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The Semantics of Human Interaction

by
Anna Wierzbicka

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Chapter 1

Introduction: semantics and pragmatics

The fate of the earth depends on cross-cultural communication.

Deborah Tannen (1986:30)

1. Language as a tool of human interaction

This book is devoted to the study of language as a tool of human interaction. It investigates various kinds of meanings which can be conveyed in language (not in one language, but in different languages of the world) — meanings which involve the interaction between the speaker and the hearer.

It could be argued, of course, that all meanings involve interaction between the speaker and the hearer: whether we talk about colours, animals, children, love, the fate of the universe, or even pure mathematics, we use language as a tool of social interaction.

In some sense this is true. Nonetheless, there are words which involve directly the concepts of 'I' and 'you', and interaction between 'I' and 'you', and there are others which do not. Similarly, there are grammatical categories, and grammatical constructions, which involve these concepts directly, and there are others which do not. For example, the English words *blue* and *yellow* make no reference to the speaker, the addressee, or the relationship between them; on the other hand, words such as *darling*, *bastard*, *already*, *yuk*, *thanks*, or *goodbye* do. Similarly, grammatical categories such as singular and plural number (*dog* vs. *dogs*) or masculine and feminine gender (for example, *la fille* 'girl' vs. *le garçon* 'boy' in French) do not involve the speaker, the addressee, or the relationship between them; whereas categories such as diminutives (*doggie* vs. *dog*), augmentatives (for example, *problemón*, *problemazo* 'big problem' vs. *problema* 'problem' in Spanish) or honorifics (for example, *otaku* 'esteemed house' vs. *ie* 'house' in Japanese) do.

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At the level of grammatical constructions, the choice between an imperative (a) and a so-called 'whimperative' (b):

- a. *Sign this.*
- b. *Would you sign this.*

involves directly the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, whereas the choice between a relative clause (a) and a participial construction (b) does not:

- a. *The boy who was sitting in front ...*
- b. *The boy sitting in front ...*

This book, then, deals with words, categories, constructions, and linguistic routines which involve interpersonal interaction, that is, which involve, more or less directly, you and me. It is a book about you and me, and about the different modes of interaction between you and me, and, more particularly, between me and you (that is, between the speaker and the hearer); and about cultural values and cultural norms which shape these different modes of interaction.

2. Different cultures and different modes of interaction

There are many different possible modes of interaction between you and me, between me and you. They depend partly on what you and I feel and want at any particular time; but they depend also on who you and I are — both as individuals and as members of particular social, cultural, and ethnic groups. For example, if you and I are Japanese our interaction will be different than it would be if we were both Americans or Russians. And if we were both Americans, the prevailing modes of our interaction would probably depend on whether we were white or black, Jewish or non-Jewish, and so on.

Consider, for example, a typical Australian utterance such as *Silly old bugger!*, recently used in public, in front of the television cameras, by the Australian Prime Minister, Mr. Bob Hawke, during a meet-the-public session, when he was goaded by an old-age pensioner about high parliamentary salaries. One has to know a good deal about Australian culture and society (cf. Chapter 5) to interpret correctly the communicative value

of this remark. In particular, one has to understand the link between the common use of 'b-words' such as *bugger*, *bastard*, and *bloody* (cf. Baker 1966:201) and the core Australian values of 'roughness', 'anti-sentimentality', 'sincerity' and so on (cf. Renwick 1980; Wierzbicka, to appear, chap. 11).

Similarly, one has to appreciate the core Australian values of 'mateship', 'toughness', 'anti-verbosity', 'anti-emotionality' and so on, to appreciate the attitudes expressed in characteristic Australian greeting exchanges (Bowles 1986:37; cf. Chapter 4):

G'day, mate, owyagowin?

Nobbad. Owsyerself? (Or: Carn complain.)

In some cases, culture-specific modes of interaction have their own folk names (cf. Chapter 5). This is the case with Black English speech events such as 'rapping' or 'sounding', which can be illustrated with the following characteristic utterances (Kochman 1972):

Baby, you're fine enough to make me spend my rent money.
(A 'rap' from a man to a woman.)

Baby, I sho' dig your mellow action. (Another example of 'rapping' to a woman.)

Yo mama is so bowlegged, she looks like a bite out of a donut.
(A 'sound' from a schoolboy to another schoolboy.)

But this is not necessarily always the case. Consider, for example, the following conversation, from a short story by the Jewish-American writer, Bernard Malamud:

[When he knocked, the door was opened by a thin, asthmatic, grey-haired woman, in felt slippers.]

'Yes?' she said, expecting nothing. She listened without listening. He could have sworn he had seen her, too, before but knew it was an illusion.

'Salzman — does he live here? Pinye Salzman,' he said, 'the matchmaker?' She stared at him a long minute. 'Of course.'

He felt embarrassed. 'Is he in?'

'No.' Her mouth, though left open, offered nothing more.

'The matter is urgent. Can you tell me where his office is?'

'In the air.' She pointed upward.

'You mean he has no office?' Leo asked.

'In his socks.' (...)

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'Where is he?' he insisted. 'I've got to see your husband.'

At length she answered, 'So who knows where he is? Every time he thinks a new thought he runs to a different place. Go home, he will find you.'

'Tell him Leo Finkle.'

She gave no sign she had heard.

(Malamud 1958:210-211)

The story is written in English, and it includes no unusual or non-standard words, but the ways of speaking and of interacting reflected here are those characteristic of Yiddish, not of (mainstream) American English. Note in particular the use of *No* and *Of course*, the bare imperatives *Tell him* and *Go home*, the rhetorical question *Who knows?*, the irony, the wry humour, the bluntness and the gruffness (for discussion, see Chapter 3 below).

