A Critique of Wierzbicka’s Theory of Cultural Scripts: The Case of Ifaluk Fago

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Abstract  The linguist Anna Wierzbicka casts linguistic meaning in terms of cultural scripts, which she constructs from a short list of 60 or so conceptual primes, each with a grammar, deemed basic to human language, in the sense that these occur in all languages. I focus on the Ifaluk Islander lexeme fago, for which she has published such a script, and which I have also analyzed in another context. I argue that her script for fago does not adequately capture its meaning. Instead, I show, a culturally adequate definition of this emotion term cannot be founded on metalinguistics but must incorporate relevant nonlinguistic experience pertaining to the domain in question—in the case of fago, early attachment and the cultural defenses that emerge in response to it. My analysis of fago is compatible with a theory of cultural meaning as susceptible to considerable cross-cultural variability while constrained by shared features of human neurobiology in combination with common features of the world in which humans all live. [conceptual meaning, cultural scripts, cultural defenses, attachment]

In a long-term, two-part program, the linguist Anna Wierzbicka, in collaboration with her colleague Cliff Goddard, (1) has developed a short list of 60 or so concepts (at last count, 63) that are universal in the sense that these researchers have identified lexemes for them in all languages of the world (see Goddard 2010:74 for an up-to-date list), and (2) has argued that these basic concepts, called “conceptual primes” (Wierzbicka 2005) or “semantic primes” (Goddard 2010), along with a limited number of grammatical rules for combining them, provide what she calls a Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) that can be used to define the meaning of more culturally distinctive lexemes.1 The resulting reconstructions of the meanings of such terms are called cultural scripts.2 It is the second of these two premises that I examine in this article.3 At the same time that I am about to raise what I believe to be a fundamental criticism of this second part of Wierzbicka’s project, I would like to say, at the outset, that it is impossible not to appreciate, to the point of awe, the large vision and the systematic, sustained effort that have gone into hers and Goddard’s overall undertaking.4 What follows is addressed specifically to Wierzbicka’s construction of cultural scripts, which are a mainstay of her approach.

These scripts, composed out of the NSM, detail the cultural meaning she argues to be implicit in each term under definition, typically a key term in a given language. The larger ambition of this project is to eliminate the ethnocentric bias inherent in efforts to conceptualize linguistic meaning in terms borrowed from the analyst’s own language, most frequently English words. Thus, something else to be appreciated about Wierzbicka’s work, that should not get lost in my critique, is that much of her sensibility about the ethnocentrism of linguistic translations
into English, and perhaps the impetus for her effort to overcome that bias, comes from her own personal experience as a bilingual speaker—a native of Poland living and raising children in Australia.\(^5\) I am entirely sympathetic to Wierzbicka’s project for finding a way to describe linguistic meanings nonethnocentrically. However, as will emerge, I think that constructing these meanings from the NSM is not the way to achieve this result.\(^6\)

I have puzzled over the cultural scripts approach for many years. Recently, I have had occasion to interrogate this approach more sharply, after chancing to examine Wierzbicka’s (1992:143) cultural script for an Ifaluk Islander term, *fago*, that I myself (Quinn 2013) have also analyzed, though for a different purpose than Wierzbicka’s. I will first summarize my own analysis and then compare it to Wierzbicka’s to argue that mine is more adequate. On the basis of my alternative analysis, I question Wierzbicka’s underlying notion of cultural scripts as a theory of cultural meaning, and I propose a different approach.

My approach, we will see, is sympathetic to that of psychologists Phillip Wolff and Barbara Malt, both of whom assume a more cognitive perspective on language. As these researchers explain in the Introduction to their edited volume, *Words and the Mind: How Words Capture Human Experience*, forces that contribute to word meaning “include shared basic cognitive and perceptual capacities that might create special sensitivities to some distinctions among experiences; shared cultural needs, goals, and experiences; and shared exposure to salient discontinuities among entities that the world presents to the observer” (2010:9). As they summarize, “three sources—pan-human sensory and cognitive mechanisms, needs, goals and experience, plus the structure the world presents—may contribute to shared tendencies in word meaning” (Wolff & Malt 2010:10). In what follows I will gloss these three sources as human neurobiology, cultural experience, and world structure, respectively.

Contributors to the Malt and Wolff volume examine the meanings of words and other lexemes in a variety of domains, including those of body parts, mental states, color perception, containers, motion, and causality. A lesson that emerges from their reported research into these various domains is that each, and hence the terms associated with each, have a unique basis in pan-human neurobiology, cultural variation, and structural features of the world, both local and universal. Therefore each domain must be investigated in its own terms, with regard to the specific neurobiological features, cultural experiences, and world structure that together contribute to linguistic meaning in that domain.\(^7\) No universal metalanguage can do this job.

In a subsequent section of this article, I will have occasion to provide illustrations, supplied by Goddard (2010), of selected grammatical constructions allowed by the mental states THINK, FEEL, and WANT. As we will see, these constructions are apt examples because, drawn from the meta-grammars for all three of these semantic primes, they play a central role in Wierzbicka’s cultural script for *fago*. Each of the 63 conceptual primes has its own set of such grammatical constraints, and like the primes themselves the grammars that they allow are universally available across languages. Too, like the conceptual primes themselves, their grammars must be empirically discovered. This is an ongoing and formidable research

The more semantically complex cultural scripts such as that for *fago*, to which conceptual primes such as THINK, FEEL, and WANT contribute, are cross-culturally variable and must be constructed individually by hand, based on native understandings of the meaning of each concept. There is no mechanical procedure for assembling these cultural scripts. Their construction is based on native linguistic understandings. These may be those of the analyst herself if she is a speaker of the language at issue. Alternatively, as in the case of *fago*, these understandings are derived from ethnographic reports by respected anthropologists or linguists who have done fieldwork among speakers of given languages.

The NSM may be a good theory of how new words and other lexemes are formed, raising the possibility as it does that these terms are universally constructed out of a few basic elements. I leave this possibility to linguists. However, the NSM is, in my view, an inadequate theory of the meaning of concepts to which words and other lexemes are attached—or of how that meaning is learned. In my view, the cultural meaning of concepts and the terms for them must be understood as historically and psychologically independent of each other (although certainly they influence each other). Wierzbicka, however, consistently conflates linguistic terms and the psychological and cultural meaning of concepts to which they are linked. For one instance picked almost at random from many possible published examples, she speaks of, “the different conceptual systems linked with different languages and cultures” (2005:269). Elsewhere, Wierzbicka makes clear that when she speaks of “conceptual systems” as being linked with languages, she is referring to human thought:

> Since the universal grammar of languages is shaped by, and reflects, the universal grammar of human thought, we are also seeking to place the study of human thought on a new basis, not speculative but empirical. The path to the understanding of thought leads through the understanding of language . . . . (2002b:258)

This is a very different view of the relation between language and thought than is held by some other linguists. Eve Clark (2010:249), for one example, quotes Dan Slobin to the effect that “Language evokes ideas; it does not represent them. Linguistic expression is thus not a straightforward map of consciousness or thought. It is a highly selective and conventionally schematic map” (1979:6).

