A linguistic analysis of *get over it*: how a phrase can influence Pauline Hanson, Indigenous rights, and our beliefs about personal autonomy

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Abstract

Get over it is an important phrase in modern English-speaking societies. This paper explores how the phrase implicitly promotes the value of personal autonomy in Anglo cultures such as Australia. First, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), a linguistic theory that proposes that the words of all languages can be analysed in more basic and translatable terms, is established to be an appropriate method of analysis for culturally specific phrases such as *get over it*. Then, it is shown that existing dictionary definitions are insufficient to conduct any cultural analysis of *get over it*. The prominent place of *get over it* in Anglo discourse, including Pauline Hanson's commentary on 'Australia Day' and other dismissals of Australia's Indigenous history, shows the expression's centrality in Anglo-Australian culture. Based on this and other discourses, as well as existing dictionary definitions, an NSM definition can be established. Comparing *get over it* to French reveals its specificity to English, as no single French expression is perfectly equivalent to the English concept. As a cultural keyword, *get over it* reflects particular cultural values relating to personal autonomy; in particular, the assumption that people can control their lives and that there are ways to tell people to do things without compromising their autonomy. *Get over it* is a key expression in our culture, and it promotes the Anglo belief in personal autonomy, blinding English-speakers to alternative ways of thinking.

Introduction

Language is often talked about as humanity's greatest tool. Encyclopedia Britannica explains that language serves basic human needs including 'communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release' (Robins & Crystal, 2023). We use language every day, but what if I told you that language is also using you, dictating how you think and speak about your everyday life? In this paper, we will take this perspective and apply it to the English phrase *get over it*. First, we will see that the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), a linguistic theory that proposes that the meaning of any word in any language can be explained using a small set of universal terms, is an effective tool we can use to define *get over it* from a culturally neutral perspective. Before establishing our own definition of *get over it*, we will consider existing definitions, seeing that they are insufficient for our analysis. We will then discuss *get over it*'s prominence in Anglo-Australian culture.

Throughout this paper, Anglo culture refers to a set of beliefs originating in England and spreading to traditionally English-speaking countries such as Australia and the USA. The paper focuses especially on Anglo-Australian examples, but the analysis will apply to a degree to Anglo cultures from around the world. The phrase *get over it* seems to have originated in 1990s USA and features prominently in contemporary Australian discourse about Indigenous issues, including Pauline Hanson's comments on the 'Change the Date' campaign, differing national attitudes towards Australia's frontier and international wars, and racist social media commentary on the company Cheer Cheese changing their name (which previously included a racial slur). We combine this discourse with popular discourse commenting on the phrase itself and existing dictionary definitions of *get over it* to create our own NSM definition of *get over it*. Armed with this culturally neutral definition, we can identify how *get over it*

'uses' English speakers. The phrase implicitly promotes a world view centred around personal autonomy: people can achieve whatever they set their minds to, and there are particular ways of telling people what to do without compromising their free will. It is vital when doing social science to be aware of the limitations and biases of our native languages, and this knowledge can help us to think about the world in new and potentially beneficial ways. *Get over it* serves as a poignant example of this.

Applying NSM methods to *get over it*

How to define a linguistic expression

Before we can determine what *get over it* tells us about Anglo values, we must define the phrase. Following Goddard (2011, p. 33), a definition's aim is to restate the original expression using 'simpler', 'more easily understood' words. Definitions thereby avoid circularity, where an expression is defined in terms of itself or in terms of words that are in turn defined using the original expression (Goddard, 2011, p. 35). Definitions must also be accurate in the sense of being an exact substitute for the original expression (Goddard, 2011, p. 37). Given these criteria, we will see that existing dictionary definitions of *get over it* are unsatisfactory. We need to establish our own definition of *get over it*, using simple and accurate terms. Identifying which words are simpler than others requires a rigorous framework defining simplicity of meaning, which is what the NSM approach provides.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage

