Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

The Semantics of Human Interaction

by

Anna Wierzbicka

Mouton de Gruyter
Berlin · New York 1991

Chapter 2
Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts

From the outset, studies in speech acts have suffered from an astonishing ethnocentrism, and to a considerable degree they continue to do so. Consider, for example, the following assertion: "When people make requests, they tend to make them indirectly. They generally avoid imperatives like *Tell me the time*, which are direct requests, in preference for questions like *Can you tell me the time?* or assertions like *I'm trying to find out what time it is*, which are indirect requests." (Clark — Schunk 1980:111)

It is clear that these authors have based their observations on English alone; they take it for granted that what seems to hold for the speakers of English must hold for 'people generally'. Another author writes:

> The focus of this chapter is on the situational conventions that influence how people make, understand, and remember requests. I will argue that people's knowledge of particular social situations results in certain requests being seen as conventional. ... My starting point will be to show how social contexts constrain the ways in which people comprehend indirect requests. ... I will sketch a new proposal that specifies how the structure of social situations directly determines the surface forms used by speakers in making requests. (Gibbs 1985:98)

This author seems to be quite unaware that there are people other than speakers of English; consequently, he doesn't even suspect that 'surface forms used by speakers in making requests' may differ from language to language, and that if they do differ then they cannot be 'directly' determined by 'social situations'.

Throughout this chapter, I will try to show that statements such as those quoted above are based on an ethnocentric illusion: it is not people in general who behave in the ways described, it is the speakers of English.

Presumably, the ethnocentric bias characteristic of speech act studies is largely due to their origin in linguistic philosophy rather than in linguistics proper (see below, section 5). Nonetheless, statements mistak-

ing Anglo-Saxon conversational conventions for 'human behaviour' in general abound also in linguistic literature. I will quote just one more characteristic example: "Every language makes available the same set of strategies — semantic formulas — for performing a given speech act. ... if one can request, for example, in one language by asking the hearer about his ability to do the act (*Can you do that?*), by expressing one's desire for the hearer to do the act (*I'd really appreciate if you'd do that*), ... then these same semantic formulas — strategies — are available to the speakers of every other language." (Fraser — Rintell — Walters 1980:78-79). These authors are not unaware of some crosslinguistic differences in this respect, but they dismiss them as 'minimal'.

Such preconceptions could probably be seriously dented by reference to almost any language. Here, I shall be drawing mainly upon illustrative material from Polish and from Australian English.

But even if one limits the task at hand to comparing selected speech acts from only two languages, the topic is still vast and couldn't be treated exhaustively in any one work. The cultural norms reflected in speech acts differ not only from one language to another, but also from one regional and social variety to another. There are considerable differences between Australian English and American English, between mainstream American English and American Black English, between middle-class English and working-class English, and so on. There is also a great deal of variation within Polish. Nonetheless, there is also a remarkable amount of uniformity within English, as there is within Polish.

It goes without saying that the differences between English and Polish discussed in this chapter could, and should, be studied in a much more thorough and systematic way than has been done here. But to do so, one would have to devote a whole book to the subject, or one would have to limit one's field of vision to a strip so narrow that one would have no grounds for reaching the generalisations which in my view explain phenomena of the kind discussed here. The present overview was compiled as a pilot study. I believe, however, that even in its present form it amply demonstrates that different cultures find expression in different systems of speech acts, and that different speech acts become entrenched, and, to some extent, codified in different languages.

1. Preliminary examples and dicussion

At a meeting of a Polish organisation in Australia a distinguished Australian guest is introduced. Let us call her Mrs. Vanessa Smith. One of the Polish hosts greets the visitor cordially and offers her a seat of honour with these words:

Mrs. Vanessa! Please! Sit! Sit!

The word *Mrs.* is used here as a substitute for the Polish word *pani*, which (unlike *Mrs.*) can very well be combined with first names. What is more interesting about the phrasing of the offer is the use of the short imperative *Sit!*, which makes the utterance sound like a command, and in fact like a command addressed to a dog.

The phrase *Sit down!* would sound less inappropriate, but in the context in question it would not be very felicitous either: it still would not sound like an offer, let alone a cordial and deferential one. A very informal offer could be phrased as *Have a seat*, with imperative mood, but not with an action verb in imperative mood. More formal offers would normally take an interrogative form:

Will you sit down?
Won't you sit down?
Would you like to sit down?
Sit down, won't you?

In fact, even very informal offers are often performed in English by means of sentences in the interrogative form:

Sure you wouldn't like a beer? (Hibberd 1974:218)
Like a swig at the milk? (Hibberd 1974:213)

Significantly, English has developed some special grammatical devices in which the interrogative form is normally used not for asking but for making an offer, a suggestion or a proposal, especially the form *How about a NP?*:

How about a beer? (Buzo 1979:64)
How about a bottle? (Hibberd 1974:187)

In Polish, *How about* utterances have to be rendered in a form indistinguishable from that of genuine questions (except of course for the intonation):

Może się czegoś napijesz?
'Perhaps you will drink something?'

