A response to N. J. Enfield's review of *Ethnopragmatics* (Goddard, ed. 2006)

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I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to N. J. (Nick) Enfield's review of the *Ethnopragmatics* volume, recently published in this journal. Although the review begins with some welcome positive statements, the tone soon shifts and the approach to cross-linguistic semantics which underlies the project (the NSM approach, which will be well familiar to readers of this journal) is presented by turn as unreasonably critical of other work, narrowly focused on lexical semantics, and uninterested in the big issues. Moreover, Enfield makes no attempt to give a realistic picture of the book as a whole. He spends most of his time objecting to the introduction ("Ethnopragmatics: A new paradigm"), while his content summary of the seven following chapters runs to six lines in total.

The wide range of culturally shaped ways of speaking considered in the volume goes unmentioned: phenomena like speech routines and proverbs in Ewe (Ameka), Chinese-specific facial expressions (Ye), speech-acts and quasi-kin terms of address in Singapore English (Wong), endearments, diminutives and other expressions of interpersonal warmth in Colombian Spanish (Travis), "rubbishing" and deadpan jocular irony in Australian English (Goddard), crying and other emotional displays in Japanese (Hasada), and phraseology of directives and quasi-directives in English (Wierzbicka). Nor does the centrality of linguistic evidence and linguistic argumentation in the work of all of these authors rate a mention. Enfield just says that "evidence from popular culture, literature and other sources" is presented as "descriptive notes." At the theory level, the biggest gap is that the review does not register the main thrust of the ethnopragmatic project—the claim that there is an explanatory link between indigenous values and social models on the one hand, and indigenous speech practices on the other. (This is, after all, what makes ethnopragmatics ethno).

Most of Enfield's review is concerned with fending off the challenge to what is termed, in my introduction to the volume, "Universalist Pragmatics" (UP). Enfield says that my critique is important and "deserves to be heard," but admonishes me for being unfairly harsh on the work

of Grice and the neo-Griceans, Brown and Levinson (politeness theory), and Blum-Kulka and colleagues (contrastive pragmatics). He even puts words in my mouth by implying that I treat these three strands of research as an “axis of evil” (words which I would never use). Paradoxically, in the same breath he castigates me for using “surprisingly prejudicial language.” What seems to have so irked Enfield is my use of the caption “Seven Deadly Sins” for a summary list of the failings of Universalist Pragmatics. Somehow, Enfield manages to get through his whole review without actually identifying any of these criticisms. So for the record, here is my list of the Seven Deadly Sins of Universalist Pragmatics (UP).

- (1) Universalist Pragmatics (UP) grossly underestimates the cultural shaping of speech practices.
- (2) Being framed in terms which are alien to the speakers concerned, UP necessarily imposes an “outsider perspective.”
- (3) UP creates a gulf between pragmatics and the description of other cultural phenomena.
- (4) UP describes, but it seldom explains.
- (5) UP is terminologically “slippery”: different authors use its technical descriptors with different meanings.
- (6) UP is Anglocentric: it implicitly adopts Anglo norms and practices as baseline universals, and its English-based descriptors are replete with terminological ethnocentrism.
- (7) Being locked into the vocabulary of a foreign language, UP closes off the description to the people concerned. (Goddard 2006: 18)

Aside from the caption (which was intended to be taken lightly), I stand by each of these criticisms. It would have been interesting to know which of them Enfield thinks is unjustified and why. Instead of taking the bull by the horns, however, Enfield takes an indirect approach. He implies that I have misrepresented the strengths of UP by picking on vulnerable targets, such as Grice’s “avoid obscurity” maxim, when really there is a much sounder body of neo-Gricean work out there which deserves to be taken seriously. Characteristically, however, he does not identify any of this work or articulate its main findings except for an en passant reference to Levinson’s (2000) *Presumptive Meanings*. Levinson is research director at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen where Enfield is based, and the two of them have co-edited a recent volume (Enfield & Levinson 2006), so we are perhaps entitled to consult Levinson (2000) for examples of exemplary work.

Levinson presents his theory of “generalized conversational implicature” as following faithfully in the footsteps of the celebrated philosopher

of language Paul Grice. Like Grice, Levinson expects “a strong tendency to universality,” because they both assume the existence of default inferential processes which are “derived ultimately from fundamental considerations of rationality” (Levinson 2000: 15). As an illustration, we can consider Levinson’s “Principle of Informativeness,” or I-Principle for short:

From the speaker’s point of view, this manifests itself as the maxim of minimization “Say as little as necessary”; that is, produce the minimal linguistic information sufficient to achieve your communicational ends (bearing Q in mind). (Levinson 2000: 114)

The claim that minimization is the default value illustrates precisely the failing (“sin”) listed as number (6) above: adopting Anglo cultural values (such as conciseness or brevity, as it was termed in the older Gricean terminology) as the baseline. In Arabic, or in Russian for that matter, the normal modes of expression are not “minimal” and speakers are not generally expected to “say as little as necessary.” A defender of Levinson’s claim could reply that speakers in these cultures have different “communicational ends” (different from “us,” that is). But this maneuver either makes the original claim vacuous and/or non-verifiable, or, if we take seriously the notion that communicative ends are culture-specific, leads back to ethnopragmatics.

