Cultural scripts: What are they and what are they good for?

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The term cultural scripts refers to a powerful new technique for articulating cultural norms, values, and practices in terms which are clear, precise, and accessible to cultural insiders and to cultural outsiders alike. This result is only possible because cultural scripts are formulated in a tightly constrained, yet expressively flexible, metalanguage consisting of simple words and grammatical patterns which have equivalents in all languages. This is of course the metalanguage of semantic primes developed over the past 25 years of cross-linguistic research by the editors and colleagues in the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) approach. The present collection of studies demonstrates the productivity and versatility of the cultural scripts approach with case studies from five different parts of world—China, Colombia, Korea, Singapore, and West Africa—describing a widely differing selection of culture-specific speech practices and interactional norms. One recurrent theme is that the different ways of speaking of different societies are linked with and make sense in terms of different local cultural values, or at least, different cultural priorities as far as values are concerned. Cultural scripts exist at different levels of generality, and may relate to different aspects of thinking, speaking, and behaviour. The present set of studies is mainly concerned with norms and practices of social interaction.

The cultural scripts technique is one of the main modes of description of the broad project which can be termed ethnopragmatics (cf. Goddard ed, in press a). This refers to the quest, inaugurated in linguistics by Anna Wierzbicka (1985) in her article 'Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts: English vs. Polish', to understand speech practices from the perspective of the speakers themselves. For this purpose, the techniques of cross-cultural semantics are also essential because to understand speech practices in terms which make sense to the people concerned, we must be able to understand the meanings of the relevant culturally important words—words for local values, social categories, speech-acts, and so on. Important words and phrases of this kind

often qualify for the status of cultural key words (Wierzbicka 1997). In the present collection of studies, the authors often refer to expressions of this kind, such as Spanish *calor humano* 'human warmth', Fulfulde *yaage* 'respect, deference', Korean *noin* 'respected old people', and Chinese *zìjǐrén* 'insider, one of us', in some cases advancing full semantic explications for them. One of the attractions of the natural semantic metalanguage is that it can be used equally for writing cultural scripts and for doing "cultural semantics", thus enabling us to draw out the connections between them.

It perhaps bears emphasising that the cultural scripts approach is evidence-based, and that while not disregarding evidence of other sources (ethnographic and sociological studies, literature, and so on) it places particular importance on linguistic evidence. Aside from the semantics of cultural key words, other kinds of linguistic evidence which can be particularly revealing of cultural norms and values include: common sayings and proverbs, frequent collocations, conversational routines and varieties of formulaic or semi-formulaic speech, discourse particles and interjections, and terms of address and reference—all highly "interactional" aspects of language. From a data gathering point of view, a wide variety of methods can be used, including the classical linguistic fieldwork techniques of elicitation, naturalistic observation, text analysis, and consultation with informants, native speaker intuition, corpus studies, and the use of literary materials and other cultural products. Other methods such as role-plays, questionnaires, discourse-completion tasks, and the like, can also be fruitfully used. The studies in this collection make reference to many of these methods.

As will be amply clear at this point, the cultural scripts approach is not trying to do something altogether new and different. Many of its concerns are shared by linguistic anthropology, ethnography of communication, and by aspects of cultural psychology (e.g., Hymes 1962; Gumperz and Hymes eds, 1986; Bauman and Sherzer eds, 1974; Shweder 1993). The chief contribution of the cultural scripts approach is an improved methodology to bear on these common concerns, a methodology which builds on two decades of research in cross-cultural semantics.

Semantic primes: the language of cultural scripts

The cultural scripts technique relies crucially on the metalanguage of empirically established semantic primes. Semantic primes are simple, indefinable meanings which appear to "surface" as the meanings of words or word-like expressions in all languages. There are about 60 in them, listed

Table 1. *Table of semantic primes (after Goddard 2002a: 14)*

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE/PERSON, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, BODY
Relational substantives:	KIND, PART
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER/ELSE
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH/MANY
Evaluators:	GOOD, BAD
Descriptors:	BIG, SMALL
Mental/experiential predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, events, movement:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence and possession:	THERE IS/EXIST, HAVE
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Time:	WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
Space:	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCHING
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Augmentor, intensifier:	VERY, MORE
Similarity:	LIKE (AS, HOW)

