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CONCEPTUAL FOCUS IN SOCIAL ENCOUNTERS: THE CASE OF DIRECTIVES

Abstract

The present analysis focuses on highlighting the conceptual focus on groups as a specific property of discourse in young peer groups of Polish speakers. Its alternative is the conceptual focus on individual interlocutors; the latter is implicitly assumed to be an interactive norm in a vast body of pragmatic studies dealing with the performance of speech acts in both monolingual and comparative setups. The analysis is based on empirical material comprising interaction in young peer groups in Poland, Great Britain and Germany under constant experimental conditions, made possible by the international commercial project “Big Brother” belonging to the genre of reality T.V.

Keywords

directive, collectivism, individualism, group processes

1. Conceptual focus in social encounters: the case of directives

The present article makes a step towards investigating the social-cognitive dimensions of language from the viewpoint of comparative pragmatics. Dealing with language use, pragmatics naturally takes into account the social forces ubiquitous in shaping all verbalisations of experience, which is socially conditioned. As verbal interaction is guided by social cognition, including perception, processing and representation of social information, languages reflect

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the ways human action is conceptualised, dependent for some part on culture-specific tendencies. The social-cognitive approach in linguistics, which emerged in the last few decades and has been successfully applied to comparative topics, needs to be expanded from the analysis of the repertoires available in the grammar and the lexicon of a given language or languages for expressing different conceptualisations, to the analysis of language use, because, as I argue elsewhere, the mere availability of a given conceptual resource in a language cannot teach us much about the tendencies characteristic of this culture or cross-cultural contrasts (cf. Pułaczewska 2006). This implies an empirical analysis of corpus data, which, in turn, should be kept within particular narrowly defined social contexts rather than abstracting from context-dependence of such conceptualisations.

The present analysis focuses on highlighting specific properties of discourse in young peer groups of Polish speakers related to the issue of the conceptual focus on groups, which represents an alternative to the conceptual focus on individual interlocutors, implicitly assumed to be an interactive norm in a vast body of pragmatic studies dealing with the performance of speech acts in both monolingual and comparative setups.

The analysis will be based on empirical material comprising interaction in young peer groups under constant experimental conditions, made possible by the international commercial project “Big Brother”, a programme belonging to the genre of reality T.V. and realised in several countries.

The statistically analysed data is a set of small parallel corpora, consisting of transcripts of extracts from two series of the programme in Polish, English and German¹. The corpora are matched in the speakers’ age and gender, mixes of social backgrounds and informality of the situation, and are of similar sizes (12, 22 and 20 hours of recorded interaction for Polish, English and German, respectively). The type of utterance which the analysis will focus upon are requestives (which includes requests and proposals). The corpora contain a similar number of requestives (647, 626 and 473 for Polish, English and German, respectively), as well as a similar number of requestives which are in the focus of this study – the beneficiary of which is only the speaker her- or himself (162, 164 and 141 for Polish, English and German, respectively). The main body of data quoted in this article comes from the Polish editions of this programme, while English and German data from parallel contexts will also be quoted to illustrate suggested cross-cultural contrasts.

¹ In the quotations, the initial of the language and the ordinal number of the series as broadcast on TV are provided to identify the data sources.

For the purpose of this study requests are defined as directives predicating an action by the addressee or its termination/abandonment, whatever their linguistic form (i.e., independent on the degree of directness of their linguistic form), while proposals are calls for a joint action of the speaker and the addressee(s). Additionally, some non-directive speech acts are quoted to support the emerging view of the culture-specific tendencies of the Polish speakers.

The main categories in the conceptualisation of human interaction being those of an individual and a group, this difference will be the focus of the following analysis. I hold the view that different degrees of salience of individuals and groups in human perception are culturally conditioned, and that particular linguistic patterns applied in talking about actions by individuals and groups are based on culture-dependent schemes. At the same time, it will be recognised that intercultural differences in the verbalisation of experience may go beyond the issue of conceptualisation and pertain to interpersonal strategies of interaction, including in particular considerations related to linguistic politeness; this results from the difference between the perception of non-human objects and people, who are emphatically conceived of as mutual perceivers and not only objects of perception (cf. Heider 1958, Moskowitz 2005).