A further difference between Polish and English concerns the literal content of interrogative offers. In English, a tentative offer (even a very informal one) tends to refer to the addressee's desires and opinions:

Like a swig at the milk? (Hibberd 1974:213)
Sure you wouldn't like a bash at some? (Hibberd 1974:214)

The phrasing of such offers implies that the speaker is not trying to impose his will on the addressee, but is merely trying to find out what the addressee himself wants and thinks.

In Polish, literal equivalents of offers of this kind would sound inappropriate. The English question *Are you sure?*, so often addressed by hosts to their guests, sounds comical to the Polish ear: it breaks the unwritten law of Polish hospitality, according to which the host does not try to establish the guest's wishes as far as eating and drinking is concerned but tries to get the guest to eat and drink as much as possible (and more). A hospitable Polish host will not take 'No' for an answer; he assumes that the addressee can have some more, and that it would be good for him or her to have some more, and therefore that his or her resistance (which is likely to be due to politeness) should be disregarded.

A reference to the addressee's desire for food is as inappropriate in an offer as a reference to his or her certainty. Sentences such as:

Miałbyś ochotę na piwo?
'Would you like a beer?'

would be interpreted as questions rather than as offers. It would not be good manners to reveal to the host that one feels like having a beer; the social convention requires the host to prevail upon the guest, to behave as if he or she was forcing the guest to eat and drink, regardless of the guest's desires, and certainly regardless of the guest's expressed desires, which would be simply dismissed. The typical dialogue would be:

Proszę bardzo! Jeszcze troszkę!
Ale już nie mogę!
Ale koniecznie!

'Please! A little more!'
'But I can't!'
'But you must!' (literally: 'But necessarily!')

What applies to offers applies also, to some extent, to invitations. For example, in English a man can say to a woman:

Would you like to come to the pub tomorrow night with me and Davo? (Buzo 1979:60)
Would you like to come out with me one night this week? (Hibberd 1974:214)
Hey, you wouldn't like to come to dinner tonight, would you? (Hibberd 1974:193)

In Polish, literal translations of such utterances would make very poor invitations. A sentence in the frame:

Czy miałabyś ochotę ... ?
'Would you like to ... ?'

sounds like a genuine question, not like an invitation or a proposal. If a man wants to ask a woman out, it would sound presumptuous for him to express overtly an assumption that she 'would like' to do it. Rather, he should show that he would like to go out with her, and seek her consent. One would say:

Możebyśmy poszli do kina?
'Perhaps we would go to the cinema?' (implied: if I asked you)

rather than:

Czy miałabyś ochotę pójść ze mną do kina?
'Would you like to go to the cinema with me?'

A tentative and self-effacing invitation such as the following one:

Say, uh, I don't suppose you'd like to come and have lunch with me, would you? (Buzo 1974:44)

could not be translated literally into Polish without losing its intended illocutionary force:

Powiedz, hm, nie przypuszczam, żebyś miała ochote zjęść lunch ze mną, co?

The sentence sounds bizarre, but if it could be used at all it would be used as a genuine question, not as an invitation or proposal. A question of this kind could of course be interpreted as a prelude to an invitation, but it would have to be reported as *he asked me whether*, not as *he invited me to*. Clearly, one factor responsible for this difference is the

principle of 'polite pessimism', characteristic of Anglo-Saxon culture (cf. Brown — Levinson 1978:134-135), but absent from Polish culture.

2. Interpretive hypothesis

Of course, Polish is not alone among European languages in differing from English in the ways indicated above. On the contrary, it is English which seems to differ from most other European languages along these lines. Many of the observations made in the present chapter would also apply to Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish and many other languages. It is English which seems to have developed a particularly rich system of devices reflecting a characteristically Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition: a tradition which places special emphasis on the rights and on the autonomy of every individual, which abhors interference in other people's affairs (*It's none of my business*), which is tolerant of individual idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, which respects everyone's privacy, which approves of compromises and disapproves of dogmatism of any kind.

The heavy restrictions on the use of the imperative in English and the wide range of use of interrogative forms in performing acts other than questions, constitute striking linguistic reflexes of this socio-cultural attitude. In English, the imperative is mostly used in commands and in orders. Other kinds of directives (i.e., of speech acts through which the speaker attempts to cause the addressee to do something), tend to avoid the imperative or to combine it with an interrogative and/or conditional form. (For certain important qualifications to this overall tendency, see Lakoff 1972; Ervin-Tripp 1976.)