The NSM approach starts from the observation that the world's languages are full of words and concepts that do not have exact counterparts in other languages (and as we will see, *get over it* is one such expression). Despite this, a history of human interaction has shown that cross-cultural communication and translation is possible. NSM research, spearheaded by Anna Wierzbicka, Cliff Goddard, and many others, has taken this possibility of cross-linguistic communication as proof that all cultures share a universal core of basic concepts, from which more complex, culturally specific concepts are built (Goddard, 1999; Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2014; Wierzbicka, 1998). Through decades of comparing the world's languages, NSM researchers have established this universal set of concepts, called 'the semantic primes', which make up the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (Wierzbicka, 2014, p. 33). For example, while many languages lack words for *colour* or *perception*, the concept of 'seeing' is universally expressed and so *see* is a semantic prime (Wierzbicka, 2014, p. 32–33). The primes are proposed to be the simplest words that exist in that they cannot be defined in terms of other words (Wierzbicka, 2014, p. 33); the implication is that they are innately understood. Using only these primes allows us to define a concept such as *get over it* with certainty that we are using the simplest terms possible. Table 1 lists the English semantic primes, organised thematically.

Table 1: English semantic primes, organised thematically.

Semantic Primes	Category
I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	Substantives
KINDS, PARTS	Relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	Determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY, LITTLE~FEW	Quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	Evaluators
BIG, SMALL	Descriptors
KNOW, THINK, WANT, DON'T WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	Mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE	Actions, events, movement
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	Location, existence, specification
(IS) MINE	Possession
LIVE, DIE	Life and death
WHEN~TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	Time
WHERE~PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCH	Place

NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	Logical concepts
VERY, MORE	Augmenter, intensifier
LIKE	Similarity

Source: Goddard and Wierzbicka (2014).

Avoiding cultural bias using NSM

One key consequence of the primes being discovered through comparison of the world's languages is that they theoretically have exact equivalents in all languages. NSM definitions (conventionally called 'explications') thereby avoid the cultural bias of using any particular language and can reveal the cultural biases hidden in a language. Even if *get over it* lacks synonyms in other languages, a definition using semantic primes should be universally translatable, as equivalent semantic primes exist for every language. Using culturally neutral language is valuable, as Wierzbicka (2006, p. 12) explains;

> By stepping over the boundaries of one's first language, one can look at that language from outside and become aware of the thick web of assumptions and values embedded in it.

For example, concepts that seem as inherent as *brother* and *sister* are alien to speakers of languages such as Kayardild, which conceptualises kinship using a totally different system (Wierzbicka, 2014, p. 38–39). These cultures instead divide 'siblings' (without having the concept of sibling) into categories that English speakers would call *younger sibling of same sex*, *older sister of a woman*, *older brother of a man*, *a man's sister*, and so on. These concepts are as inherent for Kayardild speakers as *brother* and *sister* are for English speakers.

In this paper, NSM will allow us to identify whether *get over it*'s meaning contains concepts that recur throughout the English language, but not in other languages. Such concepts, that recur in the meanings of key terms within a language but not between languages, are the key ideas of that language's culture. In *English: Meaning and Culture* (2006), Wierzbicka finds that values such as personal autonomy, fairness, and reasonableness are embedded throughout the English language despite not being prevalent in other languages. In short, the NSM approach allows us to define *get over it* in a semantically rigorous way, being sure that we are using the most basic concepts possible. These concepts are also theoretically universal rather than culturally specific, and so can shine a culturally neutral light on the cultural significance of *get over it*.

Existing definitions of *get over it*

Before constructing our NSM definition of *get over it*, it is valuable to consider existing definitions. Most existing definitions of *get over it* are insufficient for our analysis; they do not distinguish it from the more general *get over something*. For example, the Cambridge Dictionary (2022) says:

> *Get over something/someone*
>
> To get better after an illness, or feel better after something or someone has made you unhappy.
>
> To accept an unpleasant fact or situation after dealing with it for a while.
>
> To return to your usual state of health or happiness after having a bad or unusual experience, or an illness.