Individualism-collectivism (autonomy-interdependence) distinction has been identified in contrastive social psychology as the basic cross-cultural difference in the social perception of self and others². It can be expected that this difference may affect the salience of individuals and groups in the social perception of experience by members of individualist and collectivist cultures, respectively, in such a way that groups are more salient as objects of social perception in more collectivist

² The individualist bias in social sciences and western linguistics has been much discussed. To quote one, admittedly mild, example of this bias taken from the context of social-cognitive linguistics, the definition of "interpersonal verbs" in social-cognitive linguistics given by Hanna Pishwa, the editor of the volume *Language and memory: Aspects of knowledge representation* (2006), includes the following formulation: "they are interpersonal in that the processes and behaviors referred to always imply two human participants". The list of such verbs includes the least abstract descriptive action verbs (*kiss, kick, telephone*), more abstract interpretative action verbs (*help, hurt, explain*), and state verbs (*admire, hate, like*). This formulation is ambiguous as far as its implicature is concerned, and it would be proper to eliminate ambiguity by speaking of "at least two participants", as most of these verbs (all in the last two aforementioned groups) can take human groups as their objects. The negligence of the group aspects of interaction and the focus on its interpersonal (dyadic) aspects is characteristic of the bulk of socially-orientated linguistic research today.

societies. While some research has been conducted in cognitive social linguistics on the issue of group-oriented attribution of dispositional properties such as traits (within approaches inspired more or less directly by the so-called “attribution theory”, cf. Heider 1958), the present article is concerned with the very different issue of the construal of actorship in social interactions.

In the following analysis, I proceed as follows: first, I document the generally stronger group orientation of directive activities in the Polish groups by quoting statistical data pertaining to the corpora comprising all types of requestives. Then, I restrict the analysis to requestives in which the speaker is the sole beneficiary and analyse them in more detail; this is followed by an analysis of some requestives involving beneficiaries other than the speaker. Finally, some examples of directives are quoted, partly in their discursive contexts, so as to illustrate underlying social-cognitive processes and strategies which contribute to the emergence of statistical differences between the three languages. Additionally, some non-directive speech acts are quoted to support the emerging view of the culture-specific tendencies of the Polish speakers.

2. Group-involving and interpersonal requestives

The first crucial observation regarding the difference between the corpora lies in the frequency occurrence of requestives during the recorded interaction (from which scenes where no interaction could take place, i.e. editorials, scenes involving only one person and scenes showing empty rooms or sleeping groups, have been deleted). It turned out that the Poles produced more requestives per time unit than the other two groups. This I take to document a more imposing interaction style, which in turn can be interpreted as proving that people in Polish groups regarded it as legitimate to influence the behaviour of others to a higher degree. This finding suggests a stronger interdependence stance of the Polish groups (on the perception of task and fate interdependence in group processes, see Lewin 1951, discussed in Brown 2000)

LANGUAGE	Requestives	Time in min.	<i>Items per hr</i>
ENGLISH	626	1336	28
German	473	870	33
<i>Polish</i>	647	709	55

Table 1. Number and frequencies of occurrence of requestives in English, German and Polish samples.

The second finding pertains to the interaction structure of requestives which cause this difference. Attending to the difference between group and interpersonal processes (cf. Brown 2000), I have divided them into two complementary types. Those which involved only one addressee and in which, at the same time, the speaker or both the speaker and the addressee were the sole beneficiaries of the action proposed in uttering the requestive, were counted as cases of “interpersonal” encounters, that typically involve an interaction between two people. The other, complementary type includes requestives addressed to more than one person or involving other beneficiaries apart from just the speaker and the single addressee, in other words, requestives involving at least three persons in the relevant interactional roles (proponent, actor and beneficiary). The results are depicted in diagram 1; the mean number of occurrences of requestives, indicated on the vertical axis, pertains to one hour of interaction. Table 2 presents the same data in (rounded) figures.

