

Polish among European Languages

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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that Polish is spoken nowadays by about 55 million people around the world while Poland itself has about 38 million inhabitants. Chicago, U.S. turns to be the second largest Polish speaking city with over one million Polish immigrants in there. The language itself is very dynamic and together with Polish society undergoes presently many cultural and civilizational changes - some thousands of new loanwords coming from various spheres of life (especially economics, politics and information sciences) have being adapted.

Polish is one of the West Slavic languages, along with Czech, Slovak and Pomeranian (represented nowadays by the Kashubian dialect). To the West Slavic group belongs also Upper Sorbian, Lower Sorbian and the extinct Polabian. All these languages take their origin in the Indo-European language family.

Primarily Polish dialects shared most common traits with Kashubian and Polabian, secondarily with other languages of the West Slavic group. Slightly weaker ties bound Polish with the remaining Slavic languages. As for the other languages descending from Proto-Indo-European, there are more differences than similarities between them and Polish.

1. POLISH – HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Polish – historical background

Almost all languages of Europe and West Asia descend from one common stem, the Proto-Indo-European language, which was spoken by the primeval Indo-European community before the turn of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC. Numerous tribal contacts and wanderings resulted in the split of Indo-European community into several ethnic compounds. Various tribes belonging to the Balto-Slavic community occupied the territory between the Baltic Sea, the Carpatians, the Oder and Dnepr Rivers. It was probably about 1500-1300 BC when those groups formed two separate Proto-Slavic and Proto-Baltic compounds.

In the Proto-Slavic language all closed syllables became open. This brought about the originating of nasal vowels and the differentiating in the vowel length. The opposition of palatalised and non-palatalised consonants was also set up then.

In the period between the 3rd and 6th century the Proto-Slavs divided into three ethno-linguistic groups: West Slavs, East Slavs and South Slavs. The Slavs speaking those dialects are living up to the present time in the areas they settled in the 6th century AD.

Polish as the West Slavic language belongs to so called Lekhitic group together with two other dialects, Polabian and Kashubian. The West Slavic group comprises also the Czecho-Slovak and Sorbian dialects.

Table 1. The family of Indo-European languages

The formation of the Polish language of the preliterate period (until the 12th century) was influenced by two important facts: Christianisation of Poland in 966 (as a result of the adoption of Christianity from Bohemia) and the establishment of the State. Tribal dialects spoken by the inhabitants of the ancient Poland were becoming more and more similar one to another thanks to commonly shared and frequently used vocabulary in official and religious spheres of life. Both the State and the Church were interested in standardising the language finding it favorable to implementation of their politics. In a long process of a state consolidation (reinforced by a religious constraint) both institutions significantly contributed to a creation of a universally comprehensible common language. Christianity introduced Latin, which for long centuries (until the second half of the 18th century) played a role of the elite, literacy language in Poland (like in many other European countries at that time). Latin brought the alphabet, gradually adapted for the Polish phonetics over the centuries. Christianity introduced not only Latin but first Bohemisms into Polish. As we can easily

guess those were loanwords taken from religious life (*anioł* ‘angel’, *msza* ‘mass’, *kościół* ‘church’, *chrzest* ‘baptism’, *ewangelia* ‘gospel’).

Table 2. Polish tribes in the 10th century

From the 12th century onwards Polish can be defined in a more precise way thanks to the first written documents, the earliest of which is the Latin bull of Pope Innocent II sent to Jacob, the Archbishop of Gniezno. It contains about 400 Polish personal names and names of places.

Polish was then a conglomerate of tribal dialects out of which a universally comprehensible supradialectal language was gradually growing. Its formation was influenced mainly by two dialects predominant in the Polish territory at that time: the Wielkopolski dialect (Greater Poland dialect) and the Małopolski (Lesser Poland dialect).