A more general problem with formulating putative human universals in English-specific terminology (terms such as “information,” “communication,” “interaction,” and the like) is that the concepts behind these words are complex and deeply culture-specific. To frame a theory or model in such terms is to shackle it from the beginning with an Anglo bias, not only linguistically, but also conceptually (cf. Wierzbicka 2005). To my mind, there is a fundamental epistemological problem here which is not yet widely understood in the discourse of modern social science. This is not the place to pursue this issue at length but perhaps I can dramatize it as follows: Would it not be a cause for concern if the results of scientific work were to be irrevocably locked into the vocabulary of one language (English)? In view of this danger, why not try formulating hypotheses about human universals from the beginning in terms which are as clear and as non culture-bound as possible?

I would also like to mention another point of special interest to readers of *Intercultural Pragmatics*. Let us suppose that there are some universal inferencing processes of the kind envisaged by Enfield and Levinson, part of our shared evolutionary heritage, processes of such generality that they operate in the same way in all cultures. Any such principles would by definition have minimal relevance to intercultural pragmatics, because what

counts in intercultural situations are the differences between cultures and speech practices.

With this in mind, let us turn to a couple of the cultural scripts proposed in the *Ethnopragmatics* collection. This is, again, to fill a gap left by Enfield who does not quote or even describe a single cultural script in his review. A full discussion of these scripts is of course impossible in this short piece (but cf. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2004), but I hope that even a brief consideration will allow us to draw out some interesting observations. Their most notable feature, no doubt, is their intelligibility and the simplicity of the phrasing of individual phrases and sentences. At the same time, however, we can see that taken as a whole each script captures a highly specific and quite complex configuration.

Scripts [A] and [B] both concern aspects of what one might term emotional expressiveness. [A] comes from Zhengdao Ye's (2006: 152–153) remarkable study of the semiotics and associated cultural norms of Chinese facial expressions. A noteworthy feature of [A] is that it employs, in addition to semantic primes, a “semantic molecule”—namely, *liǎn* (‘face’). The script captures a social proscription against allowing others to detect in one's face any sign that one is feeling “something very good” or “something very bad” on account of some personal good fortune or ill fortune. (For reasons of space, the script presented in [A] is actually a combined version of two parallel scripts from Ye's study.)

[A] *A Chinese cultural script for concealing displays of “feeling very good/bad”*

people think like this:

when a person feels something very good/bad because something very good/bad happens to this person

it is not good if other people can know this when they see this person's *liǎn* (‘face’)

[M]

As one can see, cultural scripts are introduced by: “people think like this: —.” Although they are written in the metalanguage of semantic primes, then, cultural scripts are not explications of lexical items. Rather, they are analogous to norms of interpretation and norms of interaction. In a recent study, Wierzbicka has put it like this:

Cultural scripts are representations of cultural norms which are widely held in a given society and are reflected in its language. They constitute a certain “naïve axiology”, that is, a naïve set of assumptions about what it is good and bad to do or say, and even to think and feel. Any given speech community has such shared assumptions, and although not everyone necessarily agrees with them, everyone is familiar with them because they are reflected in the language itself (Wierzbicka 2007: 56)

Script [B] comes from Catherine Travis's study (2006: 218) into the communicative realizations of the key Colombian cultural values of *confianza* (roughly, 'trust') and *calor humano* 'human warmth.' A notable feature is its use of the notion that certain words can express social messages; for example, that when one uses endearments (like *mi amor* 'my love,' or *mamita* 'mom-DIM'), one is using words that can express the message "I feel something good toward you now" (cf. Yoon 2004 for an application of a similar notion to honorific words). The script captures the prescription favoring the use of these words whenever one actually is feeling something good toward one's interlocutor, and cautions that not to do so will invite the inference that there is no good feeling there.

[B] *A Colombian Spanish cultural script for use of terms of endearment*

people think like this:

some words can say something like this to a person:

"I feel something good towards you now"

if I feel something good towards someone when I say something to this person, it is good if I say some words like these

if I don't say some words like these, this person can think that I don't feel something good towards them

The script in [C] is proposed (Wong 2006: 116) to capture a Chinese Singaporean attitude (no doubt widespread across the "Sinosphere"), which underlies the use of honorific kin terms such as *Auntie* and *Uncle*. The first part of the script indicates that people are, so to speak, "tuned" to thinking of other people in terms of relative "age." The second part prescribes a certain attitude toward such people (roughly, thinking of them as different from oneself and as "above" oneself) and also mandates some positive views about them. This script, it should be noted, is only one of a suite of age-related cultural scripts, some of which articulate more specific attitudes linked with "generational" differences. For me at least, the articulated detail of such scripts goes so much further than the normal casual descriptions in terms of "respect." Broad expressions such as "respect for age" in fact gloss over important differences; for example, differences between Chinese norms and Korean norms (Yoon 2004) in regard to age.

