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The Illocutionary Force of Directive Speech Acts as Perceived by Native Speakers of Polish and Dutch

Abstract

This contribution is a part of a pilot study on the mutual perception of politeness standards in Poland and in the Netherlands. In an online survey, we asked native speakers of Polish and Dutch to evaluate twenty utterances in terms of politeness. In the next step, the participants were asked to choose a term that, in their view, suits the evaluated utterance: is it, for example, a request, an order or maybe a suggestion? We examined how the respondents perceive the illocutionary force of different subtypes of directive speech acts in an informal context and whether there is a relationship between politeness and speech act names. The results show that there is a difference in how the Polish and Dutch respondents perceive the illocutionary force of speaker-controlled directive speech acts. However, there seems to be no link between the illocutionary force and the syntactic form of the evaluated utterances. The choice patterns of terms seem rather to be motivated by modality markers.

Keywords: directive speech acts, request, order, suggestion, perception of directive speech acts, Polish, Dutch

1. Introduction¹

Directive speech acts, due to the variety of forms, have been a subject of interest of numerous studies within the field of pragmatics. However, Polish and Dutch are still under-researched languages. Both languages have different patterns of realization and mitigation² of directive speech acts and for this reason many misunderstandings³ occur when speakers of Polish and Dutch communicate with each other. It is

1 I am very grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

2 The data on the patterns of realization show a preference for interrogatives in Dutch and a preference for direct directives in Polish. Dutch makes a frequent use of mitigating modal particles, while the speakers of Polish use more reinforcing particles (Van Mulken 1996; Ogiermann 2009; Urbanik 2017; Wiercińska 2018).

3 Through conversations with language trainers (*taalcoach*) from the Netherlands, we know that Polish-speaking expats experience conflict situations due to the way they use the directive language when speaking Dutch or English.

a result of a different perception of the illocutionary force, which the individual language user subjectively interpreted through the context.

In this contribution, we report on a pilot survey on the mutual perception of politeness standards in Poland and in the Netherlands. Firstly, the respondents from both countries were asked to evaluate, in terms of politeness, twenty utterances that have been realized in an informal context. In the next step, they were asked to choose a term that in their view would be the best for the evaluated utterance: is it a request, an order or maybe a suggestion? We look at their term choice and we seek to answer the following research questions: are there differences in the perception of Polish and Dutch respondents when it comes to:

- 1) the intensity of the illocutionary force that the respondents associate with a given term and
- 2) the relationship between the politeness evaluation and the term that the respondents chose for the evaluated directive speech acts.

2. The illocutionary force and its strength

Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 2, 8) view the illocutionary force (henceforth IF) as a part of the meaning of an utterance and refer to what the speaker is trying to accomplish with his or her utterance. The purpose, or the illocutionary point, is “to try to get other people to do something” (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 37), thus every directive speech act has the same preparatory condition. The speaker assumes that the addressee “is capable of doing what he is directed to” (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 56). The expressed intention of the speaker, in the view of Searle & Vanderveken (1985: 100), may take a different strength of the IF depending on two factors. The first one is the formal power and authority that the speaker has over the addressee and the second one is a matter of how intense the speaker’s desire is to get the addressee to take an action.

The IF of any speech act is implied by so-called *Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices*, which are any linguistic features that can indicate and delimit the IF, such as sentence type, mood, word order, intonation and so forth. When it comes to directive speech acts, it seems that we can make a quite clear classification in three sentence types (Searle 1975). An imperative is a prototypical form of orders. Requests for actions are constituted by interrogatives with a second person subject and a modal verb of volition or ability [Will you ...?, Can you ...?]. An obligation is constituted by declaratives with a second person subject and the modal verb of obligation [You must ...]⁴. The IF seems in this way to be “built into the sentence meaning by linguistic convention”⁵ (Kissine 2013: 177) and is associated with ordering (imperatives), questioning (interrogatives), and stating (declaratives) (Pérez Hernández 2013: 129).

