

Developing Contrastive Pragmatics



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Developing Contrastive Pragmatics

Interlanguage and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Edited by

Martin Pütz

JoAnne Neff-van Aertselaer

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The conference was centrally concerned with intercultural pragmatics including linguistic, socio-cultural and cognitive perspectives. The goal of the symposium was to promote the understanding of interlanguage and intercultural competence by focussing on theoretical and applied pragmatics research that involves the use or the recognition of more than one language or language variety in a multilingual context and which extends to related disciplines such as communication science, psychology, sociology, anthropology, cognitive linguistics, second language acquisition, and bilingualism.

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The Editors

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JoAnne Neff-van Aertselaer (Universidad Complutense, Madrid)

Introduction: Developing contrastive pragmatics

Martin Pütz and JoAnne Neff- Aertselaer

Pragmatics as a usage-based perspective on the language sciences such as linguistics, the philosophy of language and the sociology of language essentially focuses on the exploration of language use and the users of language in real-life situations and, more generally, on the principles which govern language in everyday interaction. Pragmatics therefore studies language as realised in interactive contexts and, consequently, as the creation of meaning in online discourse situations. At the beginning of this new century we are now witnessing a move away from overwhelmingly monolingual and monocultural research paradigms to a type of research which finds its objectives in the multilingual and multicultural interaction of speakers from different national, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Thus in the era of globalization, communication is destined to become increasingly cross-cultural because it involves interactants who have different cultures, different conceptualisations, and different first languages, and who use a grammatically common language or lingua franca, but a pragmatically highly diversified instrument of communication representing, not only different cultures, but also different norms and values.

All 15 articles included in the present volume focus on pragmatic issues in the study of second language acquisition, i.e. the systematic research into the teaching and learning of second or foreign languages and its pedagogical implications. Furthermore, the main focus of attention will be on a contrastive perspective taking account of the learner's mother tongue (L1) and her target language or language variety (L2). The acquisition of pragmatic competence, i.e. to comprehend and produce a communicative act or speech act in a concrete speech situation in a second language, is considered a most difficult task for the L2 learner. Therefore, pragmatic issues such as the role of speech acts, conversational implicatures, facework and identity, discourse strategies in speaking and writing as well as politeness phenomena will be explored from a cross-cultural perspective focussing on contrastive patterns of pragmatic concepts and features. In recent years, there has been a growing interest in how people in different languages and cultures observe a certain pragmatic principle or how culture-specific pragmatic failures may

occur. In this vein, Contrastive Pragmatics investigates the pragmatic principles people abide by in one language or language community in contrast to how these principles may govern linguistic interaction in another language.

Reflecting the various approaches employed in studying contrastive pragmatics, this book is organized into three sections:

- (1) Intercultural Pragmatics and Discourse Markers;
- (2) Interlanguage Pragmatics: Strategies and Identity in the Foreign Language Classroom;
- (3) Development of Pragmatic Competence in Second Language Acquisition: Focus on “Requests”.

Most of the papers include empirical analyses of the performance of ‘linguistic interaction’ from a cross-cultural perspective involving at least two languages or language varieties.

Section 1:

Intercultural Pragmatics and Discourse Markers

Intercultural Pragmatics explores the interaction between insights from pragmatics and from intercultural communication, all in relation to the roles and functions of language and communication in a world-wide communication network. The articles in this section focus on the importance of cultural norms and values inherent in the differential uses of pragmatic utterances (oral and written) as well as on discourse markers in accordance with cultural preferences. The authors make use of various theories and methods such as cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. Most of the articles entail didactic and pedagogical implications geared towards an improvement of pragmatic and intercultural competence in the foreign language classroom.

In her programmatic article, **Anna Wierzbicka** confronts the reader with the question of whether the exclusive reliance on English as a source of conceptual tools is the best way in which intercultural pragmatics can serve the cause of world-wide understanding. Her paper argues that it is not, because English itself carries with it a great deal of cultural baggage, and so comparing communicative norms and cultural values through English leads inevitably to an Anglocentric bias. Wierzbicka offers an alternative to the use of English as a *tertium comparationis* by proposing her well-established NSM (Natural Semantic Metalanguage) model which as an auxiliary language (i.e. mini-language) matches the lexical and grammatical core of all languages. NSM English can be used to explain norms and values to ordinary interac-

tants and thus to advance the cause of intercultural communication and world-wide understanding.

From a cognitive linguistics perspective **Sabine De Knop** argues for an incorporation of real-life situations in the EFL classroom which are said to follow from a culture's experiences in past and present life. Cognitive pragmatics, therefore, is concerned with the study of the linguistic aspects of language use within the theoretical framework of cognitive science. By discussing examples taken from the nominal and verbal sphere of pragmatics as well as from case morphology, the author shows that the experience of socio-cultural reality is organized by speakers of different languages (here German and French) in different categories and conceptualizations, a fact which should be investigated and exploited for the purpose of FLT. Therefore, "to learn to think in a foreign language" can only be achieved with a cognitively and experientially rooted approach to language understanding and description.

Likewise, **Svetlana Kurteš** uses a cognitive linguistics approach to explain the interaction between grammar, pragmatics and culture specific processes of conceptualisation. More specifically, her paper addresses a segment of verbal reflexivity and middleness, as can be observed in a set of related verbs in Serbo-Croat, i.e. so-called 'se-verbs' as discourse markers which constitute a multifunctional grammatical device. She then discusses the pragmatic principles underlying the rules of usage of this grammatical segment and proposes ways of introducing it into language teaching curricula and relevant pedagogical materials. She also argues for a recognition of Wierzbicka's 'cultural scripts' in foreign language teaching enabling the learner to interpret messages in terms of their underlying cultural norms and values. Thus, although her contribution does not directly focus on pragmatic features and markers in the foreign language classroom per se, her proposed framework nevertheless can yield contrastively valuable results which can be applied to language pedagogy.

JoAnne Neff-van Aertselaer and Emma Dafouz-Milne's study is to be seen as part of a larger project which aims to describe Spanish EFL students' pragmatic competency. It contrasts, quantitatively and qualitatively, texts written by editorialists in both English and Spanish with those used by novice writers, i.e. Spanish EFL and American university students. Specifically, the authors explore the role of interpersonal (e.g. devices to express certainty or doubt) and textual metadiscourse (logical markers, sequences, topicalizers, illocutionary markers, etc.) in persuasive texts. The results showed that rhetorical practices vary according to cultural preferences and

that, generally, metadiscourse markers can be regarded as indicators of cultural differences in argumentative texts. In the case of the EFL students, their limited competency in academic English may hinder them from choosing more appropriate textual and interpersonal strategies.

Augustin Simo Bobda's article shows that, despite a sustained effort to expose learners to a diversified spectrum of culture-specific features, current ELT materials still show a marked imbalance in favour of the Anglo-American and other Western cultures thus highlighting the dominance of English and neglecting issues of intercultural communication. In this respect, Africa is conspicuously marginalized. The author therefore pleads for the recognition of "cultural guidelines" to assist the English user in Africa, with special reference to Cameroon. Some pragmatic features of the local cultural background are to be taken into consideration, such as the African family (i.e. kinship terms), the importance of interactional language (e.g. greetings), and class-consciousness (e.g. address terms). These domains are discussed in the light of an analysis of culture-specific words and phrases by means of a cognitive approach (in terms of salience) supported by corpus analysis.

Section 2:

Interlanguage Pragmatics: Strategies and Identity in the Foreign Language Classroom

Another focus of research in pragmatics is learner language or interlanguage, defined as the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic patterns in a second language. This section discusses research into interlanguage pragmatics, i.e. the use and development of pragmatic competence by non-native speakers. More specifically, it addresses the way L2 learners comprehend and produce a speech act in a target language and investigates how their pragmatic competence develops over time. Various articles included in this section focus on facework, indirect complaints and the speech act *humor*, as they constitute important pragmatic strategies in the foreign language classroom. Other articles deal with bilingual usage in classroom peer-group talk involving the use of code-switching and code choice as various pragmatic means of constructing linguistic and social identities.

Doris Dippold discusses the concepts of *face* and *facework* as important aspects of interlanguage pragmatics and specifically of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Based on data gathered through argumentative conversation tasks performed by learners of German and by native speakers of German and English in their respective languages, the article shows that

learners of German construct their conversational identities (i.e. the giving and taking of opinions) rather differently from native speakers of German. If the learners' development is measured based on target language norms, the researcher may run the risk of reducing learners to only one of their identities. As a result of her study, the author suggests that within the concept of 'communicative competence' researchers in contrastive pragmatics include/adapt the term 'interpersonal competence', defined as the 'interlocutors' ability to negotiate which strategies are appropriate, even though they may not match up to native speakers' competence.

