ARE GENDERLECTS UNIVERSAL?

Much has been written about gender issues in language and long are the lists of gender differences that concern different aspects of language use, e.g. grammar (Trudgill 1995, Swann 2000), pronunciation (Wardhaugh 1991), style (Lakoff 1975, Holmes 1995, Trudgill 1995), or interactional issues (Maltz and Borker 1982, Tannen 1990, Coates 1993), to name just the most popular and best studied ones. Certain findings, notably the ones concerning the domination of men in interaction (Zimmerman and West 1975) or the deficient and very affective style of female linguistic behaviour (Lakoff 1975) have already become classics and tend to be widely cited round the world. However, it tends to be often disregarded that these facts have been investigated mainly in the context of the English language and as such do not have to hold true for other ethnic and linguistic groups. My aim is therefore to focus on some of these issues briefly with regard to native users of Polish and native users of English. This is done by comparing the English and Polish speaking styles of the two genders in a specific context with the initial aim of investigating the question of genderlects in the Polish language. At this stage the discussion will therefore only have a rather tentative and diagnostic character.

The present study was predominantly inspired by a brief mention of an investigation of a similar nature carried out by L. Kessler in Great Britain (Stockwell 2002). In the study the researcher asked 6 male and 6 female respondents to describe some photographs in order to analyse the number of words that her respondents used per minute, and thus prove or disprove the claim that it is women who speak more; she also investigated the question of the sensitivity of both genders to colours. In brief, Kessler’s findings supported Coates’s (1993) claim that it was in fact men who covered more of the talking time (57% of all the time taken by the respondents). Men also made a more frequent reference to colour terms, however, the number of these terms was higher mainly due to a variety of modifiers with which they appeared, e.g. very green, rather green. Women, on the other hand, tended to use more intensifiers with their colour terms, e.g. bold reds, vibrant colour; they also made a more extensive use of evaluative adjectives (Stockwell 2002: 42).
Altogether, the presentation of the study was very scanty and very little could be discovered about the methodology used. It also lacked a detailed account of the findings. Nevertheless, it constituted a sufficient stimulus to administer a slightly modified version of the test also in the Polish context, the main idea behind my analysis being in the first place a desire to establish some more experimentally tested facts with regard to genderlects of the speakers of Polish. This area of sociolinguistic investigation, although extremely popular in the West, has not evoked much interest in the context of Polish language use, and the works of the most acclaimed researcher in the field, Kwiryna Handke (1994), do not seem to have a sound experimental foundation and are based on a more impressionistic type of data. Due to the limited information concerning the original study by Kessler and in view of some changes concerning its content, my aim was also to test some British English users with the help of the same kind of visual prompts and set the results obtained for Polish and English against each other. As it is the first attempt at this kind of research, it is necessarily of a limited scope and its aim was not to draw any binding conclusions for the Polish and English speaking worlds, but rather to initially explore the field and examine whether the method used would point to any possible gender differences both within each of the two cultures as well as within the same sex but distinguished by the variable of culture.

The number of respondents taking part in the study comprised of 40 persons consisting of 10 English men, 10 English women, 10 Polish men and 10 Polish women. The major reason for the limited size of the aforementioned groups was in the first place the objective difficulty with finding enough English speakers, notably women, living locally, i.e. in Cracow. Once the number of English speakers was fixed, the size of the Polish groups was suitably adjusted to ensure an equal basis of comparison. After a very brief introduction stating that the investigation aimed to study differences in the language of men and women each respondent was presented with two visual prompts – a traditional painted Christmas card and a postcard showing two girls in native Mexican costumes, respectively, which they were then asked to describe in a fairly detailed manner (as if the investigator did not know their content) in the order and timing of their own choice. In terms of age the respondents ranged from 20 to 50, which made them the most neutral representatives of society, i.e. not the most innovative and not the most conservative ones, either. The fixed age range helped to keep the variable constant. In terms of their education, the majority of the English respondents were teachers of English in Cracow, which was also the background of 70% of the Polish respondents; the remaining ones were young adults with higher education from the area of Cracow.