And one last group of examples — English translations of typical Yiddish blessings and curses (Matisoff 1979):

A lament to you, are you crazy or just feeble-minded?

Oh, you should be healthy, what a mess you've made here!

May he live — but not long.

A black year on her, all day long she chewed my ear off with trivia!

My wife — must she live? — gave it away to him for nothing.

His son-in-law — may he grow like an onion with his head in the earth — sold it to me.

Maybe my mother-in-law is going to visit us the day after tomorrow, may the evil hour not come!

All such utterances encode important interactional meanings. This book explores such meanings, and their cultural significance, and offers a framework within which they can be described in an illuminating and rigorous way.

3. Pragmatics — the study of human interaction

The discipline studying linguistic interaction between ‘I’ and ‘you’ is called pragmatics, and the present book is a work in pragmatics. It differs, however, from other works in pragmatics in so far as it is also a work in semantics — not in the sense that some chapters of the book are devoted to pragmatics, and others, to semantics, but in the sense that pragmatics is approached here as a part, or an aspect, of semantics; and this is the major theoretical novum of the present approach.

I will explain what I mean by means of an example. Let us consider first the words *question* and *ask*, sentences (questions) such as *What time is it?*, so-called ‘indirect questions’ such as *I don’t know what time it is*, and so-called pre-questions, such as *Do you know what time it is?*

Traditionally, the word *question* would be described in a dictionary, the sentence type illustrated by *What time is it?* would be discussed in a chapter of a grammar devoted to ‘interrogative constructions’, and the type illustrated by *I don’t know what time it is* in a chapter of a grammar devoted to ‘indirect questions’, whereas expressions such as *Do you know*, *Did you know* or *You know* would be discussed (if at all) in some works on ‘discourse strategies’, ‘discourse markers’, or on ‘organisation of conversation’. Thus, these different descriptions of words, grammatical constructions, and ‘pragmatic devices’ would be discussed in totally different types of works, and in totally different frameworks — as if they had nothing in common whatsoever.

In fact, however, they are of course closely related. They all involve crucially the concepts of ‘knowing’, ‘not knowing’, and ‘saying’; and they all involve the concepts of ‘you’ and ‘I’. They all involve some semantic components such as ‘I don’t know’ or ‘you don’t know’, ‘I say’ and ‘I want you to say’, ‘I want to know’ or ‘I want you to know’. All these are ‘interactional’ (or ‘pragmatic’) meanings. To understand human interaction we have to understand ‘interactional’ meanings expressed in speech; and we have to have suitable analytical tools for identifying and describing such meanings.

In the past, analytical tools of this kind were sorely lacking. Quite apart from the compartmentalisation of linguistic descriptions, which made it impossible to even raise the question of the semantics of human interaction, there were simply no adequate tools for describing any kind of interactional meanings. Standard lexicographic descriptions of

words such as *question* or *ask* illustrate rather well the general level of precision and clarity prevailing in the description of such meanings. For example, Longman's ambitious *Dictionary of the English Language* (LDOTEL 1984), which, according to its jacket blurb, "provides unrivalled access to contemporary English and the way it is used", offers us the following definitions:

- question* – a command or interrogative expression used to elicit information or a response
- interrogative* – an interrogative utterance, a question
- command* – the act of commanding
- response* – an act of responding
- (to) respond* – to write or speak in reply
- (to) reply* – to respond in words or writing

All such explanations of interactional meanings (like, incidentally, those of any other meanings) are, clearly, totally circular. But it is an illusion to think that circularity of this kind is exclusively a feature of dictionaries (which are, after all, modest practical reference works), whereas scholarly literature on language use is somehow different. It is not different. It relies on various more or less technical-sounding labels (such as, for example, 'face', 'distance', 'indirectness', 'solidarity', 'intimacy', 'formality', and so on), which are never defined; or if they are defined, they are defined in ways which prove, sooner or later, to be just as circular and obscure as traditional dictionary definitions. Furthermore, they are defined in terms which are language-specific (usually, English-specific), and which provide no language-independent, universal perspective on the meanings expressed in linguistic interaction.

4. The natural semantic metalanguage

To compare meanings one has to be able to state them. To state the meaning of a word, an expression or a construction, one needs a semantic metalanguage. To compare meanings expressed in different languages and different cultures, one needs a semantic metalanguage independent, in essence, of any particular language or culture — and yet accessible and open to interpretation through any language.

I propose for this purpose a 'natural semantic metalanguage', based on a hypothetical system of universal semantic primitives, which my colleagues and I have developed over more than two decades (see, in particular, Bogusławski 1966, 1972, 1975, 1981a,b, 1989; Wierzbicka 1972, 1980, 1987, 1988, 1989a,b; Goddard 1989a,b); and this is the metalanguage employed in the present book.

This means that I will try to state the meanings under consideration in terms of simple and intuitively understandable sentences in natural language. This, I believe, will ensure that the proposed semantic explications will be immediately verifiable and intuitively revealing. But the subset of natural language in which the explications are formulated is highly restricted, standardised, and to a large extent language-independent (that is, isomorphic to equivalent subsets of other natural languages). For this reason, the natural language used in the explications — a kind of highly reduced 'basic English' — can be viewed as a formal semantic metalanguage.

