

## DIFFERENT CULTURES, DIFFERENT LANGUAGES, AND DIFFERENT SPEECH ACTS REVISITED

ROMAN KALISZ

*University of Gdańsk*

### *Abstract*

In this paper I try to reconsider the ideas presented by Wierzbicka (1985) concerning cultural and pragmatic differences between languages, especially between English and Polish. Wierzbicka's (1985) basic claim is that English and Polish represent different cultures and, what follows, they exhibit different speech acts and different realizations of those speech acts. She also maintains that speech acts theory is Anglo-centric and does not take into account many phenomena pertaining to speech act theory which are exhibited by other languages than English. I do not want to challenge her views on cultural differences between English and Polish. Nevertheless, her claims referring to cultural differences are not given sufficient language evidence and in the light of this they may be considered speculative and far-fetched. Furthermore, Wierzbicka's (1985) conclusions concerning different speech acts in English, Polish and possibly other languages do not follow. The fact that various speech acts have different linguistic realizations in different languages is very well known; however, in order to claim that languages exhibit different speech acts it is necessary to show that speech acts have different felicity conditions across languages. This is not demonstrated by Wierzbicka (1985) and I take it that her stance concerning differences among languages at the level of speech acts is not justified.

### *Cultural Differences*

According to Wierzbicka (1985), Anglo-Saxon culture and the English language are based on (somewhat obsessive) respect of the right of an individual and tolerance with respect to diversity, idiosyncrasy, or even

departures from certain norms of human behavior. The Anglo-Saxon culture stresses the possibility of options and decisions on the part of the addressee of a given speech act with respect to both activities and opinions where authoritarian activities and opinions are to be avoided (see also R. Lakoff's 1977 and Leech's 1983 rules of politeness). The Polish culture is according to Wierzbicka (1985) based on different principles where a Polish language user prefers more authoritative judgements and takes over decisions and responsibility with respect to some future course of events. For example, a host of a Polish party insists on the consumption of a larger amount of food or on drinking a larger quantity of beverages by his/her guests. Wierzbicka claims that those cultural differences are reflected both in English and Polish. The arguments she presents refer to many speech acts and syntactic constructions representing those acts. Her data comprize speech acts of offers, requests, advice, presentations of opinions and also question tags, understatements and some lexical expressions. I will reconsider all those phenomena in subsequent sections of this paper.

The intuitive appeal of Wierzbicka's (1985) statement referring to cultural modes of behavior and cultural values seems very high. Indeed, people familiar with both cultures tend to agree with such stereotypes. I am not going to question such tendencies contained in Wierzbicka's (1985) paper but I am going to challenge the validity of her arguments, interpretation of data, and claims that cultural differences are reflected in language differences between English and Polish to the extent suggested in her paper.

### Offers

The first arguments refer to offers which in their interrogative form do not impose, according to Wierzbicka, the speaker's will over the addressee:

- 1 E. Would you like beer?  
P. Miałbyś ochotę na piwo?

Wierzbicka claims that the Polish example 1P would be interpreted rather as a question than an offer in contrast to 1E which represents an offer with respect to the addressee's will to accept or reject it. It is hard to argue against Wierzbicka (1985) here since she does not present any tests for distinguishing, even in a fuzzy way, offers from questions. Intuitively, 1E seems more obviously an offer than Wierzbicka's Polish equivalent 1P; however, an interpretation of 1P as an offer cannot be excluded. The difference between 1E and 1P seems to lie somewhere else. 1P may imply quite obviously *miałbyś ochotę pójść na piwo* (would you like to go for a beer/pint with me) where 1E does not seem to have so obvious an implicature. The offer in 1P would, thus

be connected with a greater effort on the part of the addressee (going out), and that is why it can be more easily interpreted as a question. There is also nothing against treating 1P as representing a double speech act, i.e. an offer and a question together (see Kalisz (forthcoming)). That is why I do not see a big difference between 1P and 2E which implies a greater effort on the part of the addressee in case the offer is accepted.

- 2 E. Would you like to go to have a beer/pint?

A better equivalent of 1E is 2P which does not imply the above effort on the part of the addressee in accepting an offer;

- 2 P. Chcesz piwo/piwa?

