

Reflections on the new Introduction to Anna Wierzbicka's *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 2003. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin/New York, xxix+502 pages, paperback, ISBN: 3-11-017769-2 (Mouton Textbook series). £29.95.

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A note to the reader: This article is written in a Chinese genre called *dubougan* [read-after-feeling], loosely translatable as 'thoughts and feelings after reading'. As the words suggest, the aim is not to offer a dispassionate assessment so much as to express the personal reactions of an informed reader. (For a standard Western type-review, see Matisoff (1996) and others).

At a time when every year millions of people cross the borders, not only between countries but also between languages, and when more and more people of many different cultural backgrounds have to live together in modern multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies, it is increasingly evident that research into differences between cultural norms associated with different languages is essential for peaceful co-existence, mutual tolerance, necessary understanding in the work-place and in other walks of life in the increasingly 'global' and yet in many places increasingly diversified world. (Wierzbicka 2003:viii)

To students of pragmatics, Anna Wierzbicka's *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: The Semantics of Human Interaction* will be instantly familiar. So is her now widely shared belief that 'interpersonal interaction is governed, to a large extent, by norms which are culture-specific and which reflect cultural values cherished by a particular society' (p. v). For more than a decade since it was first published in 1991, this book has been a rich source of insight, a constant point of reference, and, above all, an inspiring example of a vision beyond the limits and confines of the English language for those who have an interest in both the universals and the diversity of human interaction. The publication of a second edition in 2003, which appeared in the Mouton Textbook Series, attests to its public demand and stresses its practical pedagogical value. More significantly, it has shown how a theoretical approach, once

condemned as 'heresy' by orthodox linguists, has withstood the test of time, and has proven to be ever more robust and relevant in today's world – a world where human interaction has become increasingly cross-cultural.

This second edition has two important additions, namely, an 'Introduction to the Second Edition' (pp. v-xvii, hereafter 'Introduction') and an updated table of the semantic primes (p. 8) that form the basis of the culture-independent framework that Wierzbicka uses to articulate, analyze and compare different ways of speaking and their associated values, across a wide range of cultures. The new 'Introduction' gives readers a glimpse into some less well-known background 'stories' which are key to placing Wierzbicka's work and ideas in an historical context, especially with respect to the universal and culture-specific rules and principles that govern human interaction. It will reward special attention and close reading by linguists and by students and educators of cross-cultural communication.

It is the purpose of this review to try to bring in particular the new 'Introduction' of the second edition to general attention. No scholar lives in a social and cultural vacuum. As a member of society, every scholar has a personal history that makes them into who they are, and shapes what they believe in. We cannot afford to ignore those factors that determine their theoretical views. This is not just for the sake of a better understanding of what is said in the book, but to enter the author's mind, and to get to know and understand her both as a linguist with an extraordinary scholarly career, spanning several continents and decades (cf. Goddard 2003), and as a Polish migrant for more than thirty years in Australia, whose daily life commutes between two languages and cultures. The 'Introduction' provides us with an avenue to enter Wierzbicka's inner world.

As I see it, the 'Introduction' reveals three intertwined 'stories', or 'histories', which are essential to appreciating and understanding where Anna Wierzbicka comes from, and to understanding her work in a proper historical setting: one, the story of perseverance in a full-scale empirical investigation of cross-cultural pragmatics in the face of resistance; two, that of the development of the 'cultural scripts' theory over the years intervening between the two editions, braving another intellectual storm – the wide-spread loss of faith in the concept of

'culture' itself; and three, the author's own linguistic and cultural experiences following her emigration to Australia, which has had a decisive influence on Wierzbicka's approach to cross-cultural pragmatics. These three stories will be commented on in more detail one by one.

Most people would have known Anna Wierzbicka from the first edition as a firm opponent of those universal models of pragmatics that are constructed from the vantage point of the English language, such as Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) 'universals of politeness', Grice's (1975) 'universal principles of human conversation', and Leech's (1983) 'universal maxims'. But few would have had an idea of the resistance that she encountered. Story one is about that resistance, told candidly by Wierzbicka herself.

