared conceptions. In a forcedly synthetic way, we could say that when Wierzbicka talks about linguistic semantics she is referring to the possibility to translate meanings in a so called "natural semantic metalanguage" (NSM), made up of semantic primitives which can be con-sidered to be universal and independent of specific cultural configura-tions[21]. The decoding of meaning will allow the explanation for cultural outsiders of the tacit assumptions which are linked to the meanings them-selves, thus favoring cross-cultural communication (1997: 21-22).

As for the "definition" of keywords, Wierzbicka does not develop signif-icantly the one proposed by Williams. She concentrates instead on a method to analyze them. In this sense, keywords in Wierzbicka appear to be as a domain in which to apply and verify her theory of semantic universals.

---

[20] Somewhat similar is the definition of culture given by the semiotic school of Moscow-Tartu, whose most important representatives are Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij. In this perspective, culture is considered as a system of signs reproducing the internal structure of natural languages, which are primary models of representation of reality. Culture is defined as information non genetically passed down through generations. It is thus the collective memory of a community. For a detailed introduction to the semi-otic and cultural conceptions of the Moscow-Tartu school, see Gatti (2003).

[21] For a detailed presentation of NSM and its applications see Wierzbicka (1992); Wierzbicka (1994); Wierzbicka (1996).

4. A possible "discovery procedure"

Starting from their interest in argumentative texts and the way they are structured[22], Rigotti and Rocci (2002) take into consideration the issue of keywords and come to propose a way to verify the status of cultural keyword of a word[23]. With regard to the notion of keyword the authors draw on the studies of Raymond Williams and Wierzbicka, accepting the definition of keywords as words that are "particularly revealing of a culture, that can give access to the inner workings of a culture as a whole, to its fundamental beliefs, values, institutions and customs. In short, to *explain* a culture." (2002: 903) Again the problem of the lack of a discovery procedure for cultural keywords comes up and this is where the authors put forward a suggestion that stems also from the preoccupation to verify what contribution a deeper knowledge of the notion of keywords would give to the study of argumentation.

Their starting point is the argumentative text intended as a coherent sequence of utterances, where coherence is guaranteed "by the congruity

---

[22] Among the most recent contributions are: Rigotti (2005a); Rigotti (2005b); Rocci (2005); Rigotti & Greco (2005). Anyway, this is not the only approach that uses *keywords* in this sense. Just to cite an interesting example covering the areas of psychology and linguistics, one could name Sonderforschungsbereich 245: a research project that has run from 1989 to 1996 in the German universities of Heidelberg and Mannheim, with the aim of studying the extent to which the context of situation can influence language and the way it is understood (project homepage can be found at: http://www.psychologie.uni-heidelberg.de/sfb245/index.html). Among the articles produced in this effort, many studied the notion of *keyword* trying to define and describe it; one significant example is the contribution of Liebert (1994). In particular, Liebert indicates two important features of *keywords*: their meaning changes in the course of the conversation, and they can become particularly loaded from the point of view of their connotation.

[23] It is relevant to note here that the notion of keyword is in fact often studied in relation to rhetorical practices, from the point of view of its persuasive – and manipulative – potential. In Nothdurft (1996), for example, the notion of *keyword* is put in relation to the dialogic dimension and described through the observation of the effects it has on the development of a communicative exchange. He defines *keywords* as words that have a particularly relevant status in a dialogic move, in a part of or in the entire interaction (Nothdurft 1996: 379). Particularly interesting is also the presentation Nothdurft offers of the mainstream research regarding *keywords* in the German-speaking area, where studies on this concept refer mostly to political discourse and the way reality is presented through particularly "loaded" words. Regarding this last point, there are noteworthy observations which can be related to the notion of *connotation*, also taken into consideration by Rigotti & Rocci (2005).

of the meaning of each utterance with the intended effect of the whole"[24] (2002: 904). Thus the proposed strategy is one that takes into consideration the way meanings interact with the semantic-pragmatic structure of persuasive texts, in other words the way in which meanings contribute to the realization of a text's overall intended goal.