4 Ruytenbeek (2017: 296) writes that “generality of forms” in this category has actually not been defined by Searle. He assumes that Searle viewed this category in terms of “a core syntactic structure consisting in a second person pronoun, a modal verb (will, can, must, should), and a verbal phrase denoting the requested action.”

5 While analyzing directives within the framework of CCSARP, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 202–203) look at directives through the anticipated level of directness which is linked to syntactic features of directive speech acts. In their classification, “direct” means that the intention of the speaker is understood at face value. They distinguish direct directives which are syntactically marked (as for example imperatives or declaratives with performative verbs), conventionally indirect directives (for example interrogatives understood as syntactic downgraders) and non-conventionally indirect directives such as suggestions and hints which rely on a partial reference to the context. However, this approach confuses between indirectness in terms of

However, there is more to an utterance than just its sentence type when the addressee interprets its meaning. As Pérez Hernández (2013: 130) writes, the addressees rely “to a greater or a lesser extent on either the linguistic form or on contextual information.” Both the speaker and the addressee can interpret the IF of an utterance through the context without considering its propositional meaning⁶. As Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 10) argue, “the speaker may convey directly a different illocutionary force of a different propositional meaning from what is directly expressed.” Levinson (1983: 274) writes that there is no connection between the form and the meaning of an utterance and for this reason the IF is “entirely pragmatic.” He indicates that an interrogative sentence can imply the IF of various subtypes of speech acts, varying from requests to offers or threats. Pérez Hernández (2013: 130) views the IF in terms of *compatibility*: “each sentence type is compatible with a diverse range of illocutionary values.” Declaratives, as the most unrestricted ones, can cover “virtually any type of illocutionary act” whereas imperatives cannot express questions and interrogatives cannot express assertions.

In the politeness studies, indirect speech acts are often referred to as the most polite ones since their IF seems to be the least intense (Brown & Levinson [1978] 2011: 95; Leech 1983: 107–109). From the speaker’s point of view, however, indirect speech acts might not be as efficient as the direct ones but they minimize the possible threat to the addressee’s face which is essential for accomplishing the speaker’s goals. Associating indirect directives with less intense IF is, however, controversial. As pointed out, among others, by Watts (2003) and Decock and Depraetere (2018), it must not be assumed that every indirect speech act implies weak IF as this point of view suggests that politeness is a matter of linguistic structure and not of the addressee’s perception. It is up to the addressee to evaluate if he or she feels that the degree of the IF is face-threatening.

3. An individual’s perspective on the illocutionary force

From an individual’s perspective, the perception of the IF is influenced not only by factors that we directly experience while having a conversation, but also by the cultural setting (Scollon & Scollon 2001; Kádár & Bargiela-Chiappini 2012). However, not every language user is aware how hierarchical and/or collective their culture is when compared to other cultures. The conversational context of every directive consists, among others, of the social distance between the speaker and the addressee (D, distance), power (P, power) that the speaker can exercise over the addressee, and the potential threat to the addressee’s face (R, rank of imposition) (Brown & Levinson [1978] 2011). The more effort it takes to perform the requested action, the bigger threat there is to the addressee’s negative face. Using a negative politeness strategy and mitigating the IF, increases the chance that the speaker will accomplish his or her communication goal while the threat to the addressee’s face is minimized. Suggesting that we would want a lift is weaker in terms of the IF than ordering or demanding that the addressee gives us a lift. However, the closer the relationship between the interlocutors, the bigger the chance that the action will be performed no matter

perceived face-threat and indirectness in terms of sentence types. Conventional directness, as pointed out by Blum-Kulka (1987), is perceived as more polite than non-conventional indirectness (cf. Decock & Depraetere 2018).

⁶ However, there is evidence that interpreting the meaning of an indirect request does not necessarily have to take longer than in the case of direct requests, for example when the contextual factors are sufficient. See Ruytenbeek (2017) for an extended research overview, including experimental research.

how much effort it requires. But if there is a formal hierarchy between the speaker and the addressee, a greater degree of strength of the IF is predefined by authority (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 50–51). The addressee experiences a big threat to his or her negative face as refusal is unlikely to be an option.

