“Thou shalt not be a tall poppy”: Describing an Australian communicative (and behavioral) norm

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Abstract

In Australian English, tall poppies are usually individuals who, on the basis of unwarranted self-adulation, itself a consequence of success, amassed fortune or fame, have become targets for criticism; or, less frequently, individuals who, overcome by success, amassed fortune or fame, and on the mistaken assumption that they are above the law, have engaged in unlawful behaviour, only to find that, eventually, the law catches up with them as well. They become the victims of a widespread tendency, known as the tall poppy syndrome, to scrutinize high achievers and cut down the tall poppies among them. This paper looks at tall poppies and the tall poppy syndrome in Australian discourse (with special reference to sports and federal politics), and, using Wierzbicka’s natural semantic metalanguage, explicates the corresponding communicative (and, more generally, behavioral) norm “Thou shalt not be a tall poppy.” In line with the general theme of this journal, the paper also provides some explicit intercultural comparisons. Furthermore, it includes a few more general remarks, in which I look at the notion of “communicative norm” and at the place of intercultural pragmatics within the broader field of intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

“Thou shalt not whinge”; “Thou shalt not try to be better than others”; “Thou shalt not carry on like an idiot.” Of the three “Australian cultural commandments” listed by McFadyen (1995), two are so-called communicative norms craftfully expressed in deeply culture-laden language: the verb whinge, on the one hand (Wierzbicka 1997: 214–217), and the idiomatic expression carry on like an idiot, on the other hand. The third so-called commandment (McFadyen’s second one) appears to cover a much broader area than communication: it belongs to a higher category, of
which communicative norms could be considered to be a subset, and we might call it a *behavioral norm*. Closer analysis reveals that, unlike McFadyen’s first and third commandments, the second (about trying not to be better than others) is *not* a norm that most Australians adhere to. For reasons that will be explained, a better formulation is “Thou shalt not be a tall poppy”—where the term *tall poppy* is an Australianism which is, however, spreading fast to other areas of the English-speaking world. Although it could be rightfully seen as another behavioral norm (i.e., a more or less straightforward revision of the one put forward in McFadyen 1995), we shall treat it primarily as a communicative norm, even though in order to do so we will have to talk about the tall poppy phenomenon in its entire complexity. First, though, we will make a few more general remarks, dealing with the notion of “communicative norm” and with the place of intercultural pragmatics (i.e., the comparative or contrastive study of such norms) within the broader field of intercultural communication.

Broadly speaking, communicative norms encourage *some* forms of communicative behaviour and discourage others. That they are not absolutely binding is a point which has been forcefully made by Goddard (1997: 199), who claims that such norms (he calls them *cultural* rather than *communicative*) “may be followed by some of the people all of the time, and by all of the people some of the time, but . . . are certainly not followed by all of the people all of the time.” Communicative norms can be either very specific and deal, for instance, with the nature of conventional replies to an Australian *How are ya?*, or with the conditions of use of Fr. *merci* when an offer is being made. Alternatively, they can be a lot broader, and belong to the type exemplified in the following excerpt:

In some parts of the world, for example, it is quite normal for conversations to be loud, full of animation, and bristling with disagreement, while, in others, people prefer to avoid contention, to speak in even, well-considered phrases, and to guard against exposure of their inner selves. In some societies, it is considered very bad to speak when another person is talking, while in others, this is an expected part of a co-conversationalist’s work. In some places, silence is felt to be awkward and people rush to fill up every spare second with talk, while in others, silence is welcomed. (Goddard 2000: 81)

To look at each of these behaviours in detail, while making relevant comparisons, would be an excellent example of what I call *intercultural pragmatics*. While it is no doubt entirely possible to define the field of intercultural pragmatics in a number of ways, I, for one, see it as a subfield of an even bigger area of scientific endeavour dealing with intercultural communication at large. I see it as one of three possible pathways, re-
ferred to in Peeters (2003) by means of the French labels “sémantique transculturelle” (intercultural semantics), “axiologie transculturelle” (intercultural axiology) and “pragmatique transculturelle” (intercultural pragmatics). The following definitions are slightly more refined than the ones provided in the earlier paper:

1. **Intercultural (or cross-cultural) semantics** is the contrastive or comparative study of presumed cultural key words; its aim is to reach a better understanding of known cultural values, to detect new (i.e., previously undetected) cultural values, and/or to discover and explicate affiliated communicative norms. In the absence of a contrastive or a comparative focus, this approach may be referred to as *cultural semantics*.

2. **Intercultural (or cross-cultural) axiology** is the contrastive or comparative study of known cultural values; its aim is to substantiate them through the identification of relevant communicative norms underpinned by them and of any lexical evidence which, as a result, would deserve the status of key words. In the absence of a contrastive or a comparative focus, this approach may be referred to as *cultural axiology*.

3. **Intercultural (or cross-cultural) pragmatics** is the contrastive or comparative study of communicative norms; its aim is to reach a better understanding of the cultural value or values that underpin them, to detect new (i.e., previously undetected) cultural values, and/or to find supporting key words. In the absence of a contrastive or a comparative focus, this approach may be referred to as *cultural pragmatics*.