The concept of 'identity' is taken up by **Constance Ellwood**, whose paper contributes to the under-researched area of 'indirect complaint' strategies. By making use of an ethnographic study among French and Japanese students, the paper discusses relationships between different uses of code-switching and student identities in an intercultural communication setting in an Australian university. A number of indirect complaints or acts were identified such as resistance and/or solidarity, rejection of an implied identity (imposed by the teacher), or expressing frustration with the students' own ignorance (acts of resistance). The author proposes that awareness of these uses can draw teachers' attention to students' major identity concerns in language classrooms: cultural identity, student identity, and an international identity.

Bilingual and bicultural identity also play a role in **Elin Fredsted's** article which reports on bilingual language use among adolescents in the Danish-German border region involving Standard German, Standard Danish and South Jutish as a Danish-Jutish dialect. The data cover different situational contexts and speech activities (interviews, classroom dialogues, group tasks, conversations) where pragmatic devices such as code choice and code-alternation are used with social and interactive intentions, e.g. to negotiate language and culture, to position oneself in the class, or to construct 'otherness'. The author concludes that the Danish minority schools practise a less tolerant language policy than the German ones, in which code-switching is generally tolerated and a regional bi-culturality is practised.

Manuela Wagner and Eduardo Urios-Aparisi present results of a study carried out in concrete situations and role plays in the foreign language classroom. They focus on the speech act of 'humor' as a well-researched topic of pragmatic investigation hardly acknowledged in second language acquisition research. The questions addressed here are which types of humor were used by the instructor and the student, how the humor affected classroom interaction, and what kind of uptake those kinds of humor had on ei-

ther the student or the instructor. Two important functions of humor in the foreign language classroom are pointed out by the authors: (i) it can lower student anxiety (due to the discrepancy between their cognitive ability and their linguistic skills), and (ii) it represents content to be acquired in order to become skilled interlocutors in the target language. Data are drawn from Spanish and German classes of various degrees of proficiency at university level.

Section 3:

Development of Pragmatic Competence in Foreign Language Learning: Focus on “Requests”

The studies in this section aim to contribute to the growing literature on the development of pragmatic competence of L2 learners with particular attention to the illocutionary act of *requests* and their cultural significance. A single utterance such as a request can, and often does, serve a number of illocutionary acts and without requests it would be difficult for the learner to function effectively. As the various studies suggest, sources of intercultural misunderstanding are particularly revealing in regard to requests as intrinsic face-threatening acts. Some authors demonstrate that learners when producing requests rely heavily on L1 based pragmatic knowledge which then influences target language norms with negative transfer as the outcome. One of the primary goals in the language classroom is, therefore, to sharpen the learner’s awareness of appropriate cognitive and social behaviour through explicit teaching strategies in order to further and strengthen metapragmatic competence.

Most of the researchers included in this section use discourse completion tasks (DCT) as their basic methodology, although others gather their data from informal interviews and questionnaire surveys. Some papers also examine students’ knowledge and understanding of L2 pragmatic features in conjunction with positive/negative pragmatic transfer from their first language (L1).

Helen Woodfield presents findings from an empirical study of responses to written discourse completion tasks eliciting *requests* in English by Japanese and German ESL learners and British English native speaker graduate students. The study reveals that differences between the ESL learners and English native speakers were evident in the nature of request perspectives employed and the range of linguistic strategies for internally mitigating the head act. Overall the paper suggests that even at relatively advanced levels, ESL learners may operate with a limited range of linguistic strategies in

formulating appropriate speech acts and may benefit in instruction from awareness-raising tasks aimed at developing their pragmatic competence. Moreover, sociocultural transfer was evident as a significant influence in the planning processes of the Japanese learners in formulating appropriate politeness strategies.

In the same vein, **G. Bahar Otcu and Deniz Zeyrek**'s study examines how Turkish adult learners of English perform *requests* and compares them to native speakers' usage. Their investigation reveals a number of interesting findings: for example, as regards external modifiers, the overall picture is that the learners' and the native speakers' use do not show large variations. The most frequently used modal in the request head acts (RHA) was *can* for the learners whereas the native speakers used *could* most frequently, rendering *can* as a less frequently used modal for requests. The results of their study has important developmental implications: lower proficiency level learners simply rely on formulaic utterances which they have been introduced to before, whereas learners with an increased proficiency level are more liable to show pragmatic transfer, given the fact that now they have the linguistic resources for transfer.

The concept of 'transfer' is centrally taken up in the article by **Zohreh R. Eslami and Aazam Noora**. Using data from Persian learners of English the authors examine the transferability of *request* strategies to corresponding English requests contexts. A process-oriented approach was undertaken in order to explore the various conditions under which pragmatic transfer operates. The Persian request strategies were found to be differentially transferable and the learners' transferability perception was not significantly influenced by their L2 proficiency. As a result, the transferability of the L1 request strategies seemed to be influenced by the interaction between the politeness encoded in the strategies and the degree of imposition involved in the requestive goal.

Berna Hendriks also shows that *requests* can be regarded as potential areas of pragmatic failure in intercultural communication. The purpose of her study is to gain insights into the production of requests in relation to perceptions of situational factors by Dutch learners of English as compared to native speakers of English and native speakers of Dutch. Respondents were asked to formulate oral requests in response to situations that varied along three dimensions: power distance, social distance and context. Findings indicate that the English native speakers, the Dutch native speakers and the Dutch learners were very much alike in their choice of request strategies, but that they varied in the linguistic means that they used to modify their

requests. The learners generally included both fewer and less varied syntactic modifiers and fewer and less varied lexical/phrasal modifiers in their requests than the native speakers of English.

Anne Barron's paper is designed to address a research gap in the study of intra-lingual pragmatic variation. The study concentrates on the level of directness used in requesting in Ireland and England. Specifically, it takes the case of regional variation and investigates the realisation of *requests* focussing on the language pair of Irish English and English English. The study reveals similarities in the two cultures on the level of the strategy and also in the choice of modifiers. The overall analysis, however, shows that the head act is less direct in the Irish culture, with clear differences being found in the levels of upgrading and downgrading employed and in the particular distribution of the internal modifiers used.

One issue in interlanguage pragmatics which has received relatively little attention is the pragmatic development of university students who are studying at foreign universities. In this regard, **Gila Schauer** examines the productive pragmatic development (i.e. request strategies) of German learners of English at a British university over a period of one academic year, as well as German learners of English in Germany and British English native speakers studying at a British university. Specifically, she is interested in developments in the request strategy use as well as on gains in their request strategy repertoire. In addition, the effect of the sustained sojourn on learners' productive pragmatic competence is discussed by comparing the results of the three participant groups.

It is hoped that the articles included in this volume on contrastive pragmatics will encourage further research into areas of language teaching and learning that have not yet received full attention. One area which merits additional study is that of the type of sociocultural experiences language learners might find most conducive to the learning of highly entrenched patterns of behaviour in response to commonly occurring discourse situations, or, those which can most effectively prime language learners with new sets of semantic associations (Hoey 2005). In this regard, a growing body of research (Achard and Niemeier 2004; Pütz, Niemeier and Dirven 2001) has been devoted to the underlying conceptual differences between the L1 and the L2 and the need to include "conceptual fluency" (Danesi 1995) as an objective for second language teaching. Only in this way will learners be able to comprehend how contextualization cues, built up through past experiences, help guide speakers'/hearers' interpretation of what meaning was intended. The papers included in Section 1 of this volume call attention to

the idea of making schemas evident to learners in instructional materials and various suggest pedagogical practices which would offer students opportunities to develop awareness of appropriate language behaviour.

The other side of the coin –the study of language attrition of both the L1 and the L2 and, with the language, the cultural identity, a process leading to assimilation– has been examined from a macro-level approach but not so thoroughly on a micro-level. Relatively little research has considered the effect of educational background, motivation or gender on language maintenance or attrition of languages on various linguistic levels. More recent works have begun to focus on the behaviour of people who actually use various languages in daily life and how choice becomes a factor in activating these various “cultural personalities” in different contexts (Pavlenko 1999). The articles included in Section 2 contribute to the increasing number of micro-level studies by addressing the strategies employed to validate identity in the foreign language classroom, and in particular the issue of the cultural identity of learners and their possible resistance to adopting the norms of another cultural context.