The metalanguage applied in the present work is, so to speak, carved out of natural language — any natural language. For practical reasons, the version of the metalanguage employed here is carved out of English, but it could be just as easily carved out of Russian, Latin, Japanese, or Swahili, because it is based, by and large, on what I believe to be the universal core of natural languages. For example, if I say in an explication: 'I want', I mean something that could be just as easily represented as 'ja xoču' (Russian) or 'ego volo' (Latin). The expression 'I want' is used here, therefore, not as part of the 'normal' English language, but as part of the English-based version of the universal semantic metalanguage.

The metalanguage in question is a technical, artificial language, not a natural language; nonetheless, it is appropriate and illuminating, I think, to call it a 'natural semantic metalanguage', (cf. Goddard 1989a,b), because it is derived entirely from natural language and because it can be understood via natural language without any additional arbitrary signs and conventions. Arbitrary signs and conventions are not allowed in this metalanguage, because their meaning would have to be explained — and these explanations, in their turn, would not be intelligible unless they were couched in immediately understandable natural language. (On the other hand, it is allowed to use 'iconic' conventions, such as spatial arrangement of components, the use of separate lines for different chunks of meanings, and the like.)

The lexicon of the 'natural semantic metalanguage' is based on the current version of the hypothetical set of universal semantic primitives (see Wierzbicka 1989a,b; Goddard 1989a,b; Bogusławski 1981b, 1989). The first version of this set, posited in Wierzbicka (1972), included just fourteen elements. The current, considerably expanded, version of this set, contains over two dozen elements (some of them regarded as more hypothetical than others). They are:

<i>Pronouns</i>	<i>Determiners</i>	<i>Classifiers</i>	<i>Adjectives</i>
I	this	kind of	good
you	the same	part of	bad
someone	two		
something	all		
<i>Verbs</i>	<i>Modals</i>	<i>Place/Time</i>	<i>Linkers</i>
want	can	place	like
don't want	if/imagine	time	because
say		after (before)	
think		above (under)	
know			
do			
happen			

It is not clear at this stage to what extent the items listed above can be viewed as true lexical universals. It is impossible to determine without painstaking semantic analysis whether or not a given language has separate words embodying concepts such as, for example, 'part', 'know', or 'like'. (It is certainly not sufficient to consult dictionaries, native speakers, or standard linguistic descriptions of the languages in question.) It seems certain, however, that a semantic metalanguage based on the twenty-odd hypothetical primitives listed above can be matched to a considerable degree across different languages of the world. In addition, the metalexicon employed in the present work includes a limited number of other concepts, which are regarded as neither indefinable nor universal or near-universal, but which are still relatively very simple and which recur widely in the languages of the world as separate lexical items. This larger set, whose items can be defined in terms of the basic set of primitives, includes concepts such as 'feel', 'small', 'much', 'a little', 'more', 'less', 'different', and so on.

5. The need for a universal perspective on meaning

It is impossible for a human being to study anything — be it cultures, language, animals, or stones — from a totally extra-cultural point of view. As scholars, we remain within a certain culture, and we are inevitably guided by certain principles and certain ideals which we know are not necessarily shared by the entire human race.

We must also rely on certain initial concepts; we cannot start our inquiry in a complete conceptual vacuum. It is important, however, that as our inquiry proceeds, we try to distinguish what in our conceptual apparatus is determined by the specific features of the culture to which we happen to belong, and what can be, with some justification, regarded as simply human.

Trying to explore both the universal and the culture-specific aspects of meaning, we should beware of using concepts provided by our own culture or by our own scholarly tradition as culture-free analytical tools (cf. Lutz 1985). As human beings, we cannot place ourselves outside all cultures. This does not mean, however, that if we want to study cultures other than our own all we can do is to describe them through the prism of our own culture, and therefore to distort them. We can find a point of view which is universal and culture-independent; but we must look for such a point of view not outside all human cultures, (because we cannot place ourselves outside them), but within our own culture, or within any other culture that we are intimately familiar with.

To achieve this, we must learn to separate within a culture its idiosyncratic aspects from its universal aspects. We must learn to find ‘human nature’ within every particular culture. This is necessary not only for the purpose of studying ‘human nature’ but also for the purpose of studying the idiosyncratic aspects of any culture that we may be interested in. To study different cultures in their culture-specific features we need a universal perspective; and we need a culture-independent analytical framework. We can find such a framework in universal human concepts, that is in concepts which are inherent in any human language.

If we proceed in this way, we can study any human culture without the danger of distorting it by applying to it a framework alien to it; and we can aim both at describing it ‘truthfully’, and at understanding it.

We cannot understand a distant culture ‘in its own terms’ without understanding it at the same time in our own terms. What we need for

real ‘human understanding’ is to find terms which would be both ‘theirs’ and ‘ours’. We need to find shared terms; that is, universal concepts. I suggest that we can find such concepts in the ‘universal alphabet of human thoughts’ (Leibniz 1903:430), that is, in the indefinable (i.e. semantically simple) words and morphemes of natural language, (such as *I, you, someone, something, this, think, say, want, or do*), which can be found, it seems, in all the languages of the world.

6. The uniqueness of every linguistic system

Every language is a self-contained system and, in a sense, no words or constructions of one language can have absolute equivalents in another. The idea that there might be some linguistic elements which are universal in the sense of having absolute equivalents in all the languages of the world is of course all the more fanciful.

However, as soon as we abandon the notion of absolute equivalents and absolute universals, we are free to investigate the idea of partial equivalents and partial universals; and if the former notion is sterile and useless, the latter idea is fruitful and necessary.