Both in English and Polish it is possible to be clearer with respect to offer/question ambiguity exploring various intonational possibilities (in English a question would be preferably marked with rising intonation where an offer would have a rise-fall contour), and there does not seem to be a basic difference making it impossible to treat 1E and 2P as equivalent expressions to a high degree in numerous contexts.<sup>1</sup>

### Advice

Considering realizations of speech acts of advice, Wierzbicka (1985:150) claims that advice is expressed prototypically in Polish by means of an imperative form as in 3P:

- 3 P. Ja ci radzę powiedz mu prawdę!  
E. I advise you: tell him the truth!

Wierzbicka writes that advice is formulated in English in a more indirect way as in the following cases:

- 4 E. If I were you I would tell him the truth.  
5 E. Why don't you tell him the truth? I think it would be the best.  
6 E. Maybe you ought to tell him the truth.  
7 E. Do you think it may be a good idea to tell him the truth.  
4 P. Na twoim miejscu powiedziałbym mu prawdę.  
5 P. Czemu nie powiesz prawdy? Wydaje mi się, że to byłoby najlepsze.  
6 P. Może powinieneś powiedzieć mu prawdę.  
7 P. Czy nie sądzisz, że dobrze byłoby powiedzieć mu prawdę?

<sup>1</sup> On the notion of pragmatic equivalence see Kalisz (1981, 1986, forthcoming), Krzeszowski (1986, 1989), Oleksy (1984), Janicki (1985).

Wierzbicka claims that 4E - 7E can be reported by using the word *advise* as in *He advised him to tell the truth*, whereas Polish 4P - 7P cannot be reported by means of the Polish equivalent of *advise*, i.e. *radzić*. It is a very strange statement because there does not seem to be any other possibility of reporting 4P - 7P than by means of the word *radzić*. For example, 4P cannot be reported as a question because it does not even have an interrogative form. The report of 5P or 6P as *Zapytał mnie czy nie powiedzieć mu prawdy* is clearly a very non-prototypical report. There does not seem to be any substantial difference between 4E - 7E on the one hand and 4P - 7P on the other.

I also dispute Wierzbicka's (1985) claim that only expressions in an imperative form or expression with the word *radzić* can be reported in the above way, i.e. using the word *radzić* in a reported form. Further, 3P is not the most prototypical form of advice. Wierzbicka does not seem to carry out any supportive statistical experiments. I have performed a rather small elicitation test applied to thirty educated native speakers of Polish and the results show that an overwhelming majority of respondents regard 8P as the most typical form of giving advice.

8 P. Radziłbym ci powiedzieć prawdę.

Advise 1p. subjunctive past you tell the truth

E. I would advise you to tell the truth.

8P is not an extremely authoritarian statement. The subjunctive in 8P signals the speaker's respect toward the addressee, lack of imposition, and allowance for options on the part of the addressee. 8P is very close to 4E and also to 4P. Wierzbicka is right that *I advise you* sounds very formal and stiff in English but she is not quite right that *Ja ci radzę* (I advise you) is a perfect and unmarked form in Polish. *Ja ci radzę* + S also contains a shade of formality and imposition in Polish although perhaps somewhat less so than its English equivalent. The unmarked case of advice is 8P. Wierzbicka's argument that ways of expressing advice in English and Polish exemplify the cultural differences discussed above is rather weak.

### Requests

The next class of expressions discussed by Wierzbicka (1985:151) are requests. She presents after Green (1975) fourteen different interrogative forms used in English to express requests. Wierzbicka states that not a single expression out of those fourteen can be translated into Polish with the conveyed meaning of a request. It is a very controversial statement. Let us consider the following example:

9 E. Could you get me a glass of water?

P. Czy mógłbyś mi podać szklanę wody?

9E comes from Wierzbicka's (1985:151) paper as one of the fourteen expressions. It is very difficult to find differences with respect to illocutionary force between 9E and 9P. Both 9E and 9P function normally as requests rather than questions. 10P also seems to have an almost identical function to 10E.