However, dictionaries that provide separate definitions for the phrases show that *get over it* has its own significance. The following definitions of *get over it* demonstrates its more specific meaning:

> Stop making a fuss! forget about it! (WordReference.com, 2023)
>
> Forget about it and be done with it! (Said to someone who is fretting and stewing over some kind of problem) (The Free Dictionary, 2023)
>
> Forget your loss or disappointment, move on. (The Free Dictionary, 2023)

Comparing these definitions with the Cambridge definition shows that *get over it* is distinct from *get over something* in the following ways. As an imperative phrase, it is necessarily used as an instruction to someone. The *get over* component involves 'forgetting' (in the sense of not thinking about something), and the *it* is a negative emotional state associated with a negative situation. There is also a pragmatic element, with the speaker taking a dismissive attitude towards the recipient's problems,

making it clear that they do not think their problem is worth discussing or thinking about. This stigmatisation of the listener is discussed by Friedman (2021) in *Psychology Today*. This article is an example of the media discourse involving *get over it*, which we will now further review to clarify our understanding of the expression's meaning in use. This review will also demonstrate the importance of *get over it* in Anglo culture.

Get over it in popular discourse

The history of *get over it*

For *get over it* to represent Anglo cultural values, as is our hypothesis, the phrase will have arisen with particular historical changes to Anglo culture, 'in response to a shared conceptual need' (Levisen & Waters, 2017, p. 239). While establishing the specifics of the emergence of *get over it* is beyond the scope of this paper, here is a preliminary discussion. According to phrases.org.uk (Martin, 2016), *get over it* as a single unit began to be used in the early 1990s in the USA, including being prominently part of anti-war rhetoric, political discourse, and a slogan for the gay community ('we're here and we're queer—get over it'). To decipher why this context led to the emergence of *get over it* requires further research. However, we can already see that *get over it* is related to the Anglo value of personal autonomy, which is reflected in the 'live and let live' attitude of anti-war and gay rights movements. This will become more apparent as we continue our analysis. While the historical place of *get over it* requires more investigation, the phrase's cultural prominence is evident in Australian contemporary discourse and in metalinguistic analysis in popular media.

Get over it in Australia's Indigenous discourse and in metalinguistic discourse

The prominence of *get over it* in contemporary discourse and commentary on the phrase in the media shows that it is an important phrase in Anglo culture. For example, consider Australian discourse around Indigenous recognition and history. In response to protests arguing Australia's national holiday should be changed out of respect to Indigenous Australians, politician Pauline Hanson told protestors 'You know what, get over it, move on. Stop making yourselves victims' (Tuffield, 2022). We will return to this speech as it is a vivid example of the philosophy that *get over it* promotes. In 2018, artist Sam Wallman created a cartoon called 'Lest we for/get over it' which comments on the same topic (Figure 1) (Australian Museum, 2021). Its description explains that 'These are two of the most popular phrases said in Australia' and that 'Indigenous peoples are told to get over the past and move on' as a key part of Australian national identity. This contrasts with the phrase *lest we forget*, which is used to construe a parallel history of international war and sacrifice in a sympathetic light (Australian Museum, 2021). *Get over it* also features prominently in discourse around an Australian cheese company, Cheer Cheese, that changed its name, which had previously included a racial slur (Marciniak, 2021). Social media debate included posts that 'blandly stated that Indigenous people offended by the previous name for the cheese should "get over it"' (Marciniak, 2021). Noel Walker, an Indigenous man Marciniak interviewed for his article, comments on how this phrase is used to dismiss Indigenous voices in Australia:

> For years and years my people have been told, 'It's in the past', 'Get over it' … Twenty-sixth of January: 'Get over it'. Stolen Generations: 'Get over it'. Massacres of Aboriginal people: 'Get over it'. Destruction of Aboriginal sacred sites: 'Get over it' … Being followed around shops 'cause you're black: 'Get over it'. Being racially profiled in pubs and clubs: 'Get over it'. Life expectancy being 17 years shorter for Aboriginal men: 'Get over it' … The list goes on and on.

Figure 1: Lest we for/get over it by Sam Wallman.

Source: Australian Museum (2021).