Wierzbicka’s conflation of language and thought holds equally for her treatment of language and culture. Expanding on her view of the relation of language to the rest of culture, she declares, “different societies show, in their speech practices, different hierarchies of values, and the central values themselves are differently conceived in different societies. Language is a mirror in which such facts are most clearly reflected” (2002a:428). These quotations are altogether characteristic of her writings. I argue for a much more partial reflection of cultural difference in language, as well as a less direct path to the understanding of thought, culturally shared or otherwise, than through language.
Next let us see how these considerations play out in the meaning of the Ifaluk concept of fago.

**My Treatment of Fago**

When I embarked on an analysis of fago, I was not trying to provide a definition of the meaning of the term. I was on a more psychological mission to trace the origins of this emotion, and hence the term labeling it, to early childhood experience, namely the experience of attachment. This investigation was prompted by previous work of mine on American marriage, in which I had speculated that the meaning of married love, in its American usage, could be understood in terms of American's infantile experience of attachment (Quinn 1997a). So mine was a cross-cultural comparative venture.

**The Configuration of Love in America**

The first leg of the comparison had been based on an analysis of how my 22 American interviewees, husband and wife in 11 marriages, over a number of separate hour-long interviews, talked about their love for their spouse and about married love more generally. In summary (see Quinn 1997a for more detail), this analysis revealed that love, as these Americans understand it in the context of marriage, has the following three meanings: wanting to be with the person one loves, expecting to be cared for by that person, and fearing the person’s loss. In the case of married (and presumably also other adult) love, the desire to be cared for in the sense of having one’s needs fulfilled by another has as its corollaries the expectations that this care will be provided by one unique other person and will be reciprocated toward that person. I went on to argue that the three-pronged understanding of love in terms of closeness, care, and loss accounts for the cultural schema of marriage itself as something shared (expectation of closeness), mutually beneficial (in the sense of fulfilling; expectation of care), and lasting (fear of loss). This set of expectations about marriage, in turn, emerged from an independent analysis of marital metaphors, reasoning, and narratives in the interview discourse (detailed in, e.g., Quinn 1991, 1996, 1997a, 2011a). In the interests of space, rather than repeating myself here I refer readers to the prior publications cited for these analyses of love and marriage. Those who wish to know more about my methods of analysis should consult Quinn (2005b).

The next step, a more interpretive one to be sure, was my speculation that this prior understanding of love itself—about being cared for by the person one loves, being with that person, and fearing the person’s loss—derives from three infantile attachment concerns, the infant’s desires for care by the mother or another caregiver and proximity to that primary caregiver, and its fear of abandonment by that person (Quinn 1997b). I call this analytic step speculative not because of any reservations on my part about the impact of early experience on adult life; as will emerge, I take an unapologetic psychodynamic stance, which includes the assumption that earliest experience has a lasting effect over the life course. My interpretation is speculative simply because the evidence for it is nothing more than a correlation between adult and infantile experience and moreover because the infantile part of this equation is wholly theoretical. Nevertheless, I defend this step in my analysis on the grounds that I
am trying to build new theory, which to my way of thinking requires such openness to interdisciplinarity and such willingness to make provisional interpretative leaps.

The Configuration of Ifaluk Fago
I have based my reading of fago on a close reanalysis of Catherine Lutz’s rich ethnographic treatment of this and other key emotion words (Lutz 1985, 1988, based on fieldwork conducted in 1977 and 1978) in the language spoken on the Micronesian atoll of Ifaluk. Notably, Lutz’s ethnography was the basis for Wierzbicka’s cultural script for fago as well. I (Quinn 2013) supplemented my analysis with material from an earlier, briefer ethnographic report on children and child rearing on the same island by Melford Spiro (Burrows & Spiro 1953, based on fieldwork conducted in 1947–48, 30 years before Lutz’s). In this article, I also consult material from a dissertation by Donald Rubinstein (1979, based on fieldwork conducted from 1975 to 1977, overlapping with Lutz’s) about childhood on Fais island, which, along with Ifaluk, is one of the Western Carolines, and the inhabitants of which speak a dialect mutually intelligible with that spoken by Ifaluk islanders (Rubinstein 1979:23; Edward Lowe, personal communication). My consideration of these works (for a more detailed analysis, see Quinn 2013) suggests to me that Ifaluk fago is not entirely different from American love. First, the very same three concerns regarding care, closeness, and loss reappear in association with fago—which Lutz defines as compassion/love/sadness (1988:44) and summarizes as putting “emphasis on the links between loss, interpersonal connection, and others’ needs” (1988:153). I should note that when I gloss these three features shared by fago and love as something like concern about care, closeness, and loss (or when I use longer strings of English words to describe them), my linguistic descriptors for these concerns are intended merely as shorthand stand-ins, to give the flavor of the terms. They are not intended as translations for the three elements of the dependency complex that they label and that I am hypothesizing to be a universal sequel of infantile attachment. Lutz, too, seems to be cautioning similarly when she writes that a combination of American-English terms, including compassion, love, and sadness, “together best translate fago” (1988:119, emphasis mine).

However, in the case of fago these three concerns are strikingly differently configured than they are when Americans speak of love. First, according to Lutz (1988:121), you fago not one other person with whom you have an intimate relationship (as in the case of American love), but all those in need. These “needy are identified by the Ifaluk as those who are sick or dying; those who must leave the island and their families for some period; those who lack the ability to procure their own food, such as children, the aged, and the infirm; and those who lack the mental abilities or social status that would enable them to make decisions and move as autonomous agents in the world” (Lutz 1988:121–122). This list is recognizable as comprising the “compassion” component of Lutz’s English gloss for fago. The person in need of care is the other who is the target or recipient of fago, which is (unlike love) nonreciprocal. The needs to be met are pertinent to care on Ifaluk. They tend to be tied to the very real requirements of physical survival and well-being (Lutz 1988:146, 152), such as food provision, nursing through illness, or cooperative labor. In the American case, on the other hand, caring for one’s spouse or other loved one is more centrally about answering psychological needs such as those to feel loved, be emotionally supported, and
have open communication. (Notably even sex, a need that Americans expect to be fulfilled within marriage and one that might reasonably be classified as physical, is “psychologized” by my American interviewees in being viewed as a sign of love and couchèd in terms of the intimacy it engenders.)