Notes: • 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, i.e. morphologically, complex • they can have different morphosyntactic properties, including word-class, in different languages • they can have combinatorial variants (allolexes) • each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties

using English exponents in Table 1. Comparable tables could now be given in a wide range of languages (in principle, in any language). It is impossible here to review the large body of detailed research which has gone into exploring the lexical and grammatical properties of semantic primes in many languages. It can be mentioned, however, that detailed ''whole metalanguage'' studies have been carried out for English, Polish, Malay, Lao, Mandarin Chinese, Mbula, Spanish, Korean, and East Cree, and more selective studies on French, Italian, Russian, Amharic, Japanese, Ewe, Yankunytjatjara, and Hawaiian Creole English, among others; see the papers in Goddard and Wierzbicka eds, (1994, 2002), as well as Yoon (2003), Maher (2000); Stanwood (1999); Amberber (2003), in press; Junker (2003, in press).[1]

The key claim is that the semantic primes expressed by English words like *someone/person*, *something/thing*, *people*, *say*, *words*, *true*, *do*, *think*, *want*, *good*, *bad*, *if*, *because*, among others, can be expressed equally well and equally precisely in other languages; and that, furthermore, they have an inherent universal grammar of combination, valency, and

complementation which also manifests itself equally in all languages, albeit with language-specific formal variations. The universal mini-language of semantic primes can therefore be safely used as a common code for writing explications of word meanings and for writing cultural scripts, free from the danger of "terminological ethnocentrism" (see below), with maximum clarity and resolution of detail, and in the knowledge that they can be readily transposed across languages. It offers a mechanism by which meaning can be freed from the grip of any single language. As the distinguished anthropologist Roy D'Andrade (2001: 246) remarks, the natural semantic metalanguage "offers a potential means to ground all complex concepts in ordinary language and translate concepts from one language to another without loss or distortion in meaning".

Some examples and observations

Consider the following set of three Anglo scripts (Wierzbicka in press *a*). They express the central Anglo value sometimes termed "personal autonomy" [A], the consequent cultural inadvisability of issuing overt directives [B], and the availability of a culturally approved alternative strategy, namely, presenting the addressee with a quasi-directive message in the guise of a *suggestion* [C]. Because they are framed exclusively in the controlled vocabulary and grammar of the natural semantic metalanguage, they can be readily transposed across languages, unlike words such as *autonomy*, *directive*, and *suggestion* which are the "private property", so to speak, of the English language.

[A]   [people think like this:]
　　　when a person is doing something
　　　it is good if this person can think about it like this:
　　　　　'I am doing this because I want to do it
　　　　　not because someone else wants me to do it'

[B]   [people think like this:]
　　　when I want someone to do something
　　　it is not good if I say something like this to this person:
　　　　　'I want you to do it
　　　　　I think that you will do it because of this'

[C]   [people think like this:]
　　　when I want someone to do something
　　　it can be good if I say something like this to this person:
　　　　　'maybe you will want to think about it
　　　　　maybe if you think about it you will want to do it'

Using these scripts as examples, one can make a number of observations about cultural scripts in general. The first is that societies are heterogeneous, and that not every member of Anglo culture would accept or endorse the scripts [A]–[C]. However, as indicated by the frame 'people think like this: – –', the claim is that even those who do not personally identify with the content of a script are familiar with it, i.e. that it forms part of the interpretative backdrop to discourse and social behaviour in a particular cultural context. Cultural scripts are intended to capture background norms, templates, guidelines or models for ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and speaking, in a particular cultural context. While they explain a great deal about speech practices, they are not descriptions of behaviour as such.

Second, cultural scripts differ in their level of generality and can be interrelated in a variety of ways. Script [A] can be seen as one of the ''master scripts'' of the mainstream Anglo culture. It does not concern speech, or even social interaction, as such but captures a prevailing cultural attitude which has widespread ramifications across a range of cultural domains and practices. Scripts [B] and [C] spell out some of the consequences for social interaction. In the terminology of the ethnography of communication (Hymes 1962), a master script such as [A] could be seen as stating a ''norm of interpretation'', while [B] and [C] spell out more specific ''norms of interaction''.