What I mean by ‘partial universals’ is this. Within a particular language, every element belongs to a unique network of elements, and occupies a particular place in a unique network of relationships. When we compare two, or more, languages we cannot expect to find identical networks of relationships. We can, nonetheless, expect to find certain correspondences.

To put it differently, although every language has its own unique structure and its own unique lexicon (embodying unique semantic configurations), nonetheless there are certain areas of languages which can be regarded as mutually isomorphic (some examples are given in the sections which follow). It is this (limited) isomorphism in grammar and in the lexicon that gives sense to the notion of semantic universals. The metalanguage employed in the present book is based on such putative universals.

7. The problem of polysemy

The search for lexical universals may seem to be a purely empirical task: laborious, to be sure, but relatively straightforward. In fact, however, the presence or absence of a word for a given concept cannot be established by any mechanical, checklist method. The search is empirical, but it also has necessarily an analytical dimension. Above all, there is the problem of polysemy. For example, I have postulated 'you' and 'I' as universal semantic primitives, but what I mean by 'you' is 'you SG' ('thou'), rather than 'you PL' or 'you SG/PL'. Yet one doesn't have to look further than modern English to find a language which doesn't seem to have a word for 'thou'. To maintain the claim that 'thou' is a lexical universal we would have to posit polysemy for the word *you*: (1) 'you SG', (2) 'you PL'. Initially, this seems an unattractive solution, but I think there are good reasons for accepting it. Polysemy is a fact of life, and basic, everyday words are particularly likely to be polysemous (cf. Zipf 1949). For example, *say* is polysemous between its abstract sense, which ignores the physical medium of expression (for example *What did he say in his letter?*, *The fool said in his heart: there is no God*), and its more specific sense, which refers to oral speech only. *Know* is polysemous between the two senses which are distinguished in French as *savoir* and *connaître*, and in German as *wissen* and *kennen* (cf. *I know that this is not true* vs. *I know this man*).

It goes without saying that polysemy must never be postulated lightly, and that it has always to be justified on language-internal grounds; but to reject polysemy in a dogmatic and a priori fashion is just as foolish as to postulate it without justification. In the case of the English word *you*, I think its polysemy can be justified on the basis of the distinction between the forms *yourself* and *yourselves*; the choice between *yourself* and *yourselves* is determined by the choice between *you_{SG}* and *you_{PL}* (cf. *you_{SG} yourself* vs. *you_{PL} yourselves*).

There is nothing surprising in the fact that one word may have two meanings, one indefinable and one definable. It is more surprising if one word appears to have two different indefinable meanings. In fact, however, the evidence available so far suggests that there are no languages in the world which would use the same word for 'you' and 'I'. More generally, there appear to be no languages in the world which wouldn't have special (separate) words for these two vital concepts.

8. Semantic equivalence vs. pragmatic equivalence

If there are scholars who — like the ordinary monolingual person — believe that most words in one language have exact semantic equivalents in other languages, there are also those who believe that no words in one language can have exact equivalents in many other languages, let alone in all the languages of the world. For example, they say, there are languages which have no personal pronouns, no words for ‘you’ or ‘I’. Japanese is sometimes cited as an example of this. In my view, this is a fallacy. For cultural reasons, Japanese speakers try to avoid the use of personal pronouns (cf. Barnlund 1975b; Suzuki 1986) and the language has developed a wealth of devices that allow its speakers to avoid such overt reference without producing any misunderstandings. For example, there are certain verbs in Japanese (so-called honorific verbs) which are never used with respect to the speaker; and there are ‘humble’, self-deprecating verbs, which are never used with respect to the addressee; the use of such verbs often sufficiently identifies the person spoken about and the person addressed as to make an overt reference to ‘you’ and ‘I’ unnecessary. But the words for ‘you’ and ‘I’ do exist, and can be used when it is necessary or desired.

It is also true that many languages, especially Southeast Asian languages, have developed a number of elaborate substitutes for ‘you’ and ‘I’, and that in many circumstances it is more appropriate to use some such substitute than the barest, the most basic pronoun. For example, in a polite conversation in Thai, the use of the basic words for ‘you’ and ‘I’ would sound outrageously crude and inappropriate. Instead, various self-deprecating expressions would be used for ‘I’, and various deferential expressions for ‘you’. Many of the expressions which stand for ‘I’ refer to the speaker’s hair, crown of the head, top of the head, and the like, and many of the expressions which stand for ‘you’ refer to the addressee’s feet, soles of the feet, or even to the dust underneath his feet, the idea being that the speaker is putting the most valued and respected part of his own body, the head, at the same level as the lowest, the least honourable part of the addressee’s body (cf. Cooke 1968; Palakornkul 1975). But this does not mean that Thai has no personal pronouns, no basic words for ‘you’ and ‘I’.

A language may not make a distinction which would correspond to that between the words ‘he’ and ‘she’, and in fact many languages, for example Turkish, have just one word for ‘he’ and ‘she’, undifferentiated

for sex. But no known language fails to make a distinction between the speaker and the addressee, i.e. between 'you' and 'I'.

This does not mean that the range of use of the words for 'you' and 'I' is the same in all languages. For example, in Japanese, the word *ore*, which Japanese English dictionaries gloss as 'I', has a range of use incomparably more narrow than the word *I* has in English. Thus, in a recent study of the use of the first and second person pronouns (Kurokawa 1972), it was found that none of the women in the sample used *ore*, whereas 90% of the men did — along with *boku* (100%), *watashi* (80%), *watakushi* (50%) and *atashi* (80%). It was also found that "the pronoun *ore* 'I' is often used among male adult speakers only in such very informal occasions as between two close friends and at home. It is not an exaggeration to say that in many elementary schools the use of this pronoun *ore* is discouraged by the teacher. ... This pronoun is almost never introduced in texts for an elementary, or an intermediate, Japanese course for English speaking students." (Kurokawa 1972:231). The survey also shows that "men use *ore* more frequently when talking with their wives than when talking with their parents: 44% versus 33%" (1972:232).