The realization patterns of directive speech acts and patterns of linguistic mitigation are, however, influenced also by the cultural context. For this reason, living up to politeness standards becomes even more challenging as far as intercultural communication is concerned as the perception of the IF is influenced by different cultural values. We can notice that the two studied countries are different in terms of involvement (Poland) and independence (the Netherlands)⁷. Scollon and Scollon (2001: 46–47) describe involvement as positioning oneself as a fully contributing member of the society. They call involvement “solidarity politeness” which means that the speakers might be more tolerant towards directives carrying a strong IF than individualistic cultures. Zinken and Ogiermann (2013: 275) who research Polish directives, point out that direct directives are more acceptable in societies where the social hierarchy is clear-cut. Independence, on the other hand, is the addressee’s right “to be free from the impositions of others” so that he or she can act “with some degree of autonomy” (Scollon & Scollon 2001: 47). Directives with strong IF, such as imperatives, may seem more imposing to the speakers of Dutch than to the speakers of Polish who live in a hierarchical and collectivistic society. If the degree of experienced imposition is high, it is possible that the language users who are focused on acting independently, will associate any directive that carries a strong IF with setting (formal) power. Those cultural values could be reflected in which term the Polish and Dutch respondents choose for the directive speech acts.

4. Method

4.1. The survey

For this pilot study, we created an online survey in two language versions (Polish and Dutch). From corpora of spoken Dutch and Polish⁸, we extracted a total of twenty utterances together with the context⁹. The conversations from both corpora are thematically similar to each other (they occurred for example while cooking, cleaning and so forth). All the utterances were realized in spontaneous informal conversations and the interlocutors had a close relationship with each other, *i.e.* they are family members or friends. The actions which are requested carry a low level of imposition and, furthermore, all of them are so-called “here and now actions”. Both language versions of the survey had a common part of sixteen utterances where eleven were originally from the Polish corpus and five from the Dutch corpus, since there

7 See the results of Hofstede’s (2000) study: Power Distance Index Poland: 68, the Netherlands: 38; Individualism Poland: 60, the Netherlands: 80. PDI stands for power and distance that have to do with social inequality and hierarchy. The higher the score, the more hierarchical the given society is. IDV determines who is more important: an individual or the entire group. The higher the score, the more emphasis is on an individual and not on the whole group.

8 We used *Corpus Gesproken Nederlands* and *Spokes*, a corpus of spontaneous informal conversations in Polish. From each corpus, a part of approx. 100.000 words has been analyzed. Additional information on both corpora is available at <http://lands.let.ru.nl/cgn/> and <http://spokes.clarin-pl.eu/#explore/br/0/1000/>.

9 The extracted utterances are examples of the most frequent forms. See Wiercińska (2018) for a description of the encountered form variation.

was more variation in the form of directive speech acts in the Polish corpus. Those utterances could be literally translated in the other language. We have decided to keep the four remaining utterances language specific as they are frequently used forms in Polish or in Dutch but not literally translatable. A free translation would result in unnatural sentence structures or in (im)politer forms¹⁰. The respondents conducted two tasks while completing the survey. Firstly, they evaluated how polite they thought an utterance was in the context in which it has been realized, using a six-point Likert scale where 1 means ‘very impolite’ and 6 ‘very polite’. Secondly, they were asked to choose a term that in their view suits the evaluated speech act the best. The list of terms has been randomized in every question to not provide the participants with any suggestions on their IF. In the instructions for both tasks, we used a generic term, ‘utterance’.

The respondents have been recruited by personal contacts, social media, and online fora. A respondent is counted in the results if he or she is a native speaker of Netherlandic Dutch or Polish. The native speakers of Belgian Dutch¹¹ or respondents who speak Dutch or Polish as a second language have not been taken into consideration. The survey has been completed by 221 eligible respondents from the Netherlands and 146 from Poland.