The collected data provides interesting study material in terms of a variety of aspects, out of which, for the sake of the present paper, only the following issues have been selected: the overall duration of the description of the two pictures, the use of adjectival and adverbial phrases, notably with the use of colour terms,  

1 The publication by Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozińska (2005) under a promising title Lingwistyka płci. On i ona w języku polskim deals with the representation of the sexes in the Polish language rather than with the features of the male and female speaking styles.
as well as modifiers and intensifiers, moreover, in the case of the Polish respondents the rating of the use of diminutives was investigated. Other aspects, e.g. the presence of hedging devices, gambits, the question of description vs. evaluation, the speaker’s sensitivity to detail, the order of description or the level of language formality have been excluded from the present analysis mainly on the grounds of its limited size.

One of the key points of interest for me was to investigate the question of timing. Despite the common beliefs that it is women who “chatter” more, a number of studies (e.g. Zimmerman and West 1975, Herring et al. 1995) have proved that it is in fact men who take more of the talking time, at least they have exhibited this feature in the case of the English speaking world. Also, a brief exercise during one of my classes in Sociolinguistics which involved the description of one of the cards used for the present analysis – the Christmas card – by 3 Polish male and 3 Polish female students (in Polish) in front of a large group of people, proved that it was indeed the male students who talked longer, approximately twice as long as the female students (Dąbrowska 2005).

The current investigation relied on the description of two pictures. The reason for selecting two prompts was mainly motivated by the fact they were different both in form and content, thus covering a broader scope of the issues examined. The Christmas card had a fairly graphic and hence a simpler form than the photograph, the elements included were fewer, more easily recognisable for both cultures, the colours were clear and quite neatly separated. Additionally, the figures of the two dancing snowmen in colourful hats and scarves were intended to induce more emotional reactions and hence a more emphatic language from the speakers. The photograph, on the other hand, was far more complex in terms of the content, with the elements of the foreground and the background not immediately related, which was assumed to elicit a longer and more complex description; additionally, the difficulty with stating precisely the place in which it was taken, and naming some exotic elements of the picture were to trigger the use of some hedging devices and opinions from the respondents.