Secondly, Lutz tells us, *fazo* is also about being with people. This might be considered the “love” component of Lutz’s tripartite formula for the term. It is not (as in the case of love in American intimate relationships) the person you *fazo* that you want to be with, however, but people in general. If you *fazo* someone you have lost, or anticipate losing, due to severe illness, death, or travel away from the island, for example, it helps to be with other people, especially kinfolk. Largely for this reason, *fazo* is felt for those who have no kin or whose kin networks are attenuated (see Quinn 2013 for a more detailed summary of Lutz’s and Spiro’s information about this).

Thirdly, as the circumstances for wanting to be with other people suggest, *fazo* is also felt toward that person you either have lost or are about to lose, through death, death-threatening illness, or some other kind of separation, most often departure or imminent departure from the island (see Lutz 1988, who cites instances of *fazo* felt both subsequent to such loss and in anticipation of it). Lutz associates these occasions with the “sadness” component of *fazo*. It is the meaning that corresponds to the American worry about losing the loved one. However, *fazo* in this sense applies, once again, not to one special person in your life (as in the case of love), but to all those many kinspeople with whom you are close. Death and dying are the prototypical kind of loss and one with which Ifaluk islanders are preoccupied because of both a high infant mortality rate and the special dangers of atoll life, which include periodic violent and famine-threatening monsoons. Death is not only feared but also massively mourned when it happens. In any case, the association of *fazo* with loss is highly pronounced on Ifaluk.

Notably, an exceptionally high rate of interhousehold adoption may heighten Ifaluk children’s fear of abandonment, contributing to a relatively greater emphasis on loss. Lutz (1988:153) herself conjectures that this may be true, saying about this practice that both “[c]hildren and adults may receive and generalize from the message which Levy posits is sent in all Oceanic adoption, which is that ‘relationships between parents and children are fragile and conditional’” (1973:485).

There is an alternative interpretation of Oceanic adoption, however, that is perhaps truer to the Ifaluk experience of it and that needs to be considered. This version is aptly represented by Rubinstein’s description of adoption on the neighboring island of Fais. Rubinstein’s (1979:218–269) account of Fais adoption is a chapter long and thus fuller than either Lutz’s or Spiro’s for Ifaluk. In his account, adoption usually takes place at the end of the second or the beginning of the third year, and great care is taken to make the child’s transition from natal to adoptive household nondisruptive and untraumatic. The two families visit back and forth between households until, in what Rubinstein describes as “a gradual and patient process of ‘weaning’ the child from dependence upon the presence of the natural parents”
(1979:228), the adoptee is eventually willing to stay in the new household overnight. The birth parents reappear in the morning, and thereafter the child is walked back and forth between households until he or she is old enough to be able to go back and forth on his or her own. By four or five the adopted child plays exclusively around the new household, with only brief occasional visits back to the natal one.

This adoptive move occurs at a time in the child’s life when, according to Rubinstein, “mother-child interaction is showing evidence of strain” (1979:255). Mothers are typically busy with their new infants, so that “their 2- and 3-year-old children suffer a sudden loss of their previously exclusive place in the mother’s life.” But in Rubinstein’s view adoption, with the child’s move to a new household and the typical attentive nurturance of the adoptive parents, serves as an antidote to the mother’s withdrawal, rather than reinforcing it. As Rubinstein says:

[S]ocialization aims towards detaching the child from exclusive identification with the natural family. Hence new bonds are constructed beyond the family, are invested with sentiment, and are publicly celebrated and dramatized. Adoption on Fais is the prime exemplar and model of this process. (1979:264)

Thus:

For Fais children and adolescents, the psychological “message” of adoption . . . is clearly to emphasize the value of wider relations “outside of” the family. In the daily small interactions between natural and adoptive parents, and their children, relationships are constructed and sentiments expressed in such a way that children do not feel that their full identity and dependence is upon their immediate family. (Rubinstein 1979:187)

These outside relationships are extensive. Lutz points out that on Ifaluk, adoption is so widespread that it “creates important social ties between the child and a large number of classificatory parents and siblings,” with the result that this practice “in fact acts to give most individuals a kinship relation with a significant proportion of the total population” (1988:151). In this way of thinking about it, then, the child’s adoption experience is not so much about loss as about care and specifically about the redirection of care to the wider island community.

That children are a principal target of *fago* lends itself well to the practice of adoption. As Lutz observes about adoption on Ifaluk, “The notion of *fago* is heavily weighted with this focus on feeding and caring for children,” adding, “including others’ offspring” (1988:238, fn. 22). Thus Lutz’s reading of Ifaluk adoption incorporates the two interpretations of it, concluding that it communicates both loss and care:

The dual message, that nurturance is expected from and for many of one’s consociates and that relationships that were primary may be “lost” to a secondary place—can be spoken about with the “sadly compassionate” notion of *fago* . . . Adoption is, then, both a training ground for the emotion of *fago* and a cultural site for its utilization. (1988:153)
In line with this dual message, adoption not only teaches about those many who will fago one’s self, but also serves as an exemplary opportunity for learning to oneself display fago toward others:

The adoptive parent serves as a model of intensive nurturance beyond the nuclear family, while public discourse about the institution alerts others to the fact that it is the compassionate adopter (rather than the self-sacrificing biological parent) who is the “hero” of any particular adoption story . . . Here, as elsewhere in Ifaluk culture, the ideal person is portrayed as one who cares for others, who has fago. (Lutz 1988:153)

**Defending Against Adult Dependency**

Thus, and in spite of important differences in its application and its emphasis, Ifaluk fago mirrors American love in being about care, closeness, and loss. In another very important respect, fago and love are similar but different. At this point in my argument I follow Chris McCollum (2002) in assuming that infantile feelings of dependency are everywhere so threatening to newer developmental demands for autonomy in all human societies that these infantile feelings must be defended against in adulthood. Again, however, the psychodynamic defenses that have evolved to address this very general human problem are culturally distinctive. Before going on to sketch the differences between these American and Ifaluk Islander defenses, I wish to clarify my position regarding them. In introducing psychodynamic defenses into my argument, I recognize that I am treading on delicate ground. Some readers may not be familiar with psychoanalytic theories, and others may find them off-putting or discount them on sight. I, on the contrary, am convinced that these psychodynamic processes figure large in the human condition. That I take this stance does not mean that I embrace Freudian theory or any other particular school of psychoanalysis in full. Rather, I believe, psychodynamic concepts must be adopted cautiously and selectively. I am wedded to the concept of defenses, however, and in particular to the idea of cultural defenses, which are shared by members of a group because they have undergone a similar sequence of early experiences. Spiro argued some time ago for this notion of cultural defenses or, as he called them, “culturally constituted defense mechanisms” (1961, 1965).