The return of language relativity to the forefront of SLA research (Kramsch 2004) raises the question of whether, given the diversity within speech communities, one can actually state that “strict norms” really exist and if they do, what the severity of the social sanctions accompanying pragmatic failures might be (following studies concerned with which types of errors most seriously hamper communication). One area that has not yet received much attention is the interface between levels of linguistic competency in the L2 (for example, the six broad levels of competency established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) and the utilization of different pragmatic phenomena under study. Closely linked to the level of competency is the notion of stages in the development of pragmatic competence, especially in adult learners. In this respect, the studies included in Section 3 of this volume provide important insights into this relatively underdeveloped area of research.

The editors and authors offer this book as an invitation to contribute to the promising avenues for future research into the many SLA issues raised within the volume.

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Section 1.

Intercultural Pragmatics and Discourse Markers

A conceptual basis for intercultural pragmatics and world-wide understanding

Anna Wierzbicka

1. Introduction: Ethnocentrism parading as science¹

I think that one of the greatest obstacles to world-wide understanding is ethnocentrism and that a particularly dangerous form of ethnocentrism is ethnocentrism parading as “science”. This applies, in particular, to the humanities and social sciences, including psychology and psychiatry. Above all, given the current prominence of English in science (as well as in most other areas of contemporary life), it is common for the cultural assumptions associated with the English language to be absolutized as the voice of reason itself. Anglocentric assumptions presented by Anglo scholars as “rational” and “human” frequently become part of scientific paradigms widely used as a basis for research, generating in consequence equally Anglocentric results.

Sometimes scientists recognize this Anglocentrism in contemporary science themselves. For example, the medical practitioner and medical scholar Christopher Dowrick (2004) argues that the current status of “depression” as a medical condition is based on shaky foundations and has one of its main sources in the fact that “English emotional words [such as *depressed* and *depression*, A.W.] are raised to positions of apparent pre-eminence and universality because English currently has such a predominant position as the international language of science” (2004: 126).

Remarkably, what applies to medical science, psychiatry, psychology and so on, applies also to linguistics, and even more remarkably, pragmatics is no exception in this regard. The key position of the exceedingly Anglocentric “Gricean maxims” (and their various successors) in this field is a sad illustration of how pervasive this phenomenon has been, and still is, with exceedingly Anglo concepts and norms such as ‘reasonable’, ‘relevant’ and ‘evidence’ (“be reasonable”, “be concise”, “be relevant”, do not speak without adequate evidence) being elevated to the status of universal human values. I discussed the Anglocentrism of “Gricean maxims” and their “post-Gricean” and “neo-Gricean” offspring in detail in the introduction to the second edi-

tion of my book *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics* (2003). Here I will illustrate the same phenomenon with a different set of examples.

In a recent article in the British magazine *The Week* (24 September 2005), in a rubric entitled “What the scientists are saying...” one finds the following:

Old people tend to speak their minds because the part of the brain that keeps rude thoughts in check weakens with age, reports *Daily Mail*. They know what they are about to say will cause offence or embarrassment, but just can't help themselves. “It seems that young adults have a greater ability to hold their tongue than older adults in contexts where it is inappropriate to discuss personal issues”, said psychologist Dr Bill von Hippel. For the study, researchers looked at how volunteers of various ages raised sensitive subjects, such as haemorrhoids, or weight gain, in conversation. They found people aged over 65 were far more likely to blurt out personal questions than those aged 18 to 25. Dr von Hippel says that this is because the frontal lobes of the brain, which deal with inhibition, are the last to develop (which is why children are tactless), and, as we get older, the first to shrink. “It doesn't lead to a person becoming less intelligent but it gives them less control over thought suppression”.

If Dr von Hippel and his team were to study human communication in Russia, they could easily come to the conclusion that in the brains of Russian people the frontal lobes never develop at all, at least much less than in those of most Brits, Americans and Australians. As Russian literature vividly illustrates, in Russia people of all ages are likely to “blurt out” what Anglos might see as “personal questions” and “personal remarks”, and the mechanisms for “thought suppression” appear to be greatly underdeveloped: it would seem that people just can't “hold their tongues” in the ways Anglos would expect them to do.

If von Hippel and colleagues were to read Russian literature, they might be struck to see how people in it tell each other the “truth” about their appearance, especially if they haven't met for a long time. Thus, in Chekhov's “Three Sisters” Maša (a woman in her twenties) greets Veršinin, an old acquaintance whom she hasn't seen for many years, as follows (Karl Kramer's translation, Chekhov 1997):

Oh, how you've aged! (Through tears). How you've aged!

Similarly, in “The Cherry Orchard” (Michael Frayn's translation), the middle-aged Ljubov' Andreevna tells the student Trofimov after a few years' absence:

What's this, Petya? Why have you lost your looks?
Why have you aged so?

And then she continues:

You were still only a boy before, just a nice young student. You're surely not still a student?

Ljubov' Andreevna is fond of the student, but if she feels only concern for "not hurting his feelings" (an English expression, not a Russian one) it does not get in the way of "telling him the truth" or "telling him what she really thinks". Ljubov' Andreevna's gentle, kind-hearted daughter Varya (a young adult) makes similar remarks to Trofimov – without any malice but simply in recognition of the truth:

Oh, but Petya, you've grown so ugly, you've aged so!

If we don't want to assume, straight away, that in most Russian people the frontal lobes of the brain, which deal with inhibition, are severely underdeveloped, we might prefer to question von Hippel's assumptions: is it really the frontal lobes of the brain which are responsible for dealing with inhibition, or is it rather some cultural norms, associated with the English language and Anglo culture?

At this point, some readers are likely to raise an eyebrow. "The English language"? "Anglo culture"? Don't we all know that there are numerous "English languages" around the world, associated with different, and ever changing, cultural traditions and norms?

As I have argued at length in my book *English: Meaning and Culture* (2006), to reject the notions of English language and Anglo culture altogether means to throw out the baby with the bath water. There is of course a great deal of variation, and also change, in the use of English around the world, but there is also an important and relatively stable core, and this core is not culturally neutral. This core, which I call "Anglo English", corresponds in essence to what Braj Kachru (1992) called "the English of the inner circle" – a term widely adopted in current sociolinguistic literature. As I have tried to show in many publications (e.g. Wierzbicka 2002, 2003, 2006), it is linked with a particular cultural tradition, which has its roots in the British Enlightenment, in the discourse of the Royal Society and in the writings of John Locke and other influential philosophers and writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The legacy of this tradition can be found, *inter alia*, in some core English concepts, associated with such cultural key words as *mind*, *reasonable*, *right* and *wrong*, *evidence*, *fairness*,

etc., which I have analysed in detail in my book *English: Meaning and Culture* (see also Wierzbicka, To appear).

Again, there is of course a great deal of individual variation between different speakers of English (Anglo English). But there is also a shared linguistic and cultural core: they may differ in their individual attitudes, values and assumptions, but they also have a great deal in common. In particular, they share a familiarity with cultural key words of Anglo English such as *reasonable*, *evidence*, *fairness*, and *privacy*, and with the cultural assumptions encoded in their meaning.

I want to argue then that Anglo English – the language on which most contemporary science and popular science relies – draws largely on a stock of ideas and assumptions which are culture-specific and which tend to be absolutized by Anglophone writers in psychology, sociology, philosophy, etc. as the voice of “Science” with a capital S.

To say this is not to side with those in whose view science is, and will always be, a search for power rather than a search for truth (cf. e.g. Latour 1987); or those who claim that truth can never be reached because language is always in the way, since it always “bears the imprint of its user; the strain of his own affectivity and psychic structures” (Chiari 1975: 171, quoted in Fernandez Armesto 1998: 194–5). I am strongly in sympathy with Fernandez Armesto:

No development of our times is more terrifying to those who hope to sustain the truth or revive it than the breakdown of confidence in the power of language to express it. Any certainties left unscathed by other disciplines have been declared inexpressible by philosophers of language. (...) We are left with dumbstruck tongues and hands too numb to write, despairing of ever saying anything true because language is trapped in self-reference, unable to reach reality, never expressing truth and, at best, only able to ‘represent’ it.

If I say, nonetheless, “beware of English”, it is not because I believe that truth cannot be reached through English. I believe that if we do beware of English – as a language that bears the imprint of its users – we can learn to discern within English a universal core which is free from such imprints and can therefore be used for talking about the world in culture-independent ways. I will show how this can be done in section 3; first, however, let me comment briefly on the concept of ‘culture(s)’.