There is no link, except for a terminological one, between (inter)cultural axiology as defined here and either Martinet’s (1973, 1975, 1977, 1984) axiology or science of values (see Walter 2001),1 or Krzeszowski’s (1990, 1992, 1993) semantic axiology. The adjectives cultural and intercultural help identify the precise subject of the new axiology and avoid confusion with the two axiologies that were just mentioned, as well as with my own conceptual axiology (Peeters 1993, 1994), a kind of synthesis (now abandoned) between André Martinet’s axiology, Mario Alinei’s theory of semantic fields, and what has sometimes been referred to as Anna Wierzbicka’s conceptual analysis or natural semantics. Neither label has withstood the test of time. Could it be that the use of the term conceptual axiology (sic; cf. Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002b) will prove to be any more popular? If so, (inter)cultural semantics, axiology and pragmatics would be “branches” of the new conceptual axiology, as the one thing they share with the latter is the use of Wierzbicka’s natural semantic metalinguage or NSM, also used in this paper (and to be further illustrated in

Importantly, the three “branches” do not exclude one another, but are complementary. *Nothing* must prevent one and the same researcher from engaging in *more* than one of them. None of them is more basic than either of the others, and there is no preferred approach. It is possible to be an intercultural semanticist, an intercultural axiologist and an intercultural pragmaticist all at once; it is possible to start and to finish anywhere, to switch between pathways as one sees fit, to change directions anytime. This is not what we shall be doing here, though. The aim of the present paper is to undertake a study in *(inter)cultural pragmatics*, with special reference to the Australian communicative (and behavioral) norm “Thou shalt not be a tall poppy.”

2. “Martha and the Tall Poppies”

Given the importance of American English, not only among the world’s languages but also among the different varieties of English spoken throughout the world, non-Australians living outside Australia (henceforth referred to as “cultural outsiders”) are most likely to first encounter references to the tall poppy phenomenon through columns such as Robert Tracinski’s “Martha and the Tall Poppies,” first published on 27 June 2002 on the US-based Ayn Rand Institute’s website ([http://www.aynrand.org/medialink/columns/rt062402.shtml](http://www.aynrand.org/medialink/columns/rt062402.shtml)), updated and released again on 11 June 2003 ([http://www.aynrand.org/medialink/marthastewart.shtml](http://www.aynrand.org/medialink/marthastewart.shtml)), and reprinted in various newspapers in the US and elsewhere.2 Here is part of what Tracinski has to say (the version quoted here is the latest):

Why do so many people hate Martha Stewart? How does a home-decorating expert with a wholesome public persona come to be portrayed as a major cultural villain? . . . There can be only one explanation for this tone of vicious glee. Martha is hated because she’s a tall poppy.

Tracinski then quite clearly indicates he is relying on hearsay to substantiate the reference to tall poppies:

I have been told that there is an Australian saying: “You have to cut down the tall poppies.” In other words, anyone who dares to poke his head above the crowd must be attacked, denigrated and brought down to the common level. I don’t know whether this Tall Poppy Syndrome, as it is called, is really typical of Australian culture—but it is a widespread trend in American culture, and Martha Stewart has long been one of its favorite targets.
A few lines further down, we find out what is wrong with “Martha,” i.e., why she is being criticized by so many:

The problem with Martha Stewart, we are told, is that the lifestyle she promotes in her books, magazines and television shows projects an “unattainable” perfection. Her kitchen is too clean, her house is too beautiful, her parties are too elegant. She gets too much done in a day. Such perfection, the charge goes, merely makes everyone else feel inadequate because they can’t measure up.

Or, in more general terms:

Most people are able to appreciate the accomplishments of others, even if they cannot match them. But for those who suffer from Tall Poppy Syndrome, other people’s achievements are an affront, an intolerable reminder of their own shortcomings. These are the people who desperately search for dirt to sling at celebrities, to show that they aren’t so good after all—and who rush to join any witch hunt.

The problem is that this sort of resentment is not what the tall poppy syndrome is all about. Nor is it about envy or jealousy, as has been claimed, within Australia, by some self-professed “victims of the tall poppy syndrome,” and also by some others who, for whatever reason, are in a position to identify more or less readily with “real” tall poppies, e.g., academics (cf. Peeters 2004, and also several of the quotes reproduced below). Tracinski’s assessment is far too sweeping—as is his conclusion:

We have been told for centuries that the weak, the incompetent, the most down-and-out bums on the street are the most worthy objects of our moral concern—while the highest achievers are at best the bum’s servants, at worst his exploiters. The result is an upside-down morality, a code in which the better you are, the worse you are. The more you achieve, the more you are hated.

This hatred of the good is not merely ugly; it is destructive. A culture that attacks its highest achievers will mow down its tall poppies—and end up with nothing but weeds.

The curious thing is that Tracinski’s column made it into at least one Australian daily, viz. The Canberra Times, which published it on 16 June 2003 with only minimal changes. Australian culture is not one that indiscriminately “attacks its highest achievers”; Australians do however single out for criticism, i.e., cut down (among many other synonymous expressions), those of their high achievers who, for instance, take too much credit for their achievements, or those who (wittingly or not) believe that, because of their achievements, they are different from—and better than—others, and can therefore say and do things that others cannot say and do. In line with common Australian English usage (see Peeters 2004 for more details), only a subset of high achievers (and a
rather small one at that) is likely to have to contend with the negative publicity that comes with tall poppy status. To prove my point, I shall now undertake an investigation of the Australian sports scene, which has numerous high achievers, but very few tall poppies. To further illustrate one specific kind of tall poppy behaviour that Australians find particularly offensive (viz. engaging in demeaning discourse in a public forum not limited to a small circle of “mates”), I shall, in a subsequent section, look at Australian federal politics.

