

‘Early interactions’ in Australian English, American English, and English English: Cultural differences and cultural scripts

Cliff Goddard *

School of Languages and Linguistics, Griffith University, Nathan, QLD 4111, Australia

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Abstract

This study applies the techniques of contrastive ethnopragmatics to communicative style in initial conversational interactions in three varieties of Anglo English: Australian English, American English, and English English. It proposes for each variety a distinctive suite of cultural scripts concerning matters such as presumed stance in relation to sameness and difference, degree of attention to accent and speech style, expected degree of interest in personal information about the interlocutor, expressions of accomplishments and ambitions, and ‘phatic complimenting’. Evidence is drawn from personal testimonies about cultural cross-talk, sociological and cultural studies, and contrastive corpus data. Different communication styles pertaining to initial self-presentation have implications for mutual misperception, negative evaluation and stereotyping.

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1. Introduction

Australian English, American English, and English English can be regarded as three macro-varieties of “Anglo English”, and as such they obviously have a great deal in common, including in their pragmatics, as well as lexis, phonology, and grammar.¹ This does not mean, however, that there are no significant differences in preferred communication style between them. Using the techniques of contrastive ethnopragmatics (Wierzbicka, 2003; Goddard, 2006c), this study aims to identify for each variety a distinctive suite of cultural scripts that characterise the preferred or expected communication style between interlocutors who do not know each other well, i.e. roughly speaking, during the “getting to know you” stage of interaction. Evidence is drawn from personal testimonies about cultural cross-talk, sociological and cultural studies, and contrastive corpus data. The cultural scripts capture different shared expectations across the three national varieties regarding the appropriate or typical conversational moves and conversational tone during early self-presentation. The differing scripts carry with them implications for mutual misperception, miscommunication, and negative evaluation and thus fall within the ambit of impoliteness studies, as broadly conceived (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Spencer-Oatey, 2005; Haugh and Schneider, 2012). The focus of the present study, however, is not on miscommunication as such but rather on the problem of how to characterise and understand the expected communication styles of each variety in terms of cultural scripts.

* Tel.: +61 7 3735 3807.

E-mail address: c.goddard@griffith.edu.au.

¹ In using the term English English, and in describing it as a “national variety”, I am following Schneider (2008, 2012). By nature any such terms (American English and Australian English included) are approximate and somewhat idealised. The impulse behind the term English English, as opposed to British English, is to avoid any implication that the discussion is necessarily applicable to Scottish English, Welsh English or Irish English.

The term ‘cultural scripts’ can be used in either broad or a narrow sense. In the broad sense, it refers to “representations of cultural norms which are widely held in a given society and are reflected in the language” (Wierzbicka, 2007:56). In this sense, cultural scripts can be compared with what are known in the ethnography of communication research tradition as ‘norms of interaction’ and ‘norms of interpretation’, i.e. widely shared assumptions about how – and why – it is good or bad to speak in certain culturally construed situations. Obviously not everyone in a given speech community necessarily agrees with or conforms to such shared understandings and, indeed, speakers are not necessarily consciously aware of them in normal interaction. Nevertheless, they form a kind of interpretive backdrop to everyday interaction.

In a more technical sense, the term ‘cultural script’ refers to a particular technique for articulating cultural norms and values in a fashion that is clear, precise, translatable, and accessible to cultural insiders and cultural outsiders alike (Wierzbicka, 1996a, 2002, 2003, 2006a, 2012; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 1997, 2004; Ameka, 1999; Goddard, 2009a; Hasada, 2006; Travis, 2006; Wong, 2004; Ye, 2004, 2006; Nicholls, 2009:Ch. 6; Levisen, 2010). This outcome is possible because cultural scripts in this sense are formulated in a highly constrained metalanguage of semantically simple words (semantic primes) and grammatical patterns which appear to have equivalents in all languages. This metalanguage, which has been independently derived from extensive studies in cross-linguistic lexical semantics conducted by researchers in the NSM (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) approach, cannot be dealt with in any detail here (Wierzbicka, 1996b; Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2002; Peeters, 2006; Goddard, 2008). The inventory of semantic primes is tabulated in Appendix A. For present purposes, the key point is that cultural scripts are composed in combinations of simple words, such as, for example: ‘many people think like this’, ‘this someone is someone like me’, ‘if I don’t know someone well, it can be good if I don’t say much to this someone’, and so on. No technical terms, and no other words known to lack exact semantic equivalents in other languages, are allowed in cultural scripts. Because the wording is so simple, the scripts should be intuitively very clear in meaning and can plausibly be taken as representing something that is conceptually real for ordinary speakers, notwithstanding that using a small vocabulary sometimes creates a stylistically unusual effect (and that some NSM expressions, such as ‘this someone’, are not particularly idiomatic). One of the key goals of the cultural scripts methodology is to capture and represent the perspectives of cultural insiders.

The scripts to be proposed in the present study concern matters such as presumed stance in relation to sameness and difference, degree of attention to accent, word choice and speech style, expected degree of interest in personal information about the interlocutor, expressions of accomplishments and ambitions, and ‘phatic complimenting’. Differences like these between varieties of the one language readily give rise to what Carbaugh (2005) has termed “invisible misunderstandings”.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that there is tremendous overlap in values and cultural norms between the three countries whose national Englishes are the subject of this study. A good reminder of this, which at the same time alerts us to certain differences that will be relevant later, is to consider the data displayed in Table 1. This shows the rankings of the USA, Australia, and the Great Britain on three value dimensions in Hofstede’s (1987, 2001) well known questionnaire-based study of 53 countries. It can be seen that the three countries occupied the first three places on Hofstede’s Individual/Collectivism scale, and, furthermore, that they are close to one another on two other scales as well: Power Distance (roughly, how accepting people are of wide differences in power and status) and Masculinity (roughly, how ‘tough minded’ people are).

I would be among the first to acknowledge that Hofstede’s studies incurred certain methodological problems,² and also to highlight that the dimensions of comparison being employed (‘individualism/collectivism’, ‘power distance’, ‘masculinity’), being technical terms from social science, cannot shed much light on culture-internal perspectives of the societies being described. Nonetheless, the closeness of the scores bears witness to the fact that Australia, USA and Great Britain are very similar to one another, when compared with countries like France, China, Malaysia and Costa Rica.

The most striking result is of course the Individualism figure. At the same time it is interesting that on this very dimension, social psychologists have also detected a significant difference between Australia and the USA. This concerns so-called ‘horizontal’ vs. ‘vertical’ individualism: Australia is notable for its horizontal individualism, as compared with the vertical individualism of the USA. Based on questionnaire responses from a series of studies, Triandis (1995) and colleagues have concluded that in societies characterised by the vertical pattern, as in the USA, “people often want to become distinguished and acquire status, and they do this in individual competition with others” (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998:119). In societies characterised by horizontal individualism, on the other hand, it is regarded as preferable that “people should be similar on most attributes, especially status” (Triandis, 1995:44). In such societies, according to their own self-reports at least, people “are not especially interested in becoming distinguished or in having high status” (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998:119).

² For example, problems have been raised about the representativeness of the samples (which were drawn from employees of the IBM company in the various countries), and about the design and translation of the questionnaires (cf. McSweeney, 2002).

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