

**Analysis of Cultural Scripts of Suggestions and  
Rejection of Suggestions in Persian and English  
within Natural Semantic Metalanguage Framework**

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**Abstract**

Language must be studied as a social behavior and the aim of language instruction must be to facilitate learners' acquisition of communicative competence; the ability to speak both accurately and appropriately. Rules of speaking must be included into second language classroom teaching. We should teach linguistic rules along with social rules.

In this study a number of social functions in Persian are analyzed using the "Natural Semantic Metalanguage" (NSM) framework. The results are then compared and contrasted with those of English. The functions in focus are suggestions, and rejection of suggestions.

The results of this study indicate that: (1) the NSM is applicable to the communicative interaction routines in Persian, (2) cultural scripts can be used to develop an awareness of cultural differences in the learners, and finally (3)

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the model in question is suitable for cross-cultural contrastive analysis.

**Keywords:** Communicative competence, social function, natural-semantic metalanguage, cultural script, contrastive analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Goodenough (1964), as quoted by Wolfson (1989, p.36-37) explains culture as follows: “. . . a society’s culture consists of whatever one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves.” He defines language in precisely the same terms and then continues, “In this sense a society’s language is an aspect of its culture.” Cultural differences may cause miscommunication when people with different cultural backgrounds communicate.

Wierzbicka (1986) also mentions that language undoubtedly reflects culture. Language learners need to know about the general norms and speech behavior common to the group with whom they plan to interact. According to Wierzbicka (1991) cultural clashes and misunderstanding cannot be completely eliminated, but they can be minimized by enlightened, well-planned multicultural education, “when people coming from different backgrounds interact, they tend to judge each other’s behavior according to their own value systems”. Thomas (1983) identifies two sources of cross-cultural miscommunication:

1. Pragmalinguistic failure: which happens when language learners translate an utterance from their first language into target language but fail to get

their meaning across because the communicative conventions behind the utterances used are different.

2. Sociopragmatic failure: which has to do with knowing what to say and whom to say it to.

All approaches to describe rules of speaking as Wierzbicka (1991) says have a basic problem: they are ethnocentric or put it in a better term, Anglocentric; what holds for speakers of English doesn't necessarily hold for people generally.

Her proposed solution then lies in employing a universal, language-independent framework that can give descriptions of concepts and cultures in any other language in an unbiased fashion. This framework is called 'cultural script' approach. It uses a set of semantic primitives that can be found in all languages. She states, ". . . to understand a society's ways of speaking, we have to indentify and articulate its implicit 'cultural scripts'" (Wierzbicka, 1994, p.1). The primitives constitute a kind of mini-language which is called Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). Wierzbicka (1991) claims that her approach is suitable for cross-cultural contrastive analysis.

## **2. Objectives of the Study**

The overall objective of this study is to compare and contrast a small portion of communicative interaction routines in English and Persian in terms of 1. To examine the applicability of the "Natural Semantic Metalanguage", framework developed by Wierzbicka (1991) to a number of selected social functions in Persian. Objections and objection response routines, and suggestions and rejections of suggestions are the functions in cultural script

model developed by Wierzbicka (1991); however, this study is also aimed at the following objectives:

2. To compare and contrast the results of the above analysis with those of English, and
3. To see to what extent cultural script framework developed by Wierzbicka (1991) is suitable for cross-cultural contrastive analysis.

### **3. Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for a number of reasons, some of which are mentioned below:

1. From the theoretical point of view this is one of the few studies that analyze some Persian social functions in terms of ‘cultural script’ approach developed by Wierzbicka (1991). This approach can free conversational analysis from ethnocentric bias and language bias since it uses a Natural Semantic Metalanguage based on a small set of lexical universals and a set of near universal syntactic patterns. It describes people’s ways of speaking in a qualitative, non-behavioral term.
2. The findings can be used to clarify some areas of similarities and differences between a number of selected social functions in English and Persian as two languages with different cultural norms. Wierzbicka (1991, p. 131) states , “a suitable metalanguage can facilitate the description and comparison of conversational routines” used in different societies.
3. The results can be used in language teaching to inform the learners of cultural values of the target language and as a result facilitate cross-cultural communication, which can only be successful if both of the interactors,

whether the speaker or the listener, are familiar with expectations and cultural patterns of the language. Wierzbicka (1991, p. 455) states that the Natural Semantic Metalanguage can also be used for teaching linguistic interaction in different cultural settings; “and in particular, as a basis for teaching successful cross-cultural communication”.