3. Tall poppies in sport

Given the importance of sport in Australia, and in view of Australia’s quasi-unparalleled adoration of its sports heroes, it is worthwhile to explore, before asking whether they are cut down as actively as elsewhere, whether there are any tall poppies in sport. Reporting on research results originally released in 1991, psychologist Norman Feather (1994: 66) observed that “tall poppies in sport were viewed more favorably than tall poppies in politics and entertainment” (see also Feather 1996: 220–221). It should come as no surprise that Australian sentiment about tall poppies has been the topic of intense psychological research primarily undertaken at Flinders University (e.g., Feather 1989a/b, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999) as well as at the University of Western Australia (e.g., Grove & Paccagnella 1995; Paccagnella & Grove 1997, 2001). The interesting thing, from a linguistic point of view, is that Feather appears to have “hijacked” the term tall poppy (and those who have followed in his steps have done the same). In publication after publication, he has used the term in a neutral way, i.e., without the pejorative connotation that remains very much (but not always) part of it in common parlance. Feather’s references to “unpleasant” and “boastful” tall poppies are quasi-tautological in everyday language; those to “quiet” and “modest” tall poppies are oxymoronic. In his work, the phrase tall poppy is simply synonymous with the term high achiever. The two often appear together, linked by means of the conjunction or. Again and again, Feather has shown the need for a distinction, among Australia’s tall poppies, between “the good” and “the bad.” Who is good and who is bad, and which contributing factors determine whether a tall poppy (in the broader sense) is good or bad, depends of course on who makes the call.

The sports people Feather asked his subjects to assess were tennis player Pat Cash, cricket captain Allan Border and swimmer Lisa Curry-Kenny. The tall poppies selected by Grove & Paccagnella (1995), in a study dealing with sports people only, did not include any Australians.
Later studies (Paccagnella & Grove 1997, 2001) involved assessments of basketball player Kendal “Tiny” Pinder and cyclist Martin Vinnicombe, and of swimmer Kieren Perkins and aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman, respectively. Each time, the existence of tall poppies in sport was taken for granted, as is to be expected when the term is used in a neutral way.

Typically, though, it is not. Very few Australians, for instance, would be willing to count Freeman among the country’s tall poppies, even though Freeman herself is not so sure. Michael Hiestand (“Freeman freeing up her soul,” USA Today, 11 June 2002) reports: “It’s fortunate she’s so modest, given Australia’s Tall Poppy Syndrome. Its premise suggests anybody who tries to tower over others becomes an obvious target to be chopped down—and it remains a national stereotype with a basis in reality.” He must have discussed the tall poppy syndrome with her, for she is then reported to have said: “Oh gosh yeah, it’s true. Australians are such an earthy bunch. [My success] is threatening to some people. We don’t like to hear about people making millions, or any rich and famous lifestyles. It’s like we have a no-need-to-know basis about all that.” Freeman’s description is spot-on: it is not so much the realisation that the country has its rich and famous that upsets many Australians, but the fact that, because of the sorts of things they say and/or the sorts of (possibly unlawful or morally reprehensible) things they do (or are suspected of doing), some of the rich and famous end up spending too much of their time in the limelight, possibly thinking they are above the law.

Perkins’ behaviour is as unassuming, as self-effacing as Freeman’s. Perkins has been referred to as a tall poppy, but one who belongs to a special league and has not had to be cut down (see below). Other swimmers, for instance Atlanta Olympic silver medallist Scott Miller, have been less lucky:

Miller is a survivor—as is evidenced by the drama surrounding the AIS [Australian Institute of Sport; B.P.], where he was training in 1997. A night on the town, a brawl, a broken finger and Miller was told to go. He is still angry at the media for “trying to cut off a tall poppy” over the incident. (Jacquelin Magnay, “Miller aims to enjoy his comeback,” The Age, 21 June 2002)

Even a living legend such as Ian Thorpe has on at least one occasion been declared a victim of the tall poppy syndrome. On 16 May 2001, mounting innuendo about Thorpe’s sexual preferences led his coach, Doug Frost, to a widely reported outburst (quoted here after Geoff McClure, “Sporting life,” The Age, 17 May 2001). “People like to sling mud at him and that annoys the hell out of me,” he said. “There’s just a few things that really irk me and I guess I just admire the way he handles himself through all that adversity, particularly when people try to cut a tall poppy down.
He’s not a ladies’ man but certainly enjoys female company and it just annoys me when I hear people making innuendos about his sexuality.”

On the other hand, in an attempt to make sense of the “Perkinsmania” that swept through the early nineties, Wayne Smith (“Perkinsmanial!,” Courier-Mail, 19 September 1992) wrote as follows, now more than ten years ago:

Few Australian sportsmen have ever reached the pinnacle of their careers with their reputations so spotlessly untainted and enjoying popularity which transcends all barriers of age and sex. Women love him—as they repeatedly keep telling him—, men admire him and every parent wants their daughter to bring home a young man just like him. Sir Donald Bradman, Murray Rose and Australia II helmsman John Bertrand might once have basked in that same rosy glow of uncritical national adulation, but rarely do Australians allow their poppies to grow so tall.

Six years down the track, nothing had changed. A press clipping dating back to the latter part of 1998 (Anon. “Kieren ready to make memories”) states that “while Australians have at times turned on Tubby [cricketer Mark Taylor] for his batting slump, the Shark [golfer Greg Norman] for his spectacular losses, and Campo [rugby player David Campese] for his showmanship, Perkins remains the King of Hearts, a tall poppy who’s never been pruned.” There are tall poppies in each of the sports these people represent, as well as in others such as tennis. Tennis and cricket will be looked at below. Of Greg Norman, on the other hand, it has been said, in the Hobart-based Mercury (Peter Staples, “The Shark’s back, so watch out for the piranha,” 8 July 1992): “While the tall poppy syndrome continues to reign in Australia, players like Norman will take a hammering from those who choose to dig out the worst when an athlete goes through a bad patch.” In rugby news, Steve Connolly (“Supporters slur Sailor, says Slack,” Sydney Morning Herald, 26 November 2002) reports on Queensland coach Andrew Slack’s assessment of public criticism of former Brisbane Broncos winger Wendell Sailor: “Slack said Sailor had been a victim of the tall poppy syndrome and fans and the media had expected too much of him.” Slack himself is reported to have made the following statement on Sailor: “Wendell handles all this stuff okay. It’s not fun when people have a dig but he’ll make them eat their words. I think he’s been a tall poppy and a lot of people have been ready with the scissors.”