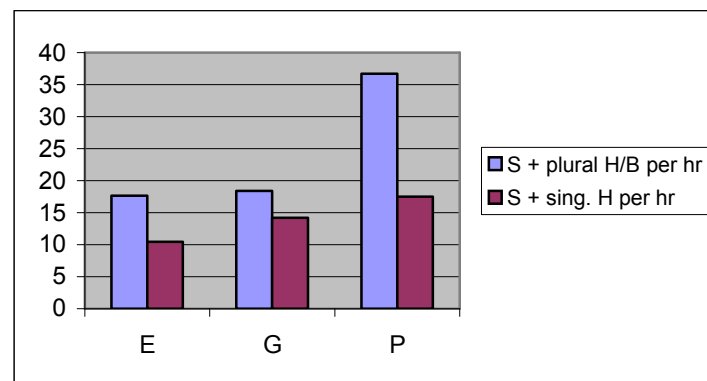


Diagram 1. Frequencies of occurrence of group-involving and interpersonal requestives in English, German and Polish

LANGUAGE	plural addressee+beneficiary	speaker + addressee
English	18/h	10/h
German	18/h	14/h
Polish	37/h	18/h

Table 2. Frequencies of occurrence of group-involving and interpersonal requestives in English, German and Polish: the figures

It turned out that the overall difference in frequencies with which requestives were uttered in Polish and the other two groups resulted mainly from more frequent production of group-involving requestives by the speakers of Polish, and to a much smaller extent from the difference with which interpersonal directives were produced.

3. Requests for the speaker's benefit to a multiple addressee

Linguistic choices can be used to articulate the perception of sharing perspectives with others, individual actions as actions by the group, and actions of others being interpretable as one's own, via shared group membership. While the phenomenon of the linguistic construal of a group as a participant of discourse occurs in the data from all three languages under analysis, they are likely to reflect such perception to unequal degrees.

In several Polish scenes, the perception of "other" as a group rather than a number of individuals was frequently manifested by choosing plural forms of reference rather than singular ones in requests. Of many types of requests which occurred in the data, I chose to concentrate first on requests produced by the speaker who is at the same time the only beneficiary of the action predicated in the request. They are usually treated as a canonical type of request in linguistic pragmatics, with "goods and services" (Leech 1983) flowing from Hearer (or, in my "corrected" model, Hearer/s) to Speaker³.

The usual negligence of requests for the speaker's sake directed at multiple addressees in research on directives seems partly justifiable in view of the data to hand. Among requests for the speakers' exclusive benefit, only 19% in Polish (31 out of the total of 162), 13% in English (21 out of 164) and 9% in German (12 out of 141) were of that type. The rest were directed at a single addressee. The difference between Polish and German was significant at $p=0.01$ ($f=1$, chi square = 7).

I stop short of attributing significance to these quantitative findings in themselves; rather, a qualitative analysis of the data should be applied in order to see whether any culture-specific interactional mechanisms and principles are involved in the quantitative difference, or whether it can be accounted for by the

³ Such requests have typically been the focus of interest in the tradition of study of politeness based on questionnaires and pseudo-natural methods. Only one item, however, in the hitherto mentioned studies concerned a request to a multiple addressee (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: a student asks people living on the same street for a ride home).

properties immanent in the situational contexts of particular occurrences of requests in the data.

This means a thematic and context-bound inspection of the data to hand. Consider the list below of several requests for the speaker's benefit to the multiple addressees in Polish.

INSTATIATING REQUESTS – POLISH

- (1) P1. F: dajcie mi ręcznik # przynieście mi ręcznik
give-PLURAL me a towel # bring-IMP-PLURAL me a towel
- (2) P3. M: e # kopsnijcie tam jaką tabletkę od bólu czapki
e # give-IMP-PLURAL like some pill against headache
- (3) P3. F: weźcie podajcie mi sól
EMPHASIS-COLLOQUIAL give-IMP-PLURAL me the salt
- (4) P3. F: tam gdzieś została moja kurtka ze skóry # przynieście mi ją
left somewhere behind there is my leather jacket # bring-IMP-PLURAL it to me
- (5) P3. F: dajcie mi tą walizkę tu
give-IMP-PLURAL me this suitcase here