4.2. Terms for directive speech acts used in the survey

The terms the participants could choose from were *request* (PL: prośba, NL: verzoek), *order* (rozkaz, bevel), *instruction* (polecenie, opdracht), *demand* (żądanie, eis), *suggestion* (sugestia, suggestie), and *hint* (wskazówka, hint). Hints, however, do not constitute an apart type of directive speech acts and are looked upon as a politeness strategy or a possible realization of a speech act. A hint can be a directive but, depending on the context, can also be a statement of an offer which is not performed literally (cf. Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 25). We list *hints* as a possible term to choose from because to a respondent *hints* can be non-committal requests or suggestions. However, hints do not necessarily have to be polite. Blum-Kulka (1987) argues that an utterance needs at least some clarity to be considered as polite. Interestingly, when we look up the term *hint* in dictionaries of Polish and Dutch¹², we find no reference to indirectness. Hints are defined as an instruction.

With regards to the other terms, we can make a distinction in directives where performing the action depends on the will of the addressee (*request*, *suggestion*) and the ones where the speaker is imposing his or her will on the addressee (*order*, *instruction*, and *demand*) (Marcjanik 1980; Searle & Vanderveken 1985). An *order* implies that there is formal power and, as Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 50) argue, the speaker achieves his or her goal “by invoking a position of authority or power over the hearer.” However, to an individual language user, this term can have connotations that are limited to for example military or governmental context, which might make it not applicable in everyday communication between interlocutors who have a close relationship with each other. *Instruction* may also imply formal power but

10 For example, in Dutch, it is possible to use a bare infinitive or a past participle (cf. Van Olmen 2009; Coussé & Oosterhof 2020) as an imperative form. A bare infinitive in Dutch is rather impolite (De Hoop *et al.* 2016). In Polish, a bare infinitive is mostly used together with *please*. A translation would in that case result in a more polite form.

11 From a cultural perspective, Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) differs from the Netherlands. The Belgian society shares with the Netherlands an individualistic mindset but at the same time is a quite hierarchical society (Hofstede 2000).

12 For example *Słownik Języka Polskiego PWN* (A Dictionary of Polish, published by Polish Scientific Publishers) and *Van Dale*.

at the same time is quite a neutral term conveying that something just needs to be done (Van Olmen 2009: 153). *Demanding* does not constitute formal power but allows the speaker to tell the addressee to do something “with a greater degree of strength than simply telling or requesting” (Searle & Vanderveken 1985: 201). When it comes to *request*, Searle and Vanderveken (1985: 99) consider its IF to be intermediate, between ordering (described as strong) and suggesting (described as weak). Pérez Hernández (2013: 135) sees three reasons why requests are different from orders. It is optional to the addressee to carry out the requested action and the intention of the sender is to minimize the cost of action that he or she is asking for. Last but not least, “a higher degree of mitigation” can be observed.

5. Results

5.1. The illocutionary force per term

Table 1 provides the average scores for both languages together with standard deviation (henceforth SD) per term, ranging from speech acts that have been assessed as the least polite to the most polite.

Table 1. The illocutionary force per term

	Dutch respondents N=221 (221 x 20 = 4420 tokens)			Polish respondents N=147 (147 x 20 = 2940 tokens)			
	average score	SD	% tokens	average score	SD	% tokens	
demand	2.79	0.97	5.2%	demand	2.43	1.16	8.2%
order	2.87	1.18	10.5%	order	2.61	1.12	6.8%
instruction	3.61	1.01	20.0%	instruction	3.34	1.18	14.8%
hint	4.01	0.95	17.5%	suggestion	4.18	1.08	31.4%
suggestion	4.40	0.92	19.5%	request	4.28	1.11	22.9%
request	4.46	1.00	27.3%	hint	4.32	1.01	15.9%

In both studied languages, *demand* and *order* are perceived as the least polite types of directive speech acts. However, those two terms are the least frequently chosen terms. They might have not seemed applicable to the respondents because of the context to which the evaluated utterances were limited. The respondents might not have experienced much imposition as the action was asked by someone with whom they have a close relationship. Interestingly, the Dutch respondents have more frequently chosen *order* than *demand*, which implies that they might have experienced that the speaker was trying to set his or her own hierarchy. If we consider the SD of the orders’ score in the Dutch survey, it seems that the respondents were the most unsure about this term. It may be a result of the non-hierarchical mindset of the Dutch culture.