The existence, in sport, of tall poppies (Thorpe, Norman, Sailor) that have been cut down, albeit only temporarily, is in sharp contrast with the common—and far too categorical—observation that tall poppies in sport (in general) are a reality, but that, unlike those in other areas, they are not
cut down. It is an observation which, from a purely linguistic point of view, is typically made in one of two ways. The first is by means of phrases such as “except (in) sport,” “with the exception of sport” or “except for sporting legends.” There are numerous examples. “One of the fundamental characteristics of Australians,” observed Murray-Smith (1989: 389), “is supposed to be their inexhaustible desire to cut down tall poppies, to undermine, not only self-importance, but any kind of egregious distinction or achievement (except, of course, in sport).” Ten years later, in April 1999, in the course of an address on “Universities, tall poppies and intellectual elites” delivered at Curtin University (Western Australia), former Labor Minister of Science Barry Jones used milder language, but the message was similar: he spoke about “the commonly held belief of the Australian wariness of tall poppies, except in sport.”

Then, in September 2000, days before the Sydney Olympics, expatriate art critic Robert Hughes, not one who is known for mincing his words, wrote in the American edition of *Time Magazine* (“The real Australia,” 1 September 2000):

> The clarity of Australian cultural achievement is often muddied by our most irksome cultural shortcoming: a peevishly insecure hatred of “tall poppies,” people distinguished by their achievements in any area except, of course, sport. Australia has never honored its artists, intellectuals, writers and musicians as fully as its sports figures; there is always an undertow of resentment, of the lowbrows’ residual suspicion that the highbrow is conning them. Everyone bitches about this, nobody does anything about it; it is hardwired into us, a proof of “toughness.”

Hughes’ remarks about the rather different treatment of high flyers in sport, on the one hand, and of “artists, intellectuals, writers and musicians,” on the other, were echoed more recently by Katie Lahey, Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia (“We of little faith,” *The Age*, 30 June 2002). She, too, established an explicit contrast, albeit one between the country’s sports heroes—no difference so far—and its “scientists, artists, business and community leaders”:

> With the exception of sport—where it seems we have no peer—and possibly movies, we seem, as a country, unwilling or unable to celebrate our achievements, our successes. It is a shame that some of our scientists, artists, business and community leaders do not get the same accolades. . . . The story goes that, if you start a business in Hong Kong, your family will work at nights to help you. In America, friends invest in your company. But, in Australia, people tell you that you will fail and, if you succeed, they will call you a tall poppy and will cut you down.

The second linguistic procedure adopted by some to set sports heroes apart from high achievers in other areas is the use of conjunctions such as *despite* or *in spite of*, followed by a reference to the tall poppy syndrome.
Melbourne-born Luc Longley, who went on to become a champion bas-
ketball player in the US, recently put it this way: “In Australia a sports
star becomes a real cultural icon and is embraced by the nation—in spite
of the ‘tall poppy syndrome’ which is alive and well down there” (“Luc
Longley—in his own words,” Australian Notes, vol. 3, issue 2, Spring
Christian Science Monitor, 16 January 2002), on the other hand, said
at the start of 2002: “Despite [Australia’s] reputation for lopping its
stars down to size—as part of what is called the ‘tall poppy syndrome’—
Australians do like their sporting stars to succeed.”

They really do. Australians love their sporting heroes, but only—
broadly speaking—as long as modesty and unpretentiousness (especially
in victory) prevail. Let’s turn to cricket, for a change. In his previously
mentioned Curtin University address of April 1999, Barry Jones referred
to cricket legend Donald Bradman as an example of a tall poppy whom
Australians in general had not and would not cut down, essentially be-
cause of his status as a sports legend (cf., above, the treatment conferred
on a much younger Kieren Perkins). When, in 2001, Bradman died, aged
in his nineties, similar comments were made in the media. Gerard Hen-
derson, for instance, wrote (“Follow the leader,” Sydney Morning Her-
ald, 8 September 2001): “The late Don Bradman is perhaps the only
Australian tall poppy who was never cut down, even if his personality
was criticised by fellow cricketer Bill O’Reilly.” On 28 November 2002,
Henderson’s research in the life and career of “the Don” was one of the
topics on ABC Radio National’s Breakfast; it was introduced by the
program’s compere as follows: “One of the Great Aussie pastimes is our
love of mowing down tall poppies, except for sporting legends that is,
who traditionally remain unscathed. Don Bradman is perhaps the best
example of a man blessed with a sports halo that left him virtually un-
touched by critics. At least, while he lived.”