INHIBITIVE REQUESTS –POLISH

- (6) P3. F: weźcie się ze mnie nie śmiejcie
EMPHASIS-COLLOQUIAL at me not laugh-IMP-PLURAL
- (7) P3. F: nie nabijać się z mojego śmiechu
not joke-INFINITIVE about my laughter
- (8) P3. F: ludzie wyluzujcie się # proszę was
people-COLLOQUIAL cool-IMP-PLURAL down # I beg you-PLURAL
- (9) P3. F: słuchajcie # przestańcie bo się porzygam
listen -IMP-PLURAL # stop-IMP-PLURAL or I will puke
- (10) P3. F: ale wy się nie odzywajcie
but you-PLURAL not speak-IMP-PLURAL

Requests (1)-(5) exemplify a type of utterance that distinguishes Polish from the other two languages: imperative plural is used to predicate an action which, in the situation given, can be performed by one person only, such as “pass me the salt” in plural rather than singular. The actor supposed to perform the request remains underspecified. To realise under-specification of the addressee (actor) in a “strong” request made in the imperative, Polish, German and English have developed specific grammatical constructions involving an indefinite personal pronoun, as in the following examples:

German:	komm mal	einer	her
	komm mal	jemand	her
	come	someone	here

English: come here # anybody

Polish: chodź/chodźcie no tu który/która
*come-IMPERATIVE SINGULAR./PLURAL here someone-SINGULAR-
 MASC./SINGULAR-FEM:*

In this Polish construction, the plural form of the imperative is used while the singular pronoun indicates that only one person is meant to perform the predicated action and the speaker relies on a single volunteer's reaction. Alternatively, in Polish it is possible to formulate a request using a hortative particle and an indefinite personal pronoun in singular:

niech mi ktoś poda sól
HORTATIVE-PARTICLE me someone give-SING the salt

Another possibility available in all the three languages to underspecify the actor of the predicated action is to use speaker-oriented constructions or an inquiry in the interrogative containing an indefinite personal pronoun.

The imperative in 2nd person plural seems to be functionally equivalent to such constructions in Polish in the peer ingroup context. The above quoted exchanges in Polish manifest a preference for using plural reference rather than any of the available forms quoted above of an underspecified address using the indefinite singular personal pronouns *który*, *która*, *ktoś* ("someone-male", "someone-female", "someone"). In Polish, a speaker-oriented form occurs once, and indefinite forms occur three times, e.g.:

(11) P1. F: e # kto ma tu dobre oczy
 ei # who has here good eyes

In English, speaker-centred formulations or constructions with indefinite pronoun were used in such contexts:

- (12) E3. M: can anyone pass me the milk?
- (13) E3. M: could I have the sugar and milk # please?
- (14) E3. M: can I get some butter?
- (15) E3. F: if anybody doesn't like their dessert # they can bring it all to me

German (16), which also implies a single actor, is speaker-oriented:

(16) G4. F: ich will auf jeden Fall einen Kuchen haben # ja?
 I want at any rate to have a cake # right?

The under-specification of the addressee by using the 2nd plural imperative or future declarative while the predicated action can only be performed by one person, or when a specific referent was meant, did not occur in the German data. Neither did such under-specification occur in English requests made in the imperative, where the plural and singular forms are morphologically indistinguishable, but the references can be distinguished on the basis of verbal and non-verbal clues (e.g. a term of address, grounder, or eye contact).

At the same time, examples (6)-(10) in Polish, containing inhibitive directives in the imperative plural or the infinitive (which very strongly implies plural addressee, cf. Pułaczewska 2006 and Marek 1973), are reactions to an immediately preceding action by only *one* person. In their reactions, the speakers indirectly attributes the undesirable behaviour to *several* hearers. Of 17 inhibitive requests addressed at a multiple addressee and the total of 57 inhibitive requests, as many as five expressed the interpretation of the undesired action of one person as an action by many. As such strategy did not occur in English and German, a statistically significant contrast occurred⁴.

