

Responsibility and Action: Invariants and Diversity in Requests for Objects in British English and Polish Interaction

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We compare the use of two formats for requesting an object in informal everyday interaction: imperatives, common in our Polish data, and second-person polar questions, common in our English data. Imperatives and polar questions are selected in the same interactional “home environments” across the languages, in which they enact two social actions: *drawing on shared responsibility* and *enlisting assistance*, respectively. Speakers across the languages differ in their choice of request format in “mixed” interactional environments that support either. The finding shed light on the orderly ways in which cultural diversity is grounded in invariants of action formation.

[Supplementary materials are available for this article. Go to the publisher’s online edition of *Research on Language and Social Interaction* for the following free supplemental resource(s): subtitled video clips of the analysed object request sequences.]

Speakers of different languages have different grammatical habits when it comes to formulating requests, but what is the sociocultural significance of this? We address this question in an investigation of the most common turn formats for requesting an object among English and Polish family and friends. In a collection of over 200 object request sequences, we find that these are formatted predominantly as imperatives (*podaj pieprz*/“pass the pepper”) in the Polish interactions, and predominantly as polar questions with a modal auxiliary in the second person (*can you*

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pass the pepper) in the English interactions. What do these differences tell us about sociocultural orientations in British and Polish homes?

Our analysis tackles this question by first asking what is the *same* in British and Polish speakers' use of imperatives and polar questions to make requests. In a nutshell, the finding we will present is the following. We will show that there are situations in interaction in which several cues converge to support the selection of one of the request forms across the two languages. We call such situations the "home environments" of a request format (cf. also the term "base environment" used by Heritage & Sorjonen, 1994). In such home environments, speakers of both British English and of Polish select the same format (imperative or polar question respectively) to make a request. The two request formats receive their action import from the mutual relationship with their home environment: The imperative in its home environment draws on the other person's cooperation on the basis of a preexisting co-responsibility for the wider course of actions within which the request emerges. The polar question in its home environment enlists the other person's assistance for a new project that benefit the requester.

However, there are also many situations in interaction, in which different cues simultaneously support the selection of different request formats. We call such situations "mixed environments." It is in such situations that we find cultural diversity. Speakers of British English here tend to select the polar question format, thereby treating the request as seeking assistance for the benefit of the requester. Speakers of Polish here tend to select the imperative format, thereby treating the request as integral to a wider project with shared responsibility.

What is new about the analysis we propose is that it does not treat different "cultures" as monoliths but does not entirely dissolve cultural diversity in the contingencies of situated action either. Instead, the distinction between home environments and mixed environments allows us to show how cultural diversity at an aggregate level can emerge from invariants of action formation. The analysis therefore proposes a new analytic avenue, which allows us to pursue an interest in comparing groups, while nevertheless grounding analysis in participant's demonstrable orientations.

Before moving to the analysis, we provide some background to situate the present work in the comparative and interactional literature on requesting.

IMPERATIVE REQUESTS: IMPOLITENESS OR INFORMALITY

Requesting is one of the main motivations in human communication (Tomasello, 2008), and our complex social lives are in part supported through a wide variety of requests. Excerpt 1 is an example of the kind of object request we are interested in. James is grinding pepper onto his food and then moves to place the pepper grinder onto an adjacent table (line 1). At the same moment, his daughter Ellen stretches her arm across the table, and asks: "Can I have some pepper please" (line 3). In response, James passes her the grinder.

Excerpt 1 Can I have some pepper please

[BP1-2 2:18]

- 01 James: ((moves arm to put pepper grinder away))
 02 Ellen: ((stretches out arm))
 03-> Ellen: >Can I have some < pepper please.
 04 James: ((passes her the grinder))

Note that Ellen does not need to make a request here. Instead, she could get up and take the pepper herself. But to do so would in a sense be antisocial; it would mean ignoring the presence of the other and effectively not treating the meal as an occasion of “being together.” Object requests are therefore, besides their interest as a sometimes delicate social action (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lerner, 1996), a prime example of the kind of prosocial interchange that is a defining characteristic of the human species (Moll & Tomasello, 2007) and a fundamental site for the everyday display and management of cooperative orientations in social situations.

However, the one aspect of the management of cooperative orientations in requests that has received by far the most attention is the fact that a request constitutes an imposition on the request recipient. By making a request, the speaker constrains the recipient’s freedom of action, however minimal and short-lived—as in the previous example—this encroachment may be. This potentially sensitive side of requests has been influentially theorized in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness. Building on Goffman’s notion of “face,” Brown and Levinson suggest that a request fundamentally threatens the other person’s “negative face,” i.e., their wish to be free from impositions. According to the theory, speakers will therefore strive to minimize the threat to the recipient’s negative face, and they do this by formulating their request indirectly.

Applying this framework to cross-cultural studies can lead to the curious implication that speakers of some languages such as Polish, where presumably more direct forms such as the imperative are frequently used, have less concern for politeness behavior than speakers of other languages such as British English, where presumably less direct (or “conventionally indirect”) forms such as modal interrogatives are frequently used. However, researchers of Cross-Cultural Pragmatics, a field largely based on Brown and Levinson’s theory, have challenged this conclusion and have argued that there is no straightforward relationship between directness and face threat or impoliteness (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Ogiermann, 2009).

But how else can we interpret this cross-linguistic difference? Cross-Cultural Pragmatics have studied the formulation of requests in different languages extensively (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Fukushima, 2000; Ogiermann, 2009; Sifianou 1992). These researchers have already found a relatively stronger prevalence of imperative formats in languages other than English, including Polish (Lubecka, 2000). However, the methodology employed in this field—eliciting possible request formulations in relation to an imaginary scenario—provides the researcher with material that is suited better to testing hypotheses than to exploring possible motivations of request formulations. Explanations in that field have therefore been restricted to critical analysis of assumptions that were part of the framework that guided the initial design of the study, as in Ogiermann’s (2009, p. 210) conclusion that “in Slavic cultures, requests are not regarded as threats to the hearer’s face to the degree that they are in Western Europe.”