[C] *A Singapore English cultural script for "respectful" attitude towards someone older*

people think like this:

I can think about some other people like this:

"I have lived for some time, these people have lived for some time more"

if I think about someone like this,
 I have to think about this person like this because of it:
 “this person is not someone like me, this person is above me”
 I have to think something good about this person because of this.

Incidentally, on my count the number of cultural scripts presented in the volume comes close to fifty, and each one is backed with detailed argumentation and linguistic evidence. To recall Clifford Geertz’s famous expression, this is indeed “thick description.”

At the methodological level, Enfield plays down the advantages that flow from the intuitive intelligibility of cultural scripts and from their accessibility to native speakers. He prefers to dwell on the point that NSM is a formalism of sorts, albeit one based on natural language and understandable on the basis of natural language. So an English-based NSM, for example, is “not really English,” and Japanese-based NSM is “not really Japanese.” According to Enfield it would be unfair to criticize NSM for this, because any formal decomposition of meaning is necessarily different from the original. And he concedes that the NSM system is superior to “other available reductive paraphrase formalisms, e.g., Jackendoff (1983), the advantage being that natural languages provide the units for direct translation at the primitive level.” Translatability, according to Enfield, is the “entire rationale for the method employed as presented in this book.” Even so, he cautions that it isn’t quite true that a cultural script or semantic explication represents an insider’s perspective, as claimed by the contributors, because the analytical process already puts us at one remove from an insider’s perspective: “the formal explications offered in this book do not literally supply insider’s perspectives, but rather give us semantic explications of what insiders’ metapragmatic terms mean.”

By this set of sideways moves, Enfield gives a misleading impression in three ways. First, he makes it sound as if cultural scripts are nothing other than semantic explications, i.e., that the ethnopragmatic enterprise is merely a kind of lexical semantics. Of course, there is a close relationship between culturally important words and phraseology, on the one hand, and dominant cultural values, on the other, so semantic explication is an important source of evidence for ethnopragmatics (cf. Wierzbicka 2003 [1991], 2006). Certainly some cultural scripts do correspond rather closely to “semantic explications of what insiders’ ethnopragmatic terms mean,” but equally, many cultural scripts do not correspond to lexical items in any straightforward way. Scripts [A], [B] and [C], for example, do not correspond to any lexical items in Chinese, Spanish, or Singapore English, as the authors of the respective chapters make perfectly clear.

Second, Enfield makes it sound as if Jackendoff's (1983, 1990) conceptual semantics and the NSM approach are pretty similar in nature. On his account, both are reductive paraphrase formalisms, except that one of them is technical and the other is not. In fact, Jackendoff's system is neither reductive (because it has no procedure for minimizing the semantic complexity of its terms of analysis), nor is it a paraphrase system (because it does not attempt to model a speaker's meanings, to say the same thing in different words). It is baffling to see the concept of reductive paraphrase apparently being used as a synonym for any system of decompositional semantics. (For more on the differences between NSM and Conceptual Semantics see the recent exchanges between Jackendoff (2007) and Wierzbicka (2007) in this journal.)

Third, Enfield manages to lower the stakes. According to him, all that is gained by articulating cultural norms in terms of semantic primes is translatability, and why that should be important he doesn't say. Though I myself would not say that translatability is the "entire rationale" for formulating cultural scripts in the vocabulary of semantic primes, translatability is certainly important and it is worthwhile to say why. First, it means that the semantic primes are accessible to the people whose speech practices are being described. Native speaker consultants can discuss, assess, and comment on them. This makes for increased verifiability and opens up new avenues for evidence. Second, translatability is crucial to the practical value of cultural scripts in intercultural education and communication, i.e., in real-world situations of trying to bridge some kind of cultural gap, with immigrants, language-learners, in international negotiations, etc. (cf. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2004, 2007). Third, the fact that cultural scripts are expressible in the native language of speakers gives them a *prima facie* better claim to cognitive reality than technical formalisms which are altogether unrecognizable to native speakers.

Overall, Enfield's review of *Ethnopragmatics* tells us more about the perspective of the "Nijmegen school" than it does about the book and the research program behind it. In the conclusion of his review, he reiterates that the problem with ethnopragmatics is that "inferential processes typically taken to be central to the pragmatics of human interaction are left unaddressed." Enfield's final call for a "integrative, interdisciplinary approach to cross-cultural pragmatics" has a nice ring to it, but the overall evaluative stance of the review reminds one of how formal syntacticians typically respond to cross-cutting work in semantics or corpus linguistics: they assume that theirs is the main game in town, and assess every other contribution according to how much it advances their program.

Ethnopragmatics—both the concept and the volume—deserves better.

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