Cultural Scripts: Applications to Language Teaching and Intercultural Communication*

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Abstract: Cultural scripts provide a powerful new technique for articulating cultural norms, values and practices using simple cross-translatable phrasing. The technique is based on many decades of research into cross-cultural semantics by Anna Wierzbicka and colleagues in the Natural Semantic Metalanguage approach. This paper illustrates the cultural scripts approach with three examples of pragmatics of Anglo English: request strategies, personal remarks, and phatic complimenting in American English. It argues that the cultural scripts approach can be readily adapted for use in teaching intercultural pragmatics and intercultural communication.

Keywords: intercultural pragmatics; cultural scripts; intercultural communication; semantic primes; Anglo English①

"More than ever, human survival depends on successful communication on a global level. The fate of the human race has become literally dependent on our ability to cope with problems of international communication" — *Jef Verscheuren, inaugurating IPrA in 1986.*

"[When pragmatic norms are violated by L2 speakers] These speakers are often viewed as rude or uncooperative or ... arrogant or insincere. ... conversational features are subtle and not easily recognisable; hence their basis is attributed not to the language of the speaker, but to the personality of the speaker" — *Gass & Selinker, 1983: 12.*

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1 Introduction

As the quotations from Verscheuren (1986) and Gass & Selinker (1983) attest, achieving improved understanding and competence in intercultural pragmatics, both at the international and interpersonal levels, is a matter of utmost importance. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value of the cultural scripts approach for researching and for teaching intercultural pragmatics. The term "cultural scripts" refers to a technique for articulating cultural norms, values and practices based on over thirty years of cross-linguistic research (Wierzbicka, 1991; Goddard & Wierzbicka eds., 2002, 2004; Goddard ed., 2006, 2008, and other works).

The cultural scripts approach differs in three ways from other common approaches to linguistic pragmatics: (i) the content of cultural scripts is related to culture-specific values (not to any presumed universals of communication, politeness, interaction, etc.), (ii) cultural scripts seek to articulate the insider perspective, i.e. the perspective of participants themselves (not an external, scientific perspective), and (iii) cultural scripts are phrased in simple translatable words (not in technical terms and concepts that resist or defy translation).

Many of the concerns of the cultural scripts approach are shared by linguistic anthropology and the ethnography of communication (Gumperz & Hymes eds., 1986; Carbaugh, 2005; Bauman & Sherzer eds., 1974). The chief contribution of the cultural scripts approach is an improved approach to the language of representation. Specifically, its reliance on a small vocabulary of simple meanings which evidence suggests are shared across all or most languages. They include meanings such as (to use English exponents): "someone", "people", "do", "want", "say", "think", "good", "bad", "because", "if", and "like" (and about 50 others). The central idea is that these simple meanings (known as "semantic primes") exist as word-meanings in all languages, and furthermore, that in all languages they can be combined in certain ways that make intuitive sense. For example, one can say things such as "many people think like this", "someone can feel something bad if you do this", "maybe you will do this after I say this, maybe you will not do". Semantic primes are the vocabulary in terms of which cultural scripts are written.

Table 1 shows English versions of the proposed 63 semantic primes. A Chinese version is given in the Appendix. Versions in Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Malay, Korean, and many other languages are available in various NSM publications (Wierzbicka, 1996; Goddard ed., 2008; Goddard & Wierzbicka eds., 2002; Peeters ed., 2006).

Table 1: Semantic primes, English version.

I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING ~THING, PEOPLE, BODY	substantives
KIND, PART	relational substantives
THIS, THE SAME, OTHER~ELSE	determiners
ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH~MANY	quantifiers
GOOD, BAD	evaluators
BIG, SMALL	descriptors
THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	mental predicates
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	Speech
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	action, events, movement, contact
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	location, existence, possession, specification
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	space
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	logical concepts
VERY, MORE	intensifier, augmentor
LIKE	similarity

Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes). Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes. They can be formally complex. They can have combinatorial variants (allolexes, indicated by ~). Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

The history of the cultural scripts approach can be sketched as follows. It was initiated in a 1985 article by Anna Wierzbicka, entitled "Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts: English vs. Polish". This article provided a nucleus for Wierzbicka's 1991 book *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*. An expanded second edition of this book was published in 2003. There have since been two further book-length publications: the special issue of *Intercultural Pragmatics* titled "Cultural Scripts" (Goddard & Wierzbicka eds., 2004) and the collective volume *Ethnopragmatics* (Goddard ed., 2006). There have been many other individual studies as well, notably by Wong (2004, 2008) on Singapore English, Peeters (2000, 2004) on French, Ameka (2006, 2009) on Ewe and other West African languages, Wierzbicka (2002, 2009) on Russian and Polish, and Yoon (2004) on Korean. All this work is deeply informed by and interconnected with extensive work on lexical-cultural semantics (Goddard, 1998; Wierzbicka, 1996, 1997, 1997, 2006a, 2010, and other works).