At least this is how English strikes native speakers of a language like Polish, where the bare imperative is used on a much wider scale. It is interesting to note that from a different cultural perspective English may be seen as a language favouring, rather than shunning, the use of imperative. This is, in particular, how English appears to speakers of Japanese. For example, Higa (1972:53) notes the wide use of the imperative in the English advertising language and points out that, for example, the Japanese sign corresponding to the ubiquitous English *Drink Coca-Cola!* would read *Coca Cola o nomimashō!* (Literally, 'We will drink Coca Cola!') rather than the imperative *Coca Cola o nome!* Similarly, Matsumoto (1988:420) points out that in Japanese recipes or instructions

an imperative would be avoided, whereas in English recipes or instructions it is quite common.

It should be noted, however, that advertisements and recipes are, first, anonymous, and second, directed at an imaginary addressee, not at a particular individual. What Anglo-Saxon culture abhors is the impression that one individual is trying to impose his or her will upon another individual. In the case of 'public speech acts' such as advertisements or recipes this danger does not arise, and the imperative is not felt to be offensive. In Polish, however, 'private' speech acts, directed from one person to another, can also use the imperative, and they do not rely on interrogative devices in this area either.

In what follows, I will consider a number of areas where Polish, and other languages, differ from English along the lines suggested here, specifically: advice, requests, tag questions, opinions, and exclamations.

3. Case studies

3.1. Advice

In a language like Polish, advice is typically offered in the form of an imperative:

> *Ja ci radzę powiedz mu prawdę.*
> 'I advise you: tell him the truth.'

In English advice would normally be formulated more tentatively:

> *If I were you I would tell him the truth.*
> *Tell him the truth — I would.*
> *Why don't you tell him the truth? I think it would be best.*
> *Why not tell him the truth? I think that might be best.*
> *Maybe you ought to tell him the truth?*
> *Do you think it might be a good idea to tell him the truth?*

All these utterances could be reported in English using the verb *advise* (*She advised me to tell him the truth*). But their literal Polish equivalents would not be reported using the verb *radzić* 'advise'. Normally, only utterances in the imperative mood or utterances with the verb *radzić* used performatively could be so reported:

Radzę ci, żebyś mu powiedział prawdę.
'I advise you to tell him the truth.'

It is also worth noting that the English verb *advise* is seldom used performatively in ordinary speech: the phrase *I advise you* sounds very stiff and formal; by contrast, its Polish equivalent *ja ci radzę* sounds perfectly colloquial and is frequently heard in everyday conversations.

3.2. Requests

In English, if the speaker wants to get the addressee to do something and does not assume that he could force the addressee to do it, the speaker would normally not use a bare imperative. Speech acts which could be reported by means of the verbs *request* or *ask (to)* frequently have an interrogative or an interrogative-cum-conditional form, as in the following examples (all from Green 1975:107-130):

Will you close the door please?
Will you close the window please.
Will you please take our aluminium cans to the Recycling Centre.
Would you take out the garbage please.
Would you get me a glass of water.
Would you mind closing the window.
Would you like to set the table now.
Won't you close the window please.
Do you want to set the table now?
Why don't you clean up that mess.
Do you want to get me a scotch.
Why don't you be nice to your brother for a change.
Why don't you be quiet.
Why don't you be a honey and start dinner now.

Not a single one of these utterances could be translated literally into Polish and used as a request. In particular, literal equivalents of sentences in the frame *Why don't you* would be interpreted as a combination of a question and a criticism, rather like utterances based on the modal *Why do it* are in English (*Why paint your house purple?*) (See Gordon — Lakoff 1975:96; cf. also Wierzbicka 1988:28.) In fact, a sentence such as:

Dlaczego nie zamkniesz okna?
(Literally) 'Why don't you close the window?'

would imply unreasonable and stubborn behaviour on the part of the addressee ('why haven't you done what was obviously the right thing to do — you should have done it long ago; I can't see any excuse for your failure to have done it'). The corresponding English sentence could also be interpreted in this way, but it doesn't have to be. In particular, as pointed out to me by Jane Simpson (p.c.), the contracted from *Why'n'tcha* suggests a request rather than a question.

It is worth noting in this connection that English has developed some special devices for expressing requests and other directives in a partly interrogative style, especially the expression *Why don't you be (ADJ)*, which can hardly be used for genuine questions. As pointed out in Green (1975:127), the sentence *Why aren't you quiet?* can be a genuine question, but the sentence *Why don't you be quiet?!* cannot. Thus, the construction *Why don't you be (ADJ)?* has an interrogative form, and an interrogative component in its meaning, but is specialised in speech acts other than questions.

Characteristically, Polish has no similar constructions. Since in Polish the use of interrogative forms outside the domain of questions is very limited, and since the interrogative form is not culturally valued as a means of performing directives, there was, so to speak, no cultural need to develop special interrogative devices for performing speech acts other than questions, and in particular, for performing directives.