In particular, they concentrate on one of the basic structures in argumentative texts, i.e. the enthymeme, or rhetorical syllogism, in which, in order to make sense of the explicit argumentative structure, it is necessary to hypothesise an unstated major premise. The example given is:

He's a traitor. Therefore he should be put to death. (2002: 904)

Here it is possible to imagine an unstated premise of the kind: *Traitors deserve to be put to death.* Considered both from the logical and the argumentative point of view, the word *traitor* appears to play a significant role in the correct functioning of the syllogism, since it has the role of the *terminus medius* and is basic for the establishment of the unstated premise. It is linked in fact to a number of culturally shared beliefs which justify the reconstruction of this particular unstated premise. Whether they be agreed upon or not, nonetheless they are part of a certain cultural heritage and are therefore easily accessible to us. Rigotti and Rocci identify this kind of culturally shared values with the Aristotelian notion of *endoxon* and propose to consider as candidates to the status of keywords the words that function as *terminus medius* in enthymematic arguments. In this sense they function as pointers to an *endoxon* or set of *endoxa* that are used to supply unstated major premises. When words have this function in public argumentation within a community, then they are likely to be considered also as keywords in the culture of that community (2002: 904-905). With regard to this last point, the authors are making a significant distinction: first keywords are to be looked for in texts, in their particular case argumentative texts, then they can be further tested as cultural keywords in the community that has produced those texts.

---

[24] For a synthetic but thorough explanation of Congruity Theory see Rigotti (2005b). Within this theory the meaning of a text is equated to the change it brings about in the intersubjectivity of the interlocutors. Moreover the text is considered as "a hierarchy of predicate-argument relations holding between the text sequences at different levels and connecting each sequence to the whole text." (2005: 78). This kind of structure allows to account for the meaningfulness and coherence of a text. In order for a text to be meaningful and coherent, both the pragmatic and semantic structures of a text have to respond to the overall intended goal of the text itself.

Another important distinction they make is the one between the denotative meaning of keywords and the endoxa they refer to. In other words Rigotti and Rocci stress the difference between what a word means, which can be recovered through a semantic analysis of the word itself, and the set of values it points to, which can be more variable across time and communities and easier to renegotiate. Both cases can occur: either endoxa attached to keywords can be redefined through texts while their denotative meaning remains constant, or the denotative meaning of a word can be redefined or reshaped by the textual context in which the word appears. It is again through texts and in texts that the function of certain keywords can be completely changed, or new keywords be established, be they text-specific keywords or cultural keywords (2002: 905-906)[25].

Also in this case, the definition of keywords given by Williams and adopted by Wierzbicka is accepted. Attention here is posed more specifically on the discovery procedure of cultural keywords within a particular text type. The reason for this can be understood by considering the fact that a clearer understanding of the status of cultural keywords could help explain the persuasive power of an argumentative strategy.

5. Final considerations

Having observed the large use of the notion of cultural keywords in a great number of studies in different disciplinary domains, the aim of this article has been to focus on three particular approaches to the study of cultural keywords which could offer significant insights into this notion.

[25] It is also important to stress here that the argumentative power of keywords is closely related to the notion of *connotation*, as appears also from the works of Nothdurft (1996), Liebert (1994), Stötzel-Wengeler (1995) and Bracher (1978). In all these works the notion of *keyword* is studied within the context of public discourse, the creation of consent and from the point of view of its persuasive power. With regard to the manipulative use of words in the creation of consent, two concepts are also worth mentioning that are taken into consideration by cognitive pragmatics: shallow processing and misuse of concepts. The result of the processing of an utterance is considered to be interpretation; among the information used for the processing of utterances is the information entailed in the logical and encyclopaedic entries of a word. By shallow processing is meant the case in which the logical entry of a concept is not retrieved. Misuse of concepts instead indicates certain ways of using concepts that can draw the hearer's attention away from information that is central to that concept, thus manipulating him/her. For a more thorough consideration of these phenomena in Western public discourse, see Allott (2005).

The three approaches presented in this paper accept common premises with regard to the theoretical status of keywords but develop them in different ways according to the specific research interests of each approach.