In the 14th century, Poland and Lithuania formed the union which was developed into the vast, multinational Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was during the Renaissance when Polish language got particularly enriched. In the 16th century it started to be used in the Polish Parliament (Sejm) and gained a status of an official state language - the first legal documents were issued in Polish at that time. However, it was still considered to be less cultivated and far less elegant than Latin. For this reason Polish kept being nourished with many loanwords. Latin was by far the language which enriched Polish most. Especially a great intensity of macaronism could be observed in the middle of the 17th century. Obviously at that time Latin was a traditional source of vocabulary for all the European languages. First loanwords coming from French and Italian were connected with Poles’ journeys to France and Italy and were related usually to court life (from Italian: *fraszka* ‘a trifle; an epigram’, *gracja* ‘grace’, *karoca* ‘a carriage’, *splendor* ‘splendour’, *kredyt* ‘a credit’; from French: *dama* ‘a lady’, *fryzjer* ‘a hairdresser’, *gorset* ‘a corset’, *szarża* ‘a charge’, *kadet* ‘a cadet’). Compared to Italian influence the French one lasted longer and dominated during the whole Enlightenment era and continued in the 19th century. From the East there were coming loanwords from Russian and Ukrainian. Germanisms were also numerous (*chwila* ‘a while’, *kubel* ‘a bucket’, *izba* ‘a room’).

During the Enlightenment time the whole Europe was concerned with “raising a cultural level of nations”, which was connected with a promotion of a national language and literature and abandoning Latin. The Commission for National Education, set up in 1773 and tasked with improving the level of educational service, planned and partly introduced a modern educational reform project. Polish became then not only a language in which other subjects

were taught, but it became an important subject of studying as well. Also a development of press turned to be of a great importance to the development of the standardised Polish.

Three subsequent partitions in the second half of the 18th century erased Poland from the map of Europe for the next 123 years. Its territory was divided between three neighbouring states: Russia, Prussia and Austria. Polish disappeared from a public life, obviously including schools and offices. Poles had to speak Russian or German there. Only in the Austrian-annexed sector the use of Polish was not banned and the Jagiellonian University in Krakow remained Polish. In spite of the partitions Polish great literature of Romanticism, Positivism and so called “Young Poland” was blossoming and developing very well. Many important dictionaries were published. First handbooks and works describing and analysing Polish grammar as well as books on a history of the language appeared on a market. Polish dialects became a subject of extended studies. The influence of French, which from the Enlightenment time onwards played a role of the official language and emblem of the intelligentsia, was enormous. Latin maintained its position and prevailed only in sciences: medicine, pharmacology, biology, law, etc. Due to the partitions, there were many loanwords from Russian and German*, including syntactical borrowings.

After Poland regained its independence in 1918, Polish became the only official language in the Second Polish Republic. However, Poland, like other new states in Central Eastern Europe, was a country of minorities. Citizens declaring themselves to be Poles made up to 64-69% of the population (depending on the scientists’ findings). The largest percentage of the non-Polish population was constituted by Ukrainians, Jews, Belorussians, Germans and other nationalities (Russians, Armenians and others).

Table 3. The diagram showing the percentage of nationalities in the Second Polish Republic. Ukrainians – 14%, Jews – 9%, Belorussians – 5%, Germans – 2%, others – 1%.

After the World War II Poland for the first time in the history became a nationally homogenous state. Various factors, e.g. the growing influence of mass culture caused almost complete disappearance of many local dialects.

Table 4. Poland in the year of the first partition, the Second Polish Republic and Poland after the World War II (three outlines)

* A. Cegiela & A. Markowski, *Z polszczyznę za pan brat*, Iskry, Warszawa 1982, p. 217–249.

After 1989 the Poles, especially the youth, who would like to work in the European Union have been appreciating more and more the importance of learning foreign languages. English keeps gaining a great popularity in Poland. As a result of the expansion of English the Polish Language Protection Law was adopted in 1999. It aims to counteract supersession of Polish from public life by other languages and to prevent its vulgarisation. Anyone who breaches this law is liable to a fine.

After joining the European Union Polish became one of the 20 official languages in this organization.

1.2. Changes in Polish language over the centuries

The Polish language began to form in the 10th century and since that time has undergone many changes.

The most important phonetic traits of Polish in comparison to other Slavic languages are:

1) sounds *o* and *a* before non-palatalised consonants instead of the former *e*; and alternations *e*: *o* and *e*: *a* (*wiezie* ‘he carries’: *wiozę* ‘I carry’, *las* ‘a forest’: *lesie* ‘a forest – locative, vocative’, *żenić* ‘to marry’: *żona* ‘a wife’).

It is the consequence of the crucial process which took place in the Lekhitic group, that is the Polish ablaut;

2) replacement of the former syllable-forming *l* and *r* by consonantal-vocalic combinations – pairs *vowel+r* and *vowel+l*, respectively, originated.