She recounts, referring to the response of an audience of her paper entitled 'Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts: English vs. Polish' presented at the monthly meeting of the Sydney Linguistic Circle twenty years ago, that 'my ideas were regarded as heretical' (p. vi). But that did not deter her. In her own words: 'it was the hostile and dismissive reaction of that audience which was for me the initial stimulus for engaging in a long-term campaign against what I saw as a misguided orthodoxy of that time', and 'from the perspective of the intervening years, I must be grateful for the negative reaction of that Sydney audience to a paper which became the nucleus of my 1991 *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*' (p. vi).

Time is often the ultimate judge of truth. Not only had that paper, later published in the *Journal of Pragmatics* (Wierzbicka 1985), become a seminal one, but Wierzbicka's challenge of the universal principles posited in what she calls the 'conceptual artefacts' of Anglo culture opened up a new branch of linguistic research – cross-cultural pragmatics. It has now grown into a vigorous research field, cutting across linguistics, applied linguistics (in particular, language teaching), and intercultural communication.

Wierzbicka was not alone in exploring the link between ways of speaking and ways of thinking and feeling of a culture. She cites a contingent of like-minded linguists, as well as a number of journals that she had benefited from and that, in her eyes, had provided a kind of tacit 'moral support' in those early years. In keeping with her

interdisciplinary research style, she mentions a number of anthropologists and philosophers holding similar views, but working from different angles and with different methodologies: for example, the linguists Donal Carbaugh, Michael Clyne, and Tamar Katriel, the anthropologists Roy D'Andrade, Catherine Lutz, and Richard Shweder, and the philosopher Wayne Davis.

To thrive in inhospitable environments requires tenacity and perseverance. After all, it is easier to 'demolish' than to 'construct'. There have been few linguists who have toiled as assiduously as Wierzbicka in the fields of linguistic analysis. She has single-handedly produced hundreds of finely tuned analyses, accounting for a rich diversity of language phenomena in an array of languages including English, Polish, Russian, Italian, German, Japanese, Chinese, Yiddish, and Hebrew, as demonstrated in *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*. Surely, her European heritage, her personal familiarity with several languages, and her varied and extensive readings all play a role in allowing her to move between these languages and cultures, and to cite linguistic data with ease.

Twelve years on from the first publication of *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics*, the intellectual climate has changed dramatically. Cultural relativity is no longer seen as a precarious idea. Instead, it is now welcomed by scholars who are interested in human interaction. A great deal of research sets out to investigate how cultural groups differ in their ways of speaking. Ironically, however, while cultural diversity is being embraced and celebrated by the intellectual community in general, the concept of culture itself is facing tough times. In the words of the anthropologists Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn (1997:3), 'culture theory is at an impasse'. Attempts to describe and generalize about cultures immediately run the risk of being charged with stereotyping. Against a chorus of criticism assailing the concept of culture as well as culture theory, Wierzbicka speaks out openly and firmly in defence of the notion of culture and the need for culture theory to describe culture-specific conceptual and behavioral patterns characteristic of a particular culture. While agreeing with the critics that cultures 'are not essences' and 'have no fixed contours', she adds: 'to conclude from this that cultures cannot be discussed, described, and compared at all – because they have no substance at all – would be a

spectacular case of throwing the baby out with the bath water' (p. xvi). Further citing the harmful consequences of dismissing culture, especially for the interests of migrants, she asserts: '[t]o deny the validity of the notion of culture-specific cultural patterns (including 'Anglo' cultural patterns) is to place the values of political correctness above the interests of socially disadvantaged individuals and groups' (p. xvi). Yoshiko Matsumoto, the author of the seminal paper 'Reexaminations of the Universality of Face' (Matsumoto 1989), emphasized the same point in her recent response to Barbara Pizziconi's (2003) criticisms:

the danger of eschewing any general statements about specific cultural groups, as pointed out by Wierzbicka (2003), is that the absence of such generalizations provides a convenient rationale for politically or socially dominant groups to disregard all cultural and social differences under the banner of 'universality'. (Matsumoto 2003:1520)

The implications of this statement far exceed the boundaries of linguistics. Linguists who voice it openly take on themselves and their work a strong sense of social responsibility and consider their research as essentially located in a public space.