I interpret these facts as manifesting the perception of a group (or a couple) as a whole rather than as an assembly of individuals by the speakers of Polish⁵. Pluralisation in corrective and terminating inhibitives can also be interpreted as an indirect politeness strategy softening an implied criticism by defocalising the actual wrong-doer. This interpretation, though, does not go against the claim that it indicates a stronger group-focus in the perception of the situation by speakers of Polish, in view of the fact that this politeness strategy seems to be not available to the speakers of the other two languages, where the only kind of polite pluralisation used is hearer-inclusive “we”-plural instead of “you”-singular. The issues involved here of social acceptability and conceptual availability are two sides of the same coin, because “communication requires that speakers should base their interactions on validity claims that are acceptable to their fellows” (Agozino 2003: 104), and the notion of validity encompasses inter-subjectively shared conceptualisation of experience. I propose to interpret the tendency to address inhibitive requestives to groups when the actors performing undesirable activities are single persons as symptomatic of a group-focusing perspective taken by speakers when attributing trespasses and distributing blame. The following exchange does not contain requestive utterances relevant to this subject but is quoted here as support for this interpretation.

⁴ Polish/German: $p=0.05$, $df=1$, chi square = 4.0; Polish/English: $p=0.01$, $df=1$, chi square = 8.0 for the proportion of inhibitive requests of this type to all inhibitive requests.

P3. F is dyeing M1's hair. M2 comes up to M1 and points at his head.

- (17/1) M2: a tu nie ma w ogóle tego?
and here there is no stuff at all?
- (17/2) F: nie # jest # wszędzie jest dużo farby
but yes # there is # everywhere there is a lot of dye
- (M2 walks away, leaving M1 and F alone)
- (17/3) M: mój tata patrzy i mówi # co ten debil robi
my dad is watching and saying # what is this idiot doing
- (17/4) F: czy ty możesz uklęknąć # cokolwiek zrobić # tak żebyś nie musiał na razie
 patrzeć # w lustro?
*can you-EMPHATIC kneel down # do anything # so that you do not have
 to for the time being look # into the mirror?*
- (17/5) M: głowę nawet mam czerwoną # przecież skórę # ej mam czerwoną nawet
 skórę # zafarbowaliście mi skórę
*but even my head is red # the skin # ei I have red also skin # you-PLURAL
 have dyed my skin*
 # zobacz
 # look-IMP-SINGULAR
 # że mi zafarbowaliście skórę
 # that you-PLURAL have dyed my skin

There is only one person involved in dyeing M1's hair. Some other members of the group function as passive observers at some stage and are absent later. However, in turn 5, even though only the actual actor is present, M1 blames the effect on the group, using the 2nd person plural personal pronoun.

It is interesting to note that my child, socialised in Germany, repeatedly objects to corrective and terminating inhibitive requests made in the plural when the actual wrong-doer is another child, much to the interlocutor's confusion whenever this happens during our visits to Poland.

To sum up, the central conclusion that can be drawn from the above quoted data is that the Poles more frequently orient to a group or a couple as a whole rather than refer to a single actor, when an action, or a termination of action, is required of a single person; this tendency is reflected in the higher frequency of appealing to groups in requests for the speaker's sake in the whole Polish sample compared to the parallel samples. While this specific issue has not been a subject of pragmalinguistic investigation other than by the author herself (Pułaczewska 2005, 2006), the conclusion is in line with the results of research conducted in the field of comparative psychology and concerned with the issue of societal tendencies towards collectivism versus individualism. Individualism/collectivism is a variable concerning a society's tendencies towards a formation of in-groups and in-group bonds, and assumptions regarding the individuals' mutual

responsibilities for other members of their respective groups. Following Hui (1984), Triandis (1988) distinguishes between *basic collectivism*, in which an individual is born into one large in-group which determines the whole of his or her life and prescribes the norms of behaviour, and *contextual collectivism* found in modern societies such as those under investigation, where an individual can be a member of different in-groups exerting influences on one or more behaviours, and can be free to find him- or herself within the network of social relationships. Collectivism promotes in-group harmony and in-group collaborative spirit (Triandis 1995). Major differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures have been summarised by Ting-Toomey (1999: 67):

Individualistic cultures

“I” identity
individual goals
individual emphasis
voluntary reciprocity
management of individuals

Collectivist cultures

“we” identity
group goals
in-group emphasis
obligatory reciprocity
management of groups