What does *ore* mean, then? It may be considered 'rude' for a child to use *ore* to other children at school, but *ore* cannot mean 'I + disrespect', because if it did it would not be permissible for a man to use it when speaking to his parents. This suggests that *ore* means simply 'I' — and that there are no invariant semantic components which could be always attributed to it other than 'I'. The heavy restrictions on its use must therefore be attributed to cultural rather than semantic factors. In a society where references to oneself are in many situations expected to be accompanied by expressions of humility or deference, a bare 'I' becomes pragmatically marked, and it must be interpreted as either very intimate or very rude. But this pragmatic markedness should not be confused with demonstrable semantic complexity.

Above all, it should be pointed out that words such as the Japanese *ore* 'I' or *kimi* 'you' (or French *tu*, or German *du*), cannot be further defined within the languages to which they belong. Even if someone insisted that words of this kind can be defined via English, for example, along the following lines:

- ore* — 'I; I don't have to show respect for you'
- kimi* (*tu*, *du*) — 'you; I don't have to show respect for you'

explications of this kind could not be translated into Japanese, French, or German without *regressus ad infinitum* (for what words would be used for *you* and *I* in the explication?). We have to conclude, therefore, that words of this kind are true semantic primitives of the languages in question. To say that they are not semantic primitives, but that their inherent complexity can be shown only via definitions phrased in English, not in the languages to which they belong, would be a case of blatant ethnocentrism. Since, however, these primitives (of the Japanese, French, or German language) can be matched semantically across language boundaries, we can acknowledge their analogous (indefinable) position within the language systems to which they belong by calling them universal semantic primitives, and by equating them in semantic explications — despite the huge cultural differences reflected in their different frequency and different range of use.

9. Universal grammatical patterns

But if the supposed lexical universals are embedded, in each language, in language-specific grammatical patterns, can they really be matched and identified cross-linguistically? In any case, words or morphemes by themselves cannot really express any meanings: they can only contribute in a certain way to the meaning expressed by a sentence. If we want to identify meanings cross-linguistically we must look not for isolated lexical items but for commensurable lexical items used in commensurable sentences. This means that we must look not only for commensurable lexical items but also for commensurable grammatical patterns.

It seems clear that the great majority of grammatical patterns of any given language are language-specific. It is possible, however, that there are also some patterns which are universal. In fact, if cross-cultural understanding is possible at all, despite the colossal variation in language structures, there must be some common core of 'human understanding', and this common core must rely not only on some shared or matching lexical items but also on some shared, or matching, grammatical patterns in which those shared lexical items can be used.

To put it differently, there must be some 'atomic sentences' (cf. Russell 1962), or 'kernel sentences' (cf. Chomsky 1957), which can be said in any language, and which can be matched across language bounda-

ries. The grammar of these 'atomic sentences' must consist in the possible distribution patterns of the 'atomic elements' (that is, the lexical indefinables). Trying to discover those patterns we should look, therefore, at the lexical indefinables themselves, and try to see what their possibilities of co-occurrence might be. In searching for universal grammatical patterns, therefore, we should not look for any universals of form; rather, we should look for universals of combinability.

The search for such simple and 'language-independent' grammatical patterns has begun fairly recently and is still in its early stages (cf. Wierzbicka 1988, in press a, b). The explications proposed in the present work employ a kind of reduced (English) syntax which is relatively simple and relatively language-independent, without being simple or universal in any absolute sense. Above all, I try to rely on simple clauses rather than on complex sentences and to avoid participial constructions, relative clauses, nominalisations, and other similar pieces of complex, language-specific syntactic machinery. I do not, however, try in this work to go as far as possible in the direction of simplicity and universality, because this would often increase the length of explications and make them more difficult to read. I aim at a compromise between simplicity and universality on the one hand and the reader's convenience on the other.

10. Semantics versus pragmatics: different approaches

Leech (1983:6) distinguishes three different ways of viewing the relationship between semantics and pragmatics, which he summarises usefully in the form of three diagrams, shown in Figure 1. He labels the three approaches 'semanticism' (A), 'complementarism' (B), and 'pragmaticism' (C).

The classical Morrisian (1938) position, which divides the study of sign systems into syntax, semantics and pragmatics, is an instance of 'complementarism'. The philosophical tradition in the study of language which started with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and which urged, 'Don't ask for meaning, ask for use', is an instance of 'pragmaticism'. The 'generative semantics' of the early 1970s, which tried to present the illocutionary force of an utterance as part of its semantic structure, can be said to have represented 'semanticism' (see

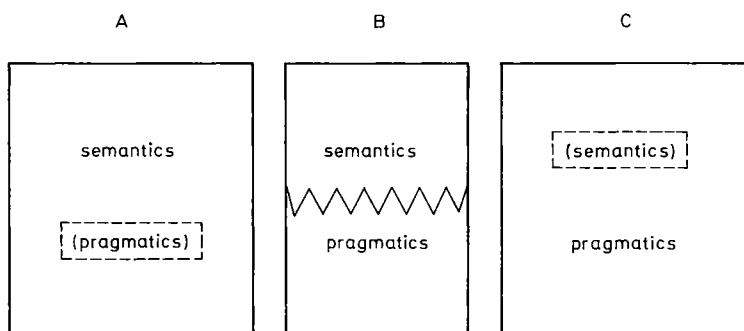


Figure 1. Three views of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics

the articles in Cole — Morgan 1975). All three of these approaches present serious difficulties, which will be discussed briefly below.