3) palatalised consonants *p’, b’, m’, v’, f’, ś, ź* and *ć, dź, rz* – from the earlier *t’, d’, r’*;

4) preservation of nasal vowels *ę* and *ą*;

5) absence of long and inclined vowels caused by the disappearance of vowel length at the beginning of the 16th century; (vowel length – distinguishing between long and short vowels; it doubles the number of vowels);

6) fixed stress and absence of non-expressive intonation.*

Another very important phonetic process was that of the vocalisation of yers, so-called extra-short vowels. The exact sound of the yers is not known. What is only known is that they were pronounced shortly. At present they are marked as *ъ* (hard yer) and *ь* (soft yer). Yers that were in weak positions – at the end of the word – disappeared (*sen* ‘a dream’); yers in strong positions, that is after a syllable in which the weak yer appeared, underwent vocalisation (that is to say they changed to *e* or – less frequently – *o*).

* *Encyklopedia PWN*, Vol. 1–6, PWN, Warszawa 1996, Entry: język polski under Headword: Polska.

Over the centuries also many grammatical changes occurred – some case endings disappeared, as well as some grammatical categories, for instance: dual number (*dwie słowa* ‘two words’, *chodźwa* ‘let both of us go’), two past tenses (aorist and imperfect) and simple adjectival declension (*wesół* ‘merry’, *wesoła* ‘merry – genitive’). Two gender classes: masculine-personal and non-masculine non-personal and the compound adjectival declension appeared. In the conjugational system, among other innovations, a new past tense (*mówilem* ‘I was speaking’ instead of *mówił jeśm*) and a compound future tense (*będę spał* ‘I will sleep’) originated. The use of participles in sentence constructions was limited and complex sentences in written language were developed. The vocabulary was also significantly enriched.

Today linguists distinguish two main varieties of Polish: Standard Polish and dialects. At present, thanks to educational service and media, the majority of Poles use Standard Polish.

2. BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT POLISH

2.1. Polish and the Latin alphabet

In the 10th century the literate period of Polish began. Our ancestors started to use the Latin alphabet and thus got under the influence of the Roman culture. However, this alphabet was not suitable for writing some Polish sounds, e.g. *sz*, *cz*, *dź*, *ć*, *ś*. It is exactly these sounds, so characteristic of Polish, that make foreigners perceive our language as “rustling”.

Table 5. Examples for “rustling” – see the separate attachment; poems at choice.

Attempts to adapt the Latin alphabet for the needs of Polish, e.g. by diacritical signs, started at that time. The earliest spelling rules were being set by monastic scribes for their own use. However, it was not scholars that solved the hard orthographic problem, but Renaissance printers.

The contemporary Polish alphabet consists of 35 letters (three of which, *q*, *v* and *x*, are used mainly in words taken from foreign languages). There are, however, about 40 phonemes in Polish.

Table 6. The Polish alphabet and the phonemes of the Polish language

The Polish alphabet

a b c ć d e ę f g h i j k l ł m n ń o ó p (q) r s ś t u (v) w (x) y z ź ż

The phonemes of the Polish language

a b c ć cz d dz dź dż e ę f g h i j k l ł m n ń o ó p r rz s ś sz t u w y z ź ż

2.2. Phonemes

In different places around the world languages got a different number of phonemes. In the Aranda language spoken at the heart of Australia or in Hawaiian the number of phonemes ranges from 10 up to 20. In such languages more phonemes need to be combined to let words be distinguished. Subsequently, single words get clumsy as they are quite long. On the other hand, the Caucasian languages or languages of the extremes of North America have an enormous number of phonemes, that is 60-70, or even 75!

Polish, having about 40 phonemes, belongs to the intermediate group, what makes it quite comfortable and handy in use, because 2-3 phonemes on average is enough to form a word root, neither an excessively long, nor an excessively short one (*dom* ‘a house’, *pies* ‘a dog’, *kot* ‘a cat’ etc.). This intermediate type will probably prevail in the evolution of world languages because it spares speakers difficulty and it is the most economical.*

Polish is one of moderately consonantal languages (in comparison to the extremely consonantal Caucasian languages). This means that the proportion of vowels and consonants in Polish deviates from the ideal proportion 3:7 (or 30% : 70%), that is the number of consonants exceeds 70% of the total of sounds.*

2.2.1. Vowels

In today's Polish the vowel length is not relevant. It has been preserved in Czech (*pátá* ‘fifth fem.’; *pata* ‘a heel’; *míle* ‘a mile’; *míle* ‘pleasantly’), in Lithuanian and German (*Weg* with a longer *e* ‘a way’; *weg* ‘away’). Poles learning the above languages have difficulty in differentiating these sounds.