Thus, the comparison of the amount of time taken by men and women within the same culture and across the two cultures in order to describe each of the pictures rendered the following results. Firstly, as had been expected, Picture 1 demanded on the whole less description time than Picture 2 in each of the four groups of respondents, though to a varying degree. What was astonishing, though, was the fact that in the British culture in the case of both pictures men provided on average a shorter description than women, which proved to be the reverse in the Polish culture. The average timings for Picture 1 and Picture 2 were respectively: 0.49 sec. and 1.32 sec. for English men, 1.38 sec. and 2.39 sec. for English women, 1.07 sec. and 2.02 for Polish men and finally 0.53 sec. and 1.30 for Polish women. It may then easily be concluded that certain differences obtain both between the sexes and within the same sex across the cultures. There is a very obvious timing difference with regard to the English speakers of both sexes as it is women who, in the case of both pictures, took conspicuously more time than men. The discrepancy remains even when one female respondent, a person who took much time to describe the prompts (4.37 sec. and 8.14 sec., respectively) is disregarded – the average timing calculated for women is
still longer than for men – 1.13 sec. and 1.51 sec. Thus, it appears that, contrary to some earlier findings, it is British women who speak more in such a situation, not men. The claim that it is men who talk more than women, however, finds its confirmation in the data concerning the Polish speakers, which seems to hold true for both pictures described. It may also be noted that the average timings for English men, Polish men (with the exception of Picture 2) and Polish women are rather comparable, whereas it is English women that exceed the other groups of respondents quite markedly in terms of the time needed for performing the task, there is therefore a noteworthy cultural difference here. What is also worth pointing out is the fact that in the case of the Polish female respondents the results varied in terms of the professional background of the person, i.e. the female teachers visibly exceeded other women in the length of their description. This distinction could not be observed in the group of the English women who were all teachers of English. However, it has to be immediately added that despite a comparable characteristics of the two groups of men such discrepancies were not observed, i.e. all the men on the whole needed a similar portion of time to perform the appointed task, disregarding their professional background. This, on the other hand, might indicate that the variable of the profession does not seem to influence the male speaking style powerfully, it may, however, have a bearing upon the linguistic performance of women (cf. Trudgill 1995). A question that remains to be asked in the context of timing is why the English women proved to be the ones who took more of the talking time, not men. The answer is obviously complex and would certainly require an in-depth psychological investigation, yet I would venture to say that one of the reasons might be the drive of the British women to please their interlocutors, to show positive politeness and maintain good relations with the other person, particularly in an intimate context, which the one-to-one with the investigator undoubtedly created. These were some of the conclusions of my earlier investigation of politeness in English and Polish (Dąbrowska 2001, cf. also Tannen 1990, Holmes 1995); notably, this feature did not manifest itself as markedly in the case of the Polish women. Directly connected with the length of the talking time is the content of the description. As has been said, it is a very broad area of analysis, therefore here it will be limited to a number of issues only, the first of which will focus on the frequency and character of adjectival and adverbial phrases. This at length will lead us to the question of the modifiers and colour terms as well as the use of diminutives. On the whole, the question of adjectives and adverbs is linked with the level of liveliness and expressiveness of the description, and the main aim of this part of our discussion is to evaluate the performance of the respondents in these terms. Also in this respect a conspicuous difference could be noted in the performance of the British male and female speakers. In this cultural group adjectival and adverbial phrases recorded for men appeared 106 times, whereas in the case of the female respondents they reached the figure of 155. The difference here certainly accounts for the discrepancies in the aforementioned average time of description at least in part. It is not only the overall number of these phrases that distinguishes between the two sexes – the type of adjectives selected by the two groups also provide some valuable insight into the characteristics of the two sexes.
Thus, on closer examination of the data it was possible to subcategorise the recorded phrases into the following types: a) descriptive adjectives and adverbs (i.e. those which provided purely factual information about the content of the pictures, e.g. long dress, plastic bracelets, round snowflakes, dangling earrings), b) categorising adjectives and adverbs, that is those which tended to express the speaker’s views or beliefs about the content of the picture rather than describe it (e.g. a typical looking Christmas card, typical greeting card, (look) quite proud, typical snow scene), c) affective adjectives, these being the words which express positive emotions and evaluation of the pictures rather than their content (e.g. a happy scene, they look very happy, two delightful and plump little snowmen, a few cute little birds), and finally d) critical adjectives which constituted a similar group to the one immediately preceding in that they expressed emotions and provided evaluation, they were, however, of a negative type, e.g. quite tacky, quite cheap, very naff postcard. The division into these categories allowed for a more detailed examination of the language of description used by men and women, and thus it demonstrated that, out of the whole number of the phrases used by each sex, men used 77 descriptive adjectives and adverbs (71% of all), 14 categorising adjectives and adverbs (12%), 13 affective adjectives and adverbs (11%), and finally 4 critical adjectives and adverbs (4%). Women, on the other hand, used 106 descriptive phrases (68%), 13 categorising phrases (8%), 37 affective phrases (27%) and no critical phrase at all. The comparison of the numbers shows therefore that women focused on the actual details of what they saw trying to enhance the description by means of adjectival and adverbial phrases, at the same time they made fewer attempts to “put things into boxes", i.e. to classify them. But what seems to be most striking is the fact that women showed far more personal emotional involvement with the content of the pictures described. It was particularly Picture 1 depicting a warm Christmas scene that obviously brought about more positive reactions and associations in women than in men; by means of this type of adjectives and adverbs the women also indicated verbally the size of some elements of the pictures. They, however, were never irritated by the content of the picture, the reaction which, on the other hand, was demonstrated, albeit to a limited extent, by the men.