When it comes to the non-committal directive speech acts, the results of this pilot study show a perception difference. It seems that there is a different understanding of *hints* which are the most polite according to the Polish respondents while the Dutch respondents evaluate them as less polite than suggestions and requests. It indicates that the Dutch respondents experience more imposition than the Polish respondents. In both languages, a *suggestion* has a lower average score than a *request*. This might suggest that the respondents from both countries see suggestions in terms of influencing one's behavior and not optionality. A research question that arises from this pilot study is whether an individual respondent interprets the terms *suggestion* and *hint* as an attempt to influence his or her behavior or rather as a piece of advice or a proposal.

It is notable that the SD's are generally higher in the Polish survey, while the evaluation of the respondents is more evenly spread in the Dutch survey, especially with regard to *suggestions*, *hints*, and *demands*. That could mean that the contextual information, that the respondents have been provided with, was less sufficient than in the case of the Polish respondents. Considering the fact that both groups have been provided with the same information for the common part of the survey, a possible explanation can be that the Dutch respondents, as speakers of a context-independent language (cf. Nishimura *et al.* 2008), rely to a greater extent on the form and not on the provided context while evaluating how polite the survey utterances were. Conversely, the Polish respondents, as speakers of a context-dependent language, rely on the contextual information and to lesser extent on the form.

5.2. The relationship between the term and the form

The speech acts that have been used in the survey included imperative sentences, personal and impersonal declaratives, and interrogatives. The choice of terms that the respondents have made shows that the pure syntactic form does not seem to have much influence on the results as the respondents seem to rely rather on modality markers. Further on, we look at the term choice patterns per sentence type (imperative, declarative, interrogative). This result is, however, context dependent.

The imperative sentences include bare imperatives and infinitive imperatives¹³, reinforced, and mitigated imperatives. One-third of the respondents from both groups have interpreted the reinforced imperatives (Figure 1) as requests (NL: 33%, PL: 32%). However, the distribution of responses within the category of bare imperatives (Figure 2) suggests that this sentence type is according to Dutch respondents to a greater extent associated with the obligation to perform the requested action as their choice shifts towards *instruction* (24%) and *order* (21%) while *request* makes up a total of 24%.

The question arises why bare imperatives are perceived as more obliging than the reinforced ones¹⁴. Is it because of the context or do the modality markers that have been used in the survey sentences (for example, the modal particles such as *toch*, *nou*) turn out to imply less imposition than bare imperatives? It should be subjected to further investigation. The Polish respondents have interpreted bare imperatives mostly as *suggestions* (27%) and *instructions* (25%). However, the results of the first task of the survey show that the term *suggestion* is rather perceived in terms of firmly influencing one's behavior

13 We count bare imperatives and infinitive imperatives as one category due to the low frequency of infinitive imperatives in the analyzed parts of both corpora.

14 The first task of the Dutch survey provided the same politeness evaluation of both categories (3,43/6 which is the lowest score when compared to mitigated imperatives and other sentence types).