4. The results can also be used in translation, since most of the time direct translations of a language to another do not reflect the same meanings as in the source language, here again the reason is socio-cultural differences.

#### **4. Literature Review**

##### **4.1 Contrastive pragmatics**

Several research traditions directed toward understanding cultural variation in patterns of conversation can be identified under contrastive pragmatics. Grice (1975) proposes that all human communication is mediated by ‘maxims of conversation’ such as ‘be brief’, ‘be informative’, ‘be relevant’ and ‘be clear’. Talking about cultures Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997) state that these maxims don’t operate in the same fashion in all cultures. For instance in Malagasy village society people are not expected to satisfy the quantity maxim, since withholding information brings a degree of status. Another work is Brown and Levinson’s (1987) on universals of politeness. They propose that in all cultures speakers use ‘positive politeness’ and ‘negative politeness’ strategies to offset the imposition involved in any communicative act, but as Wierzbicka (1991) states in making their proposals they focus on culture-specific aspects of language use instead of universal, culture independent ones. She adds that the same charge of Anglocentrism can be

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made with respect to different other supposedly universal ‘maxims’ and principles of conversational behavior and interaction. For example Leech (1983) states that apart from quantitative varieties of maxims in different cultures “They are in essence universally valid” but empirical evidence shows that this is not the case. Schiffrin (1984) has shown that Leech’s (1983) supposedly universal maxim of harmony: “minimize disagreement, maximize agreement” (p.132), is not valid in Jewish culture which displays a clear preference for disagreement. As Wierzbicka (1991, p. 68-69) states, “they show their involvement with other people and their interest in other people by saying ‘no’ rather than ‘yes’.” So here it is disagreement rather than agreement that “brings people closer together” , and assuming that all cultures value agreement more than disagreement is “an Anglocentric illusion”. There have been plenty of cross-cultural studies which shows that having different cultural values from the native speakers of the target language, L<sub>2</sub> learners face miscommunication when interacting with them. Thomas (1995) coined the term pragmatic failure, which is an important source of cross-cultural communication breakdown, to describe the failure to understand what is meant by what is said.

#### **4.2 Wierzbicka’s “cultural scripts” model**

Wierzbicka (1994: 28), pointed out, “one of the greatest stumbling blocks to understanding other people within or without particular culture is the tendency to judge others’ behavior by our own standards”. It seems obvious that if we want to compare different cultures in a way that would help us to understand those cultures, we should try to do it not in terms of our own concepts, but in terms which may be relevant to those of other cultures as

well. Goddard (1998, p.12) states that the possibility of translation between languages and the ability of people to learn and understand new languages indicate that there is “some universal framework for understanding”.

To understand societies’ ways of speaking Wierzbicka (1991) develops ‘cultural scripts’ model. She says, “ we can’t do it without ethnocentric bias unless we have a universal language independent perspective” (1994: 1), the rules of speaking as she points out must be stated in terms of “lexical universals, that is, universal human concepts lexicalized in all languages of the world”. Wierzbicka (1991) claims that culture-specific ways of speaking can be described by means of ‘cultural scripts’ written in lexical and semantic universals.

Every society has a shared set of specific cultural norms that as Wierzbicka (1994, P. 27) states “can be stated in the form of explicit cultural scripts”. Since cultural scripts can be formulated in lexical universals, they can be easily compared across languages. The key idea of the theory of cultural scripts is that widely shared and widely known ways of thinking can be identified in terms of some empirically established universal human concepts. Her model is not derived from one culture and one language, but is based on a great deal of cross-linguistic evidence. The set of universal human concepts which has emerged from cross-linguistic investigations undertaken by many scholars over the last few decades can be presented in the following form.