The results concerning the typology of adjectival and adverbial phrases recorded for the Polish respondents presented themselves somewhat differently. The overall number of the phrases amounted to 151 in the case of men and as many as 203 in the descriptions provided by women, i.e. there is once more a considerable gap between the two groups with prevalence again on the side of women. This points to some possible differences between the English and the Polish cultures, it also highlights some possible variation in the same sex group. The four categories of adjectives and adverbs which were postulated for the English speakers could also be distinguished in the Polish data. Thus, there appeared descriptive adjectives and adverbs, as in środkowa choinka; ogromny stadion or późna wiosna; categorising adjectives and adverbs as in typowa karta świąteczna or obrazeczek świąteczny; affective phrases, e.g. śliczne aniołki; faj- na karta; przepiękne, bardzo żywe kolory, and finally critical adjectival and adverbial phrases, i.e. trochę infantylne, trochę kiczowate. Their distribution between the sexes, though, demonstrated some differences.
The most numerous group was again, as could have expected, the group of descriptive phrases, which in the descriptions provided by men amounted to 125 items (83% of all) and by women – 163, this giving us 80% of all. The second group of phrases recorded for men were categorising adjectives and adverbs – 22 items (13% of all), while in the case of women this group came third in the ranking – 16, i.e. 8% of all. The next category of phrases which featured more prominently in the female group were the affective adjectives and adverbs which included 24 items, and thus constituted 11% of all the phrases used by women, while for men this group of phrases seemed to have only a marginal representation – 4 items, i.e. 2,6% of all the phrases. Lastly, the group of critically evaluating phrases was also recorded, but with a very sparse representation – 2 items, and these, unlike in the group of the English speakers, were used by a woman.

A similar conclusion as in the case of the English speakers can therefore be drawn on the basis of these data, namely, that the descriptive phrases constituted the largest group of adjectives and adverbs, yet it has to be noted that these tended to be used more frequently by Poles of both sexes than it was the case with the English speakers. Polish women likewise showed a greater tendency to be more affective and emphatic in their description than men, particularly of the prompts which aroused some positive feelings in them. The numerical representation of such verbal elements appeared, however, to be less marked than in the case of the English speakers. Could this, therefore, indicate less sensitivity on the part of the Poles in both gender groups, or at least more restraint in their verbal manifestation of such feelings?

This might be a valid conclusion if not for the fact that the Polish language offers a different means of showing one’s emotional state, particularly the positive attitude of the speaker, which, on the contrary, the English language hardly possesses, namely the diminutives, i.e. the forms which prototypically indicate the small size or young age of the entities described, and metaphorically are often used as terms of endearment (cf. Crystal 1994). The English language does possess a few suffixes which perform this function, e.g. -let, -ette, -ling, yet they are hardly used, and they certainly did not appear in the material collected. The closest that some of the English (female) respondents could get to in terms of this meaning was by means of the adjective little, e.g. little red berries, a few cute little birds, two plump little snowmen, yet even these were few and far between.

On the contrary, the Polish users of both sexes made a substantial use of the diminutives in the case of which the Polish language is very highly productive and additionally it allows even for a gradation of the meaning, e.g. gwiazda, gwiazdka, gwiazdeczka; liście, listki, listeczki or obraz, obrazek, obrazeczek, to give but a few examples. On close examination of the collected data it appeared that the language of both male and female respondents were abundant with items of this kind – the full list featured the following words (45 different items in all): balwanki, ptaszki, gwiazdka, gwiazdeczka, lańcuszek, plateczki, oczka, brzuszk, czapeczka, szaliczek, frędzeli, kropeczki, kulczki, buźka, woreczek, pomponiki, dziewczynki, chłopczyk, choineczki, jodelki, nóżka, roślinki, jagódki, kawaleczek, wianuszek, grupki, kwiatki, kijki, patyczki, wzorki, aniołeczek, gałązki, skrzydelka, koraliczki, śnieżek, karteczka, bułeczka, obrazek, obrazeczek, kolorki, kó-
Are Genderlects Universal?

łeczko, listki, serduszka, chmurki, szlaczek, and even a diminutive of an adjective, i.e. cieniutki. Altogether, diminutives were used 183 times by both men and women. Interestingly enough, despite a common belief that it is women who resort to such linguistic devices more often, the number of the diminutives recorded was almost evenly distributed among the two genders, rendering 90 items for the group of men and 93 for the group of women. This, in turn, proves that the language of the Polish respondents can be highly expressive, particularly in such cases as the description of Picture 1, a very cheerful card for children depicting two dancing snowmen, which brought forth highly positive emotional reactions in the speakers, and the use of diminutives does not appear to be a feature characteristic of one gender only (it is also worth pointing out at this point that while this very context did provoke some negative comments on the part of the English male speakers, the Polish male respondents never offered any criticism of the content of the cards).