Williams' sociological interest brought him to focus on a number of words, defined as keywords for the central role they had in describing a certain social situation. But it remained unclear how keywords should be found and analysed.

Wierzbicka's semantic theories find in the study of keywords a testbed which gives her the opportunity to verify her theory of semantic universals. In fact her claim is that only through semantic analysis it is possible to correctly interpret keywords and gain from them insights into a culture. But again it is not clear how the choice of words to be described as keywords should be done.

Rigotti and Rocci are led to the outlining of a possible discovery procedure for cultural keywords by the observation that certain words have a pivotal role within argumentation schemes, both from a logical and a communicative point of view. Their suggestion strongly links keywords to the semantic-pragmatic structure of texts, making explicit the distinction between denotation and values words are linked to, a distinction that in Williams was a bit less clear and in Wierzbicka is present though not so precisely addressed. It is thanks to this distinction that it is possible to more clearly link keywords to the common ground, and consequently to culture, in enthymematic arguments.

Now some brief observations can be made. First of all, if we agree on the definition of cultural keywords as words that are "significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought" (Williams: 1976), "particularly important and revealing in a given culture" (Wierzbicka: 1997) and "particularly revealing of a culture" (Rigotti & Rocci: 2002), it could be useful to ask oneself, what is significant and important in a culture and to explain a culture or form of thought? It is clear that in order to achieve a univocal understanding of the notion of cultural keyword it will be necessary to arrive at an agreement on what we mean when we speak of culture.

Secondly, what appears to be lacking is a definition of what is a keyword in the first place. As suggested by the works of Wierzbicka and

Rigotti & Rocci, this could be more successfully achieved by observing the role of certain words in texts, rather than isolated words. It could be hypothesised that keywords are words having a particular function in the realization of the text's global aim. At this point, it would be a matter of outlining an hypothesis on what this function is and verifying it by using the method of textual analysis which seems to offer the most significant tools to study the structure of texts, also according to their typology. Consequently the ways to find keywords will strongly depend on the role they play in realizing the text's global aim, and probably also on the text type.

Thus the notion of cultural keywords opens a number of relevant lines of research, starting from how keywords should be defined, to what is their relevance for textual analysis, how the link between keywords in texts and the cultural level should most properly be made, and, finally, in which ways an analysis through keywords could offer significant contributions to studies in intercultural understanding and communication.

References

ALLOTT, N. (2005). The role of misused concepts in manifacturing consent. A cognitive account. In: SCHULZ, P. & DE SAUSSURE, L. (eds.). Manipulation and ideologies in the twentieth century. Discourse, language, mind. Amsterdam: Benjamins: 147-168.

BRACHER, K.D. (1978). Schlüsselwörter in der Geschichte, Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag.

CARNIE, H.J. (2003). Talking to the Centre: Different Voices in the Intellectual History of The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. *Gateway: An Academic History Journal on the Web*, 6. Retrieved on 14 March, 2005 from http://grad.usask.ca/gateway/archive21.html

DWORKIN, D. (1997). Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies, Dutham London: Duke University Press.

EMANUEL, E.J. & EMANUEL, L.L. (1996). What is accountability in health care? *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 24/2: 229-239.

GATTI, M.C. (2003). Pratiche di analisi semiotica in Jurij M. Lotman e Boris A. Uspenskij. In: BETTETINI, G. et al. (eds.). Semiotica II. Configurazione disciplinare e questioni contemporanee, Brescia: La Scuola.

GEERTZ, C. (1979). Meaning and order in Moroccan society: Three essays in cultural analysis, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

GROVER, J.Z. (1991). AIDS, Keywords and Cultural Work. In: GROSSBERG, L.; NELSON, C. & TREICHLER, P. (eds.). Cultural Studies, London: Routledge.

HALL, S. (1991). Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies. In: GROSSBERG, L.; NELSON, C. & TREICHLER, P. (eds.). Cultural Studies, London: Routledge.

HOGGART, R. (1958). The Uses of Literacy, London: Chatto & Windus.

HORKEIMER, M. & ADORNO, T.W. (1972). Dialectic of Enlightenment, New York: Seabury.