Many other cricketers have been celebrated, but none as much as the
Don. Many have been criticised, and been given the traditional tall poppy
treatment. In January 2001, player Glenn McGrath voiced the Australian
cricket team’s annoyance at unjustified criticism of aggressive behaviour
on the cricket ground. “As far as I’m concerned there’s a small per-
centage of people out there trying to look at ways to bring us down,”
McGrath said. “I guess it’s the tall poppy syndrome and it’s disappoint-
ing that you have your own countrymen who would rather bag us for
something than get behind us.” (cf. Cameron Bell, “McGrath: Stop try-
ing to bring us down,” Sunday Telegraph, 7 January 2001). On the last
day of the same month, in a letter to the editor of the Sydney Morning
Herald, following public outcry after an infelicitous on-field outburst by
cricketer Shane Warne picked up by a stump microphone, Ian Hunter mounted a verbal rescue: “It appears—he wrote—that the ‘tall poppy syndrome’ is alive and well” (note the phrase that ends this quote).  

Then, in January 2002, Australia ended third in a limited-overs contest of three international teams; sports journalist Peter FitzSimons (“Face facts, Steve, questions must be asked when you finish last,” *Sydney Morning Herald, 5 February 2002*) foreshadowed the consequences of any calls for changes to the team in the following extremely well written, but otherwise very uncharacteristic, piece of journalistic prose:

There is a syndrome in Australian life far more prevalent than the famed Tall Poppy Syndrome. For what it’s worth, I call it the Guardian Ivy Complex. That is, as soon as anyone takes a shot at a Tall Poppy, myriad Guardians will start swarming to the Poppy’s defence, wrapping themselves around the trunk of the Poppy so as to take the evil blows themselves. Self-conscious in their saintliness, they are there to defend to the death the right of the Poppies to continue blossoming untouched. You can call them old-fashioned if you like, but they just want to see the Poppies get a fair go!

He then went on as follows:

Hold on to your hats, sports fans, because in the next few weeks we are going to see an unprecedented amount of this very battle. That is, as calls are inevitably made for the Australian cricket team to be rejuvenated, reformed and renewed, whole battalions of Guardians will be instantly on the march in defence. This time—and you heard it here first—the Guardians will lose.

The “Guardians” did go on to suffer a few losses, but changes to the team were not as radical as might have been expected.

What about tennis? Here, too, some nice examples may be found. Retired player Pat Rafter has been depicted as a role model: using language used by others with reference to Don Bradman and to Kieren Perkins, Fox Sports director of marketing Adam Oakes recently described Rafter as a “tall poppy who people actually haven’t tried to cut down” (Paul Malone, “Rafter TV’s perfect match,” *Sunday Telegraph, 12 January 2003*). It is debatable which of the two is the more flattering remark, the one about Rafter or this one, about Mark Philippoussis, who, “far from being the traditional tall poppy whom Australians chop down, . . . is really the prodigal son of Australian tennis” (Jake Niall, “Scud approaches his high noon,” *The Age, 30 December 2001*). As for Lleyton Hewitt, his is a particularly fascinating case, at the opposite end of the scale. He soon became a textbook example of a tall poppy, as much thanks to his on-court antics as to his uneasy rapport with the media. “Hewitt thinks he’s been harshly treated and my guess is that, like most sportsmen who run foul of the fourth estate, he probably believes himself to be merely a
victim of the famed tall-poppy syndrome” (Jake Niall, “The ball is now in Hewitt’s court,” The Age, 18 November 2001). One incident in particular deserves to be singled out. Linda Pearce (“Hero or brat?,” The Age, 15 January 2001) points to Hewitt’s belief that he was “burnt badly” in the wake of his declaration, during the Adelaide Open in January 2000, in front of a home-town crowd, “that the Australian public was stupid, and too eager to cut down its tall poppies.” Instead of lashing out at everyone, he should have singled out the hecklers. He should and could have known that it was not a good idea to call the entire Australian public stupid for encouraging his opponent, who looked like a certain loser. Choosing the side of the “underdog” is typical Australian behaviour. But Hewitt did not see it that way. The result of his comments was a prolonged stand-off with local tennis writers. A full year later, he was still having his critics, and former Davis Cup captain John Newcombe felt obliged to intervene on his behalf. “What has he done?” Newcombe asked The Sun-Herald on 19 January 2001. “He yells out ‘c’mon’ and pumps his fist. He’s done nothing wrong and the people who are criticising him should get off his back. It’s the tall poppy syndrome again.” (comments reported in The Sun-Herald, 20 January 2001, in an article titled “Lleyton deserves a fair go”). In more recent times, the tennis star appears to have somewhat toned down his behaviour on the courts as well as his attitude towards reporters (who in turn have adopted a more reconciliatory approach).

Clearly, then, even sports stars, irrespective of the discipline in which they excel, should not appear “uppity” (Australian English for ‘self-assertive, arrogant, affectedly superior’) to the general public. Those who occasionally overstep the mark to underscore their prowess, either during a sporting event or in media coverage afterwards, will be forgiven, provided they do not hoist themselves on too high a pedestal. There is a clear perception that ability and hard work, drive and determination earned them the well-deserved distinction of outperforming their opponent(s). Those who lose any sense of perspective and indulge in ego-trips that are either too frequent or simply over the top soon meet with public wrath. In other words, sports people are not immune against the tall poppy threat; at the very most, for reasons to do with merit, they are perhaps less likely to be tall poppies and more likely to be celebrated than high achievers in other areas. There is, however, another factor that is at play as well. The different treatment enjoyed by sports people also has to do with the well-known fact that Australians are able to identify with and be inspired by sports people in ways they cannot identify with or be inspired by politicians, business leaders, even entertainers. Justine Stynes, a sports psychologist at Sydney University, expresses it very succinctly: “As Austra-
lians we all swim, we’ve all kicked around a footy, we play cricket in the backyard, so we have that natural understanding of the sports game. . . . There is that feeling that ‘maybe if I’d trained a bit I might have played at an elite level’.” (quoted by Tony Davis, “Smells like team spirit,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 2002). Now, on the assumption that there is no bragging or other egotistical behaviour, who would want to call someone else with whom one feels such affinity a tall poppy? Nobody would, with the exception of those who, like psychologist Norman Feather, use the term without its pejorative connotation, to refer to high achievers in general.