In view of the above it is therefore interesting and no doubt essential to point out this systemic difference between the two languages. Even though the English language appears to offer some compensation techniques for the lack of diminutives, for instance the aforementioned adjective little or a selection of emphatic adjectives and adverbs, some of which may be referred to as “empty” adjectives, to quote R. Lakoff (1975), e.g. cute, adorable, cosy, lovely, these are certainly not able to reflect all the shades of meaning that the Polish diminutives are loaded with. It will also be noted that quite likely due to the presence of such a device as the diminutives, the frequency of emphatic and empty adjectives in the speech of the Polish users may tend to be markedly lower than in the verbal behaviour of the English speakers.

Occasionally, the adjectives and adverbs used by the respondents were additionally modified, and a more detailed analysis of this issue also brought some noteworthy observations. The most striking aspect of the material analysed was the fact that in English as well as in Polish both the overall number of the modifiers used and the variety of options suggested were higher for the female respondents. The English data featured 42 modifying items in the descriptions provided by men and as many as 65 of such items in the speech of women. This is certainly linked with the question discussed above, namely the more expressive character of female speech production. Thus, it needs to be added that not only the number of adjectives and adverbs describing nouns, but also the additional modifiers of those adjectives and adverbs make the language of the British women sound more affective. The proportions were distributed similarly, though to a much lower extent, in Polish – the male respondents utilised 23 such devices whereas the females used 32 of them. This difference in number between the two cultures can for sure be at least partly accounted for by the same reason as the one discussed in the previous section, i.e. the additional device consisting in the use of diminutives that the Poles can resort to instead.

What also needs to be pointed out with regard to the use of modifiers is their general typology. As mentioned earlier, the original study by Kessler proved that men tended to use more quantifiers, e.g. very or rather, whereas women showed greater preference for intensifiers, at least with colour terms, e.g. bold or vibrant. The present study corroborated those results only to a degree. It cer-
tainly demonstrated a very frequent use of quantifiers in the speech of men – out of 14 different types of the modifiers recorded as many as 11 belonged to that group, e.g. very, quite (a), a lot, many, few, pretty much, etc. Out of these the first item, very, was used far more frequently than the others, appearing in the descriptions 17 times out the aforementioned 42; the following ones would be: quite (a) – 8 times, a lot – 3 times, and many, few, pretty much – each used twice. The selection of different modifiers grew up to 21 types in the descriptions provided by women, out of which 10 belonged to the category of quantifiers, as e.g. very, quite, little, lots of, pretty, and these were used with notable frequency, very appearing in as many as 27 cases, the other four in 8, 5, 3 and 2, respectively. The remaining modifiers were more evaluative in character and as a rule appeared only once each, e.g. happily, delightful, beautifully, lovely, really, the intensifiers of colour terms not featuring in the data in any particular way.

The typology of the modifiers used by the Polish respondents of both sexes certainly proved to be more limited than that of the English ones. The analysis attested 7 different categories for men, 4 of which, i.e. bardzo, troszkę, trochę and dość belonged to quantifiers, and these were again most numerous, bardzo having been used 15 times. The female descriptions provided 11 different types of modifiers, with more than a half of them (7) belonging to the group of quantifiers. Here, however, the primacy of bardzo (7 times) was overtaken by trochę (8 times) and troszkę (2 times) in particular. Even though the numbers are small, a conclusion might still be ventured that Polish women when compared to Polish men, prefer less definitive statements hence the reversed order of the quantifiers.