Diphthongs, so characteristic of Lithuanian and German, are also absent in Polish. If they occur at all, they appear only in words taken from other languages (*Eu-ro-pa*, *au-tor*, *dai-mo-nion*). The diphthongs got simplified to the form of a single vowel already in the common Slavic epoch (cf. Lithuanian *kai-na*, Polish *cena* ‘a price’; Lithuanian *ei-ti*, Polish *i-ś*)ć ‘to go’). Today diphthongs exist in languages that are very close to Polish, that is in Czech (the *ou*-diphthong – Czech *dlouhy*, Polish *długi* ‘long’; Czech *budou*, Polish *będą* ‘they will be’) and Slovak (the *uo*-diphthong – Slovak *vol’a*, Polish *wola*, Czech *vule* ‘a will’ and the *ie*-diphthong – Slovak *mlieko*, Polish *mleko*, Czech *mleko* ‘milk’).

There are 8 vowels in Polish: 6 oral vowels *a*, *e*, *y*, *i*, *o*, *u* and 2 nasal vowels: *ą* and *ę*.

* J. Miodek, *Przez lata ze słowem polskim*, Ossolineum 1991, p. 15.

* A. Nagórko, *Zarys gramatyki polskiej*, PWN, Warszawa 2003, p. 31.

As far as the oral vowels are concerned, tongue and lips movements are considered to be distinctive. The scheme of the vowels classification is represented by the vowel quadrilateral.

Table 7. Vowel quadrilateral – main Polish vowels

Front row: the mid *e*; the high *i* and *y*.

Back row: the mid *o*; the high *u*

i

y

u

e

o

a

The vowel length was lost already in the beginning of the 16th century. This caused the disappearance of inclined vowels (shorter ones, as in the words *kobita* ‘a woman’, *świca* ‘a candle’), which merged with the non-inclined ones.

It should be noted that the natural nasality of Polish vowels (unlike the nasality in French) has an asynchronous character. This means that the nasal resonance takes places later with respect to the oral articulation of such a vowel.

Historically nasal vowels in many contexts change to non-nasal ones, e.g. word-finally (at the end of the word).

Phenomenon	Example	
	Spelling	Prevalent pronunciation
Disappearance of the nasality of <i>ę</i> word-finally	<i>Się</i>	<i>sie</i> ‘reflexive pronoun’
	<i>kobietę</i>	<i>kobiete</i> ‘a women’
	<i>widzę</i>	<i>widze</i> ‘I see’

However, nasal vowels not only keep disappearing. They also originate where they were previously absent, mostly before a consonant. Cf. the spelling *nonsens* and the colloquial pronunciation *nąsęs*.

2.2.2. Consonants

Polish is a consonantal language. Consonants can pose pronunciation problems, especially that in Polish occur numerous consonantal groups, including clusters of more than 4 consonants in a single word or in a sequence of words (*wzbroniony* ‘prohibited’, *wstęę*

wzbroniony ‘no entry, literally: entry prohibited’). Even the cluster of two plosives *kt-* (occurring in frequently used pronouns: *kto* ‘who’, *ktoś* ‘someone’, *który* ‘which’), which is easy for a Pole or, generally, a Slav, is a real tongue twister for an English speaker.*

Each Polish non-palatalised consonant has its palatalised counterpart (the well-developed row of palatalised consonants gives foreigners pause). Besides the opposition non-palatalised : palatalised, there exists also the opposition voiced : unvoiced (the latter is not only a trait of Polish).

2.2.3. Stress

Polish words are in the main polysyllabic. The stress is fixed and comes on the penult (paroxytonic stress), except for words taken from other languages (*logika, prezydent, leksyka*) or some Polish ones (e.g. in the 1st and 2nd person, plural, past tense: *byliśmy* ‘we were’, *byliście* ‘you were’, *kupiliśmy* ‘we bought’, *kupiliście* ‘you bought’; in compound verbs in the conditional mood, e.g. *zrobilby* ‘he would do’, *zrobilibyśmy* ‘we would do’. The latter forms are stressed as if the endings *-by*, *-byśmy* were not parts of the words).