These examples show that the phrase is a key part of how Australians think about certain issues, solidifying that *get over it* reflects an important Anglo way of thinking. As well as being prominent in Australian discourse, *get over it* has been subject of discussion and evaluation in popular media. This metalinguistic discourse, which reflects on the phrase itself, is evident in articles from *Psychology Today* (Friedman, 2021) and *everyday feminism* (Fridkis, 2012). According to cultural keyword theorists Levisen and Waters (2017, p. 237), metalinguistic discourse on an expression is a common feature of key cultural terms. This metalinguistic discourse, as well as *get over it*'s prominence in Australian discourse, suggest that it is a phrase that reflects important Anglo-Australian cultural values.

NSM explication of *get over it*

Based on the dictionary definitions, Australian discourse, metalinguistic discourse, and personal experience, here is an NSM explication of *get over it*:

> *get over it*

    a.   I want you to think like this:

    b.   you feel bad because of something

    c.   I do not want you to say something about this to me

    d.   I think it is bad you feel bad because of this something

    e.   I think you can not-think about this something

    f.   if you do this, you will not feel bad because of this something

    g.   it is bad if you do not do this

(a) establishes the context of one person telling another to do something. (b) portrays the negative circumstances and consequent negative emotional state of the addressee. (c) expresses the idea that the speaker does not want to hear the addressee's problems, and (d) portrays the disdain that the speaker has for the addressee's emotional state. (e), (f), and (g) are about the speaker's belief that the addressee could easily forget about the issue and feel better if they only tried to.

Comparing *get over it* to French equivalents

While it is clear from its place in discourse that *get over it* is culturally significant in Anglo culture, it is also important to establish that this significance is unique to Anglo culture. By establishing the lack of *get over it* equivalents in French, we can say that it reflects Anglo rather than more universal values. Our model is Waters' (2017, p. 29) comparison of *nice* to its closest equivalents in French. She establishes that the lack of French equivalents coupled with the lower salience of the nearest French translations shows that *nice* is a particularly English expression. Here, salience refers to how frequent an expression is in a language. As with *nice*, *get over it* has various potential translations into French. WordReference.com (2023) provides the following:

> *Passe à autre chose* 'move on to other things'
>
> *Oublie!* 'forget (it)!'
>
> *C'est pas la fin du monde!* 'it's not the end of the world!'
>
> *Reprends-toi!* 'get a grip!'

On the Quora online forum (Godet, 2019), a French speaker provides this more thorough set of translations for different contexts (bold added here for emphasis):

> If you mean 'get over it' in the sense of 'forget about this guy/girl' (after a breakup), I would translate it by '**Oublie-le/la**' … To say forget about something it would be '**Oublie-ça**'.
>
> If 'get over it' means 'don't cry over spilled milk' I would say '**Ce qui est fait est fait**' (what is done is done).
>
> If it means 'pull on your big boy/girl pants' the idea you try to convey is that the person should be more mature and face whatever she needs to face, so I would say '**Fais pas ton gamin**' (don't act like a brat). If you say '**Sois un homme**' (be a man), or '**Agis en adulte**' (act like an adult) it is quite powerful and would mean that you are provoking the person.

These translations all have wider potential uses then *get over it*. For example, a native French-speaking consultant informed me that *passe à autre chose* can be used when someone is working on one task and the speaker wants them to start another. She also said that most of the WordReference.com phrases could be used in a consoling tone, unlike *get over it*. Additionally, the Quora post demonstrates that *get over it* can be translated differently depending on which semantic component is being emphasised. For example, using our proposed semantic explication (above), *oublie-ça* 'forget about something' corresponds to lines (e), (f), and (g), while *agis en adulte* 'act like an adult' emphasises line (d). The range of possible translations for *get over it* in French shows that the underlying concept is not expressed in French, and that none of the close equivalents are as salient in French as *get over it* is in English. *Get over it* is therefore likely to be a uniquely Anglo concept, reflecting Anglo cultural values.