2. Linguistic evidence for shared cultural understandings

When one speaks of “Anglo culture” or “Russian culture” one is often accused of “essentialism”. I have sought to refute this accusation for many years, most recently in a paper entitled “In defense of culture” (Wierzbicka 2005a). Here, I will confine myself to emphasizing again that the meanings of words provide the best evidence for the reality of cultures as ways of living, speaking, thinking and feeling which are widely shared in a particular society. This applies in particular to everyday words which exist not only in dictionaries and in some specialized registers and genres but above all in everyday discourse, and which are linked with salient speech practices, conversational routines and cultural norms. Of course societies are not homogeneous and in every society there is a great deal of variation (across gender, generations, occupational groups, etc.). But there is also a degree of stability and unity. The point is that both the variation and the “shared understandings” can be studied, objectively and accurately, through the meaning of words and expressions.

Let me illustrate this, first of all, with the vitally important English word *privacy* (which will be discussed more fully in section 6). In his memoir *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* the Nobel-prize winner J.M. Coetzee (1997) writes about the key role that the Anglo notion of “privacy” played in his bilingual and bicultural life as a boy growing up in South Africa. For young Coetzee, “privacy” epitomized Anglo culture, linked with the English language, and the absence of this notion, and this value, epitomized for him the culture linked with Afrikaans, which he rejected with dread.

The childhood in Prince Albert that he hears his father joking about with his brothers strikes him as no different from an Afrikaans life in Worcester. It centres just as much on being beaten and on nakedness, on body functions performed in front of other boys, on an animal indifference to **privacy**.

The thought of being turned into an Afrikaans boy, with the shaven head and no shoes, makes him quail. It is like being sent to prison, to a life without **privacy**. He cannot live without **privacy**. If he were Afrikaans he would have to live every minute of every day and night in the company of others. It is a prospect he cannot bear. (p.126)

Many native speakers of English in England, United States, Canada, Australia or New Zealand would no doubt say, like Coetzee, that they “cannot live without privacy”. No doubt many would also say that the need for

privacy is a fundamental human need: they live with this word, they rely on it in their thinking, and they take it for granted, like the air that they breathe.

And yet English is the only language in the world which has a word for the concept of ‘privacy’ – a fact which native speakers of English often find hard to believe. “Surely at least European languages like French and German would have a word for it?” Well, they don’t, and bilingual dictionaries recognize this. For example, the best that the Collins-Robert English-French dictionary can offer for *privacy* is *intimité*, *solitude*, and Langenscheidt’s English-German German-English Dictionary, *Zurückgezogenheit* (glossed in turn as ‘retirement, seclusion’) and *Privatleben* ‘private life’. None of these putative equivalents comes anywhere near *privacy* as it is used in modern English, and, for example, none of them could be used to translate Coetzee’s phrase “an animal indifference to privacy...” or the sentence “he cannot live without privacy”.

I have asked John Coetzee what words the translators of *Boyhood* have used, and he told me that the French translator uses *être seul* (*le besoin d’être seul*, etc), the Italian translator uses *vita privata* and *intimità*, the German translator uses *die Privatsphäre*, and the Dutch translator uses the English word *privacy*, unitalicized, and that his Dutch-English dictionary gives *afzondering*, “which is really isolation” (personal communication, 2 February 2006).

Paradoxically, a language which could cope better with sentiments like those expressed in the Coetzee passage is Japanese – not because it has any “native” words comparable to *privacy*, but because of its great appetite for loans from English. The word *puraibashi* (the Japanese rendering of *privacy*) does not have anything like the full range of its English source, but it certainly approximates many of its core uses better than words like *intimité*, *solitude*, *Zurückgezogenheit* or *Privatleben*. Truly, nothing illustrates Herder’s dictum that “every nation speaks ... according to the way it thinks and thinks accordingly to the way it speaks” (1877–1913, v.21: 88) better than the English word *privacy*.

As the quote from Coetzee illustrates, in modern Anglo societies people often think about their own lives, and lives of others, in terms of ‘privacy’: the current meaning of the word *privacy* reflects a culture-specific way of thinking which has for an extended period been sufficiently wide-spread to have become lexically encoded, and moreover, to have become a household word – a word that Anglo/English speakers live with and live by. In a later section, I try to pin down the meaning of this word, and with it, some culture-specific ways of thinking widely shared in modern Anglo societies.

First, however, let me discuss some words and expressions from the article *What the scientists are saying*.

Consider for example the verb *to blurt out*, used prominently in that article. There is no word like *blurt out* in Russian (or, for that matter, in my native Polish). In a very limited range of contexts, *blurt out* could be rendered in Russian with the transitive and perfective verb *vyboltat'*, but *vyboltat'* is by and large restricted to unthinkingly revealing a secret, and, for example, it could not be used to translate *blurt out* in any of the following sentences from COBUILD:

Resist the temptation to **blurt out** your tales of woe to everyone you meet.

You don't have to **blurt out** everything you're thinking--there is a place for tactful gentleness in all human relations. If you try, you can probably find something optimistic to focus on.

In the presence of a star, some people ask for an autograph; some, more impressionable, scream or faint; and some, like commentator Nancy Slocum Aronie just **blurt out** the first thing that comes to mind.

"I don't bloody well believe you then," I **blurt out**.

The fact that there is such a word in modern English reflects certain cultural assumptions – assumptions which von Hippel attributes to the human brain. Using a mini-language known as the “Natural Semantic Metalanguage” (to be discussed shortly), we can articulate these assumptions along the following lines:

- it is not always good to say to another person what one is thinking
- when one wants to say to another person what one is thinking
it is good to think about it before one says it

The idea that it is not good to say the first thing that comes to one's mind without considering it first, appears to have been well established in Anglo culture from the eighteenth century, as the following quotation from the OED illustrates:

Sometimes people will blurt out things inadvertently, which if judgement had been awake it would have suppressed. (Tucker 1768)

The word *suppressed* in this quotation echoes von Hippel's phrase “thought suppression”. Of course different speakers of English may have different views as to whether it is good or bad to “suppress one's thoughts”, but the view that it may often be advisable to do so has been sufficiently widely accepted among the speakers of English in the last two or three centuries to have become lexically encoded: the word *to blurt out*, which used to mean

(as the OED puts it) “to emit the breath eruptively from the mouth” and “to utter abruptly, and as if by a sudden impulse”, with time came to include in its meaning a negative evaluation of an “impulsive” way of speaking. For example, the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (1991) defines this meaning as follows: “if you blurt something out, you say it without thinking first about the consequences, often with the result that you regret it, e.g. *he blurted it out before I had the time to stop him*”.

To anyone familiar with Russian culture it can hardly be surprising that there is no word in Russian comparable to the English *blurt out*. In Russian culture, saying spontaneously what you think at a given moment, without thinking about the consequences, tends to be considered as a very good thing, not a bad thing (although of course it was not possible to follow this norm in Soviet times). Obviously, even in Russia not everyone would agree, but a sufficient proportion of Russian speakers must have seen such spontaneity as a virtue for the ideal of “iskrennost’” to emerge in Russian culture and to become lexically encoded. The word *iskrennij* (roughly, ‘sincere and spontaneous’ at the same time) is a cultural key word in Russian, used to praise an impulsive and spontaneous way of speaking.

In fact, Russian has many words and expressions for praising the ways of speaking anathematized by Anglo scientists like von Hippel and disapproved of, so to speak, by the English lexicon and English phraseology. This applies, in particular, to the area of potentially hurtful and offensive remarks, linked by von Hippel with underdeveloped or shrunk front lobes of the brain.

As the piece in *The Week* nicely illustrates, in Anglo culture there is a widely-shared norm prohibiting so-called “personal remarks”, which can be expected to be offensive or embarrassing; and there is a concomitant assumption that people who make such remarks usually make them impulsively, “thoughtlessly”, thus showing insufficient control over the expression of their thoughts. Von Hippel speaks here of “rude thoughts”, but evidently what he means is “rude remarks”: what is at issue is control over one’s words, not over one’s thoughts. Indeed, the expressions *personal remarks* and *rude remarks* are set phrases in English whereas the expression *rude thoughts* is not.

The Anglo cultural norm proscribing “personal remarks” as “rude” 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 “with some severity”: “You should learn not to make personal remarks...; it’s very rude”.

Russian has no expressions corresponding to *personal remarks* or *rude remarks*, as it has no word corresponding to *blurt out*: as the examples from Chekhov illustrate, there is no widely shared norm in Russian culture against making what are known in English as “personal remarks”, just as there is no norm against saying what one thinks about the addressee or against speaking spontaneously, without any sustained effort at “thought suppression” or “thought control”. On the other hand, linguistic evidence suggests that considerable value is placed in Russian culture on speaking the truth and saying exactly what one thinks.