With respect to requests in Polish in comparison to (Australian) English, Wierzbicka (1985) has suggested that the preference of particular request forms can be related to cultural values. In particular, she suggests that the imperative is valued by Polish speakers for its informality, whereas the question format, according to her, is valued by English speakers for the way it respects the respondent’s autonomy (by virtue of inviting a verbal response). Wierzbicka’s observations might be plausible. However, the data she marshals in support of her conclusions are often isolated sentences, or else quotations from novels, and these are analyzed on the basis of Wierzbicka’s intuitions as a speaker of Polish. It is not always clear from the data why or how those imperative requests, but not polar question requests, would produce in participants to interaction a sense of informality; we have to take Wierzbicka’s word for it.

Our approach is to analyze the contexts of naturalistic requests in imperative and in polar question format: the interactional environments in which speakers of British English and Polish select these request forms, as well as the response space they create for others by formulating a request in a particular format (cf. Heritage, 1984, on the doubly contextual nature of talk). In their formulation of action, speakers make particular expectations and orientations consequential for the interaction. An investigation of the context-sensitive, situated production of requests should therefore provide insights into the particular ways of orienting to the social here-and-now indexed by the two request practices. It can generate empirically grounded insights into the sociocultural significance of different habits of requesting.

ENTITLEMENT TO GET THINGS DONE

Although requests are a well-investigated phenomenon in the wider field of pragmatics, there are relatively few studies of how requests are realized in the moment-by-moment unfolding of interaction. Curl and Drew's (2008) study of requests in English telephone conversations has proved a landmark in that respect (see also Heinemann, 2006). The authors compared two request formats that were common in their data: a polar question format (*Can/Could you do x*) and a declarative format (*I was wondering if. . .*). According to the authors, speakers displayed their sense of entitlement to have the request granted, and their awareness of contingencies that could hinder the granting of the request, by selecting one or the other of those formats. Whereas speakers selecting the *I was wondering if*-format also indicated in the formulation of their turn that they did not make any presumptions about its grantability (thereby displaying "high contingency" and "low entitlement"), speakers selecting the *Can you*-format also indicated in the formulation of their request that no contingencies should stand in the way of the request being granted (displaying "low contingency" and "high entitlement").

The notions of entitlement and contingency have since been adopted also for studies of imperative requests, which are important in the present study. Craven and Potter (2010) found that parents sometimes "upgraded" requests to children by formulating them as an imperative, after earlier attempts formulated as polar questions had failed. In a study of requests by staff to adults with intellectual impairments, Antaki and Kent (2012) found that "bald imperatives" were by far the most frequent format. Both of these studies show that with an imperative, a speaker displays a high level of entitlement. These authors use the notion of entitlement mainly in relation to the kind of response that the request format projects: Imperatives project compliance and are therefore the most "entitled" format. *Can you*-requests produce a slot for acceptance or rejection and thereby display less entitlement than imperatives. *I was wondering if*-requests, as declarative turns, might give space to a relatively large variety of responsive actions, and thereby display still less entitlement (cf. Vinkhuyzen & Szymanski, 2005, on declaratively formatted requests).

Both Craven and Potter (2010) and Antaki and Kent (2012) treat the imperatives in their data as a choice on the part of the speaker to disregard the independence of the other person. Imperative requests, according to Antaki and Kent, instead prioritize "getting things done" (p. 886). In sum, these authors problematize the use of the imperative as a realization of the power asymmetries inherent in the investigated settings. These finding can probably not directly be transferred to the kind of data we analyze here (nor, of course, was such comparative application the concern of the cited studies): There is little reason to believe that power asymmetries and associated perceptions

of entitlement are per se larger in Polish families than in British families. Nevertheless, the finding that imperatives express an entitlement to “get things done” might be taking us a step closer to an explication, for example, of what Wierzbicka (1985) has in mind when she characterizes the imperative as an expression of “informality.”

MANAGING RESPONSIBILITY FOR COURSES OF ACTION

Whereas the studies on entitlement embodied by imperatives have focused on the response space created by requests in this format, Wootton (1997, 2005) and Rossi (2012) have focused their attention on the details of the interactional environments in which speakers choose the imperative. Wootton investigated the selection of request formats by a young English-speaking child in interactions with her parents. According to him (Wootton, 1997), the imperative format is selected by the child in situations where there are grounds for figuring that her request is consistent with her recipient’s current line of action. The polar question format in the second person (*Can you . . . ?*), on the other hand, is selected where compliance with the request would mean a departure from the recipient’s current course of activity, so that the child has no local basis for expecting that her request will be granted (Wootton, 2005). Rossi’s (2012) finding about the use of the imperative and a polar question format in the second person in Italian everyday interaction are consistent with Wootton’s. In Rossi’s data, it is characteristic for the environments in which the imperative format is selected that “the course of action within which the request emerges has been previously committed to by both parties” (p. 439). The notion of commitment here captures two situational dimensions that might in principle be independent of one another but that often fall together (see Rossi, 2012, for a detailed discussion of shared interactional projects). Actions requested with an imperative in Rossi’s data, first, extend a recipient’s course of actions that are already underway, and, secondly, contribute to a task, or “project” (Schegloff, 2007), for which both share some responsibility or, to use Rossi’s term, which is “owned” jointly by requester and requestee. For example, when two people cook a meal together, they both take a share in the responsibility for the outcome; they jointly “own” the project of cooking that meal. If one of them then goes about getting the vegetables out of the fridge and the other requests that they get the meat out as well, this request targets the furthering of a jointly owned project—cooking a meal—and it also extends a line of action that the first person is already engaged in—getting groceries out. It is in such environments that speakers in Rossi’s Italian data regularly select the imperative format for requesting. The polar question format, on the other hand, is selected in situations in which no such existing commitment is evident, neither in terms of project ownership, nor in terms of an already evident line of action.