Get over it and personal autonomy

Get over it reflects the belief that we control our lives

The specific values *get over it* captures relate to the Anglo belief in personal autonomy. I will investigate how *get over it* promotes two assumptions about personal autonomy. These are the belief that we can control our lives and the belief that there are ways to tell people what to do without compromising their autonomy. Firstly, *get over it* relays the idea that people can control their own lives. Besermes and Wierzbicka call this value as a 'can-do spirit' (2009, p. 224). Contemporary Anglo culture, as they put it, has a strong 'emphasis on goals, plans, and expected achievements', as well as an 'assumption that people should be able to "make things happen"' (Besermes & Wierzbicka, 2009, p. 213). *Get over it* is one of many English expressions that reflect this belief. Another example is *frustration*, 'an individualistic feeling, which stems from a challenge to the Anglo-American belief that one can be in control of the situation by taking action' (Besermes & Wierzbicka, 2009, p. 216). This belief reflects a historical shift in how Anglo people think about their destinies. In the past, Anglo culture matched many other European cultures by attributing setbacks and obstacles in life to 'fate' (Besermes & Wierzbicka,

2009, p. 217). However, values such as personal autonomy and control are 'prominent in modern Anglo culture', leading to what Besermes and Wierzbicka (2009, p. 217) call a 'marginalisation of fate'. This in turn led to new vocabulary including expressions such as *frustration* and, as I see it, *get over it*. *Get over it* perhaps arose out of an Anglo need to respond to a person who is failing to properly exercise their personal autonomy and control their emotions. A fuller quote from Pauline Hanson's anti-protest tirade supports this (bold added here for emphasis) (Tuffield, 2022):

> You know what, **get over it, move on**. Stop making yourselves victims. It's not about victimhood. **Everyone has a choice in life**—you actually move on with your life and get over the problems that have happened in the past—we're talking about over 200 years ago … **You choose what you want your future to be** … My advice is to grow into tomorrow and do not slide into the past, look forward not back.

Here, the emphasis on choice corresponds to the Anglo assumption that if people want to do something, they can do it. This is reflected in component (e) of our *get over it* explication (above). Hanson makes it explicit that she believes that people in general can choose to *get over it* and *move on* (a related concept): 'Everyone has a choice in life … you choose what you want your future to be'. She states these assumptions as given facts, showing their deep roots in Anglo culture. The idea that *get over it*, like *frustration*, stems from a challenge to established Anglo beliefs is shown in our proposed semantic component (d), 'I think it is bad you feel bad because of this something'. *Get over it* enables Anglos to maintain the belief that people can control their lives in the face of contrary evidence by painting the listener as an aberration. This dismissal 'liberates the teller from any obligation to listen' (Friedman, 2021). Friedman also points to the embeddedness of the *get over it* sentiment in Anglo society, writing 'The world is designed to encourage people to keep going—not to be slowed down by emotional pain'. In fact, English has a cluster of terms related to *get over it*, including *move on, get a grip, get it together, get it under control, build a bridge and get over it, get a hold of yourself, get your house in order*. While *get over it* is the most salient of these, as evidenced by its place in Australian discourse, they all convey a strong belief about the autonomy we each have to control our lives.

Comparing *get over it* and *X got Y to do something*

The other aspect of personal autonomy that *get over it* encapsulates is the Anglo belief that you can tell someone to do something without compromising their personal autonomy. Wierzbicka (2006, p. 172) reflects that English has an extraordinary range of causative phrases, such as *X made Y do something*, or *X had Y do something*. The subtle meanings of these phrases arose because modern Anglo society required that 'lots of people had to be told what to do' without compromising the personal autonomy of individuals (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 173). By comparing *get over it* with Wierzbicka's analysis of *X got Y to do something*, we can see that both phrases promote the aforementioned belief that people can do as they want, while allowing English speakers to tell people what to do without compromising on personal autonomy. Wierzbicka's explication is as follows (2006, p. 179):

Person X got person Y to do Z

a.   X knew that if Y didn't want to do it Y would not do it

b.   X thought about it like this: 'if Y wants to do it Y will do it'

c.   Because of this X did (said) something to Y

d.   Because of this Y wanted to do Z

e.   Because of this Y did Z

f.   Because of this X could think like this

> 'I wanted something to happen
>
> It happened'