Third, it can be seen that the scripts rely heavily on evaluative components such as 'it is good (bad) if – –' and 'it is not good (bad) if – –', or variants such as 'it can be good (bad) if – –'. Another kind of framing component, useful for other scripts and in other contexts, concerns people's perceptions of what they can and can't do: 'I can say (think, do, etc.) – –' and 'I can't say (think, do, etc.) – –'. Also on the topic of the form of cultural scripts, it can be pointed out that the introductory 'when'-components and 'if'-components represent relevant aspects of social contexts. In scripts [A]–[C] these are very simple and schematic; in other scripts, they can be more complex. In particular, as shown by several contributions to this collection, they can contain certain language-specific ''semantic molecules'', i.e. complex language-specific concepts, which are relevant to cultural construals of social context. For example, some Korean scripts make reference to the social category of *noin* (roughly) 'respected old people'; and some Chinese scripts make reference to the social category of *shúrén* (roughly) 'an aquaintance, someone known personally'.

Fourth, scripts [A]–[C] allow us to make the point that mere possession of a common language does not mean that people who use this language share all their cultural scripts and associated ethnopragmatic behaviour.

There can be large regional and social variations, associated with significantly different histories and lived experiences of different speech communities. In the present collection, Jock Wong's study shows precisely that Anglo cultural scripts such as [A]–[C] are not shared by speakers of Singapore English. Conversely, several different contiguous languages in a "speech area" can share many of the same cultural scripts, or variants of them, as shown by Felix Ameka and Anneke Breedveld's study of "areal scripts" in West Africa. Because they provide a fine-grained model of cultural description, scripts enable us to recognize and describe cultural change and variation.

Finally, this little set of Anglo scripts helps us to underscore the point that although English may be an incipient global language, it is by no means a culture-neutral language. On the contrary, it carries as much cultural baggage as any other (cf. Wierzbicka in press a,b). In general terms, this point may seem obvious. And it is certainly obvious, in an immediate practical sense, to millions of immigrants, refugees, business travellers, tourists, and English language-learners around the world; but oddly enough, there has been relatively little concrete work conducted into Anglo speech ways. There is a pressing need for more research of this kind, using investigative techniques which can "de-naturalize" the pragmatics of Anglo English.

Cultural scripts compared with conventional "universalist" approaches

By conventional "universalist" approaches, we refer to the "politeness theory" of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), to so-called Gricean and "neo-Gricean" pragmatics (Grice 1975; Levinson 2000), and to the "contrastive pragmatics" approach represented in the work of Shoshana Blum-Kulka and colleagues (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989; Blum-Kulka and Kasper 1993). The first assumes a universal model of positive and negative face needs (generating positive and negative politeness strategies), the second adopts a set of universal maxims of communication said to be based on pure rationality, and the third assumes a universal inventory of speech-act types. Cultural variation is accommodated by way of differing weightings and "realizations". In our view, these models tend to greatly underestimate the cultural shaping of speech practices. Certainly the cultural scripts approach allows much finer granularity of description and much greater attention to cultural particularity.

A more serious critique of these avowedly universalist models, however, is the charge that they are Anglocentric, i.e. that they adopt as a baseline or template some aspect of Anglo norms or practices and at-

tempt to generalize or adjust this to suit all others (cf. Ochs Keenan 1976; Sohn 1983; Matsumoto 1988; Ide 1989; Wierzbicka 2003 [1991]; Clyne 1994: 176–201). The criticism is most readily illustrated with Grice's maxims such as 'say no more than is required' and 'avoid obscurity', which, as critics have often remarked, sound more like the ideals of an Anglo-American philosopher than the outcomes of the natural logic of human communication. The situation hardly improves when reformulated in terms of ''relevance'', given that the term *relevance* itself, which is supposed to sum up the overriding principle of communication, is so culture-specific that it lacks equivalents even in most European languages, let alone in most of the languages of the world. Of course it is possible for a defender of relevance theory (or Grice's maxims, for that matter) to make light of the culture-specific nature of their central construct, but this merely illustrates ethnocentrism in action.