In the next three sections, I will demonstrate the application of the cultural scripts approach to three areas of Anglo English pragmatics. The final sections consider how these and other examples can be adapted for use in language teaching and intercultural education.

② Anglo English Request Strategies

It is a well known fact about English interactional pragmatics that when a speaker wants someone to do something, in most circumstances it is culturally disapproved to express the request directly, via a bare imperative. Rather, the English language provides a brace of "interrogative-directive" formulas (sometimes called wh-imperatives), such as those displayed in (1). The number of interrogative options is very large, and, furthermore, each formula conveys a slightly different nuance of meaning or effect, posing a significant challenge to L2 learners of English.

(1) *Will you ... please?*
Would you ...?
Could you ...?
Would you mind ...?
Would you like to ...?
Won't you ...?
Do you want to ...?
Why don't you ...?
I wonder if ...

In addition to interrogative-directives, English also employs a range of "suggestive" formulas, such as those shown in (2) (Wierzbicka, 2006b).

(2) *You might like to ...*
You could consider...
Perhaps you could ...
I would suggest ...
Have you thought of ...?

These Anglo English "request strategies" are not arbitrary properties of the English language, but rather have their roots in cultural values. At a first approximation, the cultural value can be described as "personal autonomy". The term "personal autonomy" is a technical expression, however, and is unknown to most ordinary speakers of English. As such, it cannot represent an insider perspective on the cultural value in question. The two-word expression "personal autonomy" is also very compressed from a semantic point of view, in the sense that it implies a significantly complex conceptual content. Finally, the term "personal autonomy" is not directly translatable across languages, so it is not particularly helpful for the purposes of L2 pragmatic education.

These difficulties can be overcome if the basic insight behind the claim that "Anglo English values personal autonomy" is unpacked into simple cross-translatable words, using the cultural script technique. The script below shows how this can be done. It is presented in equivalent English and Chinese versions (my thanks to Zhengdao Ye for the Chinese

version).

[A1] *An Anglo English cultural script for "personal autonomy"*
Many people think like this:
when someone does something, it is good if this someone can think like this:
"I am doing this because I want to do it".

[A2] 许多人这样想：
当有人做某件事情时，
如果这个人这样想："我做这件事是因为我想要做这件事"，这是好的。

As one can see from this example, a cultural script is introduced by the framing expression "many people think like this". The material after this then sets out, using very simple phrasing, the content of a widely known and assumed-to-be-shared attitude. Cultural scripts exist at different levels of generality and/or situation-specificity. The personal autonomy script [A] is a high-level script, sometimes termed a "master script". Although it is not directly about "requesting" as such, it provides the high-level rationale behind the Anglo requesting strategies. The key point is that in order to allow the addressee to preserve the valued feeling of personal autonomy, the requesting speaker wants to avoid implying that he/she expects that the addressee will automatically comply. The cultural logic can be spelt out in further detail as in [B].

[B] *Anglo English cultural script for avoiding direct requests*
Many people think like this:
at many times when I want someone to do something, it is not good if I say something like this:
"I want you to do something, I think that you will do it because of this".
If I say this, this someone can feel something bad because of it.

Note that the middle line of this script ("I want you to do something, I think that you will do because of this") does not represent literal words but rather the semantic content of a speaker's message. The point is that using the bare imperative conveys exactly this message.

The two alternative strategies ("interrogative-directive" and "suggestive") provide two different means of achieving the intended result, i.e. influencing the addressee to do something. The strategies can be captured as in [C] and [D], respectively.

[C] *Anglo English cultural script for making an "interrogative" request*
Many people think like this:
at many times when I want someone to do something, it can be good if I say something like this:
"I want you to do something".
Maybe after I say this you will do it, maybe you will not do it, I don't know.

[D] *Anglo English cultural script for making a "suggestive" request*
Many people think like this:
at many times when I want someone to do something, it can be good if I say something like this:
"It can be good if you do this. It can be good if you think about it".

❸ Anglo English Rules Against "Personal Remarks"

Anglo English pragmatics includes certain prohibitions against making conversational comments about someone else's body, unless one knows the other person very well. This can be illustrated with a quote from *Alice in Wonderland*. When the Hatter, who "had been looking at Alice with great curiosity", remarks: "Your hair wants cutting", Alice responds: "You should learn not to make personal remarks…; it's very rude". The Hatter's comment ("Your hair wants cutting.") can be considered a negative comment, like those in (3).