While any direct comparisons in this respect between the Polish and the British culture are missing, Great Britain was placed on the top of individualism hierarchy (score rank 3) by Hofstede (1991) among more than fifty cultures that were subject to investigation, and exceeded the German culture with the score rank 15. Studies comparing Polish youths on collectivism with the Germans, such as Smoleńska & Frączek (1987), Smoleńska & Wieczorkowska (1990) quoted in Reykowski (1994), Schonpflug & Jansen (1995), as well as Bierbauer et al. (1994), and a replication of the test used by the latter (COS) by the author with the students of the Universities Łódź and Regensburg (cf. Pulaczewska 2006) confirmed a higher score on collectivist attitudes of Polish respondents. While these comparisons were based on the assessment of attitudes (by means of questionnaires with scaled answers) rather than ways of speaking, it is to be expected that these attitudes find a reflection in language use by attuning the members of collectivist cultures to interactions in group contexts being verbally rendered as involving collective subjects and collective responsibilities.

REQUESTS INVOLVING OTHER BENEFICIARIES

In what follows requestives are quoted whose beneficiary or co-beneficiary is another person (or a group of people) rather than the speaker her- or himself. Such requests occurred most frequently in Polish, while they were rarest in English, which suggests that intervening between other people is not a valued type of behaviour in British English (the figures are: once every 11 minutes and 10% of all

requestives for Polish, once in every 28 minutes and 7% of all requestives in German and once in 58 minutes and 4% of all requestives in English). The quotation (18) amply illustrates the tendency of the Polish speakers to situate themselves between the beneficiary and the addressee of a request – a sort of request which could be labelled “diagonal”, in an analogy to the so-called “lateral communication” meant to affect a bystander not identical with the addressee. Such a strategy of interaction means that the speaker attends at the same time to more than one person, mediating between the beneficiary’s perceived need and the predicated actor’s ability to fulfil it.

P1. The group meet for the first time in Big Brother house and are sitting at a table, several people talk simultaneously.

(18) P1. M: *daj mu fajkę # bo on chce palić*
give him a cigarette # because he wants to smoke

At the same time, a de-individualising perception of self as part of a group was repeatedly reflected in the speakers of Polish using the first person plural (hearer-exclusive) for self-reference. The speakers “spoke for a group” (including at least the speaker and one other person) showing that they conceived of themselves as representing that group’s perspective on the situation. The following quotation illustrates jointly the use of both 2nd person plural in the interpretation of actions of one person as action by the group, and the 1st person personal pronoun referring to the beneficiary of the predicated (non)action of the addressee(s). This tendency, which was to be perpetuated during the further course of interaction in the Big Brother house in the Polish edition P3, is displayed within the first minutes of the programme, when the housemates meet for the first time. They arrive at a yard sliding down a slide dressed up in helmets and boxing-gloves which turn the mutual embraces into a somewhat clumsy action, and the female housemate F, approached and hugged on her arrival down the slide by a male housemate, reacts by uttering a request:

(19) P3. F: *dajcie nam się porozbierać z tego*
let-IMP-PLURAL us take this off

The speakers’ conceptualisation of the situation is marked by addressing it at a plural addressee by the use of 2nd plural, in a direct reaction to the behaviour of one of the addressees (the intended embrace), displaying the speaker’s tendency to see herself as confronted with a group rather than with individuals, and to attribute actions by individuals to groups. At the same time, the 1st plural personal pronoun is used in self-reference. This signals that the speaker is speaking on the behalf of herself and the person or persons following her, demonstrating the speaker’s

tendency to view herself as facing her environment together with some other or others whom she speaks as a representative of.

The following two examples demonstrate the intercultural contrast concerning the underlying attitudes of a group-focus and a more individualist interpersonal conception of the social encounter upon the types of speech acts produced. A proposal (requestive) to the group on the putative beneficiary's behalf is produced in the one case, and an individual offer (non-requestive) at the beneficiary in the other. They illustrate my contention that a difference in socio-cognitive focus may result in a requestive being produced in one group in a context where a different speech act is produced in another group; when such cases abound, the former group scores higher on requestives. The context is in both cases the arrival of a new housemate in Big Brother house.

P3. Week 5 of the programme. F1 has just arrived in the Big Brother house. M1, M2, M3, F2 and F3 have been waiting for her in the yard.