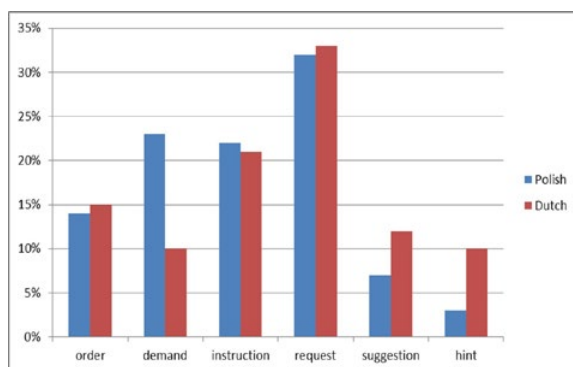


Figure 1. Reinforced imperatives

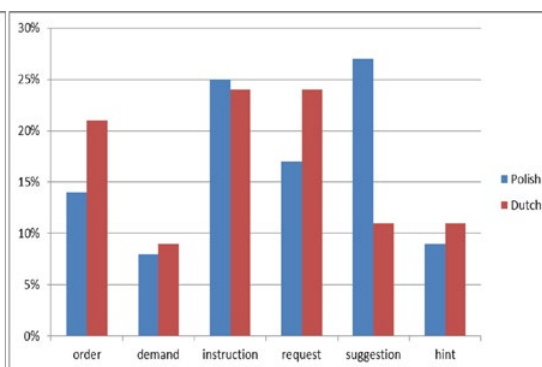


Figure 2. Bare and infinitive imperatives

as bare infinitives have an average score of 3,38 which is the second lowest score¹⁵. It could also mean that the respondents, in the context in which the utterance has been realized, do not feel obliged to perform the requested action despite the fact that the form leaves little to no space to refuse. *Suggestion* is also the most frequent choice of Polish respondents (45%) within the group of mitigated imperatives (Figure 3) while the Dutch respondents preferred *request* (53%). Also, if an imperative sentence is hearer-oriented, *i.e.*, there is a possibility of benefiting from performing the action, the choice of terms in both languages implies that the respondents do not find it that imposing (Figure 4). This is also the case as far as the interrogatives are concerned (Figure 5).

Within the group of declarative sentences, we used impersonal declaratives (*trzeba, powinno się i.e.* 'one needs to', passive sentences) and declaratives with verbs of obligation (*musieć, moeten i.e.* 'must'). The distribution of responses shows that there is a difference in how both groups of respondents perceive both categories of declaratives. The impersonal ones (Figure 6) have been mostly interpreted as *suggestions* (NL: 33%; PL: 46%) and *hints* (NL: 39%; PL: 40%). However, utterances containing the verb *must* (Figure 7) show a discrepancy in the assessment of Polish and Dutch respondents. The Dutch respondents have interpreted such an utterance as an instruction. It seems that they would feel obliged to perform the requested action. On the contrary, the Polish respondents opted for *suggestion* and *hint*.

6. Conclusion

The results of this pilot study show that in both studied languages, there seems to be no perception difference when it comes to the IF of the speaker-controlled directive speech acts. Demands, orders, and instructions are evaluated as the least polite directive speech acts by both groups of respondents. Considering how frequently the respondents have chosen the terms from this group with respect to the hearer-controlled speech acts, the assumption that in an informal context, the speakers of Dutch are much more likely to choose formal and imposing terms for directive speech acts turns out to be invalid. Speaker-controlled speech acts make up a total of 37.5% of all tokens in the Dutch survey and 29.8% in the Polish survey.

¹⁵ Only the reinforced imperatives score is lower (3,01).