Story two tells us about the refinement, since the first edition, of the descriptive tool, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), and about the advance of the theory of 'cultural scripts' – 'representations of cultural norms that are widely held in a given society and that are reflected in language' (Wierzbicka 2003:401). Her unremitting efforts to produce precise and verifiable descriptions of pragmatic practices across a range of cultures, in a time dominated by theoretical confusion, show clearly Wierzbicka's profound commitment to restoring the lost faith in the concept of culture (see, e.g., Wierzbicka 1994, 1996a,b, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2004a). They also show her determination to uncover the universal aspects of human interaction, since she believes that its discovery is premised on cross-cultural comparisons that are carried out with a culture-independent common yardstick such as the NSM.

Wierzbicka reminds readers that *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics* was after all first published more than a decade ago. Although 'its tenets and its overall approach have been essentially vindicated' (p. v), she is also quick to point out the inadequacy of the limited metalanguage that she used at that time. During the period when the theory of 'cultural scripts' was being developed, the search for universal primes was also being intensified, as reported in Goddard and Wierzbicka (2003). The current inventory of semantic primes is listed there, alongside the earlier, smaller inventory for contrast (p. 8). Wierzbicka tells us that, for logistic reasons, the analyses in the first edition, which relied on the old set of primes, have not been revised. This is a pity. Nonetheless, readers may take it as an opportunity for a critical, hands-on exercise, using the expanded set of primes to improve on the old analyses.

Undoubtedly, Wierzbicka's belief in a culturally motivated way of speaking and her faith in cultural description are deeply rooted in and supported by her own cross-cultural experience in a predominantly Anglo society, spanning more than three decades. It is hard to imagine what the field of cross-cultural pragmatics would look like had Wierzbicka remained in Poland. In the third story, which is interposed throughout the Introduction, she reveals how her life as a bilingual has had an impact on her view of human interaction by citing and commenting on excerpts from her personal memoir *The double life of a bilingual: a cross-cultural perspective*, written several years ago (Wierzbicka 1997). Understanding this story is essential for understanding the others. Here, I wish to look at the ways that this life-changing experience has influenced Wierzbicka's approach to cross-cultural pragmatics from her own account. (In order not to spoil the coherence and intimacy that a personal memoir essay brings, the content of her essay is not quoted here. The quotes below are her comments on the excerpts.)

Perhaps most importantly, Wierzbicka's migrant experience has had a decisive effect on her conviction that universal theories of human interaction, constructed using the yardstick of English, are 'fictitious and harmful' (p. x), and contrast with the persistent reality that she feels, sees, and lives with every day. That reality influences her theory-making in two major ways. In the first place, life as a migrant in Australia has made Wierzbicka acutely aware that the Anglo (-Austra-

lian) norms of social interaction differ from her native Polish ones. The differences have been made obvious and detectable by the ever-present comparative perspective naturally embedded in the view of a migrant. For a less sensitive and inquisitive mind, these differences might simply be passed off as a fact of life, except as a spur for learning a new set of rules in order to fit in. But for Wierzbicka, they have served both as a constant reminder of the reality that people from different cultural backgrounds follow different rules and norms of interaction, and also as a stimulus for reflective thinking on the deeper cause that gives rise to these differences:

Why was it that Polish had no words or expressions corresponding to 'white lies' or 'small talk'? Why was it that English had no words or expressions corresponding to basic Polish particles and 'conversational signposts' such as *przecież*, *ależ* ('but can't you see?')...expressions indicating vigorous disagreement, but quite acceptable in friendly interaction in Polish? (p.xii)

Abundant linguistic evidence from real-life situations became a source of inspiration which set Wierzbicka on the course to uncover the deeper design of the tapestry of human interaction. She says:

As I meditated on my experience, and as I discussed it with other immigrants, I developed a strong theoretical interest in the problems of cross-cultural understanding and a deep conviction that the universalist theories of human interaction dominant of the time were fundamentally flawed. (p. xiii)

Secondly, Wierzbicka's intimate knowledge of the immigrant condition convinced her that a theoretical framework for describing differences in ways of human interaction was sorely needed, and further that its true value should lie in its relevance and its applicability to the task of cross-cultural education for the goal of cross-cultural understanding.