To continue: McCollum, in his analysis of American falling-in-love stories, details a set of interrelated psychodynamic defenses that, in the American middle-class case, “reconfigure conflicting desires into more manageable form,” although they “are never able to completely reconcile them” (2002:125). For Americans, infantile dependency needs that are never fully resolved in the course of development are split off, to be given free reign only within the narrow compass of marriage or another adult love relationship. Otherwise, the tension between autonomy and dependency in middle-class American life is decided in favor of autonomy or, in its American guise, “self-reliance.” In McCollum’s words, this tension “is transformed into an uncompromising assertion of one side of the conflict”—or, in psychoanalytic terms, resolved through reaction formation. Even within the context of adult intimate relationships, furthermore, romantic fulfillment is reworked by means of compromise formation to seem to be “the outcome of individual strivings rather than dependency needs” (2002:132). This compromise formation, McCollum explains, is accomplished through the
more specific psychodynamic strategies of paradox and rationalization. The paradox is that one must first establish oneself as fully autonomous before falling in love; it is considered unwise, for example, to fall in love “on the rebound.” I can add that equally, within contemporary American marriage, one is expected to retain one’s own separate personhood, with a unique identity and inalienable rights. The rationalization that one has no control over when and with whom one falls in love (and is thereby expected to marry) transfers agency from the self to the external world and thereby, argues McCollum, disguises the infantile nature of one’s adult dependency feelings toward another.

I view fago, with its rather extravagantly lop-sided emphasis on others’ neediness and one’s own caregiver role vis-à-vis these needy, as also being a defense against one’s unwelcome feelings of infantile dependency in adulthood. However, it works quite differently than does the American defense. Fago, I would argue, is a combination of two defensive strategies. In the first of these, projection, the dependency feeling is experienced instead as belonging to and emanating from another—in this case, the needy person who is the recipient of one’s fago, and whose real neediness and hence vulnerability makes this person an especially fitting such target. In a second, complementary, strategy—reaction formation—the feeling of dependency is experienced as its reverse, caregiving. In sum, the person’s own feelings of neediness are not one’s own, but others’ feelings, and the person him- or herself is the one who cares for those needy others. That fago, unlike love in which care is expected to be reciprocated, is focused so one-sidedly on the needy other is central to its work as a defense. In projecting neediness onto other people and adopting a compassionate, caregiving stance toward these others, Ifaluk Islanders are able to disown or “disavow” their own feelings of neediness. Managed in this way, these infantile feelings no longer come into conflict with a more adult, caregiving, way of being.

Possible Origins of the Ifaluk Defense
A clue to the origins of this Ifaluk cultural defense is to be found in early childhood experience. Tellingly, Ifaluk children undergo an abrupt transition between babyhood, when they are the constant center of attention and all their desires are satisfied, and toddlerhood, when their places are usurped by younger infants. Spiro’s forceful account of this transition is worth quoting in full:

We have repeatedly emphasized the fact that the baby is king in Ifaluk. Not only are babies desired and not only are all their desires satisfied, but they are the constant center of attention. They are always the focal point of the household. This orientation, moreover, remains constant. The eyes of the adults are always focused on the babies, so that once the baby grows older he is out of focus, so to speak, and a new baby is now in focus. In other words, the king is dethroned. His place of centrality is now usurped by a younger infant. From a position of extreme overt love and attention he is relegated to a position where he is relatively ignored. Adults are still concerned about him, but they leave him to shift for himself. He is free to come and go when he wants and to eat where he wants, so long as he is not too far from sight. But what is even more important, the constant overt affection to which he had become accustomed is now withdrawn. I have seldom observed a child four or five years old to be held in an adult’s arms, to be kissed or hugged, or to receive any overt, physical affection. From a state of infancy—a
state of overabundant love—the child passed directly to a state of adulthood, with regard to the display of affection. The result of this differential treatment is a child starved for affection. (Burrows and Spiro 1953:274)

Spiro tells how Ifaluk children can cry long and loudly without anyone coming to their comfort or aid and, indeed, how a patently frustrated toddler may instead provoke amusement. This account is reminiscent of Rubinstein’s narrower description of the 2- and 3-year-old child’s sudden loss of the mother’s exclusive attention with the arrival of a new sibling. Confirming Spiro’s description of Ifaluk childhood, Rubinstein goes on to hint at this same broader shift in the child’s treatment by all the adults of the natal Fais household, which he summarizes as “…the style of early indulgence of infants, and the rather sharp discontinuity which occurs during the third year” (Rubinstein 1979:293). As I have elsewhere (Quinn 2013:230) concluded, the child cut off in this abrupt way from accustomed attention and affection learns to disavow his or her own need for affection.

Moreover, Ifaluk children are soon expected to do duty as child caregivers themselves, serving from the ages of seven or eight as mother surrogates to younger siblings, and pairs of girls being routinely charged from the ages of 9 or 10 with the supervision of larger play groups. Rubinstein (1979:305, 313) reports even earlier ages for the assignment of this task to Fais children. In addition to caring for siblings and other children, all Ifaluk children are enjoined to care for their aging parents when the time comes. Perhaps there is a dual effect of the abrupt transition from an indulged infancy to a neglected toddlerhood, and subsequent recruitment, beginning at a relatively young age, into a role of responsibility for others more needy than oneself. The common experience of adoption may accentuate the abruptness of this transition and the attendant sense of loss, as proposed in the first interpretation of it I have reported, or rather may teach the child about the extensive reach of responsibility and care for others, as in the second interpretation of it—or both, as Lutz would have it. Taken together, these early experiences could explain how an experiential complex like that labeled by *fago*, that preserves the infant’s and child’s feelings of care, proximity and loss, and projects these disavowed dependency needs onto a wide circle of others for whom one becomes the caregiver, could have come about.

**Wierzbicka’s Definition of Fago**

Now consider Wierzbicka’s cultural script for *fago*:

- **fago**
  - X thinks of person Y
  - X feels something good toward Y
  - X thinks something like this:
    - something bad can happen to a person
    - when something bad happens to someone, some people should do something good for this person
I don’t want bad things to happen to Y when X thinks that something bad can happen to Y, X feels something bad because of this, X wants to do something good for Y (1992:143)

As are all cultural scripts, this one is constructed from the Natural Semantic Metalanguage. To make clear how the NSM primes and their grammar contribute to a cultural script like this one, let me provide some examples, supplied by Goddard (2010), for the mental states THINK, FEEL, and WANT implicated in fago. Taken together, these three conceptual primes play a central role in the construction of Wierzbicka’s cultural script for fago. First, two of four possible grammatical constructions, or “syntactic frames” (Goddard 2010:76) taken by the prime THINK appear in fago: (1) there is a topic, as in “someone thinks about something/someone”; and (2) a “quasiquotational” complement can be introduced by “like this,” as in: “someone thinks like this: ‘...’” Next, the conceptual prime FEEL takes three grammatical constructions, only one of which figures in the cultural script for fago: (3) “someone feels something good/bad toward someone else.” Finally, two of the four possible grammatical constructions taken by the conceptual prime WANT also enter into this same cultural script: (4) “someone wants to do something”; and (5) “someone wants something to happen.” These five frames do not exhaust the grammatical complexities of the cultural script for fago; in addition to primes such as SOMEONE, SOMETHING, LIKE, GOOD and BAD, and HAPPEN that figure in the constructions for THINK, FEEL and WANT, the primes NOT and BECAUSE also come into play.