OUR ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

The extant interactional literature provides us with a working hypothesis of what the motivations might be for speakers in some languages to preferentially select the imperative format for making requests: Maybe speakers of those languages treat a wider array of everyday matters as a joint project and more commonly expect their interaction partners to be already attending to the wider project to which the requested action contributes.

In what follows, we pursue this possibility in detail. We first present an analysis of the sequential contexts in which speakers of British English and Polish select the imperative or the polar question format. Our analysis extends the findings of previous conversational analytic research by identifying invariants of a “home environment” for the two request formats across languages: In the sequential home environment of imperative requests—in which we find speakers of both British English and Polish using this format—the object request extends an already ongoing course of actions to which the requestee is evidently (in terms of both their verbal and embodied conduct) committed. In the sequential home environment of polar question requests, the request seeks assistance with a project that requires the requestee to depart from their current line of action. In other words, we find that the selection of imperative or polar question request formats is sensitive to the same contextual information in the two languages. The two grammatical formats, in their home environments, accomplish different social actions: With an imperative format, a speaker *draws on* the other person’s cooperation; with a polar question, a speaker *enlists* the other person’s assistance.

Of course, this finding raises the question why there are nevertheless substantial differences in the frequency of usage of the two formats between English and Polish. In a nutshell, what we find in our data is that there are interactional environments that support the selection of either format: In many situations, it is the case that two people, A and B, are engaged in a joint course of actions (say, preparing a meal), but that at the moment when A formulates a request relating to the shared project, B is occupied with something else. Such situations would appear to provide the relevant cues for selecting either the imperative or the question format to make a request. English and Polish speakers differ with respect to which aspects of the situation they pick up in their request format selection in these “mixed” environments. This finding accounts for the fact that the two request forms, on the one hand, belong to the same interactional home environments in both languages, but that, on the other hand, the imperative format predominates in Polish everyday interaction, whereas the polar question format predominates in British English everyday interaction. This distinction between types of sequential environment allows us to show the orderly ways in which diversity across languages can be related to invariants of social action.

DATA AND METHOD

Our analysis is based on video recordings made by English and Polish families or housemates in their homes, while engaged in everyday activities such as doing arts and crafts, preparing or having meals, or playing games.¹ Ten hours of recordings from each of the settings, English and Polish, have been included, taken from a larger corpus of about 50 hours of recordings. The corpus for this study has been put together to match the English and Polish recordings in terms of formality, average number of people present (between four and five), and the presence of young children.

In these data, we have identified over 200 object request sequences. We are particularly interested in the two most common formats for requesting objects (Table 1). These are simple imperatives (as opposed to double imperatives such as “*go get the x*”) and second-person polar

¹Subtitled video clips of the analyzed object request sequences are accessible on *Taylor & Francis Online*. All participants have given informed consent for these fragments to be made accessible.

TABLE 1
Object Request Formats in English and Polish Family Interactions

	Overall (N = 218)	Object Requests in English Families (N = 87)	Object Requests in Polish Families (N = 131)
Analysed formats			
Imperative	63 (29%)	2 (2%)	61 (47%)
Second-person polar question	48 (22%)	35 (40%)	13 (10%)
Other common formats			
First-person polar question	27 (12%)	19 (22%)	8 (6%)
Naming the object	15 (7%)	4 (5%)	11 (8%)
"I want x"-declaratives	13 (6%)	3 (4%)	10 (8%)
Double imperatives	6 (3%)	1 (1%)	5 (3%)
Other	46 (21%)	23 (26%)	23 (18%)

Notes. The numbers refer to request sequences initiated with the respective request format, not individual request turns. The "Other" category includes diverse formats (e.g., *where is x*, *what about x*, *is there any x*, nonverbal moves such as holding out a hand), none of which is used more than five times.

questions (as opposed to first-person polar questions such as "*can I have the x*," see Excerpt 1). Object requests in simple imperative format ($N = 68$, 28.9% of all object requests) are formulated with an action verb such as *give*, *pass*, or *bring* in imperative mode, for example, "pass me a knife." Object requests in second-person polar question format ($N = 48$, 22% of all object requests) are polar questions built with an action verb such as *give*, *pass*, or *bring* and, in English, a modal auxiliary such as *will* or *can* in the second-person singular (in Polish, this format can be built without a modal verb, see Excerpt 5), for example, "can you pass me a knife?" For the sake of simplicity, we will be referring to these formats simply as *imperatives* and *polar questions*. Together, these two formats account for just over half of all object requests in our collection.

We are interested in these two formats not only because they are the most commonly used overall, but also because the commonality of their use to initiate request sequences is strikingly different in the English and the Polish data (see Table 1). In the next section, we ask what these differences in usage might tell us about cultural diversity in family lives. We have focused on a fundamental communicative motive across human communities, getting another person to provide an object. Our analysis revolves around two comparisons: first, a comparison between the two request formats, imperative and polar question; and secondly, a comparison between "home environments," in which the selection of the respective format is richly supported by the local context, and "mixed environments," which provide multiple fit for the selection of a request format.

Because both of the action formats we are examining occur in both languages—even if with strikingly different frequencies—we first compare the selection environments of the imperative and the polar question format irrespective of the language. This analysis will be based on two sources of evidence: The relation of the request turn to what has happened just prior in the interaction, and the grammatical composition of request turns, or their position and composition (Schegloff, 1993). We then consider situations that depart from the home environments of imperative and polar question requests in some way. In these situations, speakers in our Polish recordings often select the imperative format, whereas speakers in our English recordings often select the



FIGURE 1 Beginning of Excerpt 2, line 2, “Take wash this.”

polar question format. We will show that in doing so, English and Polish speakers bring different social orientations to bear on comparable situations.

We begin with an analysis of the imperative format, the most frequently used format in our collection overall.

THE HOME ENVIRONMENTS OF IMPERATIVE AND POLAR QUESTION REQUESTS

Evidence from aspects of the sequential position and formulation of object requests in imperative format suggest that this format is selected when compliance from the recipient of the request can be expected on the grounds that they are already involved in the relevant wider project.