As for literal equivalents of sentences in the frame *Won't you*, such as:

Nie zamkniesz okna?
'Won't you close the window?'

they would be interpreted as surprised questions (not necessarily critical questions, but surprised questions). They would invite both an answer and an explanation ('You are not going to do it? That's strange; I wonder why?').

The difference between English and Polish in this respect becomes particularly clear in cases of transference. For example, my daughters, who are bilingual, but who live in an English-speaking environment, often phrase their Polish requests interrogatively (or did when they were younger):

Mamo, czy podasz mi chusteczkę?
'Mum, will you give me a Kleenex?'

This sounds very odd to me, and I tend to correct them, urging them to use the imperative (with the word *proszę* 'please') instead. To an English speaker, this might look like an attempt to teach one's child to be impolite. But in Polish, politeness is not linked with an avoidance of imperative, and with the use of interrogative devices, as it is in English.

The expression *Would you mind* has simply no equivalent in Polish. I do not wish to imply, however, that Polish never uses the interrogative form in requests. It does, but in comparison with English, the possibilities are heavily restricted. Thus, one could perform requests, or acts closely related to requests, by ostensibly 'asking' about the addressee's ability to do something, or about his or her goodness (or kindness):

Czy mógłbyś ... ?
'Could you ... ?'

Czy byłbyś tak dobry, żeby ... ?
'Would you be so good as to ... ?'

Czy był(a)by Pan(i) łaskaw(a) ... ?
'Would you be so kind/gracious as to ... ?'

But one could not ask people to do something by using literal Polish equivalents of the phrases *Would you do it, Won't you do it, Why don't you do it, Do you want to do it* or *Would you like to do it.* Pseudo-questions which ostensibly inquire about the addressee's desire and which in fact are to be interpreted as requests (*Would you like to, Do you want to*) seem particularly odd and amusing from a Polish point of view, as transparent acts of what looks like naive hypocrisy.

But it is not just the range of acceptable interrogative devices which distinguishes Polish directives from the English ones. Differences in function are at least as striking. Thus, in Polish interrogative directives sound formal and elaborately polite. They are also tentative, lacking in confidence. One would use them when one is genuinely not sure whether the addressee would do what is requested. Moreover, they could not be used in anger (unless sarcastically) and they are incompatible with the use of swear words. In Australian English, however, both the interrogative and the interrogative-cum-conditional forms are frequently used in speech acts which could be reported by means of the verbs *order to, command* or *tell to*, and they are perfectly compatible with verbal abuse and verbal violence, as the following examples demonstrate:

Can't you shut up? (Hibberd 1974:228)

Why don't you shut your mouth? (Hibberd 1974:228)

Will someone put the fucking idiot out of his misery? (Williamson 1974:48)

Will you bloody well hurry up! (Williamson 1974:56)

For Christ's sake, will you get lost. (Williamson 1974:191)

Why don't you shut up? (Buzo 1979:37)

Andrew (to Irene, very angry): *Will you please go to bed?* (Williamson 1974:197)

Could you try and find the source of that smell before then, and could you possibly put your apple cores and orange peel in the bin for the next few days? (After a pause, loudly) *And could you bloody well shit in the hole for a change?* (Williamson 1974:7)

In fact, the interrogative form in English has reached the stage of being so thoroughly dissociated from the language of courtesy and respect that it can well be used in pure swear phrases, where the speaker forcefully expresses his feelings apparently without attempting to get the addressee to do anything, as in the following example:

Why don't you all go to hell! (Hibberd 1974:199)

This shows particularly clearly that the English predilection for the interrogative form in human interaction, and the heavy restrictions which English places on the use of the imperative, cannot be explained simply in terms of politeness. After all, Polish, too, has its polite and extra-polite ways of speaking, and has developed a repertoire of politeness devices. What is at issue is not politeness as such, but the interpretation of what is socially acceptable in a given culture. For example, Australian culture is highly tolerant of swearing. Swear words are often used to express strong feelings and not only negative but also positive feelings, as in the following examples:

Stork: *Not bloody bad, is it?*
Clyde: *It's a bloody beauty.* (Williamson 1974:18)

Bloody good music! (Buzo 1979:30)

There is no longer any widely shared taboo against swear words in 'polite conversation', for example in conversation with ladies about music. On the other hand, there is evidently a strong reluctance to use bare imperatives — not only in polite conversation, but even in not-so-polite conversation. The implicit cultural assumption reflected in English speech seems to be this: everyone has the right to their own feelings, their own wishes, their own opinions. If I want to show my own feelings, my own wishes, my own opinions, it is all right, but if I want to influence somebody else's actions, I must acknowledge the fact that they, too, may have their feelings, wishes or opinions, and that these do not have to coincide with mine.