As I have discussed in my paper on Russian cultural scripts (Wierzbicka 2002), from an Anglo point of view, the insistence on saying truthfully what one thinks, characteristic of Russian discourse, may often seem extreme, even excessive. Aren't all those Russians who cherish and practise this value aware that they may hurt other people's feelings?

Russian expressions like *rezat' pravdu v glaza* ('to cut the truth into somebody's eyes') and sayings like *Pravda glaza kolet* ('truth stings the eyes') show that in fact Russians are well aware of the painful effect that truth-telling may have on the listener. Yet the same expressions and sayings also suggest that telling the truth may stand higher in the hierarchy of values than any consideration for the interlocutor's feelings. For example, the expression *rezat' pravdu v glaza* does not suggest at all that it is bad to throw the "cutting truth" into one's interlocutor's eyes (usually a truth expressing a negative moral evaluation of the interlocutor's actions or person).

Furthermore, linguistic evidence suggests that it is seen as good, rather than bad, to speak to another person *bez obinjakov*, that is, without any "soft padding" or "wrapping" around an unpleasant or painful message; it is good to speak *prjamo*, that is, "straight." One example from Chekhov's play *Ivanov* (1997) (my translation):

Nikolaj Alekseevič, forgive me, I'll speak openly [*prjamo*, lit. 'straight'], without beating about the bush [*bez obinjakov*]. In your voice, in your intonation, not to mention your words, there is so much soulless selfishness, so much cold heartlessness.... I can't tell you, I don't have a gift of words, but—I profoundly dislike you!

To which the addressee, evidently also concerned about the truth, replies:

Maybe, maybe . . . You may be seeing more clearly because you're looking at it from the outside. Probably, I'm very, very guilty. . . . You, doctor, don't like me and you're not hiding it. This does you credit [lit. it gives honor to your heart].

As we saw earlier, it is not only a concern for moral truth that can make people speak “straight”, “without wrapping”, it can also be a simple desire to say to another person what one is currently thinking — for example, about the addressee’s appearance.

This doesn’t mean, needless to say, that Russian culture doesn’t place any value on “not hurting people’s feelings”, but rather, that it places a greater value on saying, truthfully, what one thinks. Again, in saying this, I am not speculating about Russian “national character”, or indulging in idle stereotyping (as the Swiss linguist Patrick Sériot (2005) recently accused me of doing), but describing the hierarchy of values reflected in the Russian language. The absence in Russian of expressions like *personal remarks* and words like *blurt out*, and the presence of positively charged words and expressions like *prjamo* (‘straight’), *otkrovenno* (‘openly’) and *bez obinjakov* (‘without soft wrapping’) shows how this hierarchy of values differs from that reflected in English.

Von Hippel’s idea that before their frontal lobes shrink normal human beings don’t ask “personal questions” would also be amusing – if it were not such a good illustration of extreme ethnocentrism parading as “science”. Memoirs of Anglo travellers are full of stories about “natives” asking their age, earnings, marital status, reasons for not being married or not having children and so on, often combined with the assumption that those who ask such questions must be savages.

In fact, the phrase *personal questions* – like the phrases *personal remarks* and *rude remarks* – is part and parcel of “Anglo” English; and it reflects a cultural norm which is part of a particular historical formation. I will return to the meaning of the expression *personal questions* and to the cultural norm associated with it in section 5.2.

As these preliminary examples illustrate, cultural norms relating to ways of speaking differ from one speech community to another, and while there can be a great deal of individual variation, there are also in each case some “shared understandings” (cf. Quinn and Strauss 1997) embedded in the lexicon itself. These shared understandings can of course change, but this too is reflected in language: new “shared understandings” lead to the emergence of new expressions (such as, for example, *personal questions* and *personal remarks* in modern English), and above all, new meanings (such as the pejorative meaning of the English word *to blurt out*).

As these examples also illustrate, English is not a culturally neutral language. Words and expressions like *blurt out*, *personal remarks* and *personal questions* are as culturally loaded as *reasonable*, *evidence*, *fairness*,

privacy, mind and so on (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2007). Like all other languages, English, too, is a cultural universe. And so are Singapore English, Sri Lankan English, Indian English, and Nigerian English. But “Anglo” English is not an exception: it, too, carries with it its own cultural baggage. Its cultural vocabulary is to a large extent “made in England”.

3. A conceptual lingua franca for intercultural pragmatics

Current research in intercultural pragmatics “*finds its research objectives in the multilingual and multicultural interaction of speakers from different national, ethnic, and racial backgrounds*” (see the “Call for Papers” for the Laud Symposium 2006). This is indeed where current research finds its objectives – but where does it find its conceptual tools? The fact is that most research in pragmatics (as in many other areas of humanities and social sciences) continues to find its conceptual tools in the conceptual vocabulary of English.

In the era of globalization, communication is becoming increasingly intercultural and it involves interactants “*who have different cultures, different conceptualisations, and different first languages, and who use a grammatically common language or lingua franca [such as English], but a pragmatically highly diversified instrument of communication representing not only different cultures, but also different norms and values*” (see the “Call for Papers” for the LAUD Symposium 2006). But the question must be asked: in what **language** (and in what **conceptual vocabulary**) can those different norms and values be articulated? Is the exclusive reliance on English as a source of conceptual tools the best way in which intercultural pragmatics can serve the cause of world-wide understanding?

I want to argue that it is not, because English itself carries with it a great deal of cultural baggage, and so comparing communicative norms and cultural values **through English** leads inevitably to an Anglocentric bias. Many would say that such a bias, while real, is unavoidable. This paper argues otherwise and offers an alternative to the use of English as a tertium comparationis. This alternative can be called “NSM English”. “NSM” stands for “Natural Semantic Metalanguage” – a formal language based on empirically established semantic primes and intelligible through natural languages. Semantic primes are simple, indefinable meanings about sixty five of which can be found as the meanings of words or word-like elements in all languages. The English and, for comparison, Spanish exponents of these ele-

ments can be found in Table 1. Comparable tables can be drawn for other languages; and several have been drawn in the book *Meaning and*

Table 1. Universal Semantic Primes – English and Spanish exponents

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE/PERSON, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, BODY	YO, TU, ALGUIEN/PERSONA, ALGO/COSA, GENTE, CUERPO
Relational substantives:	KIND, PART	TIPO, PARTE
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER/ELSE	ESTO, LO MISMO, OTRO
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, MUCH/MANY, SOME, ALL	UNO, DOS, MUCHO, ALGUNOS, TODO
Evaluators:	GOOD, BAD	BUENO, MALO
Descriptors:	BIG, SMALL	GRANDE, PEQUEÑO
Mental predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	PENSAR, SABER, QUERER, SENTIR, VER, OÍR
Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE	DECIR, PALABRAS, VERDAD
Actions, events, movement, contact:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	HACER, PASAR, MOVERSE, TOCAR
Location, existence, possession, specification:	BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS/EXIST, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)	ESTAR, HAY, TENER, SER
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE	VIVIR, MORIR
Time:	WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	CUÁNDO/TIEMPO, AHORA, ANTES, DESPUÉS, MUCHO TIEMPO, POCO TIEMPO, POR UN TIEMPO, MOMENTO
Space:	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE	DÓNDE/SITIO, AQUÍ, ARRIBA, DEBAJO, CERCA, LEJOS, LADO, DENTRO
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	NO, TAL VEZ, PODER, PORQUE, SI
Augmentor, intensifier:	VERY, MORE	MUY, MÁS
Similarity:	LIKE	COMO

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 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.

Universal Grammar (Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 2002²). Together with their combinatory properties, the elements listed in the table can be seen as a universal mini-language – NSM. This mini-language has as many versions as there are languages; so there is NSM French, NSM Russian, NSM Malay, NSM Japanese; and so on. And there is NSM English.

Thus, NSM English is a mini-language derived from English but unlike “normal” (full-blown) English, matching the lexical and grammatical common core of all languages (as it has emerged from more than two decades of empirical cross-linguistic investigations). As the paper seeks to demonstrate, and as many other NSM publications have sought to demonstrate earlier (cf. in particular Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 2004, 2007), NSM English can be used to describe and compare different communicative norms and cultural values without the inevitable bias inherent in the use of “normal” English. It can also be used to explain those norms and values to ordinary interactants and thus to advance in practice, as well as in theory, the cause of world-wide understanding.