10 E. Why don't you be quiet?

P. Dlaczego nie będziesz cicho?

A similar situation seems also to occur in several other cases from the fourteen types presented by Wierzbicka. Generally speaking English possesses a more developed system of interrogative forms employed to signal requests but the differences are not so drastic as Wierzbicka presents them. She also sees differences in the functioning of indirect requests in English and Polish. She claims that Polish expressions of this kind sound formal and are overpolite, displaying uncertainty on the speaker's part concerning the addressee's fulfilling the request. Furthermore, she claims as evidence for the above statement that Polish interrogative requests are incompatible with euphemisms in contrast to (Australian) English. The following examples indicate something different.

11 P. Czy będziesz cicho do cholery?

E. E. Will you be quiet euphemism?

12 P. Przestaniez, kurwa, bębnić?

E. Will you stop, euphemism, drumming?

13 P. Czy do diabła zamkniesz wreszcie swój pysk?

E. Will euphemism you finally shut your mouth?

The above expressions are correct and often used in Polish and they do not signal speaker's uncertainty concerning the addressee fulfilling the request. 11P - 13P are not overpolite either.

Wierzbicka claims that a distance building function which is expressed in English by means of interrogative requests is realized in Polish by means of impersonal forms:

15 P. Zabierać się stąd!

Get out -impers. of here

E. Get out of here!

- 16 P. Nie pokazywać się tutaj!  
Do not show up -impers. refl. here!  
E. Don't show up here!

However, the distance building function is, according to Wierzbicka, perceived differently in Anglo-Saxon and Polish cultures. Distance in Anglo-Saxon culture has a positive cultural value connected with respecting an individual's autonomy. In Polish culture distance is connected with hostility and alienation. This tendency seems to be basically correct. However, it is not so obvious and clear as Wierzbicka (1985) seems to present it. In American culture there exists a stronger tendency than in Polish culture to break distance. One evidence for this is the lack of the institution of the *Bruderschaft*, i.e. ceremonial transition from formal address forms to informal first name forms in contacts between two persons. Americans very often address their interlocutors with the first name terms even in cases of great age or status differences between/among participants of discourse.

#### Tag Questions

The next issue which Wierzbicka (1985) examines to support her claim about cultural differences between English and Polish is the problem of tag questions which supposedly express the deep-rooted system of respecting individual points of view. The difference concerning the range of occurrence of tag questions in English and Polish is indisputable (see also Oleksy 1977 and Fisiak, Lipińska-Grzegorek and Zabrocki 1978). Polish does not have a well developed system of tag questions. The other problem, however, is whether this fact really supports Wierzbicka's claim about the function of tag questions in English. Question tags such as 17 do not manifest tolerance with respect to a different point of view.

17. Shut up, will you?

Tag questions are often quite fossilized forms which do not always possess the pragmatic function Wierzbicka ascribes to them. She is aware of this fact and admits that tag questions express the conviction on the part of the speaker that the addressee would share the speaker's opinion, but she argues that the signal itself represents the speaker's awareness of possibly different points of view. I would argue that this may be true only diachronically but not in case of fossilized forms such as 17.

#### Negative Exclamations

Exclamatory sentences can take negative form except for a possible form where the function of negative exclamations is treated similarly by Wierzbicka as the function of tag questions. She claims that there are no Polish exclamatory sentences in negative forms. This is simply false: 18P-21P are perfect and quite frequently used exclamations.

- 18 P. Czyż to nie wspaniałe!  
E. Isn't it wonderful!  
19 P. Czyż to nie cudowna dziewczyna!  
E. Isn't she a beautiful girl!  
20 P. Czyż to nie okropne!  
E. Isn't it terrible!  
21 P. Czyż to nie cud!  
E. Isn't that a wonder!

There is one form of negative exclamatory sentence in English, *be+neg*

$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Pro} \{ \text{N} \} \\ \text{N} \{ \text{Adj} \} \end{array} \right\}$  as there is only one in Polish, *czy(ż)*  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{N} \\ \text{Pro} \end{array} \right\}$  +*neg* (*być*)

$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{N} \\ \text{Adj} \\ \text{Adv} \end{array} \right\}$ . The range of occurrence of negative exclamations in English is not very

wide. Ewa Kalisz (forthcoming), who was examining negative exclamatory sentences in English and American drama, could often find only one or two cases in a volume of plays and even those cases were problematic with respect to their interpretation as exclamations or questions. The border between the category of questions with negation and the category of negative exclamations is fuzzy, and the only contextual conditions available in the above case were utterances surrounding a purported negative question or exclamation. Those conditions are often insufficient for unambiguous interpretation of such utterances.

