II. Reviews

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Requests, responsibilities, and family interaction*

Jörg Zinken, *Requesting Responsibility. The Morality of Grammar in Polish and English Family Interaction*, Oxford University Press, 2016, xx + 245 pp. ISBN: 9780190210724. Price £64.00, hardcover.

In *Requesting Responsibility. The Morality of Grammar in Polish and English Family Interaction*, Jörg Zinken undertakes an ambitious task of comparing how the Polish and English language facilitates the expression of requests understood as action. The author offers an in-depth analysis of various types of requests, together with their functions, elaborating on their grammatical and pragmatic coding. The monograph is written in the tradition of linguistic relativity and cultural pragmatics. The data for analysis includes video recordings of everyday conversations in Polish families (37 participants), English families (36 participants), and mixed Polish-English families (26 participants). Zinken assumes that a natural environment for any language use is a dialogue entrenched in a particular situational context.[1] It may not be a groundbreaking hypothesis, yet what makes Zinken's study novel is its comparative character and the outstanding precision displayed in his explications of the linguistic-social differences between expressing requests in Polish and English. Detailed analyses show how the language we use can shape a certain set of social behaviours and affect our social roles.

The book is divided into an introductory part (the Foreword, Acknowledgments, List of abbreviations and symbols), eight chapters offering smaller sections, a summary section, a footnotes list, a bibliography and an index. The first chapter introduces two correlated concepts: linguistic relativity and cultural relativism. It

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[1] Zinken claims, after Mead (1934), that meanings "are available through another's response" (p. 14).

also attempts to define the domain of social action called REQUEST,[2] i.e. "all actions participants do to get another person to cooperate in the accomplishment of some work here and now" (p. 24), together with its dynamic and interactive context. Zinken shows how the category can be expressed either verbally or non-verbally and how its expression hinges on the contextual behaviour of the addressees and may induce them to action. The second chapter offers an overview of different forms of actions that may be undertaken in relation to the category of REQUEST, e.g. nudging, appealing, requesting assistance. These forms are illustrated with an authentic material, i.e. transcripts of dialogues exchanged in the Polish and English families (neatly summarised in a table on p. 222). The third chapter juxtaposes the non-personal construction *trzeba x* 'it is necessary to x' and the personal forms of the verb *musieć* 'must, to have to' with grammatical constructions typical of the interrogative and imperative mood in Polish and *we need* in English. Zinken aptly observes that the non-personal construction *trzeba x* may be used in reaction to a problem that needs to be solved and obliges the addressee to take some action (e.g. *to już trzeba wyrzucić / it needs to be thrown out*, p. 101). At the same time, it verbalises an invocation of objective necessity (np. *trzeba wypić ciepłą herbatę / you need to drink hot tea*, p. 112). The constructions *we need x* and *musimy* 'we must/have to' encourage the addressee to take a joint action and adopt a shared stance (p. 130). Zinken moves on to discuss the constructions of *weź-V_2 (take-V_2)* and *idź-V_2 (go-V_2)*. While the latter performs similar functions in Polish and English ("exhorts the recipient to do something against the background of a bad move [they have] made in the just prior moments", e.g. *idź umyj ręce / go wash your hands*, p. 169), the former, not present in English, may be used to remobilise a recipient's commitment to a course of action (e.g. *weź wyprostuj to / take straighten this*, p. 148). The fourth chapter serves as a summary of the work and takes a stance on the relationship between language and culture in the context of REQUEST practices.

The monograph offers a rich, authentic, dialogue-based material which has been subjected to scrupulous analysis in a specific socio-cultural context. The author stresses the importance of the context of use, claiming that "any choice of formulation picks out some qualities of the situation and turns them into relevant context for understanding the nature of the action embodied by a given turn" (p. 18). The use of such a research methodology, based on context-dependent, authentic material makes Zinken a continuator of the work initiated by field researchers such as Franz Boas, Bronisław Malinowski, Edward Sapir, or Benjamin Whorf. Zinken also makes a reference to the key pragmatic theories, e.g. speech acts by John Searle, politeness maxims by Geoffrey Leech, or politeness by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson.[3]

Another asset of the publication is the author's adoption of a novel, broader understanding of REQUEST as an action domain, expressed both verbally and

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[2] The use of capital letters signifies a certain domain of action, rather than an English concept.

[3] The author is often critical of these theories, e.g. rejecting the use of the term *directive* by John Searle, which is not only limited to ordering but also covers advice-giving.

non-verbally, and covering all types of social practices through which the recipient is addressed to take some action with a clearly specified goal. Zinken shows that RE-QUESTING is not limited to the imperative grammatical patterns, prototypically dedicated to actions such as *ordering* or *commanding*, but may in fact encompass many other speech acts such as granting permission (*Okay, go to the party*), making an invitation (*Come to my party*), encouraging (*Go on, go to the party*), or expressing wishes (*Enjoy the party*) (p. 41). Zinken goes a step further and shows how the Polish and English languages grammatically code REQUEST within the same context (e.g. through constructions *trzeba x, weź+ V₂*, not present in English, or the imperfective imperative aspect in *Otwieraj!* 'Open it up!'). However, the author refrains from drawing on the logic of cultural relativism and instead proposes that "different verbal REQUEST practices can be analyzed as components of distinct types of action" (p. 225). Zinken achieves this objective not only through a critical review of the available literature but also by incorporating his own terms (*nudge, appeal, call to social reason*, etc.) into the field, later used in his contrastive analysis. All of this means that Zinken's work must be considered of great value to cultural pragmatics scholars dealing with the action domain of REQUEST in Polish and English.[4]

It should be noted, however, that the research material comes from a limited database of video-recorded conversations registered in the context of Polish-speaking, ten English-speaking, and six bilingual families. Zinken himself seems to acknowledge the fact that the size of the material is somewhat limited, especially in the context of corpus studies in contrastive linguistics (p. XV). This begs some questions concerning the full validity of general comments being made on the nature of REQUESTING by Polish and English speakers. The author could also provide more information on the socio-cultural background concerning the participants, i.e. their ages, education levels, professions, etc. These factors may have a considerable influence on the choice of the preferred grammatical structures expressing the action domain of REQUEST. Furthermore, REQUESTING is limited only to "here and now" cases, without acknowledging the ones more distant in time. Finally, Zinken could have devoted more space to two concepts mentioned in the title of the monograph, *responsibility* and *morality*, as they appear merely in a short section of the first chapter.

These remarks, however, do not undermine the great quality of the work, which, thanks to the novelty of its database and approach, a thorough contrastive analysis, and clearly presented conclusions, will prove attractive to all scholars interested in the pragmatically oriented study of language-and-culture relationship.

Translated by Konrad Żyśko

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[4] Zinken has published widely in this field; cf. Zinken and Ogiermann 2013 or Zinken and Rossi 2016.

References

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