It is interesting to note that the flat imperative, which in English cultural tradition can be felt to be more offensive than swearing, in Polish constitutes one of the milder, softer options in issuing directives. When the speaker gets really angry with the addressee, the speaker will often avoid the imperative and resort to 'stronger' devices, in particular the bare infinitive:

Nie pokazywać mi się tutaj!
'Not to show oneself to me here!' (i.e. 'You are not to come here.')

Wynosić się stąd!
'To get away from here!' (i.e. 'Get away from here!')

Zabierać się stąd!
'To take oneself off from here!' (i.e. 'Off with you!')

In the examples above (taken from Andrzej Wajda's film "Moralność pani Dulskiej", based on a number of Gabriela Zapolska's plays), the verbs chosen (*wynosić się, zabierać się*) are offensive and pejorative, but especially offensive is the impersonal syntactic construction, with the infinitive used instead of the more neutral imperative. The impersonal infinitive seems to annihilate the addressee as a person (the absence of a mention of the addressee in the sentence being an icon of his/her 'non-existence'): it implies that the addressee is not worthy to be addressed as an individual human being, and that the speaker does not wish to establish any 'I-you' relationship with him/her. In particular, the speaker excludes the possibility of any reply from the addressee. The infinitive signals: 'No discussion' ('there is no person here whom I would regard as a potential interlocutor, for example, as someone who could refuse or decline to do as I say').

By contrast, the English interrogative directives explicitly invite a verbal response, as well as a non-verbal one (*Okay, All right, Sure*, and the like), and thus indicate that the speaker views the addressee as an autonomous person, with his or her own free will, who can always decline to comply. The imperative is neutral in this respect: it neither precludes nor invites a verbal response. Partly for this reason, no doubt, it is favoured in Polish and disfavoured in English.

I would add that the infinitive construction is by no means restricted to contexts where the speaker is angry. It can also be used simply to assert one's authority; for example it can be used by parents who wish to sound stern, as in the following example:

> *Macie parasol? Iść prosto – nie oglądać się. Pamiętać: skromność – skarb dziewczęcia.* (Zapolska 1978:30)
> 'Do you have the umbrella? (To) go straight — not to look around. (To) remember: modesty is a girl's treasure.'

When the speaker wants to be more polite while still wishing to signal coldness and a lack of intimacy, the infinitive can be used in combination with a performatively used verb:

> *Proszę się do tego nie mieszać.* (Zapolska 1978:108)
> 'I ask not to interfere.'

> *Proszę – proszę powiedzieć, proszę się nie krępować.* (from the film "Moralność pani Dulskiej")
> 'I ask — I ask to say, I ask not to be embarrassed.'

In a sense, the infinitive directive functions as a distance-building device in Polish, just as an interrogative directive does in English. But in Anglo-Saxon culture, distance is a positive cultural value, associated with respect for the autonomy of the individual. By contrast, in Polish culture it is associated with hostility and alienation.

3.3. Tags

The deep-rooted habit of acknowledging possible differences between individual points of view is particularly clearly reflected in the English tag questions. Seen from a Polish point of view, English speech is characterised by an all-pervasive presence of tag questions, highly diversified in form and function. Essentially, Polish has only five or

six words which can be used as tags: *prawda?* 'true?', *nie?* 'no?', *tak?* 'yes?', *co?* 'what?', *dobrze?* 'good', and *nieprawdaż?* 'not true?' (slightly archaic). These are comparable to the English tags *okay?, right?,* and *eh?* (this last one frequently encountered in Australia).

If these five or six Polish words were used nearly as often as English tag questions are, Polish speech would sound grotesquely repetitive. The English strategy of using auxiliary verbs — any auxiliary verbs, in any combinations of moods, tenses and persons — as tags, ensures great formal variety of tag questions. Expressions such as *did he, was she, have you, aren't they* and so on may all have the same function, but the sheer variety of their form allows them to be used much more frequently than the five Polish tag words could be used.

But the differences between the English and the Polish systems of tag questions go much further than that. The topic is vast and obviously cannot be treated exhaustively here (see Chapter 6, section 5 on the illocutionary force of tag questions). Let me simply make a few observations.

As has often been noted, English imperatives allow not one tag but several, each with a slightly different function:

Close the door, will you?
Close the door, won't you?
Close the door, could you?
Close the door, can't you?
Close the door, why don't you?
Close the door, why can't you?
Close the door, would you?

In Polish, all these different tags would have to be rendered by means of a single one: *dobrze?* 'well (good)?':

Zamknij drzwi, dobrze?