All versions of NSM – English, Spanish, Malay, and so on – are culture-free, and so they can all be used for the elucidation of ideas across languages. Arguably, however, given the realities of the world today, it is NSM English rather than NSM Malay or NSM Spanish, which can be used as the most practical auxiliary lingua franca for cross-cultural comparisons and intercultural training. I stress: not a lingua franca for international communication, but a lingua franca for cross-cultural comparisons and intercultural training. I will elaborate this distinction in the next section.

4. English NSM as a culture-free “nuclear English”

It is a truism to say that, as the doyen of English studies in Britain Randolph Quirk (1981) put it quarter of a century ago, “the world needs a single medium for international communication”, and that “the best current candidate” for this role is English. But what kind of English? Here, opinions differ, and the view appears to be gaining ground that it cannot be “ENL”, that is, English spoken as a native language in countries like Britain and USA, and that

as Barbara Seidlhofer (2001:133) puts it, it is “inappropriate and counter-productive” to tie teaching English world-wide “to native speaker norms”, given that English is now used most extensively as a global lingua franca, “largely among ‘non-native’ speakers”.

But how exactly can English become an effective medium for international communication if it is not to be tied to any particular norms, including “native speaker norms”? Where would the (relative) stability (which is the prerequisite of intelligibility) come from if there were no shared code of communication?

Quirk’s own proposed solution was the creation of “nuclear English” – an English trimmed to the bone and freed from its historical and cultural baggage, “easier and faster to learn than any variety of natural (full) English”, and at the same time “communicatively adequate” (Quirk 1981: 155).

Culture-free as calculus, with no literary, aesthetic or emotional aspirations, it is correspondingly more free than the ‘national Englishes’ of any suspicion that it smacks of linguistic imperialism or even (since native speakers of English would also have to be trained to use it) that it puts some countries at an advantage over others in international communication. Since it is not (but is merely related to) a natural language it would not be in competition for educational resources with foreign languages proper but rather with that other fundamental interdisciplinary subject, mathematics.

Is a “nuclear English” as described here by Quirk a real possibility or just a linguist’s dream? In my view, a language meeting **all** the criteria of Quirk’s “Nuclear English” is indeed a linguist’s dream rather than a real possibility, and the fact that in the intervening twenty five years Quirk himself apparently did not seek to implement his programmatic idea suggests that he, too, may have reached this conclusion. At the same time, a language which meets **some**, though not all, of Quirk’s criteria is in my view not only a real possibility but a reality: the English version of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) is nothing other than a “nuclear English” – a subset of “full English”, easy to learn, and culture-free as calculus, with no literary, aesthetic or emotional aspirations, and for some purposes (though by no means all), communicatively adequate.

Gabriele Stein (1979: 68), to whom Quirk refers with approval, says about “Nuclear English” (as originally envisaged by Quirk) that “its vocabulary is conceived of as self-contained: with the items included it will in principle be possible to express whatever one wants to express”. In a sense (to be clarified below), this condition is met by the Natural Semantic Metalan-

guage, in any of its versions: Spanish, Russian, Malay, and of course also English.

Does this mean that NSM English, that is, the English version of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage could serve as a medium for international communication? Here the answer is of course: no – certainly not in the sense in which Quirk hoped his Nuclear English could be. According to Quirk, “the emblematic consumers of Nuclear English should not be seen as Indonesian children in a village school room, but as a Italian and Japanese company directors engaged in negotiating an agreement” (p. 156). I don’t imagine that Italian and Japanese company directors could negotiate an agreement in the English (or any other) version of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, that is, in a mini-language with just sixty or so words.

The key question about any “nuclear English” – and any language of international communication – is the question about the vocabulary. Quirk avoids this question altogether: “Reluctantly ignoring issues in the lexicon, let me ponder a little on seeking appropriate nuclei in grammar” (p.156).

But if “issues in the lexicon” are ignored, the whole project of creating a nuclear English for international communication can be no more than a promisory note, utopian and lacking in substance. A “culture-free calculus” must be based on *universal* human concepts (otherwise, it will be culture-bound, not culture-free), and as decades of empirical investigations carried out with the NSM framework have shown, there are only sixty or so such concepts. This is not enough for negotiating international agreements between Italian and Japanese company directors.

Declaring his reluctant disinterest in the lexicon, Quirk refers the reader to Gabriele Stein’s (1979) article “Nuclear English: reflections on the structure of its vocabulary”. But sensible as Stein’s reflections are, the soundness of the argument cannot make up for the absence of an empirical basis. For example, she proposes as “culture-free” lexical items for the hypothetical “nuclear English” words like *female*, *brother*, and *sister*, that is words which are in fact exceedingly culture-specific: most languages of the world don’t have a word corresponding to *female* (covering women and girls as well as bitches, cows, mares, hens, etc.); and numerous languages don’t have words covering both elder brothers and younger brothers, or elder sisters and younger sisters, the distinction between older and younger brothers and sisters being often culturally very important. As these examples illustrate, a “nuclear English” based on the speculations of native speakers rather than on extensive cross-linguistic investigations is bound to reflect ethnocentric preconceptions rather than being a desired “culture-free calculus”.

A genuinely “culture-free” nuclear vocabulary cannot exceed the set of word meanings which constitute the intersection of the vocabularies of all languages. As NSM publications such as the Special Issue of *Intercultural Pragmatics* (Goddard and Wierzbicka eds. 2004) show, such a minimal (but truly universal) vocabulary is sufficient for the elucidation of culture-specific concepts encoded in “full” natural languages, including Anglo English. It is not sufficient, however, for tasks like negotiating international agreements, conducting business negotiations, safeguarding human rights or coordinating anti-terrorism or disaster-relief operations on a global scale.

Thus, agreeing with Quirk that the world needs a single medium for international communication and that the best current candidate for this role is English, I cannot agree that a nuclear, culture-free subset of English could fulfil such a role: only a much richer, larger subset of English could do that, and such a larger subset could not be “culture-free”. In particular, culture-specific concepts like ‘negotiations’, ‘compromise’, ‘deal’, ‘agreement’, ‘dialogue’, ‘efficiency’, ‘evidence’, ‘commitment’, ‘deadline’, ‘probability’, ‘performance’, ‘competition’, ‘opportunity’, ‘feasible’, ‘reasonable’ and ‘fair’ are unlikely to disappear from English-based international communication, and it is ironic that they often crop up in the very passages in which their authors denounce the “unfair” position of (Anglo) English in the world today. Quirk’s own use of the words *negotiate* and *agreement* in the sentence referring to the “emblematic consumers of Nuclear English” is very characteristic in this regard, as is also the use of words like *unreasonable* in Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas’ (1999) bitter attack on “Englishisation” of the world (“it is unreasonable to expect that Danes, Catalans or other users of English as a second language use English supremely well. The dice are loaded against them (...) and native speakers often seem to be unaware of this.” (1999: 33).

As this paper seeks to illustrate, a culture-free “nuclear English” (in the form of NSM) can play a useful role in the contemporary world as a universal cultural notation for elucidating meanings, ideas, assumptions, and so on. Ordinary international communication, however, for which speed is as important as accuracy, requires a language closer in scope to full natural languages, and such a language cannot be entirely culture-free.

Three quarters of a century ago in his paper on “The function of an international auxiliary language” Edward Sapir (1949 [1931]: 113) wrote:

What is needed above all is a language that is as simple, as regular, as logical, as rich, and as creative as possible; a language which starts with a minimum of demands on the learning capacity of the normal individual

and can do the maximum amount of work; which is to serve as a sort of logical touchstone to all national languages... . It must, ideally, be as superior to any accepted language as the mathematical method of expressing quantities and relations between quantities is to the more lumbering methods of expressing these quantities and relations in verbal form. This is undoubtedly an ideal which can never be reached, but ideals are not meant to be reached: they merely indicate the direction of movement.

Obviously, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage in its English (or any other) version does not look like what Sapir had in mind because with its sixty or so lexical items it is poor rather than rich. In many other respects, however, it fits Sapir's requirements for an ideal auxiliary language amazingly well. It is simple and can do maximum amount of work with a minimum of demands on people's learning capacities, and it can indeed be regarded as a logical (or cognitive) touchstone to all natural languages.

This brings us back to the question of language and truth. To quote Fernandez Armesto again, "To a philosopher seeking truth, the limitations of language seem like a tiresome obstacle. If natural language does not suffice to convey meaning precisely, it ought to be possible to construct an alternative language (...) free of ambiguities or cultural alterations – or a metalanguage in which the limitations of language can be contemplated without self-reference" (1998:197).