(3) *You've put on weight.*
You're sweating a lot.
How you've aged!

As in many cultures, there are Anglo cultural scripts against voicing such opinions (Wierzbicka, 2008). (Not all cultures are equally against saying negative things about one's interlocutors; in many contexts, Russian culture, for example, tolerates negative comments in the interests of genuineness and spontaneity, cf. Wierzbicka, 2009). The cultural script against making negative personal remarks in Anglo English can be written as in [F].

[F] *Anglo English cultural script against making "negative personal remarks"*
Many people think like this:
if I don't know someone very well, it is bad if I say something bad about this someone's body to this someone.
If I say this, this someone can feel something bad because of it.

Interestingly, however, in Anglo culture one has to be careful not only about negative remarks, but also about positive personal remarks as well. For example, the positive statements in (4) could all be deemed inappropriate (impertinent, too personal) coming from someone who does not know the addressee well.

(4) *You've lost weight.*
You're looking very well.
You look so young.
You are very handsome.

To capture this, the script in [F] needs to be supplemented with its close counterpart in [G].

[G] *Anglo English cultural script for caution in making "positive personal remarks"*
Many people think like this:
if I don't know someone well, it can be bad if I say something good about this someone's body to this someone.
If I say this, this someone can feel something bad because of it.

The wording of the two scripts ([F] and [G]) is not exactly parallel. Script [F] advises that "it is bad" to say something bad about someone else's body, whereas script [G] advises merely that "it can be bad" to say something good about the addressee's body unless one knows the person well. It should also be noted that "personal compliments" (e.g. about clothing, hair style, or make-up) many be more acceptable in many contexts from one woman to another, than from a man to a man or from a man to a woman. Nevertheless, the default position is that personal remarks, even positive ones, can be perceived as offensive if they come from someone one does not know well.

4 Managing "Good Feelings" in General Anglo English and in American English

Wierzbicka (2009) has argued that a large family of Anglo cultural scripts conspires to produce the effect of "pleasant interaction", highly valued by speakers of Anglo English. One of these scripts, she argues, is shared across all varieties of Anglo English. This recommends that interlocutors from time to time make "positive statements" about various subjects, with the goal of creating some good feelings which can be shared by both speaker and the interlocutor. Notice that the comments are not necessarily about the interlocutor;

they could be about anything: the only point is that they should be facilitative of "pleasant" interaction. (Hence, relentlessly "serious" conversation is not highly valued by Anglo cultural interlocutors (cf. Goddard, 2009), unlike as in Russian, for example.)

[H] *An Anglo cultural script for "pleasant interaction"*
Many people think like this:
at many times, when I am with someone for some time, it is good if I say something good to this someone about something during this time.
If I do this, this someone can feel good because of this during this time.
At the same time, I can feel something good because of this.

Notwithstanding the general Anglo preference for pleasant interaction, there are also some differences between sub-varieties of Anglo English (American English, Australian English, English English, etc.) in how speakers routinely express and manage feelings. Such differences can also be explored using the cultural scripts methodology.

Wierzbicka (1999, 2006b) argues that American English places relatively higher priority on expressing good feelings — both good feelings in general, and good feelings towards one's addressee. Scripts [I] and [J] have been proposed to capture the cultural ideas underlying the "expressive positivity" of American interactional style (cf. Ehrenreich, 2009).

[I] *Anglo-American cultural script favouring positive feelings and display of positive feelings*
Many people think like this:
it is good if someone can feel something good at many times.
At many times when someone feels something good, it is good if other people can know it.

[J] *Anglo-American cultural script for projecting good feelings during verbal interaction*
Many people think like this:
at many times when I say something to someone else, it is good if this someone thinks that I feel something good at this time.

Goddard (in press a, b) argues that the general theme of American positivity extends into the area he terms "phatic complimenting". This refers to the frequent use of seemingly effusive compliments, such as those in (5).

(5) *You look great.*

You're so intelligent.
You play the guitar so beautifully.
You're the best employee we have.

Consider the following set of quotations from linguist Lynne Murphy's blog "separated by a common language", which is chiefly dedicated to differences between British and American English (http://separatedbyacommonlanguage.blogspot.com). In an exchange in June 2008, respondents were discussing different "complimenting" practices in British English and American English. A British respondent (John B.) stated (with a critical tone) that he found American compliments such as those in (5) to be "insincere" and "highly exaggerated". Not so, responded two American bloggers:

I am an American and I very deliberately and consciously do what you've described. Especially when I encounter someone I don't have a lot in common with, I deliberately seek out something about them I like to compliment them on. ... I didn't realise that other cultures might see this as insincere —it's not. [Robin, 11 June 2008, 21:27]

John B, I find it curious that you find those compliments highly exaggerated. I don't see any of them as exaggerated. [Ellen K, 12 June 2008, 21:34]

Two other Americans with intercultural experience made contributions that helped bring to light the American culture-internal perspective.