Semantically, the Polish tag corresponds most closely to the English *will you*, the tag which assumes and expects compliance. The sentence *Sit down, will you?* is more confident, more self-assured than *Sit down, won't you?*, and the sentence *Shut up, will you?* sounds much more natural than *Shut up, won't you? Shut up, won't you* could of course be used sarcastically, but the sarcasm would exploit the effect of the semantic and stylistic clash between the forcefulness of *shut up* and the tentativeness of *won't you.*

In contrast to *won't you, will you* can be used very widely, for example in orders and commands, as well as in requests, and it is compatible with the use of swear words:

Look at this bloody ring, will you? (Williamson 1974:58)

So just move out, will you? (Buzo 1979:73) (said by a wife throwing her husband out of their house)

In Polish in similar circumstances a bare imperative would normally be used, unembellished by any tag whatsoever.

There are many other kinds of contexts where a tag question would be used in English but not in Polish. In particular, English negative questions with an opposite polarity would normally be translated into Polish without a tag:

I don't suppose you've seen Hammo around, have you? (Buzo 1979:79)
Nie widziałeś przypadkiem Hammo?
(literally: 'You haven't seen Hammo by any chance?')

You are not having a go at me, are you? (Buzo 1979:11)
Czy ty się przypadkiem ze mnie nie nabijasz?
(literally: 'You are not having a go at me by any chance?')

You haven't heard anything about me, have you: Any sort of ... rumours, have you? (Buzo 1979:64)
Nie słyszeliście przypadkiem czegoś o mnie? Jakichś ... plotek?
(literally: 'You haven't heard anything about me, by any chance? Any rumours?')

Another situation where a tag question sounds plausible in English but not in Polish can be illustrated with the following utterance:

I've made a bloody fool of myself, haven't I? (Williamson 1974:48)

The speaker discovers something about himself that he supposes the addressees have been aware of all along. In Polish, a plausible thing to say in a case like this would be *widzę* 'I see', without a tag:

Widzę, że się zachowałem jak dureń! (?co, ?prawda, ?tak, ?nie, etc.*)*
'I see I have acted like a fool!' (?what, ?true, ?yes, ?no, etc.)

Again, I am not suggesting that tag questions are always used in English out of consideration for other people or out of politeness. In fact, they can be combined with accusations, insinuations and abuse, as in the following examples:

> *Well. We have become a sour old stick, haven't we?* (Williamson 1974:195)
>
> *What? You've changed your mind again, have you?* (Williamson 1974:198)
>
> *You are a smart little prick, aren't you.* (Williamson 1974:192)
>
> *You've engineered this whole deal, haven't you?* (Williamson 1974:193)
>
> *You'd rather I was still over there, wouldn't you?* (Williamson 1974:187)

In cases like these, one would not use a tag in Polish. In Polish the use of tags is, by and large, restricted to situations when the speaker really expects confirmation. In English, however, tag questions have come to be so ubiquitous, and they have developed into such a complex and elastic system, that their links with politeness, cooperation and social harmony have become quite tenuous. Often, they are used as a tool of confrontation, challenge, putdown, verbal violence and verbal abuse. The very fact that tag questions have come to play such a major role in English seems to reflect the same cultural attitudes which have led to the expansion of interrogative forms elsewhere, and to the restrictions on the use of the imperative, the same emphasis on possible differences of opinion, of point of view. Basically, tag questions express an expectation that the addressee will agree with the speaker, but the very need to voice this expectation again and again signals constant awareness of a possibility of differences.

The range of contexts and situations where speakers of Polish would invite confirmation is not nearly as wide, precisely because Polish cultural tradition does not foster constant attention to other people's 'voices', other people's points of view, and tolerates forceful expression of personal views and personal feelings without any consideration for other people's views and feelings. In fact, the basic Polish tag, *prawda?* 'true?', presents the speaker's point of view not as a point of view but as an objective 'truth'; and it doesn't seek agreement but an acknowledgement of this 'truth'.

Needless to say, it would be good if the observations ventured above could be supported with text counts. So far, I have not undertaken any large-scale counts of this kind. But to give the reader some idea of the order of differences let me say, on the basis of a perusal of a large anthology of Polish plays and of several volumes of Australian plays by different authors, that one can easily get through fifty or more pages of Polish plays without encountering a single tag, while in Australian plays one can seldom get through five pages without encountering one, and often one finds several on one page.

I would like to stress, however, that apart from quantitative differences suggested here, which require statistical validation, there are also some indubitable qualitative differences. As a particularly clear example I would mention chains of tag questions, characteristic of English conversation but impossible in Polish. I quote a dialogue which I heard not long ago at a bus stop in Canberra:

> A: *Lovely shoes, aren't they?*
> B: *Aren't they nice?*
> A: *Lovely, aren't they?*

One might say that in exchanges of this kind the interlocutors are no longer seeking confirmation, but rather are, so to speak, celebrating a ritual of social harmony based on anti-dogmatism and religiously respected freedom of judgement and right to one's own opinion.