10.1. 'Complementarism'

Morris wanted to separate the relations between signs and 'reality' from the relations between signs and their users. But the very nature of natural language is such that it doesn't separate extralinguistic reality from the psychological and social world of language users.

Language is an integrated system, where everything 'conspires' to convey meaning: words, grammatical constructions and various 'illocutionary' devices (including intonation). Accordingly, one might argue that linguistics falls naturally into three parts, which could be called lexical semantics, grammatical semantics, and illocutionary semantics. A Morrisian division of the study of signs into semantics, syntax, and pragmatics may make good sense with respect to some artificial sign systems, but it makes no sense with respect to natural language, whose syntactic and morphological devices (as well as illocutionary devices) are themselves carriers of meaning. In natural language, meaning consists in human interpretation of the world. It is subjective, it is anthropocentric, it reflects predominant cultural concerns and culture-specific modes of social interaction as much as any objective features of the

world 'as such'. 'Pragmatic (attitudinal) meanings' are inextricably intertwined in natural languages with meanings based on 'denotational conditions' (see for example Wierzbicka 1980, 1987; see also Padučeva 1985).

Since the meanings conveyed in natural language are inherently subjective and anthropocentric, they cannot be neatly divided into 'referential' and 'pragmatic', or 'denotational' and 'attitudinal'. What is needed, therefore, is a unified semantic framework, equally suitable for describing the meaning of 'cultural kinds' (such as *cup* and *mug* in English, or *sake* in Japanese), 'natural kinds' (such as *cat* and *dog* in English, or *nezumi* 'rat/mouse' in Japanese), interactional verbs (such as *promise*, *vow*, or *pledge* in English, or *materit'sja* 'mother-swear' in Russian), and so on. All such meanings are culture-specific, subjective, and anthropocentric (see Wierzbicka 1985a,b, 1987), 'referential' and 'pragmatic' at the same time. For example, Leech's 'complementarist' position forces him to analyse illocutionary forces such as requesting, promising, and ordering under 'pragmatics', and the meaning of verbs such as *request*, *promise*, and *order*, under 'semantics', as if the two tasks had nothing in common, and as if the so-called illocutionary force of requesting, promising, or ordering wasn't simply a function of the English verbs *request*, *promise*, and *order*.

10.2. 'Pragmaticism'

The approach that Leech has called 'pragmaticism' has perhaps more to offer, because it creates no artificial gulf between 'pragmatic meanings' and 'denotational meanings' and recognises the anthropocentric nature of natural language, where 'man' (the language user) is truly a measure of all things, and where 'objective' aspects of meaning are inextricably linked with 'subjective' and interactional ones.

Yet 'pragmaticism', too, proves very hard to apply fruitfully when it comes to actual description of meanings, especially in a cross-cultural perspective, because it has no rigorous framework for description and comparison, no firm grid in terms of which the endless vagaries of language use can be rigorously analysed and interpreted.

To try to describe language use without such a grid is like trying to describe phonological systems of different languages without having a universal phonetic alphabet of any sort. Not surprisingly, many linguists accustomed to high standards of rigour in domains such as phonology,

syntax, or historical linguistics reject linguistic articles and books based on the philosophy of ‘pragmaticism’ as ‘woolly’, ‘waffly’, and arbitrary.

10.3. ‘Semanticism’

In the present writer’s view, the approach which Leech calls ‘semanticism’ has much more to offer to the study of meaning in natural language, because it can provide it with a firm basis and can allow it to combine insight with rigour. Natural language is a system for conveying meaning, and any integration of linguistic science can be achieved only on the basis of meaning.

The fact that a well-known linguistic school which advocated a ‘radically semantic’ position (‘generative semantics’) has failed, and has acknowledged its defeat (see Newmeyer 1980:167-173; Lakoff 1986: 584-585), doesn’t mean that there is something inherently wrong with a ‘radically semantic’ orientation as such. One cannot describe and compare meanings in a non-arbitrary way without a well-justified set of (candidates for) universal semantic primitives. Generative semanticists didn’t strive to discover such a set (although they did like to refer, in the abstract, to some unidentified ‘atomic predicates’). One can argue that this was the main cause of their failure (in pragmatics, and in semantics in general), not their ‘radically semantic’ approach. What they lacked was a methodology which would lend coherence and unity to the field of semantics, and which would define a well-justified boundary around it.

Linguistic semantics and linguistic pragmatics are one. What applies to colour semantics, kinship semantics, speech-act semantics, to the semantics of natural kinds, cultural kinds, ‘emotions, and so on applies also to the semantics of interpersonal attitudes.

10.4. A fourth approach: two pragmatics

But can all aspects of pragmatics be handled by means of a universal semantic framework, the same framework which can also be used for all other areas of meaning?

Probably nobody would want to go so far as to claim that. The term ‘pragmatics’ has been applied to a very wide and heterogeneous range of phenomena, including ‘conversational analysis’, ‘linguistic etiquette’, ‘acquisition of communicative competence’, and so on. In fact, many

scholars have suggested that 'pragmatics' is no more than a wastepaper basket, where everything that has to do with language but which cannot be treated rigorously is thrown. This position gives 'pragmatics' a very broad scope indeed, but it leaves the 'core linguistics' greatly impoverished and deprived of a component which is essential to a coherent and integrated description of linguistic competence.