What is wrong with this definition of fago, in my view? First of all, Wierzbicka is constrained by the necessity of constructing it out of her Natural Semantic Metalanguage, composed of just those semantic primes on her list of linguistic universals and the grammatical constructions taken by these primes. Hence, she can only say that “something bad can happen to a person,” not that that something bad is typically separation from oneself in the form of death, departure from the island, or imminent death or departure, or that the person one is separated from, in this small, tightly knit community, is likely to be a kinsperson, and so forth. She can only say that the person who feels fago “wants to do something good for” the recipient of this fago, not that the something good is (in this case, physical) care for the person who may be ill, hungry, elderly, or otherwise in need. Thus the cultural script she provides for fago is lacking in critical meanings. It is like a semantic stick figure.

A feature of Wierzbicka’s descriptions that forcefully brings home the inadequacy of the bare script to capture the full meaning of the scripted term is that a great deal of additional exposition surrounds, and supplements, each of her cultural scripts. Indeed, in line with her use of an abstract metalanguage as the basis for cultural scripts, Wierzbicka considers such supplementation normal and necessary, observing that the individual statements that compose a cultural script “are quite general in nature, and they all require further specifications, provisos, and supplementary statements…” (1994:72). Thus, in the case of the cultural script for fago, Wierzbicka (1992:143) adds, for example, that the “bad things” likely to trigger the feeling of fago are illness, a departure from the island, or lack of food. She explains, again as an addendum to the fago script, why a woman might feel “a bit of fago”
(Lutz 1988:121) for her younger brother when she hears him singing as he fishes in the lagoon: “Apparently, nothing bad has happened to the young man yet, but his sister appears to think of him as vulnerable (as well as dear), and this thought activates her desire to protect him and to do good things for him” (Wierzbicka 1992:144). But, as I have already suggested, it is another’s perceived vulnerability that unifies being a young child or an elderly person, having an illness or an infirmity, lacking food or other resources, and dying or travelling away from the home island. To say merely that “something bad can happen” to another person does not capture any of these specific grounds for vulnerability.

Wierzbicka (1992:146) argues that “something bad” and “something good” can be considered “common denominators” for the actual bad things that can happen to an Ifaluk Islander and the actual good things that one wants to do as a result. Indeed, she touts this as a definitional asset of the cultural script for *fago*: “It seems to me that the formula proposed is sufficiently vague and comprehensive to cover all these different cases of *fago*” (1992:144) that Lutz describes. According to Wierzbicka, such abstract formulae are an expected feature of cultural scripts more generally.

In my different view, the NSM does the best job that language can do in capturing a given meaning, but ultimately, language can only approximate meaning. Because restricted to the Natural Semantic Metalanguage, the “something bad” and “something good” that can happen to an Ifaluk islander are over-general common denominators. My objection is that we can do better if we are not so constrained. We can get at the root meaning of *fago*, which, as I have indicated, I believe to have its origins in early attachment experience. In my approach, *fago* (like *love*) originates in that early dependency complex that links the desire to be cared for and be close to the caregiver, the felt threat of abandonment by this caregiver, and whatever (actual or imagined) experiences of care, proximity, and abandonment accompanied those desires and that fear. Subsequently, the experience of dependency is shaped and reshaped over a person’s life course. A culturally shared element of that reshaping, in the Ifaluk life experiences leading up to adulthood, is the disavowal of the entire dependency complex by means of its defensive reconfiguration as *fago*. Lutz reports, in this connection, that “the ability to *fago* is dependent on the acquisition of mature language skills, and of social intelligence (*repiy*), more generally” (1988:140). She goes on to say that Ifaluk children are said to first feel the emotion of *fago*—and thus to be able to *fago* others—only after about seven, the age at which they are thought to acquire social intelligence. Presumably also the label *fago*, describing this second, more mature stage in development when the child is no longer just the recipient but now the agent of the associated emotion and its enactment, comes relatively late in the individual Ifaluk child’s development.

There is a more drastic problem with Wierzbicka’s script for *fago*. Beyond doing good for another, which I have equated with the specific kinds of caregiving that Lutz describes, the rest of the complex meaning of *fago* is entirely missing from Wierzbicka’s cultural script for this term. She herself acknowledges this when she notes that her script “would fail to account for the links between *fago* and *compassion* and *sadness*” (Wierzbicka 1992:143). As she concludes, while her “explication does not fit all the situations when *fago* can be used...
range of these situations, however, is so broad that I don’t think any unitary formula could be proposed for them” beyond the components—X is thinking of Y, X feels something good toward Y, and X wants to do something good for Y—captured in her script. Her solution: “I suspect, therefore, that *fago* may be polysemous and that two different senses of this word should in fact be distinguished: the core sense explicated here and the more peripheral sense, which is closer to something like admiration than to something like compassion or sadness.” However, my definition of *fago* as encompassing closeness and loss as well as care does indeed capture the broader range of situations to which *fago* applies, and does so in a wholly natural way, by invoking a stable infantile experiential complex. Wierzbicka’s resort to polysemy with regard to two central components of *fago* seems like surrender in the face of semantic complexity.

Wierzbicka’s allusion to “admiration” as glossing a peripheral sense of *fago* begs for explanation. This is a reference to Lutz’s observation that “While most of the contexts in which the word *fago* is used represent major or minor disasters for those involved, the emotion is also importantly linked to encounters with people whom the Ifaluk define as exemplary in crucial kinds of ways. As one person told me, ‘You *fago* someone because they do not misbehave. You *fago* them because they are calm and socially intelligent’” (1988:137). Island chiefs, who look after the entire community, are a prime example of such admirable people. This may be a case of polysemy, but if so, it is a fairly narrow one. My interpretation of *fago* still captures much more of the full meaning attributed to this term by Lutz, and illustrated in her examples of it, than does Wierzbicka’s cultural script for it.

Wierzbicka’s exclusion of closeness and loss from her script for *fago* ultimately hamstrings even her interpretive addenda. For example, she attempts to explain why a certain Ifaluk woman continues to feel *fago* for her mother even after the mother’s death, supposing that the grieving daughter “still wants to do good things for her (although there is perhaps nothing, or little, that can be done)” (Wierzbicka 1992:144). This coupling of loss of the parents with *fago* for them after their death reinforces Lutz’s inclusion of sadness (along with compassion and love) in her English translation of *fago*, although Wierzbicka concludes, on the basis of her analysis of the concept, that “*fago* does not have very much in common with sadness” (1992:145). Sadness is in response to loss, and in this sense *fago* has everything to do with sadness.