In Excerpt 2 from a Polish recording, the family’s grown-up daughter Asia has begun clearing the table after dinner, occasioned by the fact that one of the toddlers has started mucking around with his cutlery. Asia’s mum, Ela, joins her in this effort at line 1. She gets up from her chair saying “OK, I’m taking this (away)” (*Dobra zabieram to*, line 1), and takes hold of two stacked empty plates. Asia is at this moment in the process of brushing food crumbs from the boy’s tablemat onto those same plates. At the end of Ela’s turn, Asia addresses a request in double imperative format to her, “take this and wash it” (*weź to umyj*,² line 2, see Figure 1), presenting the mat for Ela to take (another imperative request, of course, but not a request for an object, and not the kind of imperative format we are focusing on here; see Table 1). This is the environment in which Ela formulates the object request that interests us, “Give this here” (*Daj to tutaj*, line 18), a request for Asia to put the tablemat on top of the stack of plates Ela is holding.

²This turn is in fact ambiguous between the enumerative reading we have chosen for the gloss and a reading upon which *weź* (“take”) has an auxiliary-like function (Zinken, 2013).

Excerpt 2 Daj to tutaj (give this here)

[PP1-1 25:07]

- 01 Ela: ale nie łyżeczką- >tylko< dobra zabieram to
 but not spoon.INSTR- only good take.1S this
but not with the spoon but- ok, I'm taking this
- 02 Asia: weź to umyj ((holding out table mat))
 take. IMP this wash. IMP
take this and wash it
- 03 (0.2)
- 04-> Ela: daj to tutaj
 give. IMP this here
Give this here
- 05 ((Asia places table mat onto plates))

The object request, “give this here,” is formulated in an environment in which the request recipient, Asia, is evidently already assuming responsibility for the wider project of removing the toddler’s eating utensils from the table. Asia’s commitment is evident both from her embodied behavior—she starts stacking empty plates and removes the tablemat—and from her request that Ela wash the tablemat (line 2). In her response to Ela’s object request, Asia also displays that her involvement in the project of removing the dinner implements can already be expected: She simply does as requested, placing the tablemat on top of the plates Ela is holding (line 5), without any verbal response that would accept the job before complying. Throughout our collection, recipients of imperative object requests predominantly comply without any verbal response. By complying with the request without first producing a verbal acceptance, recipients can align to an interactional environment in which they are treated as already committed co-owners of the project for which the object is required, and therefore projectably compliant with the request.

Cases like this are common in our Polish data (cf. also Rossi, 2012, on Italian). In our English data, such imperative object requests are very rare, but crucially, not entirely absent. Excerpt 3 is an example. Tom and his mum Catherine are preparing ingredients for a chicken stew together. Tom has been assigned the job of chopping the carrots, and, here, he is looking for a knife. He first asks his mum to pass him “his” knife (“Can you pass me my knife please,” line 1). Mum turns her gaze to a block of knives and contemplates these a moment, but when she asks, “which one’s yours” (line 3), it turns out that Tom didn’t have any particular knife in mind. “I have no idea” (line 4), he answers, and he then extends this turn with another request, now for just any knife, and formulated in the imperative format: “just give me one (h)uh” (line 4). Catherine responds by choosing a knife and offering it to Tom.³

³Her response is accompanied by an “okay” (line 5). We find an “okay” (or Polish *dobra*) response after three object requests in imperative format. In all cases, the requestee is unsure about the object they have been asked to get and indicates this problem as part of their responsive turn. The “okay” in this position appears to register a compliance-in-principle in the face of some trouble that forestalls actual compliance.

Excerpt 3 Just give me one

[Chicken stew 6:03]

- 01 Tom: Can you pass me my knife please
 02 (1.0) ((*Catherine does a visual search for the knife*))
 03 Cath: Which one's yours
 04-> Tom: I have no idea just give me one (h)uh
 05 Cath: okay ((*reaches for knife*))
 06 Cath: that one?
 07 Tom: yeah. thank you

The object request in imperative format here comes in a similar interactional environment as in the previous case: In her embodied behavior (doing a visual search of the knife block, line 2) as well as in her pre-second insertion turn (Schegloff, 2007), “which one’s yours” (line 3), Catherine is already displaying her commitment toward the project of equipping Tom with a knife.

The imperative requests in the last two cases occur in noninitial positions within wider sequences of actions, in which prior moves have already been concerned with the project that is being pursued with the imperative (see Robinson, 2013, on the overall structural organization of “activities”). In Excerpt 2, the imperative object request is designed to further a project that has already been initiated with the daughter’s request to take the table mat; and in Excerpt 3, the imperative request occurs as part of a repair that aims to identify the referent of an earlier request (namely, the referent of *my knife* in *Can you pass me my knife please*). In these noninitial environments, in which the other person’s commitment to a joint project is already richly specified we find imperative requests that are simple in their composition: They are unadorned by mitigating devices (“please,” “maybe”), and the requested object is formulated with a pro-form: “this” (*to*) rather than “the table mat” in Excerpt 2, and “one” rather than “any knife” in Excerpt 3—additional evidence that the request speaker is treating the request recipient as already concerned with the relevant object (a finding that is again consistent with the finding for Italian in Rossi, 2012).

Turning now to the polar question format, the formulation and the sequential environment in which we find such object requests in both our English and Polish recordings suggest that this format indexes that the request recipient is not expected to be already committed to the project for which the object is needed. In Excerpt 4, compliance with the request requires the recipient to depart from a projectable line of action. This case comes from a recording in which four students are chatting in the lounge of their shared accommodation. At the start of this excerpt, there is a lapse in the conversation as Ben is slowly walking back into the room from the adjacent kitchen, where he had gone to throw away an empty crisps bag. After reentering the lounge, Ben takes up a standing position next to the kitchen entrance and considers out loud whether he should now proceed to the next phase of his meal, which had already been the topic of earlier talk: “Do I go upstairs and get that chocolate bar” (line 4). Just before he reaches the projectable end of his turn, Ruth addresses to him an object request in polar question format, compliance with which requires Ben to put his plans on hold and turn back into the kitchen: “Can you grab me some juice hon” (lines 5–6).