In my view, the only possible solution to this dilemma is to recognise that there are two pragmatics, differing from one another not so much in subject matter as in methodology. There is a linguistic pragmatics, which can form a part of a coherent, integrated description of linguistic competence, and there is another pragmatics, or other pragmatics (in the plural): a domain or domains of the sociologist, the psychologist, the ethnomethodologist, the literary scholar, and so on.

As Hugo Schuchardt (1972:67) pointed out, the unity of a scholarly discipline is created by its coherent methodology, not by any inherent unity of the subject matter. Pragmatics is, up to a point, an integral part of linguistics, and the boundary between linguistic pragmatics and nonlinguistic pragmatics is determined by the stretching capacities of a coherent unified linguistic framework.

Attitudinal meanings can be treated in the same descriptive framework as any other kinds of meaning. They can therefore be regarded as belonging to semantics and, ipso facto, to 'core' linguistics. There is no gulf between linguistic pragmatics and linguistic semantics; on the contrary, linguistic pragmatics can be fruitfully seen as part of linguistic semantics. But there is a gulf between linguistic pragmatics and various other, heterogeneous, considerations of language use. This leads us to propose a fourth diagram, shown in Figure 2, in addition to the three proposed by Leech.

This diagram represents a 'radically semantic' approach to meaning, with so-called 'pragmatic meanings' being treated in exactly the same way, and being described in exactly the same framework, as any other kind of meaning. But this doesn't mean that anything that has ever been called 'pragmatics' could, or should, be swallowed by semantics.

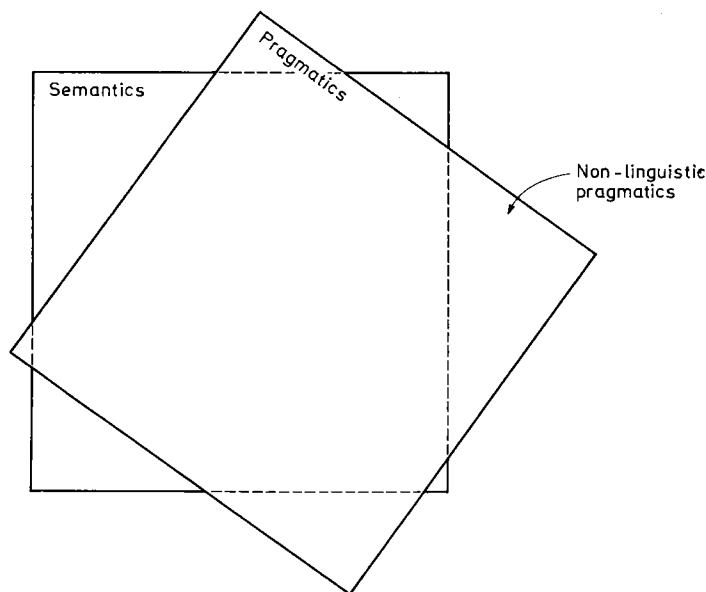


Figure 2. A 'radically semantic' approach to meaning

11. Description of contents

Chapter 2, 'Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts', discusses a number of differences between two languages, English and Polish, in the area of speech acts, and links these differences with different cultural norms and cultural assumptions. It is shown that English, as compared with Polish, places heavy restrictions on the use of the imperative and makes extensive use of interrogative and conditional forms. Features of English which have been claimed to be due to universal principles of politeness are shown to be language-specific and due to specific cultural norms and cultural traditions. Linguistic differences are shown to be associated with cultural values such as individualism and respect for personal autonomy in the case of English, and cordiality in the case of Polish. Furthermore, certain characteristic features of Australian English are discussed and illustrated, and are shown to reflect

some features of the Australian national ethos. Implications for the theory of speech acts and for intercultural communication are discussed. In particular, certain influential theories of speech acts, based largely on English (in particular, Searle's theory) are shown to be ethnocentric and dangerous in their potential social effects.

Chapter 3, 'Cross-cultural pragmatics and different cultural values', uses a much wider range of examples (in particular, from Japanese, Black American English, Yiddish, and Hebrew), to show that differences in the ways of speaking associated with different languages are profound and systematic, and that they reflect, and can be explained in terms of, independently established differences in cultural traditions, cultural values, and cultural priorities. It demonstrates the anglocentrism of supposedly universal 'maxims' of human conversational behaviour of the kind put forward by Grice (1975) or Leech (1983). It also shows how progress in cross-cultural pragmatics has been hampered by the use of inadequate conceptual tools: in particular, of unanalysed, obscure and protean global labels such as 'directness', 'self-assertion', 'distance', 'intimacy', 'solidarity', 'harmony', 'informality', and so on, which have led to paradoxical and contradictory conclusions; and it proposes a method whereby different communicative styles can be clarified in terms of 'cultural scripts' written in the metalanguage of universal semantic primitives.

Chapter 4, 'Describing conversational routines', shows that while considerable effort has gone into the description and comparison of conversational routines associated with different languages and different cultures, much less has been achieved in this important area than might have been — because not enough thought has been given to the vital question of a standardised and 'culture-free' metalanguage in which such comparisons could be fruitfully carried out. To show how the use of the natural semantic metalanguage can facilitate this task I examine, in particular, a number of generalisations suggested in Pomerantz's (1978) paper 'Responses to compliments', and I show how these generalisations could be reformulated to make them both clear and verifiable. I also examine a number of other conversational routines, trying to show how the use of the natural semantic metalanguage can bring a new level of rigour to conversational analysis, and can free it from ethnocentric bias.