It may be worth mentioning, before we move on, that the cutting down (or lopping, etc.) of tall poppies has *itself* come to be seen as a sport. The depiction as a sport of what appears to be Australia’s preferred treatment of tall poppies is particularly fascinating, and seems to have a certain currency when reference is made to business leaders. “Australians are supposed to *make a sport of* tearing down tall poppies,” observed TV host Kerry O’Brien on the Australian ABC’s *7.30 Report*, on 12 November 2002. This statement was made with reference to business tycoon John Elliott. Alan Bond (sometimes referred to as “Bondy”) is another well-known example of a successful businessman who quickly gained tall poppy status; when his business empire started to collapse around him, a cartoon by Mark Lynch, published in *The Australian* (Australia’s national newspaper) on 28 June 1989, showed his face at the top of a huge poppy stem in the process of being sawn off, with numerous onlookers with handsaws, chainsaws, even a bulldozer on the one side, and a host of reporters on the other side. The caption said: “Australians enjoying their favourite sport.”

4. **Tall poppies in Australian (federal) politics**

Federal politicians have come to be seen as being among Australia’s *worst* specimens of the tall poppy species. Large sections of the electorate love to hate them, either indiscriminately or more selectively (on the basis of political allegiance), mostly while they are in power, but sometimes also long after. Former prime minister Gough Whitlam was a tall poppy in the seventies: months after his Labor government was sacked by the Queen’s representative in Australia, governor-general John Kerr, back in 1975, *The Bulletin* of 28 February 1976 wrote that “in local slang he is a ‘tall poppy’, someone egregious in stature and therefore vulnerable to the scythe” (cf. Wilkes 1996: 299). He was no less a tall poppy when, at the end of 2002, he once again relished in his criticism of the then leadership, to the despair of Gerard Henderson, who decided the time was right for
a counter-attack, published in *The Age* on 3 December. As soon as the day after, readers were expressing their outrage. “Please, don’t cut down the best tall poppy we’ve ever had,” wrote one of them in a letter to the editor.

Terrill (2000: 77–117) devotes two chapters or about forty pages to a number of Australian prime ministers, including Robert Menzies, Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke. All are referred to as “tall poppies.” The list could easily be extended, though. There can be little doubt that Bob Hawke’s successor, Paul Keating, in his political heyday, was a tall poppy, too. When, towards the end of 1993, Keating came under fire for spending huge sums on rare bird prints for the Cabinet room and a Thai teak dining table for the Lodge (the Canberra residence of prime ministers), he was portrayed by political cartoonist Geoff Pryor dressed in a Louis XIV outfit and pronouncing the words: “… Philistines, doncha [don’t you] know….”

Curiously, Keating has been depicted as a reluctant exemplar of the tall poppy species (Watson 2002), an exemplar in whose subconscious subsisted what one reviewer (Robert Manne, “Keating, the ‘fanatic heart’ PM,” *The Age*, 13 May 2002) has called “a Bankstown boy’s resentment of all tall poppies” (Bankstown is the Sydney suburb where Keating was brought up as a youngster). But how “reluctant” a tall poppy is someone who, over the years, gained a reputation for being “arrogant, dominant, assured, brutal and occasionally coarse in his use of invective” (Brown 2002: 188)? “Keating . . . seemed to care little for parliamentary proprieties, debate or processes. The House of Representatives was little more than a forum for him to demonstrate his authority. The Senate, in his mind, was composed of ‘unrepresentative swill’” (ibid.: 189). Keating was “savage in his denigration of opponents” (ibid.: 188). For instance, in 1995, after John Howard resumed the role of opposition leader, Keating told Parliament, referring to Howard: “What we have got is a dead carcass, swinging in the breeze, but nobody will cut it down to replace him”; and on another occasion he said, once again with reference to Howard, that here we had a man who “would make a cat laugh” (Terrill 2000: 281, Brown 2002: 188).

Keating, who has now left politics, was not the only politician to excel in the “art” of verbal aggression. There were others, and the genre is still being practised at present . . . The American Congress seems “tame by comparison—even more so the genteel legislature of New Zealand” (Terrill 2000: 282). The same author observes (281):

Australian political discourse can be raucous, and often it is spiced with clever repartee and blunt language. Exact Westminster procedural rules frame parlia-
mentary remarks like, “The Honourable Member for Berrumburra is a screeching galah”. Day by day, politicians call each other “dingo,” “canary,” “mongrel,” “bandicoot” and “termite.” Sometimes they also address such terms to journalists. “Get out of it, you maggots,” said Senator Mal Colston to photographers as he left parliament on the occasion of his retirement in 1999.

It is this kind of verbal misdemeanour that Keating’s successor, opposition leader Kim Beazley, referred to when, on 10 May 2001, in a speech to the House of Representatives, he made the following statement, a curious (but not uncommon; cf. Peeters 2004) praise of the tall poppy syndrome:

I have no doubt that it is a good thing in a democracy for people to show healthy skepticism for political discourse. Our larrikin spirit, our convict origins, our well-known and often lamented “tall poppy syndrome” are probably good for this country. This attitude has stopped in his tracks many an aspiring dictator. It is hard to imagine a Hitler or a Mussolini ever surviving the dry wit of an Australian pub crowd. Nevertheless, it cannot be healthy for our democracy that there has been such a decline in regard for our major institutions.