The argument concerning negative exclamatory sentences favoring cultural differences between English and Polish does not seem valid since the range of occurrence of negative exclamations in both languages is similar.

#### Opinions

The next argument given by Wierzbicka does not seem to be convincing, either. She maintains (1985: 166) that opinions expressed by Poles such as *to dobrze* (it's good) or *to niedobrze* (it's not good) are rendered in English as

*I like it/I don't like it* or even *I think I like it*. Again, this claim is not justified. *That's good* is an equally good if not better equivalent of *to dobrze* than *I like it*. Wierzbicka's thesis is that Anglo-Saxons more often use expressions modifying their opinions, i.e. hedges. Hedges weaken the effect of a statement, absolving the speaker from full responsibility for what is expressed in a proposition embedded under a clause containing a hedged expression. The examples of hedges in English are *I think, I guess, I believe, in my view* and the Polish examples are *sądzę, uważam, myślę, moim zdaniem*. Obviously, the above expressions are only samples of numerous expressions in both languages. The usage of hedges is the subject of dialectical, idiolectal and group differences. Robin Lakoff (1974) presents evidence to the effect that hedges are used more often by American women than by American men. The usage of such expressions is not only a matter of a language but is also determined by other factors. Some Poles use many a hedges too and the repertory of hedges in Polish is also large. Wierzbicka's example, from Australian English, *reckon* which does not have a Polish equivalent, would support to some extent her claim that the usage of hedges in English is much wider than in Polish, but again it is not a strong evidence. Wierzbicka herself writes that the usage of *reckon* in Australian English is used extensively only among lower classes of society. No statistical evidence is given by Wierzbicka concerning the variability of usage in English and Polish. The sole intuitive judgment seems to be suspicious here.

### Lexical Expressions

Wierzbicka's further arguments refer to some lexical expressions. The English word *privacy* does not seem to have an equivalent in Polish. However *personal remarks* has the equivalent, *wycieczki osobiste*, or a more sophisticated *argument ad personam*. The Polish equivalents of *personal remarks* are considered as having a derogatory flavour. There are also other quite idiomatic, clearly pejorative expressions in Polish referring to interference with someone's privacy, for example *wchodzić komuś w życie z butami* (to enter someone's life with shoes on). Wierzbicka also suggests that the Polish word *kompromis* (a compromise) has a negative connotation and *bezkompromisowy* (uncompromising) has a positive one, where the situation in English is exactly the opposite. This would apparently reflect different cultural values between Anglo-Saxons and Poles, and would be a good argument. However, the assessment of *kompromis* differs among many Poles from positive to negative connotations. The English word *compromise* does not always have a positive connotation, either.

22. He failed to overcome the pressure and had to compromise.

### Cultural values

Wierzbicka (1985:165) juxtaposes Anglo-Saxon and Polish cultural values. Objectivism is according to her a positive value in Anglo-Saxon culture, especially with respect to one's own person and country. The expressions *this country* and *same here* used in reference to one's country or oneself, respectively, are given as evidence to support the above point. Wierzbicka argues that the Polish corresponding expressions *ten kraj* or *to samo tu(taj)* are incompatible in the contexts signifying objective judgment. The Polish expression *ten kraj* is to be used with reference to a foreign country or when a Pole considers himself a psychological emigré. The range of usage of *this country* with reference to one's country is probably larger in case of the English construction than the Polish equivalent, but it is incorrect to say that *ten kraj* cannot be used at all with reference to Poland without considering oneself a psychological emigré. The utterance *Kocham ten kraj* (I love this country) with reference to motherland is not an incorrect or incomprehensible expression. As an example of an "objective" usage of *(the) same here* Wierzbicka (1985:165) quotes a short dialogue after Williamson (1974):

23 E. Michael: I might just have a small claret.

Carmel: Same here.

P. Michał: Chciałbym małą lampkę czerwonego wina.

Karmela: To samo tutaj.