- (20/1) M1: może ją oprowadzimy
 perhaps *we will walk her around*
(simultaneous speech)
(20/2) F2 to M1, M2: weźcie się zajmijcie dziewczyną # no
 EMPHASIS-COLLOQUIAL take-IMP-PLURAL care of the girl
 #yeah

Consider now the analogous situation in which a new female housemate in E3 is offered a walk round the house with the speaker:

E3. Week 3 of the programme. F1 has just arrived in the Big Brother house.

- (21/1) F2 to F1: do you want to see the house
(21/2) F1 to F2: yeah # go on then

As shown by the reaction of F1, and confirmed by two native informants' judgement, in (21) F2 makes the offer of showing F1 around in her own name. The utterance in the Polish (20) interaction is a proposal directed at the other team members. It is one of the hearers, F2, and not the beneficiary, who reacts to the tentatively formulated proposal by M1 on the (putative) beneficiary's behalf. She strongly supports the idea producing an imperative utterance addressed at the previous speaker and his addressees. At the same point, F2 shows that she has interpreted the proposal as addressed to the male part of the group only, and that she assumes it to be their gentlemanly duty to take care of the female newcomer. In this move, F1 introduces gender role stereotyping, emphasising the group-focused rather than interpersonal component of the encounter. The verbal negotiation of action concerning the beneficiary expresses and confirms the identity of the

existing group, who collectively deal with the recipient of favour as their object of interest.

Within social psychology, Brown (2000) notes the distinction between an interpersonal and a group encounter. In the former, people meet as unique individuals and in the latter, they act towards each other as representatives of a group towards members of the same or other group or groups. While “social encounters are frequently rather ambiguous to define”, an indicator of group behaviour is the uniformity of behaviour of group members, which “suggests that the participants appear to be interacting in terms of their group membership rather than their distinctive personal characteristics” (p. 9). According to Brown, gender stereotyping is a typical component of group encounters, where people conceive themselves as representatives of groups, rather than interpersonal ones. Social stereotyping, including gender stereotyping as one of its current aspects, is a way of displaying uniformity of behaviour, which is an indicator of a group-focused concept of the social situation.

The impression should be avoided that the “benevolent incapacitation” of the putative beneficiary illustrated in the above exchange is a matter of gender perception by the Polish speakers; rather, it is an additional component intensifying the group dimension of the encounter. Scheduling activities of guests and newcomers by (group) hosts as a Polish cultural script has been noted by Boski (2003: 121), using the “cultural standard” method and reporting on the cultural shock of a male German visitor to a Polish host family: “... er wurde als kostbares, zerbrechliches Objekt behandelt, ja genau, als Objekt, nicht als Subjekt, das eigenständig Entscheidungen treffen konnte. Er wurde nicht einmal nach seinen eigenen Wünschen gefragt.”⁶ Although Boski does not explicitly comment on this particular feature of the reported interaction as related to the group focus, he interprets the cultural script underlying this behaviour as the assignment to the guest of a role within the family (in-group); he also acknowledges higher collectivism of the Polish culture compared to the German and other cultures of the Western Europe elsewhere (cf. Boski 2005).

At the same time, there occurs in the Polish data a pertinent tendency towards group-focused perception of the speaker’s own actions, reflecting the psychological mechanism of “identification” –the individual cognitive basis of collectivism as a societal tendency – as opposed to “individuation”, the individual cognitive basis of individualism as a societal tendency. According to Reykowski (1994: 279-280), “the processes of cognitive separation and recognition of

⁶ “He was treated as a valuable brittle object, yes, exactly, as an object, not as a subject who could make decisions on his own. He was not even asked about his own wishes.”

similarity between the self and others are interconnected with analogous processes concerning perception of the social world. Individuation and identification are the two opposing processes. Individuation [...] if applied to oneself, [...] contributes to the growing differentiation of ‘I/they’. The process of identification, on the other hand, blurs the boundaries [...] Identification [...] is a precondition for the development of the collectivism orientation [...] It should be acknowledged that the two facets of self-identity develop unequally in different social settings. Some cultures foster individuation, whereas others foster identification [...] The fact that both individualist and collectivist assumptions can coexist in a human mind does not deny that individuals and cultures differ widely in this respect. The differences among people can be explained as a result of unequal availability of the two facets of self-identity [...] Triandis (1989) concludes that ‘aspects of the self [...] are differentially sampled in different cultures’ (p. 517)”. In verbal action, identification can be observed in plural self-reference, such as occurs in the following two scenes, where the plural form of the requestive performative verb *prosimy* is used – Polish differentiates between the singular and plural form *proszę* vs. *prosimy*:

P3. F1 and F2 enter the bedroom where M1 is present.

