

# What we mean when we ask for the milk

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New research into the different ways that English and Polish people use language in everyday family situations can help members of each community to understand each other better and avoid cultural misunderstandings.

The study from the University of Portsmouth and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) shows how ordinary ways of expressing needs in Polish could sound rude or ill mannered when Polish speakers use them to construct [sentences](#) in English.

Dr Jörg Zinken, a senior lecturer in the University's psychology department, recorded everyday domestic situations and analysed how people asked other family members to perform tasks, such as passing the milk at breakfast. He found that native English speakers tended to use questions ("can you pass the milk?") whereas Polish speakers used imperatives ("pass the milk").

The Polish form can sound impolite to native English speakers, says Dr Zinken, because the latter would almost never use an abrupt-sounding imperative or direct command in this kind of situation.

Because the English form is framed as a question, it allows the other person to feel a sense of autonomy as Dr Zinken explains: "Even if it is obvious that they will comply, by asking someone to do something rather than telling them, the English form gives the other person a choice."

Using a question also gives the other person an opportunity to say

something like "yes" or "of course", he says, which means they can have the last word in the exchange. Dr Zinken found by contrast that the Polish people usually responded to a request without saying anything, or would sometimes say "juz", which means something like "already" (as in: "I'll do it in just a second")

Dr Zinken believes the fact the imperative is not seen as impolite to Polish speakers reveals something about both cultures. "When a Polish person wants a family member to pass the milk, there is a presumption that the other person will be available at that moment and will help," he says. "The fact that you can make this presumption is seen as a good thing, it says something positive about the relationship between the speaker and the other person."

The research shows how two very different cultural values - individual autonomy and collective purpose - are expressed in the ways that people use everyday language. "Every culture has its own social rules and values, but we often don't notice them because they are ingrained in the way we use language, not just in the words we use but in grammar and sentence structure," he says. "If we understand these differences better, we can understand where other people are coming from, while also reflecting on what our own language says about us and how we relate to others."

**More information:** This article is based on the findings from 'Sharing responsibility across languages and cultures: English, Polish and mixed couples dealing with everyday chores' carried out by Jörg Zinken at University of Portsmouth. Part of the research has recently been published in the journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction*.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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