As mentioned, the one institution that Beazley was thinking of in particular was the House of Representatives itself, the politicians. They were in danger of losing, or had perhaps already lost, the respect and the confidence of the people they were meant to represent; they were tall poppies, wasting their time arguing, spending taxpayers’ money on all sorts of hidden entitlements, and behaving arrogantly. The opposition leader called for a set of codes of conduct, and for the appointment of an independent auditor of parliamentary allowances. Were it not for the negative feedback received from the electorate over the years, the tall poppy treatment inflicted upon ministers and members of parliament in general, these are things he may not have thought of including in his speech.

To conclude this section, here is an excerpt from an interview broadcast on Dimensions (ABC TV, 17 February 2003). The host was George Negus, the interviewee Ross Fitzgerald, Professor of History and Politics at Griffith University, and a well-known commentator on political and social issues. The excerpt neatly summarises many of the points made hitherto, and it contradicts in part what was said earlier in the programme, in the lead-up to the interview, where reference is made to “that perverse Aussie tendency to want to chop those ‘tall poppies’ down”:

GN: Why do we hate politicians as much as we do, because isn’t that in democratic terms self-hate?
RF: Well, indeed it is, and it’s something . . . The truth of the matter is I’m unable to explain why that is. It’s part of that tall poppy syndrome.
GN: Right.
RF: And the tall poppy syndrome—having a go at tall poppies—has a good quality to it. We’ve always taken the piss out of inflated egos. . . . But there is a negative to that. There’s a dark side to that and that is the tremendous envy that Australians often have of people who are successful.

5. “Thou shalt not be a tall poppy”

The previous sections clearly demonstrate the existence, in Australian English, of a communicative norm which discourages grandstanding, boasting and other similar behaviour. People who engage in such acts, especially public figures, are referred to as tall poppies—and tall poppies need to be cut down. There are several possible ways of making that norm explicit. One possibility is to formulate it as a “cultural commandment” à la McFadyen (1995): “Thou shalt not be a tall poppy.” But to the cultural outsider such a formulation does not provide a very clear indication of what sort of behaviour it is that is being discouraged. To make things clearer, we need to explain—or explicate—what is meant by a “tall poppy.” We have already tried to do this at the outset, but there is a better way. Using nothing but universally available concepts linked together by means of universal syntactic principles, the current meaning of the term tall poppy, and the Australian antipathy towards tall poppies, can be summarised as follows:15

(1) \( X \text{ is a tall poppy} = \)
\[
X \text{ is a person because of the things this person does,}
\]
many people think they know something about this person
many people think like this about this person:
this person thinks:
\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ am someone very good} \\
I & \text{ am not like other people} \\
\end{align*}
\]
because of this
I can do things that other people cannot do
I can say things that other people cannot say
I want other people to think like this about me:
this person is someone very good
this person is not like other people
it is bad if someone thinks like this
I do not want to be like this person
I do not want this person to be like this

Several lines in the account above are reminiscent of a number of so-called cultural scripts proposed by Wierzbicka (2002: 1194–1195). The
material in (1) is a *semantic explication*, entirely formulated in an empirically tested universally intelligible and unambiguously translatable *natural semantic metalanguage* (NSM) intended to disambiguate culturally specific comments and descriptions through the use of a) a mini-lexicon of intuitive, semantically simple and culturally neutral concepts (so-called semantic primes), and b) a rigorously controlled syntax of combinatorial patterns with counterparts in all the languages of the world. NSM is a descriptive tool elaborated over the last forty years or so by Anna Wierzbicka and a close-knit group of disciples and collaborators with expertise in a large number of geographically and typologically very diverse languages (for the latest, see Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002a).

Using an “expanded version” of the NSM, in which the term *tall poppy*, as explicated in (1), is allowed as a shortcut (a so-called pseudo-prime), the communicative—and behavioral—norm “Thou shalt not be a tall poppy” can now be expressed as in (2) below, which also refers to how the norm is enforced and to the pleasure derived from enforcing it:

(2) it is good if people can think like this about someone:
   this person is someone like me
   sometimes, people think about someone like this:
   this person is not someone like me
   this person is a *tall poppy*
   when people think like this about someone, they feel something bad
   they do not want this person to be like this
   they want other people to know this
   because of this, they say something bad about this person
   when they can do this, they feel something good

The first two lines are once again reminiscent of a cultural script proposed by Wierzbicka (2002: 1194). This time, we have made one important change, though: we have taken out the adjective *other* inserted by Wierzbicka in the first line (“it is good if *other* people can think . . .”), since its inclusion creates the mistaken impression that the script does not apply across the board. Taken together, (1) and (2) provide a universally intelligible explication of, and comment on, a communicative (and more generally behavioral) norm which is widespread in Australia. The explication and the comment are universally intelligible because they are couched in a culturally neutral metalanguage which facilitates comparison with cultural practices that exist elsewhere.