- (22/1) F1: nie no # my z Majką idziemy spać tam w kącie #
 no # Majka and I (lit. "we with Majka") go sleeping there in the corner
 (to M1:) a wy tu #
 (to M1:) and you-PLURAL here
- (F1 points to two beds in the corner)
- (22/2) F2–MAJKA: a czemu?
 and why?
- (22/3) F1: tak # bo tu poprzestawiali # i dobrze
 yes # because they have moved the furniture around # and this is good
- (M2 and M3 come in)
- (22/4) F1: ej # . wy śpicie teraz tu (points to a place)
 hey # you-PLURAL sleep now here
- (24/5) M1: dlaczego?
 why?
- (22/6) F1: bardzo prosimy (BEGGING INTONATION)
 very much we beg-PLURAL-PERFORMATIVE

In this episode, the plural is used in a context where a different form could also be applied but would reflect a different conception of the social situation. In turn 6, F1 uses a plural form of self-reference in the performative verb *prosić* ('ask for something'). She refers to herself and the other female housemate F2 when declaring that they beg the male group members for their consent to the proposal, without actually having made sure whether F2 accepts the proposal. She does it

even if at first, F2 does not understand the reason for F1's proposal, which is made clear by her question in turn 2 (a czemu? "and why"?). This does not block the attribution by F1 of her own (verbal) action to a group she assumes to be representing. Similarly, in the following episode M1 assumes the identity of the group's preferences with his own wish. Prior to the utterance (23) F1 suddenly stops dancing in the bedroom where M1, M2, F2 and F3 are lying on their beds:

(23) P3. M1 (to F1): no dalej # dalej prosimy
go on # go on we beg-PLURAL-PERFORMATIVE

This property of the polite requestive performative – lending itself to the purpose of representing a group by using 1st person plural – is shared by other performative verbs of polite speech acts in Polish: apologising (*przepraszam/przepraszamy*), thanking (*dziękuję/dziękujemy*), and in conversational formula used for responding to thanks (*proszę/prosimy*). Anecdotaly, after just a few months spent in a Polish school, my twelve-years-old son, raised in Germany, developed a habit of jokingly using the plural form of the verb in thanking in Polish ("*dziękujemy*", "we thank") when speaking only for himself, thus indicating the high frequency with which Polish children (as well as adults) are supposed to use plural forms of politeness formulae in the presence of co-beneficiaries.

To sum up, the above examples of interaction comprise a number of ways and aspects of focusing on the group rather than on a single individual when making directives, typical of interaction within young peer groups of Polish speakers:

- addressing a group in plural when asking for a favour, even if it can be performed by one person only;
- using plural in making reproaches and issuing inhibitive directives in reaction to the behaviour of a single person;
- issuing directives on assumption of voicing a group's interest in a form that makes this assumption explicit by including first person plural;
- proposing doing favours to others jointly to other group members, rather than consulting putative beneficiaries or offering individual action;
- issuing diagonal directives, in which the speaker acts as an intermediary between the person in need and the actor of the predicated helping action.

While in the first four items in this list group-centred attention is reflected both in the role structure of the verbal action and in plural grammatical forms, such as verb inflection and pronouns, in the last one "pluralisation" is a matter alone of performing verbal action involving multiple participants. It is essential to note that these two aspects of speech acts, i.e. their form and role structure, cannot be held apart and analysed separately as they both reflect the same set of cognitive phenomena and are constitutive of the same perspective on the social activities they are part of. Even though the data presented above is admittedly very limited in

quantity as well as the kind of speech events it includes, I hope nevertheless that it is productively suggestive of directions in which to look for the verbal expressions of group and individual focus.

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