As an American living abroad ... I do miss compliments! They may seem meaningless, but they're such a part of our culture that frequent meaningless comments become a sort of baseline [Kel, 11 June 2008, 18:15)]

We are so used to it, that we crave it even from strangers. I live in northern Germany, where people ... do not engage in small talk with strangers. They do not give compliments to create some sort of social connection. [Judy Wyatt, 13 June 2008, 21:34]

Evidently, to take compliments such as those under discussion literally would be to miss the point. From an American English perspective, the point of such compliments is to show good feelings towards the interlocutor — as respondent Judy Wyatt put it: "to create some sort of social connection". From this point of view, such compliments can be 'sincere' if the feeling being expressed is genuinely felt. I would therefore advance script [K] below.

[K] *American English cultural script for "phatic complimenting" to show good feelings towards an addressee*

Many people think like this:

at many times when I am with someone else, if I feel something good towards this someone, it is good if this someone knows it.

this someone can know it if I say something good about this someone to this

someone at this time.

This concludes my examples of how cultural scripts can be used to describe and explain aspects of Anglo English cultural pragmatics. I will now turn to the advantages cultural scripts offer for practical application in language learning and intercultural communication.

❺ Using Cultural Scripts in Language Teaching and Intercultural Education

Cultural scripts formulated in semantic primes can be readily translated into any language. This is crucial to their practical application in real-world situations of trying to bridge some kind of cultural gap, with immigrants, language-learners, in international negotiations, etc. (Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2004, 2007). In my estimation, this fact alone confers a huge advantage on the cultural scripts method, as compared with other, more technical modes of linguistic pragmatics.

A second advantage of the cultural scripts methodology is that it is intended to show not only what one should do (according to local cultural rules), but also why one should do it. Regardless of the level of language learning, it is arguably always as important — if not more important — to understand the reasons underlying a cultural rule, as it is to understand the rule itself. This is because understanding the reasons for a rule enables one to see its links with other phenomena, to understand when the rule may be weakened or suspended, and so on.

A third advantage of the cultural scripts method is that it lends itself equally well to the researchers' and students' home language and culture, as to the L2 language and culture. A critical part of intercultural training — for self-awareness, as well as to avoid negative pragmatic transfer — is learning about one's own cultural scripts. English-speaking learners of Chinese, for example, need to understand the cultural pragmatics of Anglo English. Chinese-speaking learners of English need to understand the cultural pragmatics of Chinese.

Up to this point we have been considering cultural scripts as a research tool, as a principled methodology for representing insider perspectives about culturally valued ways of speaking. It is also possible to consider how cultural scripts can be adapted for explicitly pedagogical purposes, for use with L2 learners of English, for example.

At least four kinds of adaptation come to mind. First, one can add an explicit reference to the L2 country, i.e. the introductory framing component can become: "in America/ Britain/Australia, …". Though seemingly a small change, this represents a big shift in the

nature of the script: from an insider perspective to an "external" perspective. Second, to make it easier for learners to focus on the pedagogical message, the mode of the script can switched to directive, with a concomitant change in pronouns from "I" to "you". Third, adjustments can be made to simplify and naturalise the metalanguage, e.g. using "he/she" instead of "this someone". Fourthly, one can add contrastive information to draw attention to differences from the home culture.

Script [L] below shows how one of the "request" scripts presented earlier could be adapted into a pedagogical version for Chinese learners of English. It has been adjusted in line with points one to three, as just mentioned.

[L] A *pedagogical script for how not to make a "request" in English*
In America/Britain/Australia, when you want someone to do something good for you, at many times you can't say something like this to him/her:
"I want you to do something good for me. I think that you will do it because of this."
If you say something like this to someone, he/she can feel something bad.

The example in [M] below shows how contrastive information can be added to a pedagogical script to draw attention to differences from the home culture.

