

The Intercultural Pragmatics of Doing Nothing

Speaking of work and its opposites across linguacultures

Abstract:

In an era of “workaholics”, “quiet quitters”, and an explosion of neo-vocabulary in the transnational global job market, this paper contributes with new conceptual analysis of work and its opposites. The English word “work” has been transplanted across many linguacultures, and much has been said about the alleged Protestantism of “work ethics”. Much less, it seems, has been said about the conceptual encounters of “work” and work-related concepts and scripts across linguacultures. In this context, the aim of the paper is to provide a new conceptual analysis of the attitudes and directions that the global discourse of “work” is taking, through an analysis of its opposites: the cultural construction of the opposite of work and work-related meanings, and the intercultural pragmatics of “doing nothing”. This paper is particularly interested in exploring conceptual diversity and the interactions between the meanings and scripts associated with the opposites of “work”. It begins by offering an overview of key concepts in the literature of cultural semantics and anthropological linguistics, which includes the Caribbean concept of *liming* (Eriksen 1990) and the Danish concept of *hygge* (Levisen 2012). Subsequently, the paper conducts an original analysis of Bislama *spel* “to catch one’s breath, to rest, to go on leave”, a South Pacific concept of “doing nothing”. The analysis is based on a decade of fieldwork in Vanuatu (Levisen 2024).

Spel is contextualized and situated in a wider context of tourism in Vanuatu, where holiday-makers from Australia and New Zealand go to holiday “in paradise”. Many young, local Islanders work in the tourism industry, and the dream of these workers is not to “go on holiday”, but to *go spel*. The meaning of *spel* is dreamy and conflictual at the same time. It relates to the joy and tediousness of working with tourists, and the confinements of catering to other people’s needs for doing nothing. In the paper, the discourse of *spel* is compared with other local ideas, such as *trikim wok* ‘work truancy’ (modelled on skipping school), and with the concept of *holiday* in the conception of middle class Australian/NZ tourists.

For the conceptual analysis and the articulation of cultural scripts, the paper relies on the paraphrase methods of the NSM approach originated by Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard (Wierzbicka 2013, Goddard and Wierzbicka 2014). This high-resolution approach to conceptual analysis allows for a holistic account of meaning and a detail-rich granularity at the same time. Applying this analysis to the intercultural pragmatics of work and its opposites, the paper hopes to contribute to a plurilingual and pluriconceptual turn in the discourses of work linguaculturally specific concepts, ideas and scripts.

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