Chapter 5, 'Speech acts and speech genres across languages and cultures', discusses a number of speech acts and speech genres from English, Polish, Japanese, Hebrew, and Walmatjari (an Australian Aboriginal language), approaching them through the words which name

them (that is to say, through their folk labels). It is claimed that folk names of speech acts and speech genres provide an important source of insight into the communicative styles most characteristic of a given society, and reflect salient features of the culture associated with a given language; and that to fully exploit this source one must carry out a rigorous semantic analysis of such names, and express the results in a culture-independent semantic metalanguage. This is shown in detail through the semantic analysis of a group of Australian English speech-act verbs, together with a discussion of traditional Australian values and the Australian national ethos.

Chapter 6, 'The semantics of illocutionary forces', examines a wide range of English constructions and expressions encoding certain modes of interpersonal interaction, and spells out their meaning (or their 'illocutionary force'). For example, different types of tag questions and different types of 'interrogative directives' ('whimperatives') are discussed, and both the similarities and differences between them are made explicit. Here as in the other chapters of the book, the analysis takes the form of decomposition of illocutionary forces into their components, which are formulated in the natural semantic metalanguage. It is argued that the decomposition of illocutionary forces illustrated in this chapter offers a safe path between the Scylla of the 'performative hypothesis' (which has proved to be empirically inadequate and theoretically unjustifiable) and the Charybdis of the 'autonomous grammar', which tries to divorce the study of language structure from the study of language use.

Chapter 7, 'Italian reduplication: its meaning and its cultural significance', constitutes a case study of one culture-specific pragmatic device: the Italian 'reduplication' (for example *bella bella* 'beautiful beautiful'), examined against the background of various other 'intensification devices', such as, for example, the absolute superlative (for example *I am most grateful*). It is demonstrated that subtle pragmatic meanings such as those conveyed in Italian reduplication can be identified and distinguished from other, related meanings if ad hoc impressionistic comments are replaced with rigorous semantic explications; and it is shown how a semantic metalanguage derived from natural language can be used for that purpose. It is also argued that syntactic reduplication belongs to a system of pragmatic devices which reflect, jointly, some characteristic features of Italian communicative style. More generally, it is argued that illocutionary grammar can be linked directly with 'cultural style', and that cross-cultural pragmatics can gain considerably in both

insight and rigour if its problems are translated into the framework of illocutionary semantics.

Chapter 8, 'Interjections across cultures', argues that interjections — like any other linguistic elements — have meanings of their own, and that these meanings can be identified and captured in the natural semantic metalanguage. A number of interjections from English, Polish, Russian, and Yiddish are discussed, and rigorous semantic formulae are proposed which can explain both the similarities and the differences in their range of use. For example, the English interjection *yuk!* is compared and contrasted with its nearest Polish and Russian counterparts *fu!*, *fe!*, *tfu!* and *t'fu!* It is shown that while the meaning of interjections cannot be adequately captured in terms of emotion words such as *disgust*, it can be captured in terms of more fine-grained components, closer to the level of universal semantic primitives. The role of sound symbolism in the functioning of interjections is discussed, and the possibility of reflecting this symbolism in semantic formulae is explored.

Chapter 9, 'Particles and illocutionary meanings', examines a number of English and Polish particles, quantitative (for example *only*, *merely*, *just*) and temporal (for example *already*, *still*, *yet*), and in each case offers a paraphrase in natural semantic metalanguage, substitutable in context for the particle itself. Special attention is given to 'approximative' particles, such as *almost*, *around*, *about*, or *at least*. It is shown how the 'radically pragmatic' approach to the study of such particles, advocated by Sadock (1981) and others, fails to account for the range of their use. It is demonstrated that even the vaguest 'hedges' and 'approximatives' (for example *roughly* and *approximately*) can be given rigorous, and yet intuitively clear, semantic explications, which can explain their uses, and the differences in the use of closely related particles, both within a language and between different languages.

Chapter 10, 'Boys will be boys: even 'truisms' are culture-specific', develops more fully a critique of a 'Gricean' or 'radically pragmatic' approach to language use. Evidence against this approach is drawn mainly from the area of colloquial 'tautologies' such as *War is war* or *A promise is a promise*, which have often been adduced, by Grice and by others, in support of such a 'radically pragmatic' approach to language use. The chapter shows that such 'tautological constructions' are partly conventional and language-specific, and that each such construction has a specific meaning, which cannot be fully predicted in terms of any universal pragmatic maxims. It is argued that the attitudinal meanings conveyed by various tautological constructions and by similar linguistic

devices can be stated in rigorous and yet self-explanatory semantic formulae. 'Radical pragmatics' is rejected as a blind alley, and an integrated approach to language structure and language use is proposed, based on a coherent semantic theory, capable of representing 'objective' and 'subjective' aspects of meaning in a unified framework.

Chapter 11, 'Conclusion: semantics as a key to cross-cultural pragmatics', recapitulates the main features of the approach to the study of human interaction advanced in the present book, stressing in particular its universal, 'culture-free' perspective, and its 'multicultural', culture-specific, content. It highlights the theoretical and methodological novelty of the book, its empirical orientation, and its potential for use in language teaching and in the teaching of cross-cultural understanding and cross-cultural communication.

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 ochotę zjeść 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 form *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 krepować. (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*.