Wierzbicka writes that a literal translation of *same here* into Polish would not be understood as a means of identifying the speaker. Again, this is not true. In Polish restaurants or cafe's one can quite often hear *to samo tu(taj)* in a context very similar to that of English dialogue 23E. That is why Wierzbicka's claims with respect to differences concerning the inclination of looking at oneself from a distance or an awareness of many points of view as distinguishing Anglo-Saxon culture and language from Polish seems to be considerably weakened in the light of the above facts.

Wierzbicka (1985) presents cordiality and courtesy as positive Polish cultural values. The linguistic exponents of cordiality are diminutive expressions such as *śledzik* (herring+dim), *Jureczek* (George+dim), *prędziutko* (fast+dim), etc. Unlike Polish, English has a rather poorly developed diminutive system. Furthermore, Polish courtesy is reflected in a more developed system of address forms, for example *Pan, Pani*, in contrast to the impersonal English form *you*.

Generally, Wierzbicka considers distance, objectivism, respect of other's opinions, and idiosyncrasies as positive values in Anglo-Saxon culture. She claims that those values do not rank too high among Poles. The values

commanding higher respect for Poles are cordiality and courtesy, where Polish exhibits tendencies toward expressing authoritative opinions while neglecting the rights of others to different judgements and opinions. Wierzbicka may be right about the above tendencies. However, the tendencies are expressed in an exaggerated way. This belief is supported by some linguistic facts which differ from those presented in Wierzbicka (1985). Nevertheless, her attempt constitutes an extremely interesting analysis in contrastive pragmatics that also considers sociolinguistic phenomena.

### *Theoretical Issues*

Theoretical implications which according to Wierzbicka (1985) stem from her analysis are by no means obvious and uncontroversial. Firstly, the title *Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts* is not fully justified, especially the third component. There exist various ways of expressing speech acts which Wierzbicka calls culture specific speech acts. The norms and foundations of speech act theory were formulated on the basis of English and Anglo-Saxon culture. Wierzbicka accuses Searle (e.g. 1975) of ethnocentrism in many formulations in speech act theory. The basic objection here is that Searle and others link indirect meaning of some utterances with principles of politeness expressed in English by conventional interrogative forms representing requests. Wierzbicka claims that it is an English and not universal conventionalization because in her characterization, the function of requests is represented by imperative forms (in Polish). Blum-Kulka (1985) showed that indirectness is not always connected with politeness in Hebrew or in English, therefore Wierzbicka is not the first person to note that. Nevertheless, whenever we have an interrogative form representing a request in Polish (I hope I demonstrated that such cases exist in Polish) the reason for its occurrence is very similar to the reason why such forms occur in English. The fact that conventionalization is more common in English may constitute evidence for Wierzbicka's sociolinguistic claims; however, it does not follow that given different conventionalizations in different languages, we have to do with different speech acts. In such situations we have simply different realizations of a given speech act in different languages and a different relation between a syntactic form and a given illocutionary force. It seems to me that we would deal with different speech acts when for a given speech act in one language, a corresponding act in some other language would have different felicity conditions; for example, if for a promise in English we would have to do with some significantly different felicity conditions than for a promise in Polish. This does not seem to be the case. In the case of indirect speech acts we face small although important correspondences between a type of speech act and

a syntactic form. A different range of correlations and different ways of building those correlations are rather obvious facts and are matters of different languages' idiosyncracies. I claim that there are no substantial differences at the speech act level between English and Polish, which does not mean that a speech act is a universal category. Polish and English certainly do show cultural differences between Polish and Anglo-Saxon cultures. However, apart from those differences are great similarities which stem from the European cultural tradition based on Greco-Roman heritage. The differences at the speech act level, at least with respect to Searle's (1969, 1975, 1976) formulations, do not exist. In more remote cultures than English and Polish such differences may well appear. Some cases from Ilongot (Rosaldo 1982) or Samoan (Ochs 1984) may support such claims.