**Wierzbicka’s Comparison of Fago and Love**

Looming large in Wierzbicka’s project is the demonstration that similar terms in related languages have different, although not unrelated, cultural scripts. A good example of this strategy, with a summary of the accompanying argument, is provided by D’Andrade (2001:248). This is Wierzbicka’s (1992:125–130) contrast between the meanings of the English word *disgust* and the French word *dégout*:

\[
\text{disgust} \\
X \text{ thinks something like this:}
\]
I now know: this person did something bad
People shouldn’t do things like this
When one thinks about it, one can’t not feel something bad
Because of this, X feels something bad
X feels like someone who thinks something like this:
I have something bad in my mouth
I don’t want this
dégoût
X thinks something like this: this is bad
Because of this, X feels something bad
X feels like someone who thinks this:
I have something bad in my mouth
I don’t want this

The differences in the definitions reflect the fact that “dégoût” is associated more closely and directly with eating than “disgust,” while “disgust” involves feelings caused by bad and ugly human actions. Thus “disgust” is more moral and judgmental than “dégoût.”

This comparison succeeds reasonably well because the point of contrast is singular and hence fairly obvious, and the two words having evolved from the same common base language in slightly different directions: the narrower confinement of the French term to eating, versus the wider extension of the English cognate. However, Wierzbicka’s comparison of fago with English “counterparts” compassion and love works less well, possibly because the English terms chosen for comparison are not cognate, but undoubtedly also because of the complexity of meaning attached to all these terms. Here is Wierzbicka’s cultural script for love:

\[\text{love (X loves person Y)}\]
(a) X knows Y
(b) X feels something good toward Y
(c) X wants to be with Y
(d) wants to do good things for Y (1992:145)

Her script for love, perhaps because Wierzbicka is more familiar with this emotion, is more fully filled out than that for fago: it includes wanting to be with the other person, Y, as well as wanting to do good things (again, of some unspecified nature) for Y. Apparently in this case polysemy is not a worry as it is for Wierzbicka in the case of fago. Even so, the script is missing the concern for losing Y, which is an integral part of my reconstructed definition of American marital love. In the case of fago, as I have said, Wierzbicka’s script leaves out not one but two of the meanings that, in my definition, are central to the dependency
complex—both wanting to be with others and fearing and grieving their loss. (Nor are these two meanings covered by Wierzbicka’s script for compassion, which she argues, with love is the closest counterpart to fago.) Even beyond these omissions of content, entirely absent from either Wierzbicka’s cultural script for fago or her cultural script for love is any notion that these might serve as cultural defenses.

By way of comparison between fago and love, Wierzbicka can only point to specific differences: “The concept of fago doesn’t include component (a) (unlike love, it can be extended to strangers) or component (c) (which in the case of love suggests a kind of personal attraction to another person). It does contain, however, components (b) and (d)” of the cultural script that she provides for love—that is, the components “X feels something good toward Y,” and “X wants to do good things for Y” (1992:146). In my interpretations of these two terms, (a) and (b) are secondary to the essential meaning of either. Instead, as I have tried to spell out, it is larger meanings associated with each of these terms that makes the best sense of why, in the one instance, fago but not love can be extended to strangers, and why, in the other instance, love but not fago is based on personal attraction to one other person (a and c, respectively, in Wiezbicka’s cultural script for love). That is to say, fago is likely to be extended widely in the community because, as we have seen, Ifaluk children’s sentiment is directed outward from their natal families to those many others with whom they have kinship or fictive kin connections. Again, adult love in middle class America may owe its exclusive focus on one other person to that of the idealized mother-child relationship.

Elsewhere, Wierzbicka speculates that, while love is not the universal human emotion it is often assumed to be, “all languages may nonetheless recognize lexically a distinct type of feeling linked with the semantic component ‘person X wants to do good things for person Y’. But the matter requires further investigation” (1999:294). What I am suggesting, instead, is that in all human societies this infantile dependency complex—an expectation of care, a desire for proximity, and a fear of abandonment—endures across the life course, asserting itself in adulthood as concerns about care by and closeness with certain others, and the potential or actual loss of these others. When wanting to be cared for takes the defensive shape that it does in fago, then the result is something like Wierzbicka’s nonreciprocal “X wants to do good things for Y”—which would be better cast, I think, as “X wants to care for Y” (but, of course, care is not a semantic prime). In all likelihood, this is a not uncommon cultural defense, especially characteristic of preindustrial, kin-based (sometimes called “collectivist”) societies. It is also a defense, I might add, that is not unknown among individuals in our own society. The founder of attachment theory, John Bowlby (1980:156–157, 206–209) reported on just such clinical cases, which he called “compulsive caregiving for others” and about which he had this to say: “Because a compulsive caregiver seems to be attributing to the cared-for all the sadness and neediness that he is unable or unwilling to recognize in himself, the cared-for person can be regarded as standing vicariously for the one giving the care” (1980:157; see Quinn 2013). Bowlby, then, agrees with my interpretation of such “compulsive” caregiving as a defense against recognizing one’s own neediness.
The Theoretical Point

Some readers may have concluded that I am missing the point of Wierzbicka’s project. As one reviewer of this submission argued, “I don’t think that the generality of Wierzbicka’s script for fago constitutes an objection to it: its generality subsumes the instances that the author mentions. That is its function as a script.” If this function is to provide a nonethnocentric linguistic translation, then cultural scripts like this one for fago certainly do that. On the other hand, this script for fago is unlikely to be recognizable to a speaker whose task is to use the term, or learn to use it, appropriately. Crucially, it fails to capture all but a fraction of the meaning of the term it is intended to represent, leaving unaddressed defining elements of this meaning. I have been arguing that this failure is due to the fact that these cultural scripts do not get to the root of that meaning. This is because the cultural meaning of words and other lexemes does not arise from this universal metalanguage out of which the scripts are constructed. Instead, some blend of human neurobiology, cultural experience, and world structure is the source of complexes of meaning that, when these complexes have cultural significance, get assigned terms. In the case of fago, some of that original complex of meaning arises prelinguistically, to be labelled subsequently. The meaning of fago rests, first, on its biological basis in infantile attachment; second, on the Ifaluk cultural experience of caring for others, cultivated, for example, in the widespread practice of adoption, in children’s ubiquitous task of caring for their siblings and other children, and in the idealization of personages, especially chiefs, known for their care of others; and thirdly, on features of the island world that support such practices. These features include the prevalence of sickness and death on this danger-ridden island, the density of kinship and fictive kin ties in this small world, and a subsistence economy that demands cooperation (see Quinn 2013 for a fuller summary of these conditions). No language or universal metalanguage is equipped to fully recapture the meaning of such a concept.