Borrowing a term coined by Besemeres (2002), Wierzbicka calls herself a 'language migrant' from Polish to English. English has become the daily language of her social realm and a medium in which she expresses her thoughts and ideas. Quite often, however, she has

found her Polish self not so 'in tune with' the one that is presented through the English language. Migration from one language to another means, more profoundly, a translation of one's self (Besemeres 2002). In that process, a language migrant is constantly confronted with the decision of whether to defend one's original self or to adapt to the new self. Either way, there is still the question of how, and to what degree. Migration to another cultural environment through language becomes, for Wierzbicka, a life-long journey of self re-making. That life experience, which resonates with that of many other immigrants (ibid.), has strengthened Wierzbicka's belief that 'cultures are real' because 'they can influence and even shape people's lives and people's selves' (p. xvi). As she points out, to deny the notion of culture is tantamount to 'denying the subjective experiences of immigrants' (p. xvi; see also Wierzbicka 2004b).

Wierzbicka's experiences tell her that a theory of human interaction has to be able to address itself to the task of cross-cultural education. It must have practical value. A theory constructed on the basis of the Anglo code of communication cannot address one of the key questions concerning the actual practice of language teaching – 'How can a foreign way of viewing the world be taught via an educational culture which is itself the product of native conceptions and values?', as expressed most representatively by Kramsch (1993:9; p. iv). This is clearly another driving force behind Wierzbicka's constant efforts in applying herself to describing and analyzing pragmatic practices and their associated values, across a range of cultures. It is no accident that much research in cross-cultural pragmatics is motivated by the actual needs in language teaching (cf. e.g. the new *International Journal of Intercultural Pragmatics*; Kecskés 2004).

In Wierzbicka's view, an Anglo-based 'universal' framework can be *harmful* to the cause of cross-cultural understanding, because such a framework can only lead to culturally insensitive views of Others in real life situations. For example, in a vignette she tells us how a Chinese neighbour was seen by her well-meaning Australian neighbour as 'rude', simply because she used straight, 'naked' imperatives (a transfer from Chinese). The message is that if members of host cultures are not made aware that their norms of interaction are specific to their own cultures, how can they not see behaviour that departs from their



norms as an 'anomaly' or view it negatively? How can the cultural 'reception' of immigrants be improved? How can mutual understanding be achieved? This seemingly trivial vignette illustrates the need for a culture theory that is not only theoretically sound, but also practically helpful, so that both immigrants and locals can be made aware of the diversity of human interaction, and the differing rules that guide that interaction. Traditionally, it has been those who are at the 'receiving end' who are thought to have the need to learn the rules of their target languages and cultures. Rarely has the thought occurred to people that an equal onus resides with the members of a host society as well. For cross-cultural understanding to be achieved, 'cross-cultural literacy' has to come about from *both* sides.

From the inception of her work in pragmatics, Wierzbicka seems to have anticipated that the 'fate' of cross-cultural pragmatics is closely tied with the cause of cross-cultural understanding. Thus she cites Deborah Tannen's (1986:30) words that 'the future of the earth depends on cross-cultural communication' as an opening statement in the first edition, and emphasises it again in the 'Introduction' to the second.

It is fitting that the second edition is published in a textbook series because of its high relevance in today's educational and social context. If the significance of the first edition of *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics* was more in its theoretical approach, that of the second edition has to be seen in its wider pedagogical value. The 'Introduction' is important, not only because it gives us an opportunity to understand the background of Wierzbicka's work and to get to know her as a person and as a scholar, but also because it shows us that the vitality of a theory comes from its relevance to, close affinity with, and deep grounding in, the reality of people's lives, and from its ultimate concern for people in the real world. Wierzbicka's 'Introduction' reminds us of the humanistic nature of the science of language. She has never lost sight of it, as neither should we.

*Afterword*

My approach to this review-reflection is undoubtedly influenced by my Chinese intellectual outlook. The Chinese intellectual tradition places great emphasis on the social value of learning and knowledge. That is the meaning of learning, and the quest of knowledge and truth is inseparable from its wider social and moral context. Intellectual discourse is located ultimately in the public space. Anna Wierzbicka's work on pragmatics provides a good example. Her work, which is deeply rooted in her own cross-cultural experience, has shown us how the field of cross-cultural pragmatics can both meet the challenge of, and seize, the unprecedented opportunities presented by an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world, so as to address key practical issues in the educational tasks of cross-cultural literacy and contribute to the positive reception of foreign cultures and to cultural pluralism in general.

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