Excerpt 4 Can you grab me some juice hon

[BB8-1 1:21:07]

- 01 (3.0)
 02 ((Ben lets his arms clap against his legs))
 03 (3.0)
 04 Ben: Do I go upstairs and get that chocolate [bar
 05-> Ruth: [can
 06 you grab me some juice hon
 07 Ben: ((four nods, turns around to kitchen)) (2.0)
 08 Ben: [>°yep°<
 09 Ruth: [°thank you°
 10 ((Ben goes to get the drink))

When Ruth formulates her request for juice, not only has there been no prior indication that Ben would now concern himself with providing drinks for his housemates, but to the contrary, it was apparent that Ben would go somewhere else.⁴

Again, this usage of the polar question format to request an object is much less common in our Polish data, but, crucially, it is not entirely absent. Excerpt 5 is an example. Having cleared up some dishes after supper, Zuzia is standing by the table. At line 1, she produces an account for why she will now be going again. She wants to go and drink something, and she formulates this as a plan concerning only herself, a fact that will become important in the analysis: “ok, then I go and have a drink mum because terribly-” (*dobrze to ja idę się czegoś napić mamie bo strasznie*, lines 1–2). Her mum, Bogusia, advises her to return to the table with her drink, but also treats this as a line of action concerning Zuzia individually: “yes, bring, bring yourself a drink” (*no przynieś przynieś sobie picie*, line 3). After a few seconds of other talk (omitted here), Bogusia starts formulating some kind of plan (at line 9), possibly to drink something as well (with her gaze, she had just been following Magda take a sip from her cup). However, she abandons that turn and, more loudly, calls after Zuzia, who has by that time disappeared into the kitchen: *a nalejesz mi herbaty Zuziu* (“and/but will you pour me some tea Zuzia,” line 12).

Excerpt 5 A nalejesz mi herbaty Zuziu?

(And/but will you pour me some tea Zuzia)

PP3-1 [8:35]

- 01 Zuzia: Dobrze to ja (.) idę się czegoś napić
 good then I go REFL what.GEN drink
 OK, then I go and drink something

⁴Note also the benefactive “me” in Ruth’s request. As opposed to Tom’s “me” in Excerpt 2, the benefactive marking here is not required by the argument structure of the verb. This indexing of the requester as sole beneficiary of the requested action also appears to be relevant to the selection of the polar question format, although it is a matter that is in principle separate from the status of the request as initiating a new project versus contributing to a shared project.

- 02 mamo [bo stra:sznie
 mum because terribly
 mum because (I'm) terribly
- 03 Bogusia: [no przynieś przynieś picie sobie
 PRT bring.IMP bring.IMP drink self
 Well get- get yourself a drink
- ((five lines omitted))
- 09 Bogusia: zaraz jeszcze ja (chyba od
 in.a.moment still I (probably from
 Wait a moment, I will (probably also from
- 10 Bogusia: ciebie)
 you)
 you)
- 11 Magda: °co ma [mo°
 what mum
 what mum
- 12 Bogusia: [A NALEJESZ mi herbaty Zuziu:?
 And pour.FUT.2S me tea.GEN Zuzia?
 And will you pour me some tea Zuzia
- 13 Zuzia: .hh ↑a no ↑jasne.
 And PRT clear
 But of course

A relevant feature of turn-design here is the turn-initial *a* in Bogusia's request at line 12. The Polish *a* is a conjunction that, according to dictionary definitions joins two sentences of contrasting content (Doroszewski, 1963) and combines elements of the conjunctive *i* ("and") and the disjunctive *ale* ("but"). In a first conversation-analytic characterization of the difference between turn-initial Polish *i* ("and") and turn-initial *a* ("and/but"), Weidner (2012, p. 173) suggests that *a*-prefaced questions constitute a departure from the larger activity, or the agenda-so-far. In the present case, Bogusia's *a*-prefacing indexes that her request is for an action that constitutes a departure from the course of action as it had been unfolding up to that point. So far, Zuzia was involved in the project of getting herself a drink, and both Zuzia and Bogusia had treated events in that way in their prior interchange (lines 1–3). Pouring a drink for mum as well slightly changes the nature of Zuzia's trip to the kitchen, and it is this departure from a previously unfolding course of actions that is acknowledged in the choice of the polar question format.

To sum up the analysis so far, we have identified home environments for object requests in imperative and in polar question format. With the term "home environment" we want to capture two observations: Firstly, we find that, across languages, the two formats are selected in sequential environments with certain invariant characteristics. In the home environment for imperative requests, there is converging evidence from talk and embodied conduct that the recipient is already, at that moment, committed to the wider activity within which the request emerges. In the home environment for polar question requests, the requester asks the recipient to depart from

their current course of action to engage in a new, unrelated one. Secondly, in these environments, the request turn is formulated in such a way that it builds off, and reaffirms just those aspects of the sequential environment. Imperative requests, in their home environment, formulate the referent with a pro-form, and do not include address terms. Polar question requests, in their home environment, do often include an address term and name the referent with a full form.

There is then, in the home environment of a request format, a mutual relationship between interactional environment and turn formulation that constitutes the request as a particular kind of social action. To provide a gloss for the two different action shapes analyzed here, we might say that in selecting the imperative format to request an object, the speaker *draws on* another person's co-responsibility in order to mobilize cooperation, whereas in selecting the polar question format, the speaker newly *enlists* another person for cooperation (a term used by Lindström, 2005). Recipients' responsive conduct provides evidence that supports the analysis of these two formats as enacting two different social actions. In response to imperative requests in their home environment, recipients proceed to provide the relevant object. In response to polar question requests in their home environment, recipients accept the request verbally as well.