The domain of attachment represented by my comparison of fago and love, involving as it does a psychological complex of infantile experience and resulting defense mechanisms, is perhaps more challenging than domains that are addressed by contributors to Wolff and Malt (2010), such as motion or containers (though these are hardly simple). I assume that the unusually extended period of dependency of human infants on their caregivers, and the innate system of attachment that has evolved to address that circumstance, combined with the practical necessity of ultimately outgrowing this early dependency, sets the stage for the meanings of fago, love, and like concepts that might be expected to exist in other languages. The demands of dependent human infants everywhere to be cared for and kept close, and the threat of caregiver loss that they face, are universal experiences that round out this picture. It should be clear from this account that I presume some such complex of meaning, however configured, however labeled or even unlabeled, to emerge in all human societies. While some attachment theorists have made other proposals about the aspects of early attachment that endure into adulthood (see my discussion of this, Quinn 2013:217), neglecting especially the expectation of continuing care, I think most attachment theorists would agree that these three components of attachment are reasonable extensions of its meaning for adults. The expectation of care, in particular (including those of closeness and
loss when these are associated with care), is at cross-purposes with the equally universal expectation of adult autonomy. As this article illustrates, such cultural notions about adult autonomy range across American’s fierce self-reliance and Ifaluk islander’s dictate that adults themselves be caregivers. The inevitable conflict between the two impulses, for grownup autonomy and for dependency on others’ care, everywhere inspires cultural defenses.

Thus, when the reviewer quoted previously in support of the generality of cultural scripts, elsewhere asserts that “Wierzbicka is analyzing the meaning of words, not the psychological formation of Ifaluk,” he or she is again missing my point. I too am analyzing the cultural meaning of words (or, more broadly, lexemes). If this meaning is inherently psychological, it is because in human evolution and in the resulting human brain, thought, feeling, motivation, and language have become entangled. Moreover, in both the addenda to the cultural script for fago that she provides and within the script itself, Wierzbicka too makes psychological assumptions about the meaning of this lexeme. Unlike Wierzbicka, however, I insist that this meaning can only be understood in terms of a combination of human neurobiology, cultural experience, and the structure of the world. Within the common constraints set by these parameters, of course, the meaning can vary quite a bit cross-culturally. Beyond the two cases addressed in this article, the universality I have posited for the complex of meanings I have described in these cases, the range of possible cultural configurations that such a universal complex of meanings might take, and the possible labels for these, have yet to be investigated. Obviously, systematic evidence for such a universal complex of meaning is as yet lacking, a vivid shortcoming beside the evidence that Wierzbicka and Goddard have produced for the NSM. By my analysis of the two cases presented here, I hope to provoke further research into this possible universal and its variants.

I hasten to add that of course I appreciate the fact that language is an element of cultural meaning. The practices by which fago is cultivated are repeatedly labeled as such, until the term fago is part of its practice, and sometimes even reinforces its nonlinguistic enactment. Wierzbicka (e.g., 2003:583) makes the point that language is an important vehicle for the transmission of cultural norms. Further, she observes, in conveying such shared expectations language thereby reduces individual variation. So, when people share a term for some experience, such as fago, their way of thinking about that experience tends to converge. It needs to be added that further meaning is carried in the grammatical system surrounding a given lexeme. Too, the habitual way of saying things in a given language can have very powerful effects indeed on the way we think about them. My point is only that the cultural meaning of something is never reducible to the linguistic term for it.

**Conclusion**

Wierzbicka is certainly right that “in searching for either universal or culture-specific features of cognition we are searching for certain generalizations” (2005:257). What she is mistaken about, I believe, is the assertion that directly follows: that “these generalizations have to be expressed in some language”—in her view, to avoid the bias of specific natural languages, in the universal Natural Semantic Metalanguage that she has developed, and that combines,
in grammatically permissible ways, concepts on her list of universal semantic primes. I, too, am in search of universals. I have opted, however, for an approach to cultural meaning that is not language (or metalanguage) bound, but that rather looks to common human neurobiology, culturally variable experience, and the structure of the lived world for that meaning.

In the course of my career, I have learned a great deal from linguists, including Wierzbicka. Especially, I and other psychological anthropologists have mined linguistics for its close, systematic, and inventive methods of analysis (see Quinn 2005a), which we have found to provide invaluable windows into the rest of culture. Moreover, language is a vital part of culture, but as I hope to have illustrated with the case of fago, it is only a fraction. Humans arrive in structured, sometimes radically differently structured, worlds; they come into them with much innate nonlinguistic equipment that constrains cultural variation within its limits; and they share much nonlinguistic, including prelinguistic, experience, both panhuman and distinctively cultural.

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Notes

Acknowledgements. I owe a huge debt to the unanimous reviewers who responded with such care and commented so incisively on two successive versions of this article. When reviewers are astutely selected, as I have found Ethos reviewers to be, and when authors are open (while still being selective, of course) to their suggestions, as I tried to be, they can contribute so centrally to article revisions as to become tantamount to (unacknowledged) coauthors. Thanks, y’all. And I owe an even larger debt to Ethos editor Ted Lowe, who not only shepherded this article through that review process with patience and acumen, but as a Micronesian researcher himself, corrected me on several vital ethnographic facts and pointed me to several important ethnographic sources I should have known about, but didn’t. What a great journal, and what a joy to publish in it!

1. As Wierzbicka (2005:258, Table 1) explains, the culturally variable “exponents” of these conceptual primes “may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes”; “they can be formally, i.e., morphologically complex,”; “they can have different morphosyntactic properties (including word-class) in different languages”; and “they can have different combinatorial variants (allolexemes).” To capture all these possibilities, I generally use “terms” or “lexemes” rather than “words.” Lutz, on whose ethnography of the Ifaluk concept fago I here depend, typically calls this and other such terms “emotion words.” Indeed, fago appears to have the status of a separate word in the sense that it can stand alone. Wierzbicka herself sometimes also slips into calling fago a “word.” All of us, when we talk about linguistic terms that label cultural concepts, are intending to abide by the more extensive definition of lexemes that Wierzbicka provides.

2. Sometimes referred to as “cultural models” (see Wierzbicka 2005) and sometimes equated with concepts (see Goddard 2010:66 for a discussion).

3. I am reasonably if provisionally convinced with respect to the first premise, the idea of a basic list of universal conceptual primes and the meta-grammar of each, and the cross-linguistic research establishing this list. There are undoubted theoretical implications of this finding for the development of human language. These implications remain to be explored. As I argue in this article, the cultural meanings of other more complex cultural concepts
cannot be composed out of these basic primes and relations among them. Therefore such a project is not one of the theoretical advantages of having identified this basic list.