The fatal flaw of the ''contrastive pragmatics'' approach is also easy to identify: the assumption that speech-act categories such as *request*, *apology*, and *compliment* are appropriate tools for describing languages and cultures which have no such indigenous categories. To use such words as cultural descriptors is clearly to engage in terminological ethnocentrism. By adopting ''non-emic'' analytical categories, contrastive pragmatics foregoes the opportunity to represent the indigenous conceptualization of speech-acts in many, if not most, cultures of the world. As for Brown and Levinson's ''politeness theory'', an increasing number of critics, especially from East Asia, have drawn attention to its ''individualist'' character, which they see as betraying its Anglo origins. And of course, it too is flawed by terminological ethnocentrism, not only in its primary dichotomies of *positive face* and *negative face*, but also in its uncritical use of descriptors such as *direct* and *indirect*, not to mention quintessentially Anglo terms such as *imposition*. The central point is that terms which do not correspond to indigenous conceptualizations cannot articulate the perspective of a cultural insider. At best, they give a so-called ''observers' model'' or ''outsider perspective''. Furthermore, because they are locked into the untranslatable vocabulary of a foreign language, they close off the description to the people concerned.

The accessibility and practicality of cultural scripts

To illustrate the point that cultural scripts written in semantic primes can be readily transposed across languages, the studies in this collection all present one or more scripts in the indigenous language itself, as well as in English. Thus there are examples of a West African cultural script

written in Ewe, capturing a local norm about leave-taking practices, of a Chinese cultural script written in Chinese, capturing a local norm about the preferred mode of interaction with familiar people, and so on.[2]

From a methodological point of view, the accessibility of cultural scripts means that native speaker consultants can become involved in a very direct way with working and re-working them. In our experience, native speakers from different cultures are often surprisingly interested in engaging in this kind of collaborative work, especially those who have had direct personal experience of intercultural cross-talk and confusion. Of course, consultants need guidance and support in such work. It is no easy matter to learn to express one's ideas solely within the limited vocabulary and grammar of the natural semantic metalanguage. As Keith Allan (2001) has remarked, natural semantic metalanguage may be easy to read, but it can be difficult to write. But the intuitive accessibility of cultural scripts means that native speakers <u>can</u> at least read (or hear) them, that they can understand them, and that they can respond to them without the continual intervention and mediation of the analyst. Conventional technical approaches cast the "Other" in the role of the object of description, never a co-interpreter or interlocutor. At the risk of using a PC term, cultural scripts are potentially empowering for native speaker consultants.

The accessibility and transparency of cultural scripts written in semantic primes gives them a huge advantage over technical modes of description when it comes to real-world situations of trying to bridge some kind of cultural gap, with immigrants, language-learners, in international negotiations, or whatever. There is no need to begin with a "tutorial" about collectivism vs. individualism, positive politeness vs. negative politeness, high context cultures vs. low context cultures, or other arcane academic concepts. Because cultural scripts "interface" more or less directly with simple ordinary language—in any language—they can be practically useful for the purposes of cross-cultural education and intercultural communication (cf. Goddard 2004a).

The present volume and the state of the art

The earliest explicit statement of the cultural scripts approach can be found in an article by Anna Wierzbicka published in 1994, though the roots of the approach are evident in her landmark volume *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics* (first published 1991, re-issued 2003), and are prefigured in her work on speech acts in the second half of the 1980s. Early adopters of the approach, in spirit if not in all details, include Christine Béal (1990, 1992, 1993, 1994), Felix Ameka (1994, 1999), Rie Hasada (1996,

in press), Cliff Goddard (1992, 1997, 2000, 2002b, 2004b), and Bert Peeters (1997, 1999, 2000), in studies of Australian English, French, Ewe, Japanese, Yankunytjatjara and Malay (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka 1997). Wierzbicka has herself produced detailed studies of Japanese (1996b), Chinese (1996c), German (1998), Polish (1999: Ch 6), Russian (2002a), Australian English (2002b), and Biblical Hebrew (2004). Wierzbicka has a book-length study of (Anglo) English in press b, and there is a good deal of other work by various authors pending publication, especially in Goddard (in press a). Over the years, one can see various improvements being worked through in the form and format of scripts, and this process is still ongoing. We are still finding out, via trial and error experimentation, about the range of different formats and structures which may be appropriate to material of different kinds from different settings. The present collection of studies is a major step in this direction.