HUMBOLDT VON, W. (1836). Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluß auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts, Berlin: Dümmer.

LIEBERT, A. (1994). Das analytische Konzept "Schlüsselwort" in der linguistischen Tradition, Bericht 83, Arbeiten aus dem Sonderforschungsbereich 245 "Sprache und Situation", Heidelberg: Universität Heidelberg/Mannheim Verlag.

MARTIN, J. (1998). Cultural semantics. Keywords of our time, Amherst: University of Massachussetts Press.

NOTHDURFT, W. (1996). Schlüsselwörter. In: KALLMEYER, W. (ed.). Gesprächsrhetorik. Rhetorische Verfahren im Gesprächsprozeß, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag: 353-417.

REED, T.V. (2001) Theory and Method in American Cultural Studies: A Bibliographic Essay. Retrieved on 14 March, 2005 from http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~amerstu/tm/bib.html.

RIGOTTI, E. (2005a). Towards a typology of manipulative processes. In: SCHULZ, P. & DE SAUSSURE, L. (eds.). Manipulation and ideologies in the twentieth century. Discourse, language, mind, Amsterdam: J. Benjamins: 61-83.

RIGOTTI, E. (2005b). Congruity Theory and Argumentation. *Studies in Communication Sciences: Argumentation in Dialogic Interaction.* Special Issue: 75-96.

RIGOTTI, E. & GRECO, S. (2005). Introducing Argumentation, ARGUMENTUM eLearning Module, URL: www.argumentum.ch

RIGOTTI, E. & ROCCI, A. (2002). From argument analysis to cultural keywords (and back again). In: VAN EEMEREN, F. et al. (eds.). Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation, Amsterdam: Sic Sat: 903-908.

RIGOTTI, E. & ROCCI, A. (2005). Denotation vs. Connotation. In: BROWN, K. (ed.). Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics 2nd Edition. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

ROCCI, A. (2005). Connective Predicates in Monologic and Dialogic Argumentation. *Studies in Communication Sciences: Argumentation in Dialogic Interaction.* Special Issue: 97-118.

SAPIR, E. (1958). The Status of Linguistics as a Science. In: MANDELBAUM D.G. (ed.). Culture, Language and Personality. Berkley: University of California Press.

SAPIRO, V. (1999). Considering Political Civility Historically: A Case Study of the United States. Annual Meeting of the International Society for Political Psychology. Retrieved on 15 March, 2005 from http://polisci.wisc.edu/users/sapiro/papers/civility.pdf

SCHULMAN, N. (1993). Conditions of their Own Making: An Intellectual History of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. *Canadian Journal of Communication* 18/1. Retrieved on 14 March, 2005 from http://info.wlu.ca/~wwwpress/jrls/cjc/BackIssues/18.1/schulman.html.

SONDERFORSCHUNGSBEREICH 245 (March 2005). Sprache und Situation. Retrievable at http://www.psychologie.uni-heidelberg.de/sfb245/index.html.

STÖTZEL, G. & WENGELER, M. (1995). Kontroverse Begriffe, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

WHORF, B.L. (1956). Language, Thought and Reality, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

WIERZBICKA, A. (1972). Semantic Primitives, Frankfurt: Athenaum.

WIERZBICKA, A. (1992). Semantics, Culture and Cognition: Universal Human Concepts in Culture-Specific Configurations, New York: Oxford University Press.

WIERZBICKA, A. (1994). Semantic and lexical universals: theory and empirical findings, Amsterdam: Benjamins.

WIERZBICKA, A. (1996). Semantics: Primes and Universals, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

WIERZBICKA, A. (1997). Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

WIERZBICKA, A. (2002). Australian cultural scripts-*bloody* revisited. *Journal of Pragmatics* 34: 1167-1209.

WIERZBICKA, A. (2004). Jewish cultural scripts and the interpretation of the Bible. *Journal of Pragmatics* 36: 575-599.

WIGGERSHAUS, R. (1994). The Frankfurt School: its History, Theories, and Political Significance, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

WILLIAMS, R. (1959). Culture and Society, London: Chatto & Windus.

WILLIAMS, R. (1976). Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, London: Fontana.