Similarly, the difference between the 'opinion-oriented' English tag ('I think you would say the same; I don't know if you would say the same') and the 'truth-oriented' Polish tag ('true?') is a matter of structure, not of frequency, and needs no statistical validation.

3.4. Opinions

In Polish, opinions are typically expressed fairly forcefully, and in everyday speech they tend not to be distinguished formally from statements of fact. One tends to say:

To dobrze.	*To niedobrze.*
'That's good.'	'That's bad.'

as one says: 'That's white', 'That's black', in situations where in English one would say: *I like it, I don't like it*, or even *I think I like it.*

As mentioned above, this difference is manifested in the structure of Polish tag questions. One says in Polish, literally:

'She is nice (terrific), true?'

as if being nice or terrific or not were a matter of truth. In English, one might say:

She is Italian, right?

but hardly

?She is nice, right?
??She is terrific, right?

But in Polish, the same tag, *prawda* 'true', would be used in both cases.

In Polish, one seldom presents one's opinions as just opinions (rather than as 'the truth'), and one seldom prefaces them with expressions such as *I think, I believe* or *in my view*. Expressions of this kind exist of course (*ja sądzę, ja myślę, moim zdaniem, ja uważam*), but their use is much more restricted than the use of their English equivalents. In particular, Polish has no word which would correspond to the English word *reckon*, which is used very widely in working class speech, especially in Australia, in non-intellectual contexts, and which has no intellectual pretentions. Translating utterances with *I reckon* into Polish one would often have to leave it out, since all the conceivable Polish equivalents would sound too intellectual, too cerebral, and simply would not fit the context. For example:

> Gibbo: *I reckon it's the spaghetti they eat. Drives them round the bend after a while.* (Buzo 1974:37)
>
> Jacko: (smiling) *You know, Robbo, I reckon you'd have to be about three hundred to have done all the things you reckon you've done.* (Buzo 1974:51)

Polish expressions such as *sądzę, myślę* or *uważam* would sound as inappropriate in these contexts as the expressions *I believe* or *in my view* would be in English. Similarly, the expression *I guess*, commonly used in American English, is very colloquial, and it has no similarly colloquial counterparts in Polish. In situations when in English one says, for example:

I guess it's true.

in Polish one would say simply:

To prawda.
'This is true.'

Drazdauskiene (1981) notes that expressions such as *I think, I believe, I suppose* or *I don't think* are used much more often in English than they are in Lithuanian. She suggests, basically correctly, I think, that they signal "diminished assurance and therefore courteous detachment and optional treatment of the subject matter" (1981:57), and a desire not to put one's view bluntly, and not to sound too abrupt or quarrelsome.

I don't agree, however, with her interpretation of this difference: "This leads to a conclusion of the principal differential feature of English and Lithuanian which is that in the familiar register English is verbally more courteous and less straightforward than Lithuanian." (1981:60-61). In my view, it is ethnocentric to say that Lithuanian is less courteous than English (or, for a Lithuanian author, ethnocentric à rebours): simply, the rules of courtesy are different in each language. Furthermore, the significance of the English norm in question should be seen as a reflection of a deeper cultural attitude. English speakers tend to use expressions such as *I think* or *I reckon* even in those situations in which they evidently don't wish to be courteous, as in the following exchange:

> Gibbo: *Shows how much you know. Those back room boys work harder than any of us.*
> Jacko: *Ar bulls. I reckon it'd be a pretty soft cop being a back room boy.* (Buzo 1974:20)

As a different manifestation of the same cultural difference I would mention the English preference for a hedged expression of opinions and evaluations, and the Polish tendency to express opinions in strong terms, and without any hedges whatsoever. Consider, for example, the following exchange:

> Norm: *Well, you see, Ahmed, I'm all alone now, since my good wife Beryl passed away to the heaven above.*
> Ahmed: *I'm very sorry to hear that, Norm, you must feel rather lonely.* (Buzo 1979:15)

In Polish, one would not say anything like 'rather lonely'. Instead, one would say *bardzo samotny* 'very lonely' or *strasznie samotny* 'terribly lonely'. Similarly, if someone's wife should kick him out of their house, to live there with another man, it would be very odd to comment

on this situation in Polish using a term such as *rather*, as in the following passage:

> Richard: *Tell me, how's your lovely wife?*
> Bentley: *I don't know. She's living with Simmo in our home unit.*
> Richard: *Bad luck.*
> Bentley: *Yes, it is, rather.* (Buzo 1979:64)

In English, hedged opinions go hand in hand with hedged, indirect questions, suggestions or requests. People avoid making 'direct', forceful comments as they avoid asking 'direct', forceful questions or making 'direct', forceful requests. They hedge, and an expression such as *rather* or *sort of* often fulfills a function similar to that of conditional and interrogative devices. In fact, lexical hedges of this kind often co-occur with grammatical devices such as the conditional and the interrogative form, as in the following examples:

> Richard: (to Sandy) *Could you sort of ... put in a good word to Simmo about me?* (Buzo 1979:42)

> Jacko: *Oh, Pammy's a nice enough kid in her own way. But you're sort of different. I mean, there's a lot more to you, I'd say. I mean, now don't get me wrong, I'm not trying ... well, all I said was, how about coming to lunch?* (Buzo 1974:44)

Translating this last passage into Polish, one would have to leave out several of the hedges. There is no way of saying *I mean* in Polish, in any case no way of differentiating *I mean* from *I'd say*; there is no particle in Polish which would correspond to *well* (cf. Wierzbicka 1976); and there is no equivalent for *sort of* (except perhaps for *jakaś/jakoś*, but this is closer to *somehow* than to *sort of*: the emphasis is on the speaker's inability to describe the quality in question, not on a lack of full commitment to what is said).

Thus, English is fond of understatement and of hedges; by contrast, Polish tends to overstate (for emphasis) rather than understate. When I translate my own writings from Polish into English, I find myself removing words such as *totally, utterly, extremely* or *always*, or replacing them with words and expressions such as *rather, somewhat, tends to*, or *frequently*; and vice versa.

3.5. Exclamations

The notion that English is fond of understatement is of course commonplace. Sometimes, however, the validity of this notion is disputed. For example, it was questioned by Drazdauskiene (1981:66), who noticed that strong positive stereotypical exclamations such as *How lovely!* or *Isn't it lovely!* are much more common in English speech than they are in Lithuanian speech. I would say that the same observation would apply to Polish: Polish, like Lithuanian, makes frequent use of negative (critical) exclamations but not of positive, enthusiastic ones.

I would point out, however, that the English understatement applies to spontaneous opinions and feelings, not to opinions or feelings which are presumed to be shared. The stereotypical exclamations discussed by Drazdauskiene typically express enthusiastic appreciation for something which the speaker presumes to be shared by the addressee. They often sound exaggerated and insincere, and they certainly don't sound dogmatic. The speaker is not bluntly stating his/her own view, disregarding any potential dissent; on the contrary, he (or, according to the stereotype, she) is eager to agree with the addressee. It is of course highly significant that, as mentioned earlier, the stereotypical exclamations often take an interrogative form (*Isn't that lovely?*) or are followed by a symmetrical question asking for confirmation (*How wonderful! Isn't that wonderful?*)

Drazdauskiene suggests that the difference between English and Lithuanian with respect to the use of stereotyped positive exclamations may be related to the fact that Lithuanians are reserved and restrained (and this view, expressed by a Lithuanian, certainly agrees with the Polish stereotype of Lithuanians). But Poles, unlike Lithuanians, are not regarded as restrained or reserved, and yet in this particular respect they seem to be closer to Lithuanians than to speakers of English. I suggest that exclamations under discussion do not point to any lack of emotional restraint on the part of the speakers of English. On the contrary: they are a conventional device aimed at 'being nice' to the addressee rather than any spontaneous and unrestrained outburst of the heart.

In English, exclamations can take not only an affirmative and positive form, as in:

> *How nice!*

but also (especially in what tends to be regarded as more typically feminine speech) an interrogative-negative one, as in the utterance:

Isn't he marvellous! (Buzo 1979:41)

Thus, the function of such exclamations is similar to that of tag questions with an opposite polarity:

Terrible place, isn't it?

Negative-interrogative exclamations do not always have an interrogative intonation, and do not always invite confirmation. Often, they are used simply to express the speaker's feeling, and are followed by a positive statement from the speaker rather than by a pause to be filled by the addressee:

Bentley: *Isn't she a sweetie? a real darling.* (Buzo 1979:45)

Sundra: *Wasn't that funny? That was the funniest thing I've ever heard.* (Buzo 1974:114)

Sundra: *Isn't that nice of them? I think that's very nice of them.* (Buzo 1974:115)

Sundra: *Isn't that wonderful? I think that's wonderful.* (Buzo 1974:115)

However, even when interrogative-negative exclamations are not used as a truly dialogic device they still signal (at least in a perfunctory way) an interest in what the addressee would say; they acknowledge the possibility that the addressee could say the opposite (even though the speaker regards this as unlikely) and symbolically seek confirmation. The speaker expects agreement, but does not take this agreement for granted, and 'graciously' leaves the addressees the opportunity to express their point of view, too. All this may of course be purely perfunctory, purely conventional, but the convention is there, and it has its own cultural significance.

Characteristically, in Polish there is no similar convention. Exclamations always take a positive form:

Jak głupo!
'How stupid!'

Wspaniale!
'Wonderful!'

The interrogative form would be interpreted as a genuine question.