5. See, e.g., Wierzbicka (2003) for a description of how the distinctive meaning of the Polish term _teskmota_ is tied to the experience having grown up in Krakow.

6. Malt and Wolff (2010:7–8) suggest some other solutions, represented in their edited volume, to the problem of ethnocentric bias in defining word meaning: using recent advances in structural semantics to sort out the structural from the idiosyncratic parts of linguistic meaning; grounding the meaning of words and other lexemes in objective features of the world; or, finally, taking advantage of new neuroimaging methods to map regions of the brain in which their meaning is activated by given terms.

7. The chapter by Regier et al. (2010) is an especially fascinating argument. Universals in color terms appear to be rooted in the physics of color combined with the optics of the human visual system, having, as these authors put it, some limited “wiggle room” for cross-cultural variation.

8. All interviewees were native-born Americans who spoke English as a first language. All were in first marriages during the period over which they were interviewed. Beyond these commonalities, interviewees were selected to maximize diversity with regard to such obvious differences as their geographic and ethnic origins, their occupational and educational backgrounds, and the age of their marriages. No claim is made for the statistical representativeness of this sample, nor would representativeness with respect to various sociological characteristics of residents of the middle-sized southern city in which all the interviewees lived even have been feasible for a sample so small. However, because there were several universities and research corporations in the area, this originally working-class town, and hence the interviewee sample, had ample residents from other regions of the United States. The striking regularity of the study findings about love and marriage, augmented by some subsequent less systematic checking, gives me confidence that the cultural models of marriage and love shared by these interviewees are (or were at the time the interviews were collected, 1989–90) the dominant, in the sense of most common, ones in the United States.

9. Rubinstein reports an adoption rate of 92% on Fais, which, as he says, is “one of the highest recorded for Oceanic communities” (1979:221).

10. It should be added that those who give away a child to a childless or bereaved couple are also displaying _fago_ (Lutz 1988:239, fn. 24).

11. The historically more recent application of this expectation to women, of course, has been the focus of much American feminism.

12. See Nuckolls (1996) for a somewhat different account of Ifaluk cultural defenses and Quinn (2013:232–233) for a discussion of this difference in our interpretations.

13. Rubinstein does add, about episodes he observed of adults’ studied indifference to or amused disinterest in two-year-old tantrums, that “[r]ather than explaining this process in terms of ‘rejection’ or ‘social distancing’ following the early period of infant indulgence, I suggest that we can understand these incidents as communicating to children certain cultural notions of authority and autonomy. In adults’ unresponsiveness to children’s tantrums, the children are learning the limits to the emotional demands which they can place on others, and they are learning the futility of direct shows of anger on Fais” (1979:297). Whether learning such limits might involve disavowal of one’s own emotional needs, is the question.
14. It may be telling in this context that sisters prototypically fago their brothers. Lutz tells us, “It is said that women, more often than men, are tangiteng” (describing a tendency to cry often) and that “the person who is tangiteng is one who tends to experience stronger than usual fago ‘compassion/love/sadness’ for others…” (1985:67). No further hints regarding a possible gender difference in the expression of fago are to be gleaned from Lutz’s published material. Such a gender difference would support my argument for the effect of early experience to the extent that young girls more frequently than similarly aged boys are recruited to be caregivers to smaller children.

15. Rubinstein says that, on Fais, “3 and 4-year-old children are first encountering the adult expectation that they take a nurturant and protective role towards infants and children still younger than them” (1979:305), while “[b]y the age of four or six, children often are expected to assist in feeding, watching over, or carrying about younger siblings” and “slightly older children, the 7- or 8-year-olds, appeared to feel fully confident in their own authority as caretaker” (1979:313).

16. Fago does seem to have a different meaning when applied to exemplary persons: You fago these individuals not because they are needy, or because you miss them, but because they are known for their fago of others. Lutz says, “Here, however, it is not the perception of need but its alleviation by the maluwelu person that prompts declarations of fago. To be calm is to be giving, and giving ought to be reciprocated with compassion if possible” (1988:138). She elaborates: Not only do maluwelu (calm, gentle) people have fago for others—demonstrating their compassion through their calmness because they do not frighten those others—but such a calm person also “creates the emotion of fago in others” (1988:139). These comments do indeed seem to introduce a new and different element into the meaning of fago, though, to be clear, it involves, not an expectation of direct reciprocity on the part of the person who expresses fago as with American married love, but rather a feeling engendered by that person in others who are witness to the fago—not necessarily or typically its recipient. Perhaps maluwelu people elicit fago toward themselves from others because they model it for these others, stirring it up in them? Or perhaps people fago them because—as Rubinstein (1979:277) reports about Fais chiefs—they pity them for their chiefly burdens and restrictions. Only Lutz herself, or perhaps only further investigation by Lutz or another ethnographer, could resolve this seemingly discrepant meaning of the Ifaluk term. In any event, this application of fago to chiefs does not fit neatly into my analysis of fago.

17. Wierzbicka’s speculation that there is perhaps little or nothing that can be done is another, if more minor, error. It is entirely natural to feel fago for one’s mother even after her death, because on Ifaluk, and throughout Micronesia, when one’s parents die they do not cease to exist or lose contact with the living, but still have needs and desires that children can and should fulfill (Edward Lowe, personal communication).

18. Although “something bad in my mouth,” like the “something bad” and “something good” in the script for fago, remains underdefined in these scripts.

19. Wierzbicka (1992:145) glosses love as the “English” term for a “western” concept. More recently she defends a somewhat narrower category, Anglo English, which includes American, British, and Australian varieties and, she claims, “captures an important historical and cultural reality,” while at the same time she acknowledges “that Anglo English is neither homogeneous nor unchanging” (2006:5–7). Notwithstanding this later proviso, Wierzbicka here offers only one “English” cultural script for love, a concept that has undergone enormous historical change in Great Britain, for one.


21. With regard to this latter piece of the attachment complex, psychologists Lotte Thomsen and Susan Carey make a relevant observation. Discussing the possibility that some universals in relational models might be learned rather
than innate (or have learned components), they comment whimsically about 10-month-old infants everywhere that “surely the big creatures in their experience are deeply associated with love, comfort, feeding, and family” (2013:21).

22. While Wierzbicka has written about cultural scripts in multiple publications, I quote this 2005 Ethos article here since it is one of her most recent discussions of this matter that I have come across.

23. Indeed, this understandable inclination to grant too foundational a role to language in cultural meaning once overtook my whole subdiscipline in the form of componential analyses of kin terms and other such lexical contrast sets. Such analyses were deemed sufficient to capture the cultural meanings of such terminological sets. The pursuit of this erroneous theory of cultural meaning preoccupied virtually an entire generation of psychological anthropologists (see Quinn 2011b for an account of this case).

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