[M] A *pedagogical script for how to make a "request" in English*
In America/Britain/Australia, when you want someone to do something good for you, at many times it will be good if you say something like this to him/her:
"I want you to do something good for me."
Maybe after I say this you will do it, maybe you will not do it, I don't know.
You say it like this if you know him/her well, or you say it like this if you don't know him/her well
You say it like this if he/she is someone below you, or you say it like this if he/she is someone above you

The underlined components at the end are not part of any genuinely "Anglo" cultural script but they may well be helpful for Chinese learners of English, because they effectively cancel certain presuppositions that are likely to be held by many Chinese learners (cf. Ye, 2004), namely, the assumptions that different ways of speaking are appropriate for known individuals as opposed to people one doesn't know well, and that different ways of speaking are appropriate for people who are socially "below" and "above" oneself, respectively. Explicitly adding the information that the script applies regardless of these differences can presumably assist with acquisition of the L2 pragmatics.

No doubt many other creative pedagogical adaptations will be developed as cultural scripts begin to used in practical instruction by experienced and talented teachers.

6 Concluding Note

I conclude with the following quotation from Anna Wierzbicka, the pioneer of the cultural scripts methodology:

It is therefore more important than ever to treat intercultural pragmatics as a matter of practical, as well as theoretical concern. Putative "universals of politeness" cannot provide a framework for intercultural training. The methodology of cultural scripts formulated in simple and universal human concepts offers such a framework. It is a framework which can help explain shared assumptions and values embedded in ways of speaking across languages and cultures and can at the same time be practically useful in intercultural education. It is not technical, and it is generally accessible.

It is not tied to English, and while for practical reasons it is likely to be implemented most widely through a mini-English ("NSM English"), it does not rely on technical English. It can be used even at introductory levels of intercultural induction and training, as a simple and practical lingua franca for intercultural pragmatics. (Wierzbicka, 2009).

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Appendix: Semantic primes in Chinese, (Ye 2006b)

I, YOU	*wǒ* 我， *nǐ* 你
SOMEONE, SOMETHING ~ THING PEOPLE, BODY	*shéi* 谁 ~ *yǒurén*有人, *shénme* 什么 ~ *yǒushì* 有事 ~ *dōngxi*东西 *rénmen* 人们 ~ *rén*人， *shēntǐ* 身体
KIND, PART	*zhǒng* 种, *bùfen* 部分 ~ X *yǒu* Y_{PART} X 有 Y
THIS, OTHER ~ ELSE	*zhè* 这， *bié (de)* 别 (的)
THE SAME	*tóngyàng* 同样 ~ *tóngyī* 同一 ~ *yīyàng* 一样
ONE, TWO, MUCH ~ MANY	*yī (ge)* 一(个)， *liǎng* 两 ~ èr二, *(hěn)duō* (很)多 ~ *xǔduō* 许多
SOME, ALL	*yǒude* 有的 ~ *yǒuxiē* 有些 ~ *yīxiē* 一些, *dōu* 都 ~ *suǒyǒu(de)* 所有(的)
GOOD, BAD	*hǎo* 好, *huài* 坏 ~ *bùhǎo* 不好
BIG, SMALL	*dà* 大, *xiǎo* 小
THINK, KNOW, WANT	*xiǎng* 想 , *zhīdào* 知道, *yào* 要
FEEL, SEE, HEAR	*gǎnjué* 感觉, *kàndào* 看到, *tīngdào* 听到
SAY, WORDS, TRUE	*shuō* 说, *zì* 字 ~ *huà* 话, *zhēn* 真
DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	*zuò* 做, *fāshēng* 发生, *dòng* 动, *jiēchù* 接触
BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, HAVE	*zài (mǒdì)* 在(某地)， *yǒu* 有, *yǒu* 有
BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	*shì* 是
LIVE, DIE	*shēnghuó* 生活 ~ *huó* 活, *sǐ* 死
WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER	*shíhou* 时候 , *xiànzài* 现在, *yǐqián* 以前, *yǐhòu* 以后
A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	*hénjiǔ* 很久， *yìhuǐr* 一会儿 *yǒuyíduànshíjiān* 有一段, *yíshùnjiān* 一瞬间
WHERE/PLACE	*shénme dìfāng* 什么地方 ~ *nǎr* 哪儿 /*dìfāng* 地方
HERE, ABOVE, BELOW	*zhèr* 这儿, *shàngmian* 上面~ *-shang* 上, *xiàmian* 下面 ~ *-xia* 下
FAR, NEAR	*yuan* 远, *jìn* 近 ~ *de shēnbian* 的 身边
SIDE, INSIDE	*-biān* 边~ *pāngbian* 旁边, *-lǐ* 里~ *lǐmiàn* 里面
NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	*bù* 不~ *méi* 没, *kěnéng* 可能, *néng* 能, *yīnwèi* 因为, *rúguǒ* 如果
VERY, MORE	*hěn* 很, *duō* 多
LIKE	*xiàng* 象 ~ *zhèyàng* 这样