### 4.3 English version of universal semantic primitives

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMONE, (PERSON), SOMETHING (THING), PEOPLE, BODY
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, MANY/MUCH, ALL
Attributes:	GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
Mental Predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORD, TRUE
Actions, Events, Movements:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence, and Possession:	THERE IS, HAVE
Life and Death:	LIVE, DIE
Logical Concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Time:	WHEN(TIME), NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space:	WHERE (PLACE), HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
Intensifier, Augmentor:	VERY, MORE
Taxonomy, Partonomy:	KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity:	LIKE (HOW, AS)

**(Wierzbicka, 2001, p. 56)**

Wierzbicka's (1991) metalanguage is carved out of English, but could be just as easily carved out of any other language, since as she believes it is based on universal core of natural languages. It is derived from natural language and can be understood via natural language without any arbitrary signs and conventions.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1 Participants

The participants of this study constituted 100 undergraduate students studying at Shiraz Azad University. They consisted of 50 males aged 18 to 27 and 50



females in the same age range, majoring in different academic subjects, such as architecture and computer. Those students studying English, Arabic, linguistics and majors related to language were not included in order to decrease the amount of interference.

The participants were selected since they all had a supposedly full command of the language and the culture. All of them were educated native speakers of Persian. They were asked for their age, sex, level of education and field of study. The subjects took a discourse completion test (DCT) in which they had to express what they would say in situations stated in the questionnaire and what the possible answer would be. Then a closed questionnaire was prepared based on the results from the DCT.

## **5.2 Data collection**

The data were elicited from the native speakers of the language. Two researcher-made questionnaires were used in the inquiry, an open questionnaire and a closed one. The open questionnaire which included eight situations was used for the pilot study. It consisted of suggestions and rejections of suggestions. The content validity of the questionnaire was ensured, seeking the advice of content experts. It is worth mentioning that, in preparing the questionnaire different degrees of social distance have been assumed. For instance: the distance between close friends, acquaintance, family members, neighbors, and finally strangers which is assumed to be the farthest. Different levels of power, such as employee vs. boss, student vs. professor, and parents vs. child; have been considered. Different degrees of imposition (low vs. high) are also involved in the questionnaire.

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Eighty undergraduate students, studying at Shiraz Azad University were the subjects in this stage of the study. They were asked to imagine themselves in the given situations and then write what they would say in each case and what the possible answer would be.

The closed questionnaire was prepared based on the data elicited from the pilot study and the intuition of the writer as a Persian native speaker. This questionnaire included the same eight situations, and was administered to 100 participants, 50 males and 50 females, at Shiraz Azad University. They were asked to mark the best and the most common choice in each situation. Then the frequency of all the choices was calculated, and to discover whether the sample data fit into the population distribution or not, and whether the differences in figures were large enough to say that they were truly different the Chi-square test at an 0.01 level of significance was applied. In most of the situations the results showed that the choices with the highest frequency could be considered as the commonest forms in Persian. In the cases where the Chi-square test didn't prove significant the analysis relevant to all the choices was given.

English data came from Wierzbicka (1991), *Cross-cultural Pragmatics*; and Wierzbicka (1987), *English Speech Act Verbs*.

### **5.3 Data analysis**

The elicited Persian data were analyzed in terms of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) developed by Wierzbicka (1991).

The elements of NSM given in the previous part combine according to the morphosyntactic conventions of the language from which they are

extracted. Using such elements the underlying cultural norms behind communicative interaction routines can be described in the form of cultural scripts that refer to things which are good or bad in a community, things that one can or cannot do, and things that one can or cannot say.

The Persian cultural scripts were then compared and contrasted with those of English to seek the areas of similarities and differences and as a result facilitate cross-cultural communication. In order to clarify the point, the following example from Persian will suffice.

**Situation**

**a. The text**

It's a holiday. Everybody is at home and they don't know where to go for a walk. You think going to a park is good for them; you decide to make a suggestion, but you don't know whether they accept.

**b. Suggestion choices**

- A:     četowr ? ast beravim park xoš migozarad.  
how is go + we park good pass + it  
(How about going to the park? We'll have a good time.)
- B:     biyâyid beravim pârk barâ-ye ruhiye-yetân xub ?ast.  
let's go + we park for feeling of you good is  
(Let's go to the park. It's good for you.)
- C:     ?emruz havâ xeyli xub ?ast. ?agar movâfeqid beravim park.  
today weather very good is if agree + you go + we park  
(The weather is very good today. If you agree let's go to the park.)
- D:     nazaretân darbâre-ye park raftan či-ye?  
your opinion about park going what is

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(How about going to the park?)

- E:     behtar ? ast beravim park yek havâyi ? avaz konim.  
        better is go + we park one weather change do + we  
        (We'd better go to the park and breath pure air.)