Wierzbicka's (1985) study, which looks at pragmatic phenomena from a sociolinguistic perspective and explores correlations between speech act types and syntactic constructions in two languages, constitutes a model case of a study in contrastive pragmatics. Language facts, however, do not justify her sweeping conclusions, both theoretical (i.e. speech act differences among languages) and empirical (i.e. those referring to vast differences between Polish and Anglo-Saxon cultures). It has to be noted that Polish cultural patterns are happily or unhappily drifting toward Anglo-Saxon patterns. This drift also refers to hospitality in Poland where we exhibit less and less of an insistence on our guests' consumption of more food and drinking of more beverage. Individual differences are respected more and more by a Polish host, who continues to function as the master of ceremonies. Wierzbicka's claims could be more justified some twenty years ago.

We can observe that at British parties of a more formal character, guests have little influence on the course of events and parties have a rather transparent structure. Even a foreigner after some experience is able to find out what stage a given dinner party is at, i.e. when it is time to go home etc. A Polish party is more of an improvisation and the course of events depends considerably on the guests. These circumstances could be invoked to argue that a guest's will and preferences are more respected in Polish than in Anglo-Saxon culture. I would not, however, like to draw far-reaching conclusions on the basis of cases like the above.

### REFERENCES

- Blum-Kulka, S. 1985. "Indirectness and politeness in requests: same or different?" Paper presented at the International Pragmatics Conference. Viareggio.  
 Cole, P. and J. L. Morgan (eds). *Syntax and semantics 3: speech acts*. New York: Academic Press.  
 Fisiak, J., M. Lipińska-Grzegorek, and T. Zabrocki. 1978. *Introductory English - Polish contrastive grammar*. Warszawa: PWN.

- Green, G. 1975. "How to get people to do things with words." In: Cole, P. and J. L. Morgan (eds). 107-142.
- Janicki, K. 1985. "On the tenability of the notion of pragmatic equivalence in pragmatic analysis." *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics* 20, 19-25.
- Kalisz, E. forthcoming. "On polar interrogatives." *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego. Studium Języków Obcych*. Gdańsk: Uniwersytet Gdański.
- Kalisz, R. 1981. *The pragmatics, semantics and syntax of the English sentences with that complements and the Polish sentences with że complements. A contrastive study*. Gdańsk: Uniwersytet Gdański.
- Kalisz, R. 1986. "More on pragmatic equivalence." In: Kastovsky, D. and A. Szwedek. (eds). *Linguistics across historical and geographical boundaries, Vol. 2*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1247-1255.
- Kalisz, R. forthcoming. *Pragmatyka językowa*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Krzeszowski, T. P. 1986. "Prototypes and equivalence." *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics* 21, 5-20.
- Krzeszowski, T. P. 1989. "Toward typology of contrastive studies," In: Oleksy, W. (ed.). *Contrastive pragmatics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Lakoff, R. 1974. "Why women are ladies." *Berkeley Studies in Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 1, XV*, 1-45.
- Lakoff, R. 1977. "What can you do with words: politeness, pragmatics and performatives." In: Rogers, A., Wall, E. and J. P. Murphy (eds). *Proceedings of the Texas conference on performatives, presupposition and implicatures*. Arlington: Center for Applied Linguistics, 79-106.
- Leech, G. N. 1983. *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Ochs, E. 1984. "Clarification and culture." In: Schiffrin, D. (ed.). *Meaning, form and use in context: linguistic applications*. Washington, D. C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 325-341.
- Oleksy, W. 1977. "Tags in English and equivalent constructions in Polish." *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics* 7, 95-109.
- Oleksy, W. 1984. "Towards pragmatic contrastive analysis." In: Fisiak, J. (ed.). *Contrastive linguistics: prospects and problems*. Berlin: Mouton, 349-365.
- Rosaldo, M. Z. 1982. "The things we do with words: Ilongot speech acts and speech act theory in philosophy." *Language in society* 11, 203-237.
- Searle, J. R. 1969. *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. 1975. "Indirect speech acts." In: Cole, P. and J. L. Morgan (eds). 59-85.
- Searle, J. R. 1976. "A classification of illocutionary acts." *Language in Society* 5, 1-23.
- Wierzbicka, A. 1985. "Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts: Polish vs. English." *Journal of Pragmatics* 9, 145-178.
- Williamson, E. 1974. *The coming of stork, jugglers three. What if you died tomorrow*. Sydney: Currency Press.