What remains yet to be discussed briefly is the question of colour terms. Even though the reference to colours and their precise naming tends to be commonly perceived as the domain of women, Kessler’s study proved otherwise – it was men who appeared to be more sensitive to them, though the high frequency of their use resulted from the repetition of the same colour with different modifiers. The present analysis, however, proves to be rather inconclusive in this matter. On the whole, colour terms were recorded with a fairly high frequency as the English men used 49 colour items, English women 80, Polish men 88 and Polish women 103. These results would therefore support the stereotypical belief that it is after all women who pay more attention to colours, it is, however, the Polish women in particular who take more notice of them than the Polish men. It is noteworthy that none of the Polish women disregarded the question of colour in the two described pictures, though the majority of them would limit themselves to the most basic and visible ones as czerwony, fioletowy, zielony, złoty, niebieski, beside the general and very frequent adjective kolorowy, moreover, colour terms would appear in the description of Picture 1 above all. If any respondent ventured a very detailed description of Picture 2, the result naturally contained a number of less common colour terms and also the more complex ones, e.g. srebrny, szafirowy, czerwono-pomarańczowy, czerwono-czarny, intensywny błękit, różowo-turkusowy, granatowo-szary, śniady. Some more complex terms were also recorded in the descriptions provided by men, e.g. szaro-biały, jasnoniebieski, pstrokaty, on the whole, however, the simple colour terms prevailed. Unlike in the case of the English respondents, all women and all men
made some reference to colours, though in one case only the adjective *kolorowy* appeared. Amongst the English speakers, however, this did not appear to be the rule for either of the two sexes. In the group of women 2 of them ignored the presence of colours, in the group of men 1, whereas 4 others made only one very general reference to them, mostly by means of the word *colourful*. On the other hand, in both groups of the English speakers there were persons who provided a very extensive and rich account of the colours, e.g. *turquoise, midnight blue, rainbow-coloured, swarthy* (women) or *dark blue, bluish-purple, greyish-silver* (men). Thus, there seems to be no clear distinction in terms of the frequency of colour terms between the sexes, yet they still appear to be more prominent in the female speech.

The above-mentioned were just a few selected aspects of a broad spectrum of the features of language of men and women that manifested themselves in this brief pilot study. Even these few, however, appear to throw some light onto the subject flagged in the title of this paper “Are genderlects universal?”. The answer to this question has to be twofold. The existence of separate genderlects is to be acknowledged in view of such aspects as e.g. the ones discussed – the length of description which in intimate contexts manifests a greater verbosity of English women (contrary to the Polish ones), a much more descriptive, detailed and more personal content of the female accounts of both nationalities due to the higher frequency of adjectives, and those of an affective and evaluative type in particular. These, in the case of women, are additionally enhanced by a higher number and variety of modifiers and finally a somewhat greater sensitivity to colours.

The positive evaluation of the facts, however, has to be a little more tentative when it concerns the more precise frequency issues for it is only then that some more conspicuous and essential cross-cultural differences appear and some sweeping statements about the language use of men and women, without a more precise definition of the culture they refer to, are to be avoided. Our brief study indicated for instance that English women might take a longer time than Polish women to describe certain objects or issues. Also, the language of English women might appear more expressive than the language of men for different reasons than the language of Polish women – it will be marked by a greater number of adjectives, notably the affective ones, and a larger number of modifiers as opposed to the particularly high frequency of diminutives in the speech of the Poles. Finally, what appears also a rather noteworthy conclusion that stems from this introductory analysis is an observation, corroborating my earlier research in politeness (Dąbrowska 2001), that gender differences appear more striking with regard to the users of English rather than the users of Polish.

References

Czy style konwersacyjne kobiet i mężczyzn są uniwalne?

Niniejszy artykuł wpisuje się w popularny obecnie, zwłaszcza na Zachodzie, nurt analizy języka płci, starając się włączyć w zakres tych badań także dość ubogi pod tym względem dorobek odnoszący się do języka polskiego. Tematyka pracy została zainspirowana jednym z badań przeprowadzonych w Wielkiej Brytanii. Opierając się na przeprowadzonym eksperymentie, polegającym na opisaniu przedstawionych respondentom bodźców wizualnych z udziałem 40 osób (Brytyjczyków oraz Polaków obu płci), autorka niniejszego artykułu bada takie elementy nagrań, jak przeciętna długość opisu, liczba i charakter użytych przymiotników i przysłówków, częstotliwość i typologia modyfikatorów oraz intensyfikatorów, użyte zdrobnień, liczba użytych nazw kolorów. Analiza powyższych aspektów zachowania werbalnego kobiet i mężczyzn w obu kulturach wykazuje widoczne różnice w średniej długości przedstawionych opisów między kobietami i mężczyznami oraz różnice kulturowe. Ponadto wskazuje na znacznie bardziej emocjonalny charakter wypowiedzi kobiet wynikający z liczby, jak również charakteru przymiotników i przysłówków oraz modyfikatorów i intensyfikatorów, szczególnie Brytyjek, a także na różnice między kobietami i mężczyznami obu narodowości, wynikające z częstego użycia zdrobnień w języku polskim.