### c. Frequencies

Items	A	B	C	D	E
Frequencies	15	9	22	41	13
$X^2 = 32$	$\alpha = 13.27$			$P > 0.01$	

### d. Rejection choices

- A:     na park xub nist.  
        no park good isn't  
        (No, it isn't good to go to the park.)
- B:     harf-e park-râ nazan ke ? aslan hâlaš - râ nadârim.  
        talk of park OM don't say that basically its mood OM not have + we  
        (Don't talk about park. We're not in the mood.)
- C:     pârk šoluq ?ast.  
        Park busy is  
        (The park is busy.)
- D:     boro bâbâ ki howsele-ye pârk raftan-râ dârad?  
        go father who patience of park going OM has + s/he  
        (Oh, go away who is in the mood to go to the park?)
- E:     behtar ? ast jâ-ye digari beravim.  
        better is place of other go + we  
        (We'd better go somewhere else.)

**e. Frequencies**

Items	A	B	C	D	E
Frequencies	14	12	23	15	36
$\chi^2 = 19.5$	$\alpha = 13.27$		$P > 0.01$		

**f. Representative dialogue for this situation**

- A: nazaretân darbâre-ye park raftan či-ye?  
 your opinion about park going what is  
 (How about going to the park?)
- B: behtar ? ast jâ-ye digari beravim.  
 better is place of other go + we  
 (We'd better go somewhere else.)

**g. Cultural script**

- A: (a) I think some people don't know what to do  
 (b) I think X is a good thing for them to do  
 (c) I don't say: "I want you to do X"  
 (d) I say "what do you think about doing X"  
 (e) I say this because I want you to think about it and do it  
 (f) I don't know whether you will do it
- B: (a) When a person wants me to think about doing X  
 (b) and I know this person wants to do something good for me  
 (c) If I don't want to do it  
 (d) It is not good to say something like this:  
 "I don't want to do it"  
 (e) It is good to say "some other thing is good to do"

## **6. Results**

### **6.1 Suggestions and rejections in persian**

Hornby (2006) states that a suggestion is an idea or a plan that is put forward for consideration, as a possibility. When a person makes a suggestion he thinks that there is something that he knows and thinks about but the other party doesn't, so by proposing it he tries to make the addressee think about it.

In different cultures rules of making suggestions and rejections are different, since such rules depend on specific cultural norms and expectations. So clarifying the cultural norms behind these speech acts is of considerable importance; it can help language learners in finding the areas of similarities and differences between their native language and the target one, and as a result facilitate cross-cultural communication.

### **6.2 comparison of English and Persian cultural scripts**

#### **6.2.1 English and Persian suggestions in contrast**

Different cultures have different norms for suggestive behaviors. The person making a suggestion thinks that it might be a good thing if the addressee did something, so he invites him to decide whether or not he wants to follow it. Wierzbicka (1987) states that suggestions tend to use an interrogative form (in particular, the forms 'how about' and 'why don't you'). Such forms show the speaker's lack of certainty about what decision the addressee is going to reach. She states that a desire to be useful for the addressee is the reason for making a suggestion which is considered as a possibility put forward to think about. "For this reason, *suggestion* is a mild, tentative, unassuming speech act" (187). The speaker is just trying

to help the addressee in making his own decision, he doesn't attempt to influence the addressee. Utterances such as "it's a suggestion" highlight the tentativeness of the speaker's attitude.

Wierzbicka (1987, 1991) proposes this cultural script for suggestive behavior in English.

- (a) I say: I think it would be a good thing if you did X
- (b) I say this because I want to make you think about it
- (c) I don't know if you will do it
- (d) I don't want to say that I want you to do it

The interrogative form of the suggestions shows that the speaker doesn't expect the addressee's action to be controlled by the other's wishes (the speaker's), and compliance is not taken for granted.

The results of our treatment showed that there are three general strategies for making suggestions in Persian.

a) Strategy No. 1: Using interrogatives

- (a) I think X is a good thing for this person to do
  - (b) I want this person to think about it and do it
  - (c) I don't know whether this person will do it
  - (d) I don't say: "I want you to do this"
  - (e) I ask: "Why don't you do this"
- or "What do you think about doing X"

The above cultural scripts are similar to that of English except that here the speaker wishes to control the addressee's action (I want this person to think about it *and do it*). Sometimes some substrategies accompanies the above

norm. In some situations for instance using the term bebaxšid meaning excuse me the speaker tries to mitigate the force of the imposition being made. Sometimes the speaker does the same by asking for permission before stating the suggestion. To make the addressee do the act the speaker may express the positive results of the action and tries to convince the addressee that the suggestion is based on good reasons.