As colleagues and I have sought to demonstrate, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage can be seen as such an alternative language; and while it has, potentially, thousands of versions (as many as there are languages), one of these versions – the English one – has also the value of being a practical option in the world today. This privileged position of NSM English has of course nothing to do with any inherent superiority of English – a notion that we emphatically reject. The reason is simply that English has now become, to a large extent, a global language.

Thus, the warning formulated earlier – "Beware of English!" – can now be refined and supplemented with a more positive message: let's beware of Anglo English and let's not mistake it for the language of the human mind; at the same time, however, colleagues and I argue that we can trust NSM English – a faithful representation of the conceptual intersection of all natural languages, and at the same time, a practical global auxiliary lingua franca.

To reiterate the main point, NSM English can serve as such an auxiliary lingua franca only because it is divested of all cultural and historical "idio-

syncretisms” of “normal” English, which to many monolingual and monocultural speakers of English are simply invisible.

What is most important in the present context is that being (like any other version of NSM) culturally neutral, NSM English can serve as a cultural notation for cross-cultural comparisons and explanations. It cannot serve as a full-fledged language of intercultural communication but it can serve as a language of cross-cultural comparisons and intercultural training. In what follows, I will illustrate how NSM English can be used for such purposes with examples drawn from the same area on which von Hippel and his colleagues based their startling claims cited earlier. I will start with the Anglo conceptual category of “personal questions”.

5. *Personal questions and some related expressions*

5.1. The key word *personal* and its collocations

The word *personal* is a cultural key word in contemporary English and it enters several common collocations, such as, for example, *personal opinion*, *personal belongings*, *personal choice*, *personal decision*, *personal appearance*, *personal hygiene*, *personal letter*. Aside from *personal opinion* and *personal choice*, which are the most common and the most culturally loaded of them all and deserve a separate study, those most important in the present context are *personal questions* and *personal remarks*, which I will discuss in this section. I will also touch here on the expressions *for personal reasons*, *personal issues*, *personal matters*, and *personal space*. In all these expressions the word *personal* functions, one might say, as a signal: “keep off”, “don’t intrude”, “private territory”. As we will see in section 6, they all express meanings related to the Anglo cultural value of ‘privacy’ and they are associated with a whole family of interrelated cultural scripts. I will start my discussion of this family of scripts with the script linked with the expression *personal questions*.

5.2. *Personal questions*

The concept of “personal questions”, which is very important in contemporary Anglo culture, is linked with a cultural norm which as a first approximation can be formulated very simply: “don’t ask personal questions”. But

what exactly are those “personal questions”? Trying to answer this question, I will adduce here first of all some citations from the COBUILD corpus, to illustrate how the expression *personal questions* is used in contemporary English. As these examples illustrate, English speakers are very conscious of the cultural implications of the phrase *personal questions*: obviously, this phrase reflects, and appeals to, some shared cultural understandings.

But it was not Oliphant’s way to intrude with **personal questions**.

The star then began a series of the most intrusive **personal questions**.

...out of Ramon’s character and past: Did he have a drug problem? Was he a chronic liar? What was his real criminal record? Had he left a trail of kited checks behind him back in the United States? When Ramon began to protest at his detailed, highly **personal questions**, Kevin patiently explained to him that in front of a jury and a good defense lawyer, Ramon’s virtues were going to be a good deal less evident than his failings would be. Rick was full of questions about Dan and me. How long had we been together? Why had we never married? Was Rachel planned? Hang on, I thought. We are still at the stage in our relationship when we should be talking about what music we like. Now here I was, answering **personal questions** and being interrogated about bloody Dan, of all people.

As these examples also illustrate, there is really no finite list of questions that count in Anglo culture as “personal questions”: what links all “personal questions” is, above all, the fact that they are questions about the addressee, and also that they refer to matters which can be regarded as “private”, that is, matters which do not belong to public knowledge and which are not accessible through public sources of information.

But of course the words *public* and *private*, which I have just used in this preliminary explanation, are also part of the Anglo/English conceptual vocabulary and don’t have semantic equivalents in most other languages of the world and so would not be intelligible to cultural outsiders. Using NSM English, we can explain the norm in question in the form of the following cultural script:

[A] The cultural script against asking *personal questions*

[many people think like this:]

some things are like this:

not many people can know these things about other people

if they don’t know these other people well

it is not good if someone wants to know things like this about another person

if they don’t know this other person well

it is bad if someone says to another person about something like this:

“I want to know this about you
because of this, I want you to say it to me”
if they don’t know this other person well

Arguably, the norm reflected in this script is related to (and implicitly contrasted with) the Anglo cultural norm which encourages free exchange of information (cf. Eades 1982, Goody 1978): in general, if one doesn’t know something one needs to know, one can ask, and Anglo children are encouraged to do so. For example, one asks directions in the street, one can ask what time it is, one can ask when the last bus left, and so on; and to do so, one doesn’t need to know the addressee at all. As the expression *personal questions* indicates, however, not **all** kinds of questions are culturally permissible: “personal questions” are not.

Formula [A], which articulates a “local” cultural norm in universal human concepts, is an example of what is known in NSM literature as “a cultural script”. As this example illustrates, the content of a cultural script can be complex and culture-specific. In particular, the script presented here includes the assumption that there are some “kinds of things” that not many people can know about other people if they don’t know these other people well. To many cultural outsiders, such an assumption will be no doubt unfamiliar, perhaps even strange. Nonetheless, the way it has been presented here, this assumption will be intelligible – and with it, the whole cultural script.

5.3. *For personal reasons*

The expression *for personal reasons* is usually used by someone who withdraws from some public or collective activity and doesn’t want to be pressed for explanations. Typically, it collocates with verbs like *to retire*, *to withdraw*, *to resign* and *to leave*, as in the following examples from COBUILD:

“It was a tough decision not to go on the tour, but I have discussed it with a few people and it’s the right decision for me,” Larson said. “I’ll say it was **for personal reasons** and leave it at that.”

The orchestra was curtly informed by Shaw that, **for personal reasons**, Miss Norman was withdrawing. Everyone was flabbergasted: no further explanation has ever been provided, and it was extremely difficult to find another singer at short notice.

Last night McGovern would only confirm the news, saying: ‘I have resigned from the club **for personal reasons**. I have nothing more to add’.

Father Joe quit his job at Coventry's St Mary's Church last year. But he has still not quit the priesthood. Church leaders at the Birmingham Archdiocese say Father Joe simply told them he was taking time off **for 'personal reasons'**. They have not heard from him since and say they had no idea he was living with a married woman.

Using NSM English, we can articulate the message sent by this expression like this:

for personal reasons

[I don't want to do this anymore]

I know that many people can want to know why I don't want to do this anymore

I don't want to say it

people know that some things are like this:

not many people can know these things about a person

if they don't know this person well

this is something like this

because of this, I don't have to say it

As the examples cited earlier illustrate, the expression *for personal reasons* can be used in reported speech as well as direct discourse, but it invariably refers to speech. For example, a sentence like "She resigned for personal reasons" clearly implies that this is what she said (and if used in an explanation offered by a third person it is often given in quotation marks). Thus, *for personal reasons* is an established speech routine, a ready-made tool for fending off unwanted questions (which could be seen as "personal questions").

5.4. *Personal issues* and *personal matters*

The expression *personal issues* also refers to things that a person normally doesn't want and is under no obligation to discuss with many other people. Some examples from COBUILD:

He's now serving back but I'm still getting harassed letters phone calls and it's all basically to do with emotional blackmail on **personal issues** that he knows I've confided in him.

Advertisement: WOMEN'S THERAPY GROUP: A place to work on **personal issues**, gain help in coping with transitions, change dysfunctional patterns, nurture self esteem, learn to love your inner child.

Women who work in a man's world may welcome the camaraderie of all women being together, finding it a relief to talk about **personal issues** and themselves in the company solely of other women.

Self-exploration, in some form, of **personal issues** related to illness and loss should be included in one's training experience, regardless of discipline.

Generally, it is risky for clinicians to use self-disclosure as a vehicle for working through unresolved **personal issues**.

This process (...) needs to be sensitively balanced with family needs for confidentiality regarding **personal issues**.

Without entering into a detailed analysis of the meaning of the expression *personal issues* and of the underlying cultural assumptions, I will note that the examples above refer to “confidentiality” and to the need to “address”, “work through”, or “resolve” any “personal issues” through “self-exploration” and through talking to carefully selected others. All such “issues” appear to involve things which are not of the kind that not many people who don't know a person well can know about this person. Furthermore, the expression *personal issues* implies that when a person thinks about these things, this person can feel something bad because of this, and that because of this, this person may – for a long time – not want to think about these things. Thus, for others to ask someone about their “personal issues” may be even “worse” than to ask them “personal questions” of other kinds. The two cultural norms are clearly related to each other, and also to the norm which discourages inquiring about someone else's “personal reasons”.