One such cultural practice, referred to here for illustrative purposes only, and without going into detail, is said to be typical of so-called Black English. It has been referred to in the literature as “self-assertion” (e.g., Kochman 1981: 29–30; for a critical evaluation, see Wierzbicka 2003:...
78–85). When Muhammad Ali famously said: “I am the greatest!,” and when Little Richard called himself “the Architect, Creator, Emancipator, Inventor, King and Originator of Rock and Roll,” these two high-profile members of the Black English community were drawing attention to themselves in an utterly un-Australian fashion. They were doing this on purpose: Wierzbicka (2003: 84) describes Black English self-assertion (which differs from other forms of self-assertion in other cultures) as an “uninhibited desire to draw attention to oneself, and to behave, verbally and non-verbally, in ways which would ensure this.” But, as she then goes on to point out, the attention sought by high-flying Black Americans has to be inspired by admiration; in addition, it also has a “somewhat theatrical quality,” and is meant in part as “public entertainment.” We are dealing here with a communicative norm which can be explicated as follows (our starting point is the explication provided by Wierzbicka 2003: 84–85 from the point of view of the self-asserting individual:)

(3) it is good if someone can think like this:
   I am not like other people
   I can do good things
   other people cannot do these things
   when someone thinks like this, this person feels something good
   this person wants other people to know this
   this person wants other people to think something good when they
   know this
   because of this, this person says something like this:
     I am very good

Explications (2) and (3) clearly show that the Australian norm is primarily about unacceptable behaviour attributed by the majority to specific individuals (so-called tall poppies, whom one does not like to identify with), whereas the Black English norm is about acceptable and generally accepted behaviour that everyone can and must aspire to.

6. Concluding remarks

The study I have engaged in is an unfinished exercise in intercultural pragmatics. It is unfinished because, setting aside the few references to Black English towards the end, it is essentially (or it could be) a stepping stone towards a more detailed investigation of intercultural differences. Moreover, in my view, intercultural pragmatics, or the contrastive or comparative study of communicative norms (such as the one studied here), has a broader aim that has not been pursued in the context of this paper.
As pointed out in section 1, that aim is to reach a better understanding of the cultural value or values that underpin those communicative norms, to detect new (i.e., previously undetected) cultural values, and/or to find supporting key words. There has been no talk about cultural values or key words in this paper; however, in Peeters (2004), a paper repeatedly referred to above which I am now in a position to describe as an (equally unfinished) exercise in cultural semantics, I have shown that the term tall poppy (explicitly present in the communicative norm studied here, at least when formulated à la McFadyen) is a key word of Australian English which allows us to get a more solid grasp on the Australian cultural value of egalitarianism. The reason why it, too, is unfinished, is that there are no NSM explications in that paper, whereas—as pointed out—the use of NSM is one of the defining features of the three pathways into the broad area of intercultural communication as I see it.

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Notes

1. In Peeters (1999), axiology is described as a short-lived theoretical framework ("un cadre théorique sans lendemain"). That observation may have been a little premature . . .
2. I thank the Ayn Rand Institute for granting permission to reproduce excerpts of Robert Tracinski’s column. The Institute has supplied a list of US newspapers which carried the column in one of its versions. The list includes Jacksonville Business Journal (FL), The Journal Press (VA), Milwaukee Business Journal (WI), Orange County Register (CA), Philadelphia Inquirer (PA), and The Princeton Herald (NJ).
3. One of the most interesting changes, albeit unrelated to the topic of this paper, is the substitution of the adjective malicious for the adjective vicious in the phrase this tone of vicious glee. What is vicious for the American reader is apparently just a matter of malice for Australians . . . The title, too, is different: “Wholesome Martha Stewart, the cultural villain.”
4. The politicians included Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke, Federal Opposition leader Andrew Peacock and Democrat leader Janine Haines. The entertainers were actress and singer Kylie Minogue, actor Paul Hogan and singer John Farnham.
5. Another aboriginal athlete, Nova Peris, is similarly convinced she has been treated as a tall poppy: “I have no doubt that the tall poppy syndrome has played a major part in things that were written about me in the newspaper” (interview with Barbara McCarthy, Stateline Northern Territory, ABC TV, 6 June 2003).
6. Efforts to obtain precise publication details have remained unsuccessful.
7. The quote is from the report published in Curtin University’s fortnightly paper *The Voice* (29 April 1999).
8. Interestingly, in a shorter version of the same text published in *The Guardian* (18 September 2000), the words “except, of course, sport” do not appear.
9. The third phrase (“except for sporting legends”) is used in a quote reproduced further below.
10. *Australian Notes* is a quarterly publication of the Australian Consulate General in New York. The use of the phrase *alive and well* is noteworthy, and a relatively common occurrence whenever the tall poppy syndrome is being discussed. For more examples, see Peeters (2004).
11. Warne has been called the *enfant terrible* of Australian cricket. In an article published in *The Guardian* (Roy Keane, “Unspun hero,” 7 October 2001), he was described as “an Australian superstar, a ‘tall poppy’ swaying beneath the scythe of public suspicion at home.”
13. John Howard is Australia’s current prime minister, a position he has occupied since 1996. Surprisingly, perhaps, the image he has projected in all these years is not that of a tall poppy. Reminiscing about the Sydney Olympics, Alice Thomson (“Grey is good—just ask John Howard,” *The Telegraph*, 18 July 2003) writes: “When the Olympics was a huge success in the Millennium year, he [= John Howard; B.P.] was careful not to take credit, insisting it was Sydney’s triumph. He doesn’t want to become a tall poppy.”
14. A *galah* is a fool or a simpleton; originally an Aboriginal word, from the Yuwaalaraay language of New South Wales, it refers to a species of pink and grey cockatoo. A *dingo* is a contemptible person or a coward (named after a dog-like species roaming the beaches of Queensland). In Australian English, a *canary* is (historically) a convict; reference is made here to the colour of the earliest prisoner outfits. A *bandicoot* is an Australian marsupial. A *maggot* is a reprehensible or despicable person—such as a journalist, at least in the late Mal Colston’s view. In his days as a Senator, Colston was noted for ongoing clashes with the media, who, for all sorts of reasons, had been very unkind in their depictions of him.
15. There is an older meaning (‘high income earner’) as well, but that meaning is today obsolete. See Peeters (2004) for details.

References


‘Thou shalt not be a tall poppy’