b) Strategy No. 2: Stating the right way

- (a) I think X is a good thing for this person to do
- (b) I want this person to think about it and do it
- (c) I don't know whether this person will do it
- (d) I don't say: "I want you to do this"
- (e) I say: "I think it would be a good thing if you did X"

The speaker expresses his opinion and tries to show the best way, but doesn't ask the addressee to do the act, although he is indirectly controlling him. The decision is obviously up to the addressee. This strategy is not common in Anglo-American culture for making suggestions.

Sometimes the speaker tries to make a good feeling in the anxious addressee by reminding God's power to him. This shows the Persian speaker's deep belief in God's support. The expression xodâ bozorg ?ast meaning God will provide, used in some situations, is an example of this kind.

c) Strategy No. 3: Using imperatives

- (a) I think X is a good thing for this person to do
- (b) I want this person to do it
- (c) I say: "It is good to do X  
I want you to do X"



(d) I say this because I did X before

(e) I don't know whether you will do it

The speaker invites the addressee to do the act and *wants* him to do so, however he is not sure that it will be accepted (I don't know whether you will do it).

### 6.2.2 English and Persian rejection of suggestions in contrast

Wierzbicka (1987) proposes the following cultural script for rejections in Anglo-American culture:

(a) When someone says something like this to me:

“How about . . .

Why don't you . . .”

(b) If I don't want to do it

(c) I can't say something like this to this person:

“I don't want to do it”

(d) I can say something like this: “I can't do it”

(e) It is good to say something like this at the same time:

“I want you to know why I can't do it”

Although the addressee doesn't want to do the act, he doesn't state it. He says that he 'can't' rather than 'doesn't want' in order not to threaten the speaker's positive face.

As the result of our analysis showed, there are two general strategies for rejection of suggestions in Persian.

#### a) Strategy No. 1: Rejecting by stating reasons

(a) When a person says: “Why don't you do X”

(b) If I don't want to do it

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(c) I can't say something like this to this person:

"I don't want to do it"

(d) It is good to say something like this: "I can't do it"

(e) It is good to say something like this at the same time:

"I want you to know why I can't do it"

This cultural script is the same as the English one. The addressee's feeling is considered and by stating some reasons the suggestion is rejected.

### **b) Strategy No. 2: Rejecting by stating an alternative way**

(a) When a person says: "Why don't you do X"

(b) If I don't want to do it

(c) I can't say something like this to this person:

"I don't want to do it"

(d) It is good to say: "some other thing is good to do"

The addressee doesn't want to perform the suggested action, so by providing an alternative way he states it.

### **c) Strategy No. 3: Rejecting directly**

(a) When a person says:

"X is a good thing for you to do"

(b) If I don't want to do it

(c) I can say something like this: "I don't do it"

The addressee wants to express his freedom of act; however, he also states his gratitude for the suggestion made (I feel something good about you because of what you said, I say this because I don't want you to feel something bad).

## **7. Conclusions**

This study was devoted to a comparison and contrast of Persian and English communicative interaction routines within the framework developed by Wierzbicka (1991). This natural semantic metalanguage framework was proved applicable to describe and analyze the communicative interaction routines in Persian. However, it should be noted that research in this area is still at an embryonic stage of development in Persian. So it is necessary to undertake further studies to open new avenues in the area. Wierzbicka's cultural script model was also proved suitable for cross-cultural contrastive analysis.

From the theoretical point of view this is one of the first studies that analyze some Persian interactional routines within the framework of scripts model developed by Wierzbicka (1991). This approach describes people's ways of speaking in a qualitative, non-behavioral term and frees conversational analysis from ethnocentric bias and language bias. The findings can be used to clarify some areas of similarities and differences between a number of selected social functions in English and Persian as two languages with different cultural norms.

As for application, the results of this investigation can be used in language teaching to inform the learners of cultural values of the target language and its differences with the native one and as a result facilitate cross-cultural communication. . Due to the significant roles of religion and cultural values in Iran teaching foreign culture is limited in this country. Only the values that are compatible with Iranian cultural norms are included and the other

ones are ignored. Here an explicit discussion of cultural differences can be helpful to make the students aware of the existing contrasts.

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