In addition to their value as documentation and as ''road tests'' of the cultural scripts method, each of the present studies makes a notable theoretical or methodological innovation. As mentioned, Felix Ameka and Anneke Breedveld's study develops and illustrates the concept of ''areal cultural scripts'' with particular relevance to West Africa (cf. Ameka 1994). They draw attention to the interesting phenomenon of ''triadic communication'' as a favoured speech practice for serious matters of all kinds in this part of the world. They also highlight the sensitivity and importance of personal names in the area, explaining some of the differences, as well as similarities, in name avoidance practices among neighbouring language groups.

Kyung-Joo Yoon's study articulates the cultural assumptions about relative age, absolute age, and the vertical model of society underlying the Korean honorific system, which is one of the most complex such systems in the world. She also advances a new way of spelling out the kind of ethnopragmatic knowledge associated with honorific words, proposing that speakers understand certain words as literally expressing messages of a social nature (such as 'this person is someone above me', and the like). Her paper includes indigenous Korean versions of every script, with a number of detailed comments about Korean natural semantic metalanguage (cf. Yoon 2003). Yoon's (2004) other work has delved into Korean ethnopsychology, among other topics.

Zhengdao Ye's paper on Chinese argues forcefully that to understand social interaction from an insider perspective presupposes an understanding of local categories for interpersonal relationships. She insists that Chinese categories such as *shúrén* vs. *shēngrén* (''aquaintance'' vs. ''stranger'') and *zìjǐrén* vs. *wàirén* (''insider'' vs. ''outsider'') are so fundamental that they enter into cultural scripts as ''semantic molecules''. Ye's

study also provides a welcome relief from the over-emphasis on concepts of "face" in Western studies of Chinese culture. In related work Ye (2001, 2002, 2004, in press) explores emotional expression, verbal and non-verbal, and some of the cultural key words of Chinese.

Jock Wong's contribution has the most explicitly contrastive orientation of the present set of studies, contrasting Anglo English with Singapore English. Wong shows how certain "normal" speech conventions of Anglo English are absent from Singapore English precisely because the "group-oriented" Singaporean culture lacks the Anglo emphasis on personal autonomy, favouring instead values more akin to unity and interdependence. In this and other work, Wong (2004a, 2004b) problematicizes the construct of "English" as a stable cultural and linguistic entity.

Catherine Travis' study of the Colombian Spanish -*ito*/-*ita* diminutive combines close semantic analysis of a set of polysemic meanings with a set of interrelated and mutually reinforcing cultural scripts, demonstrating in an impressive fashion how the diminutive morphology enables speakers to implement cultural preferences for the expression of interpersonal "warmth". Her study uses data from a corpus of spontaneous Colombian Spanish conversation. In this corpus, the interpersonal expressive uses of the diminutive, including its use in minimising directives, offers and criticisms, far exceeds its "literal" use in relation to small size. As some other analysts have done before her, Travis sees attitudes towards children as furnishing a kind of prototype for diminutive use, but she goes much further in articulating how it all works. Travis's (1998, 2003, in press a,b) other work includes semantic studies of Spanish discourse markers, conversation analysis, and cultural key words.

To sum up, the studies presented in this issue show in detail how the cultural scripts model makes it possible to describe cultural norms and practices in a way which combines an insider perspective with intelligibility to outsiders, is free from Anglocentrism, and lends itself to direct practical applications in intercultural communication and education.

Notes

1. For more on the theory and practice of NSM semantics, see Wierzbicka (1996a, 1992), Goddard (1998), and Durst (2003). There is a comprehensive bibliography on the NSM Homepage: [www.une.edu.au/arts/LCL/disciplines/linguistics/nsmpage.htm]
2. Mey (2004: 4) seems to imply that NSM semantic primes are "bound up with a particular realization in English" and that writing cultural scripts in English NSM amounts to accepting the "hegemony of English as a descriptive medium for intercultural events and concepts"—no matter how much Wierzbicka and colleagues argue against such a supposed hegemony. The fact that cultural scripts can be equally well written in Korean NSM, in Chinese NSM, in Ewe NSM, and so on, should go some way to dispelling these

doubts. Mey also chooses not to mention the extensive NSM work in cross-linguistic semantics (e.g., Goddard and Wierzbicka eds 2002), which provides abundant positive evidence for the lexicalization of semantic primes in a range of non-English languages.

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