Another expression similar to *for personal reasons* and *personal issues* in its “hands-off!”-implications is *a personal matter* (or *personal matters*). Like *for personal reasons*, it can be used in direct discourse to fend off unwelcome questions, but like *personal issues*, it can also be used in other contexts. Some examples from COBUILD:

From the couple's cosy two-storey mews house in Islington, north London, new partner Lise said yesterday: Angus insists this is a **personal matter** and will not be making any statement.

Yesterday a Buckingham Palace spokesman said: (...) I cannot comment on his rent. It is a **personal matter** and he will not speak on it.

“Did Mr Stevens ever mention her to you?” “No, I don't think so,” Remmers said. “However, there was no particular reason why he should. Our own relationship wasn't such that **personal matters** were discussed.”

As in any group process, disclosure of **personal matters** will need time to reach a comfortable level.

Peter Powell refused yesterday to reveal if he had been in touch with estranged wife Anthea since her split from Grant. Powell (...) said: "I never make any comment about **personal matters**, especially Anthea and myself."

In these examples, too, the implications are that people don't normally want to, and don't have to, talk about things described as "personal matters" to people who don't know them well.

In all these examples, the expressions *a personal matter* and *personal matters* are not purely descriptive but imply certain cultural scripts, including the following one:

[B] Cultural script concerning *personal matters*

[many people think like this:]

some things are like this:

not many people can know these things about a person

if they don't know this person well

if a person says to another person about something like this:

"I want to know this about you

because of this, I want you to say it"

this other person can say: "I don't want to say anything about it"

In fact, the phrase "I don't want to talk about it" is virtually a set phrase in English (there are numerous examples of it in the COBUILD corpus, including a book title and a song title) and it always implies a "personal" matter (more often than not, a "personal issue"). One example in COBUILD dots the "i": "I don't want to talk about it 'cos it's personal", but in most of the other ones it is simply implied.

5.5. *Personal remarks*

Turning now to the expression *personal remarks* (or *a personal remark*), it is used in English in three different senses. The first sense can be illustrated with the following example from COBUILD:

Last night Government insiders distanced themselves from Mrs Jones's remarks. A source said: These were the **personal remarks** of a backbench MP and do not form part of policy.

Roughly speaking, the expression *personal remarks* indicates here that in making those remarks, the MP wanted to say what **she** thought, not what the Government thought. Often, *personal remarks* in this sense is used (perhaps

somewhat jocularly) in titles of books, essays, newspaper columns and the like, to indicate that the author is expressing a purely “personal” point of view – only their own, not anybody else’s, and possibly idiosyncratic. Some random examples from Google:

On the homepage of the US Coast Guard one finds a personal narrative by one of the first US aviators – his personal recollections describing his time at the Naval Aviation Training Station at Pensacola, Florida – under the title “Pensacola: Personal Remarks by Eugene A. Coffin, Senior”. On the pages of the journal *Current Dialogue*, published by the World Council of Churches, one finds an essay by Krzysztof Skuza entitled: “Poland – the lost plurality: Some personal remarks on the religious plurality in Poland”. In the on-line publication of the “Lutheran Church of Messiah” one can find a feature called “Paul’s Personal Remarks Page”. And so on.

While the first sense of *personal remarks* refers to the speaker and contrasts the speaker, implicitly, with other people, the second sense refers to somebody else (usually the addressee), and contrasts this other person, as an unsuitable topic for discussion, with things (issues etc.) which should be discussed instead. For example, in a book about the rules of parliamentary procedure, the American parliamentarian Doris Zimmerman (1997) gives the following “basic rule”: “Personal remarks in debate are always out of order. The presiding officer must rule all personal remarks out of order.” Similarly, the American legal manual (Williams 2004), in a chapter on “Ethics in the workplace”, instructs all supervisors and managers: “Behave civilly and avoid personal remarks”. The Municipal code of the City Council of Hamilton, Montana (2004) stipulates: “No personal remarks”. The free on-line encyclopedia called *Wikipedia* in its instructions for contributors warns: “Avoid personal remarks”. Examples could be multiplied. Used in this sense, the expression *personal remarks* refers to some negative comments about another person (usually, but not necessarily, the addressee) made in a public setting, where abstract matters rather than persons are expected to be discussed. To some extent, it is an English counterpart of the Latin expressions *ad personam* and *ad hominem*.

Whereas both the first and the second sense of *personal remarks* imply, in different ways, a public context, the third sense usually applies to a situation involving two private individuals. This third sense can be illustrated with the following passage from COBUILD:

Binge-eating usually starts between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. It may occur for one or more of the following reasons: i) Social pressures to be slim (including a phase of anorexia nervosa) ii) An upsetting incident or

personal remark iii) A major stressful event or adverse circumstance. Many sufferers have anxieties about fatness sparked off during their adolescent years by a **personal remark** concerning their shape, size or weight. They may be overweight or simply think they are fat and develop a dislike for their body shape or size.

Here, the phrase a *personal remark* refers, roughly speaking, to a negative comment made by someone about another person's body. In the example from *Alice in Wonderland* quoted earlier, the Hatter says about Alice, in her presence, "Your hair wants cutting", and Alice points out to him, "with some severity", that "making personal remarks ... is very rude". Had the Hatter said to Alice, "Your hair looks lovely", this would not have been a "personal remark" but a "compliment". Had he said to her "You seem dumb", this would have been a "rude" remark, but not a "personal remark": it appears that the category of "personal remarks" in that third sense of the term has to refer, specifically, to the addressee's body – usually, to their appearance, but possibly also to the body odour, bodily sounds, and the like.

Compliments can be inappropriate, and someone might conceivably call a crass compliment "a personal remark". Generally speaking, however, the fixed phrase *personal remarks* targets negative comments about the addressee's body. For example, St. Patrick's Senior National School in Skerries, Ireland, has an "Anti-bullying Code", which states, first: "Our School Community will not tolerate unkind, hurtful or insulting remarks", and then follows this general rule with one targeting, in particular, "personal remarks":

When good-natured banter extends to **personal remarks** about appearance, clothing of personal hygiene or involves references of an uncomplimentary nature to members of one's family, it assumes the form of bullying.

Here, all kinds of critical comments are categorized as, potentially, a form of "bullying", but unfavorable comments about another person's body ("appearance, clothing, personal hygiene") are singled out for special attention as "personal remarks".

Thus, unfavorable comments about the addressee's body are singled out in contemporary Anglo culture as the target of a distinct cultural norm. Like the norm proscribing "personal questions", the norm proscribing "personal remarks" in the sense under discussion applies to people whom one doesn't know very well: one cannot make "personal remarks" about one's spouse, children or siblings. For example, if a husband said to his wife: "Your hair

wants cutting” or “You have put on weight”, these could be hurtful remarks, but not “personal remarks”.

So the “personal remarks” rule is a rule about how “not to talk to people whom one doesn’t know very well”, as well as a rule about how not to talk about the addressee. But while “personal questions” refer to something hidden, “personal remarks” can refer to something obvious, such as the addressee’s current appearance. Furthermore, “personal remarks” (in the relevant sense) are always critical, whereas “personal questions” can be perfectly neutral.

Trying to account for all these aspects, we could propose the following Anglo cultural script:

[C] Cultural script against making *personal remarks*

[many people think like this:]

if someone doesn’t know someone else very well

it is bad if they say something bad about this other person’s body to this other person

It is precisely this cultural script which is violated, unwittingly, by Russian speakers in sentences such as those quoted earlier from Chekhov’s plays: clearly there was no corresponding cultural script in Russian culture in Chekhov’s time (and it appears that there is none today either; cf. Wierzbicka 2002).

The Anglo rule against making “personal remarks” about the addressee’s appearance (etc.) can be seen as a special case of a more general Anglo rule about criticising the addressee, which I will discuss in a later section (section 7). Linguistic evidence suggests, however, that it is also seen as a rule in its own right.

5.6. *Personal space*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines *personal space* as “the physical space immediately surrounding someone, into which encroachment can feel uncomfortable or threatening”. The use of the expression *personal space* in contemporary English can be illustrated with the following examples from COBUILD:

Personal space, privacy and independence in old age are not luxuries. They are rights to be defended.