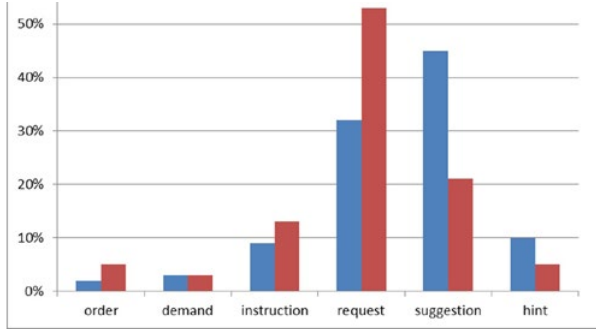


Figure 3. Mitigated imperatives

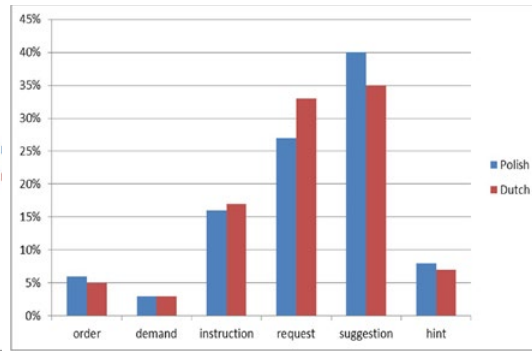


Figure 4. Imperative sentences that imply a benefit for the addressee

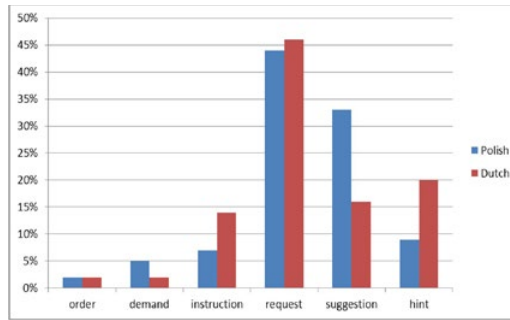


Figure 5. Interrogatives

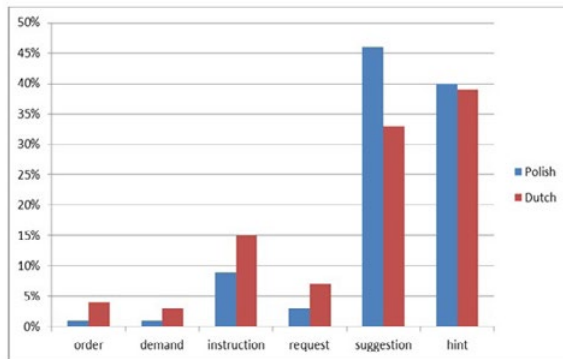


Figure 6. Impersonal declaratives

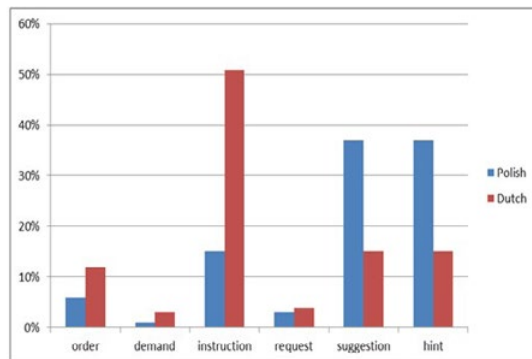


Figure 7. Declaratives with a verb of obligation

When it comes to the hearer-controlled directives, the results show a different perception of the IF of hints. While the Polish respondents see them as the most politely realized directives, in the Dutch survey they turn out to be less polite than requests and suggestions. The question arises if the Dutch respondents see directives realized as hints as directives carrying a higher degree of imposition or do they think they are more impolite because there is no such clarity like in requests. It is a consideration for

further research to clarify, for example, in follow-up interviews, how a respondent would define a hint as a mode of realization of directive speech acts and under what circumstances he or she would evaluate it as impolite.

In both studied languages, there seems to be no connection between the syntactic sentence type and the term choice. All the three sentence types, *i.e.* imperatives, declaratives, and interrogatives, can be interpreted as any kind of directive speech acts. The patterns in the term choice are motivated by other features such as linguistic modifiers (mitigating or reinforcing) or who the beneficiary is. If there is a reinforcing element like, for example, a modal particle, the term choice shifts towards terms implying more intense IF. The term choice of both groups shifts towards those from the hearer-controlled acts group if the sentence contains a mitigating particle, offers an option of saying no or if the performer of the action is not directly stated. There is, however, one exception concerning declaratives. Declaratives with a verb of obligation, when directly addressed to the hearer, tend to be considered as hints by the Polish respondents which, including also the evaluation of the IF, implies that the requested action is perceived as optional. Conversely, the Dutch respondents interpreted this declarative mostly as an instruction.

The results of this pilot study are, however, limited to the informal context, where there is no distance or power relationship between the speakers ($D = \text{low}$, $P = \text{low}$) and where the requested actions have a low rank of imposition ($R = \text{low}$). The utterances which have been limited to twenty, did also not include a full range of modifiers as those were limited by the choice of the analyzed conversations from the corpora of Polish and Dutch. As the patterns of term choice seem rather to be motivated by modifiers, it is a direction for further study to investigate what results we would obtain if there was more variation in modifiers. Another question is, if we would get comparable results if the context variables (D , P , and R) were different.

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