The analysis so far raises a puzzle: If the selection of an imperative or polar question request means the same thing in English and in Polish, and if these formats "belong to" the same interactional environments in the two languages, how can imperatives be more frequent in the Polish recordings, and polar questions more frequent in the English recordings? The answer is that speakers of these two languages have different habits when it comes to selecting request formats outside of the home environments we have characterized. In the next section, we analyze contexts in which speakers of English select the polar question format, whereas speakers of Polish select the imperative format. In doing so, speakers of the two languages bring different social orientations to bear on such situations.

ENLISTING ASSISTANCE OR DRAWING ON SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

In selecting a grammatical format for requesting, we do not, of course, just react to environmental configurations. We also *make* our social worlds through our actions. Some moments in social interaction strongly support the selection of a particular request format through several converging aspects of the situation. But in many other situations, different formats might be equally warranted by aspects of the situation. We now want to consider situations that have, to some extent, the qualities that we have found to be characteristic of the home environment for requests in imperative format, as well as the qualities that we have found to be characteristic of the home environment for requests in polar question format. In such situations, speakers of Polish tend to treat their object requests as part of a jointly owned activity, whereas speakers of English tend to treat their object requests as requests for assistance in a project individually owned by the request speaker.

Consider the common situation when a family are having dinner together, and one person asks another to pass some food across the table. In Excerpt 9, Viola asks her nephew Jason to pass her a bowl of cabbage, using the polar question format. In the seconds leading up to her request, Jason has been involved in a brief exchange with his mum, Margaret, regarding the camera (lines 2–3) and has otherwise been occupied with the food on his plate. When Viola formulates her request (line 7), Jason swings his head around toward her, and then follows the direction of Viola's

pointing gesture with his gaze. At the possible completion of Viola's request turn, in overlap with her "please," Jason puts down his cutlery and proceeds to pass her the bowl of cabbage.

Excerpt 6 Can you pass me the cabbage please Jason

[BB7-1 49:15]

- 01 (2.0)
 02 Margaret: That camera's pointing quite down is that-
 03 [is it up enough.
 04 Jason: [yeah but that- [yeah it is
 05 Viola: [that's good
 06 (0.4)
 07 Viola: .m. H: : ↑can you pass me the cabbage please
 08 Jason
 09 Jason: ((*passes cabbage*))
 10 Viola: °thank you°

In some respects, the interactional environment in which Viola here selects the polar question format to formulate her request is similar to those we have found to be characteristic for requests in this format earlier. The request recipient, Jason, is not presently showing any commitment to passing food (and the meal has been on-going for a while, so that this is not a phase of the meal in which "passing food around" is a main activity); compliance with Viola's request requires him to depart from his present activity, eating his meal. However, the sequential environment here is also in some ways dissimilar to those earlier cases where we have observed speakers to select the polar question format. Jason's proximity to the cabbage bowl does not just present a momentary constellation that makes him a good recipient for this request: The material organization of the dinner event means that Jason is likely to remain close to the cabbage bowl.⁵ This should make it easy for Jason to accommodate the request among other activities. Furthermore, by sitting down at the dinner table to share a meal with others, Jason has made a commitment to participate in the events that constitute "having a meal together"; passing the food is an integral part of this. Indeed, Jason has been passing bowls of food to other participants, including Viola, before, so that passing the cabbage bowl now is not an entirely new or unexpected action.

In sum, there is not the kind of tight fit between action environment and turn format here that we have seen to be characteristic of the home environment of polar question requests. Importantly, recipients of object requests orient to this. Jason just passes the object without verbally accepting the job (line 9) and, by doing so, lets the grammatically projected opportunity to accept the job pass by. Throughout our collection, we find that recipients of polar question requests produce an acceptance token as part of their response in those cases (20 out of 48 cases, or 41.7%)⁶ where compliance with the request does make it necessary to stall, cut short, or adapt an unrelated course of action, but very rarely where compliance is quick and immediate, and easily integrated with the main ongoing activity, such as at the dinner table.

In our Polish data, speakers in similar situations commonly select the imperative format, thereby treating the object request as part of a jointly owned project. In these cases, equally,

⁵On recipients' momentary proximity to an object as a factor in the situated issuing of a request, see Rauniomaa and Keisanen (2012).

⁶In Rossi's (2012, p. 452) Italian data, recipients of requests in polar question format respond with acceptance or refusal tokens in 50% of cases, a number close to what we find in our data.

participants orient to the fact that these are not the home environments for the imperative format. In Excerpt 7, a family are sitting at the dinner table. The older son, Bolek, is trying to engage his toddler brother in a conversation about some drawings he did (line 1). At the same time, Jacek is gazing towards his wife, Ilona, and when she meets his gaze, he winks at her. This is the context in which Ilona formulates her request for the salad (line 2).

Excerpt 7 Podaj mi kochanie jeszcze sałatki
(Pass me, dear, more salad)

[PP2-1 22:20]

- 01 Bolek: wiesz kto go malował? Bolek
 know.2S who him paint. PST. 3S Bolek
 You know who painted it? Bolek
- 02 Ilona:-> wiesz co podaj mi kochanie jeszcze
 know.2S what pass.IMP me dear still
 You know what, pass me some more
- 03 sałatki
 salad. GEN
 salad, dear
- 04 Jacek: bardzo proszę ((passes salad bowl))
 very beg.1S
 Here you are
- 05 Bolek: a ten kolorowy kotek to rysowała
 and this colourful cat this draw. PST.F.3S
 and this coloured cat, that one
- 06 go Iza wiesz? o tutaj o
 him Iza
 Iza drew