Component (b) reflects the belief that if someone wants to do something, they can do it. (d) and (e) are this belief playing out. (f) further exemplifies this belief; after *getting* Y to do something, X thinks that 'I wanted something to happen' and 'it happened'. Comparing this explication to *get over it* suggests that telling someone to *get over it* is tantamount to telling them 'get yourself to not think about this bad

thing', that is, do something to yourself that will make you want to move on and then you will be able to move on. This corresponds with components (c), (d), and (e) of Wierzbicka's explication. Additionally, the speaker who says *get over it* is framing the interaction between themself and the addressee in terms of the *Person X got person Y to do Z* script, positioning themselves as person X getting person Y to *get over it*. This is what makes telling someone to *get over it* culturally acceptable, even though the Anglo belief in personal autonomy discourages imposing your will on others (Wierzbicka, 2006, p. 52). *Getting* someone to do something involves first convincing them to want to do it (see components (b) and (d) of Wierzbicka's explication). Speakers using *get over it* avoid directly compromising addressees' personal autonomy by evoking this culturally acceptable way of telling someone to do something. Comparing these two phrases shows us that *get over it* is part of a wider English heritage that promotes the autonomy to do what you want and provides culturally acceptable ways to tell someone what to do.

Can a phrase be a bad thing?

Get over it poses the question of the potential moral consequences of having particular values embedded in our lexicon. While I am not able to judge on the general benefits and downsides of the Anglo belief in personal autonomy, my research into the Australian context certainly points at a weaponisation of the phrase *get over it* to dismiss calls for acknowledgement and action relating to Australia's history of persecution of Indigenous people. The centrality of the phrase in the speech of Pauline Hanson in Tuffield (2022) and in racist social media commentary (Marciniak, 2021) seems to represent a culture of dismissiveness and a denial that events beyond individuals' control can have lasting effects on their lives. Further, in my personal life I have experienced and seen many examples of *get over it* being used in lieu of people being given the time and support to properly heal from traumatic events. In Marciniak (2021), Indigenous man Noel Walker explains the harm in trying to just *get over it*: 'Ignoring is not good, because it just festers, but you also don't want to be perceived as being an angry person and you don't want to be violent'. The metalinguistic discourse in *Psychology Today* and *everyday feminism* are also critical of *get over it*. Friedman's (2021) title is 'Let's Get Over Telling People to "Get Over It"', while Fridkis (2012) writes 'Don't Tell Me To Just Get Over It'. Friedman writes that we should 'tell each other that what matters is each other's journey, including our healing. And we are here for each other to help no matter where that journey takes us'. I think that this criticism of undue emphasis on personal responsibility, at least with regards to mental health, is productive, and represents a positive cultural shift in our society. Whether these challenges will see phrases such as *get over it* replaced by a new vocabulary remains to be seen.

Conclusion

This paper was born out of personal experience; last year I was thrown into heartbreak days before my *Language, Culture and Society* essay was due. Frustrated that I could not concentrate on writing, the phrase *get over it* circled in my head, teasing me with its promise of emotional relief. I harnessed my frustration to write the original version of this paper. Situating my feelings in the context of Anglo culture helped me understand that there were ways to think about my situation other than just *getting over it*, and that I should not feel guilt for my frustration as my reaction was culturally conditioned. A year on, redrafting this paper for publication has led me to reflect on the benefit accepting and engaging with my emotions, rather than just 'getting over them', has had for my life. Through this paper, we saw how *get over it* can exert such influence on the thoughts of ordinary people such as myself and Pauline Hanson. After considering existing dictionary definitions and looking at *get over it*'s place in historical and contemporary discourses, we created an NSM explication for the phrase, allowing us to conduct a cultural analysis. *Get over it* seems to be an English-specific phrase, as it lacks equivalents in French. This is because *get over it* is based on prominent Anglo-specific values about personal autonomy, including the belief that we can do whatever we set our minds to, and the idea that there are appropriate ways to tell someone what to do without compromising their autonomy. This paper serves as a valuable reminder that many of the rules and assumptions we live our lives by are not givens; despite the weight of Anglo culture telling you to just *get over it*, you have the autonomy to choose other ways to live.

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