Again, the sequential environment of this request has some characteristic qualities of the home environments for requests in both imperative format and in polar question format. On the one hand, Jacek is not, in a stricter, local sense, already committed to passing bowls of food when the request comes; he merely happens to sit close to the salad bowl. Sequentially speaking, the request initiates any dealing with the salad bowl, and furthermore, it requires him to depart from the little moment of intimacy he was pursuing with his wink. On the other hand, just as in the previous case, Jacek is committed to mealtime-related activities such as passing food around by virtue of being a participant in this event. Also, by keeping his gaze oriented toward Ilona, Jacek achieves a moment of mutual attention, and maybe indexes an availability of sorts. When their eyes meet, this creates an opportune moment for Ilona to place her request. In selecting a format for her request, Ilona chooses to attend to these joint aspects of the situation, but she also designs her turn in a way that orients to the fact that this situation is unlike the home environment for the imperative. Firstly, she prefaces it with an additional turn constructional unit, “you know what” (*wiesz co*, line 2), which alerts Jacek to the imminence of some business he does not yet know about. This neutralizes one of the social orientations otherwise carried by the imperative

format, namely that Jacek should already be attending to the project (having more salad) for which the object is required. Secondly, Ilona inserts an address term, *kochanie* (“dear”) into the request, a practice that further supports the establishment of a participant framework, and that, in its home environment, we have seen to be a characteristic feature of requests in polar question format.⁷ Finally, this is one of the rare cases in which the recipient of a request in imperative format formulates a verbal response, *bardzo proszę* (“here you are,” line 4), emphasizing the simultaneously unfolding compliant response of providing the object.

With the last two cases, we have illustrated the general finding that speakers of English and Polish differ in the request practice they select in comparable situations outside of the home environments for these formats and also that participants to interaction in both languages treat these requests differently. We now want to consider two final request sequences that are formulated in situations that seem to warrant the selection of either the imperative or the polar question format. In both of these cases, the object request is made by one parent to the other and is in the service of a project benefitting their young child. These cases further illustrate how speakers, through their choice of request format, can bring different social orientation to bear on similar situations and how the default nature of particular request formats can thus produce what Sidnell and Enfield (2012) call culture-specific “collateral effects.”

In Excerpt 8, Caroline and Joe are sitting at the table having breakfast with their nearly two-year-old toddler Tim. Caroline is sitting next to Tim’s highchair, and throughout the meal, she has been the one offering Tim various things to eat. Joe is sitting further along the table, next to Caroline. Here, Tim wants some of his father’s porridge (see Figure 2).

Excerpt 8 Can you pass me his bowl

[BB1-2 19:20]

- 01 (4.0)
 02 Joe: khkh
 03 Tim: ((points to porridge bowl)) Do::w. °daddy°.
 04 Joe: What more porridge
 05 Car: DID ↑YOU SAY DADDY ↑o::ho:: >you know< that’s
 06 the second time he said [that (I think)
 07 Joe: [You can have porridge
 08 if you say daddy Hh::
 09 (.)
 10-> Joe: ku- can you pass me his bowl.
 11 Car: No he’s gotta learn (n-) to go
 12 ((grasps bowls and puts down next to J))
 13 ↑daddy:¿ daddy:¿ daddy:¿
 14 (1.8)
 15 Car: Can I have some money >can I have a ca:r
 16 daddy:? Huhu
 17 Joe: it’ll wear off

⁷Address terms are less common in imperative requests in our collection (they occur in 20 out of 63, or 32%, object requests in imperative format) than they are in polar question requests (25 out of the 48 cases, or 52%). More importantly, their use in imperative requests is restricted to such situations in which there is no tight fit between sequential context and imperative format.



FIGURE 2 Excerpt 8, beginning of line 10.

At line 3, Tim points towards his father's bowl of porridge and exclaims something like "do::w. daddy." Joe offers the candidate understanding that Tim wants more porridge ("what more porridge," line 4), but Caroline's attention is captured by a different matter: the fact that her son has said "daddy." Joe's next turn, "you can have porridge if you say daddy" (lines 7–8) picks up on the topic of the child's language skills introduced by Caroline and somewhat affiliate with her excitement, but it also brings to the fore again the relevance of the project of giving Tim some porridge, a project that had already been taken up by Joe's previous turn ("what more porridge," line 4), but that had become momentarily stalled by Caroline's excitement about the word "daddy." The distribution of rights and responsibilities to provide Tim with porridge is not clear-cut here. On the one hand, this might be considered a matter for Joe to deal with; after all, it is his porridge, and he is the one who initially responded to Tim's request. On the other hand, providing Tim with more food is a parenting issue, and it has been Caroline who has been taking charge of Tim's eating throughout the meal. Furthermore, she is seated between Tim and Joe. Joe selects the polar question format to formulate his request to be passed Tim's bowl ("ku- can you pass me his bowl," line 10), thereby treating the project of providing Tim with porridge as his and treating Caroline's involvement as an act of mere assistance. However, in formulating his turn without an address term, Joe might be orienting to the fact that Caroline is already, or should already be, attending to the matter that his request will concern. Furthermore, the self-repair on the first item of his turn, which ends up not changing anything and becoming a mere "hesitation," might indicate some uncertainty on Joe's part about the action he is putting together.⁸ Caroline's

⁸It might also work to attract Caroline's attention (cf. Goodwin, 1980).

response indicates an orientation to the complex nature of the situation in which this request sequence unfolds. While passing the bowl, she jokingly rejects the request in her verbal response (“No he’s gotta learn (n-) to go ↑daddy:¿,” lines 11–13). This response presents a justification for why she has not passed the bowl so far, thereby treating her noninvolvement in the business of porridge provision as accountable. In this way, Caroline retroactively treats the situation as one in which her engagement could already have been expected. One thing she might be doing in this way is to reject the social orientations of a “mere assistant” carried by the polar question format and reclaiming her role and authority in the childcare matter at hand.

Finally, in Excerpt 9, Marta, Kazio, and their two daughters Gosia and Jana are at the dinner table. Dad has got up to prepare a second helping for his partner and himself (this is what occasions the daughter’s pronouncements on lines 1–5 that she might on some other occasion eat a second helping of pea soup, but not of the food that is presently available). Marta is at the table, supervising the children’s eating. In line 6, she first (inaudibly) responds to Gosia’s previous turn and then, more loudly, addresses her partner with an imperative request for a tissue, which becomes extended with an account: “because Jana’s face is dirty” (*bo Jana ma brudną buzię*, line 7).

Excerpt 9 Kazio daj mi jedną husteczkę (Kazio give me one tissue)

[PP 6-2 07:19]

- 01 Gosia: Ja będę jadła groszkową
I will eat pea (soup)
I will eat pea soup
- 02 (0.3)
- 03 Gosia: nawet dokładkę: >CHYBA
even second.helping probably
even a second helping >PROBABLY
- 04 (0.4)
- 05 Gosia: >chyba-< (0.3)
probably
probably
- 06-> Marta: °()° Kazio daj mi jedną
() Kazio give me one
Kazio give me a
- 07 husteczkę bo Jana ma brudną buzię
tissue because Jana has dirty face
tissue, Jana’s face is dirty
- 08-> ((Kazio walks towards drawer, takes out tissue,
and puts it on the table))⁹

⁹Note that there is no acceptance token from Kazio. This case, and other similar cases in our collection, shows that acceptance does not always become necessary where the compliant action cannot happen immediately. The relevance of acceptance seems to be “multimodally” created by polar question turn format and the spatial and material configuration of the situation.

Again, we can characterize the situation in which this request becomes formulated as exhibiting qualities that are reminiscent of the home environments for both imperative and polar question request formats. On the one hand, a mealtime event is on-going, with all of the commitments that this entails; in this case, relevantly, the parents' commitment to assisting young children with their eating. On the other hand, Kazio is not at the table and is currently busy with an unrelated line of action, preparing more food. Nevertheless, Magda here selects the imperative format. We can identify features of her request formulation, which show her orientation to the fact that this is not the home environment for an imperative request. Firstly, she uses an address term ("Kazio," line 6) to secure Kazio's reciprocity of the request. Secondly, she extends her turn with an account that specifies the project—cleaning their daughter's face—for which the object will be instrumental. By appending this account to her imperative request, Magda displays an orientation to the fact that in the present situation, the request emerges from events that are not in common ground (Clark, 1996; Enfield 2008), and the reason for her request is therefore not accessible to Kazio. To us as analysts, the presence of the account that relates the request to a project (a practice we find in six cases of imperative requests in our collection and in only one polar question request) provides evidence that Magda expects compliance with her request on the basis of a presumed shared responsibility to the wider childcare project at hand.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated similarities and differences in the social action of requesting an object across two languages, British English and Polish, focusing on the two most frequently used request formats: imperatives ("pass the salt") and second-person polar questions ("can you pass the salt?"). Firstly, we have identified home environments for these two request formats in which they are selected by speakers of both British English and Polish. Speakers of both languages formulate imperative requests in situations in which there is rich evidence available to the speaker that the request recipient is presently committed to the wider project within which the request emerges. Speakers of both languages formulate polar question requests in situations in which compliance with the request requires the recipient to depart from their present, unrelated course of actions. In these home environments, there is a mutual fit between sequential environment and request form that gives the move the quality of a particular kind of social action: Picking up the distinction between "helping" and "taking responsibility" from the literature on household working styles (Goodnow & Bowes, 1994, p. 16), we can say that with a polar question request, a speaker *enlists* another for help, whereas with an imperative request, a speaker *draws on* the other's (co-) responsibility. This finding is consistent with earlier work on the use of imperative and polar question requests. The imperative requests embody a stronger sense of entitlement than do polar question requests (Antaki & Kent, 2012; Craven & Potter, 2010). Our analysis shows how entitlement can be locally grounded in—or claimed in relation to—joint commitment to courses of action.

Secondly, we have shown that diversity across languages in the formulation of requests is not holistic (e.g., communities being more direct or less direct), but is instead located in particular kinds of interactional moments, namely those in which different situational cues support the selection of either request format. In such "mixed" environments, speakers of British English in our data tended to select the polar question format, and speakers of Polish tended to select the imperative format. By choosing different request formats, speakers of British English and

of Polish bring different social orientations to bear on comparable situations: By selecting the imperative format in “mixed environments,” speakers of Polish treated their request as part of an activity with shared responsibility even when such shared responsibility was not locally evident, and by selecting the polar question format in “mixed environments,” speakers of English treated their request as an act of seeking assistance with something they were individually concerned with even when such individual responsibility was not locally evident. In sum, what we have found are not so much different social actions across cultures but culturally specific (over-)extensions of social practices into new interactional territories.

Through these overextensions, members of different cultures emphasize different values. Our analysis supports Wierzbicka’s (1985) proposal that the preference for polar questions in English requests can be linked to the value of respecting the other person’s autonomy: By selecting the polar question format, a speaker displays their awareness that the request might dislodge the recipient from an unrelated activity. The preference for the imperative in Polish can be linked to an interdependent orientation in everyday life: By selecting the imperative format, a speaker appeals to the sharing of concerns, commitments, and motives as a ground on which to issue a request. Importantly, our analysis also suggests that these values are, ultimately, part of the fabric of social life across communities.

Conversation Analysts have in recent years turned to the question of what makes a sequentially first move recognizable as a social action of a particular kind. The answer will have to do with the relationship between formal aspects of the turn and its context (e.g., the relative distribution of knowledge among participants in the case of question formation, see Heritage, 2012). Of course, researchers of social interaction have long been well aware that aspects of both turn formulation and context enter into the constitution of social actions. However, beyond this general consensus, the details have received less attention than they probably deserve.¹⁰ With the notion of home environments, we have wanted to make a step toward formulating a relationship of mutual fit between turn format and locally evident aspects of the sequential and material environment, a relationship that might be the locus of the action quality of an interactional move. A better analytic grasp of this mutual relationship might prove crucial to an understanding of how social actions are recognized by participants.

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¹⁰In this context, authors often cite Schegloff’s (1993) assertion that “both position and composition are ordinarily constitutive of the sense and import of an element of conduct that embodies some phenomenon or practice” (p. 121). It is worth mentioning that Schegloff formulates this observation in a footnote, in a paper that is concerned with other matters.

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