2.2.4. Morphology and syntax

Polish, like all Indo-European languages in the past, is an inflectional language (from Latin *inflectere* ‘to bend’). This property is also shared by Latin, Greek, Lithuanian, Latvian and all Slavic languages with exception for Modern Bulgarian. It is characteristic for these languages that the grammatical part changes within the word and at the same time it constitutes an inseparable unity with its lexical part. Speakers of analytical languages, such as English, French or Norwegian, in which grammatical functions are specified by detached auxiliary morphemes and the position of the sentence parts, intending to learn Polish or Russian, are often amazed by the plenitude of endings.

Polish school grammar textbooks distinguish 10 parts of speech. Five of them are inflected parts of speech (noun, adjective, numeral, pronoun, verb), the other five – uninflected ones (adverb, particle, preposition, conjunction, interjection).

Polish has 7 cases, two numbers (singular and plural), three genders: masculine, feminine and neuter (in plural there are two: masculine-personal and non-masculine-personal).

Cases

There are 7 cases (in brackets the case questions are given):

* A. Nagórko, *Zarys gramatyki polskiej*, PWN, Warszawa 2003.

- nominative (who? what?)
- genitive (whose? of what?)
- dative (to whom? to what?)
- accusative (whom? what?)
- instrumental (with whom? with what?)
- locative (in whom? about whom? in what? about what?)
- vocative

In plural the vocative form is always the same as the nominative form.

Number

There are two numbers in Polish – singular and plural, although there are also few dual forms, especially in expressions for bodily parts existing in pairs.

Genders

According to the criterion of agreement with the adjective, five genders can be distinguished:

Gender	Example – accusative singular		Example – nominative plural	
	Modifying word	Modified Word	Modifying word	Modified word
Masculine personal	<i>nowego</i> ‘new’	<i>pracownika</i> ‘worker’	<i>nowi</i> ‘new’	<i>pracownicy</i> ‘workers’
Masculine non-personal Animate	<i>nowego</i> ‘new’	<i>psa</i> ‘dog’	<i>nowe</i> ‘new’	<i>psy</i> ‘dogs’
Masculine non-personal inanimate	<i>nowy</i> ‘new’	<i>stół</i> ‘table’	<i>nowe</i> ‘new’	<i>stoły</i> ‘tables’
Feminine	<i>nową</i> ‘new’	<i>Szafę</i> ‘wardrobe’	<i>nowe</i> ‘new’	<i>szafy</i> ‘wardrobes’
Neuter	<i>nowe</i> ‘new’	<i>krzesło</i> ‘chair’	<i>nowe</i> ‘new’	<i>krzesła</i> ‘chairs’

However, usually only one masculine non-personal gender is distinguished; thus, there are four genders on the whole: three in singular and two in plural.

Verbs are inflected for number, person, tense, mood, voice and aspect.

Characteristically, the word stem can appear in several alternate forms (*kot* ‘a cat – nominative’ – *kocie* ‘a cat – locative, vocative’, *wiozę* ‘I carry’ – *wieziesz* ‘you carry’) and the endings can be co-functional (that is, forms of one case in the same gender and number, can

be produced with different noun endings, e.g. in accusative – *młot-ek* ‘a hammer’, *kot-ka* ‘a cat’). The inflectional forms are the basis for the syntax of the sentence.

In languages where the category of case plays a significant role, the word order does not have to be strictly fixed. Only in some situations this may cause misunderstandings, as in the sentences *Dzieci pogryzły psy* ‘The children bit the dogs’ or ‘The dogs bit the children’; *Kury przejechały rowery* ‘The hens run the bicycles down’ or ‘The bicycles run the hens down’. In English, a change in word order would bring about changes in the meaning of the sentence.

Conclusion

Every language changes constantly. Some changes have lasting impact on language, other influence it only in a limited way or even fall into total oblivion. Changes, both grammatical and lexical, happen also in today's Polish.

Due to state border displacements after World War II, urbanisation process, influence of mass culture (television, press) and public education conducted in Standard Polish, the Polish language is getting more and more uniformed. Not all dialects are concerned by this process, e.g. Kashubian as well as the dialect of Highlanders and the Silesian dialect are not threatened with extinction, so far. However, the majority of Polish speakers uses the standard language presently.

Plenty of words are being borrowed from English and, at the same time, many older loanwords, mainly from French and Russian, are disappearing. Interestingly enough, pronunciation of some Gallicisms changes from the French one to the English one, e.g. *image* is in today's Polish pronounced as [i'mid??] rather than as [i'ma??].

Due to a great number of borrowings from English, phonetically quite different to Polish, many sounds and groups of sounds that until now have been rare are spreading. Above that, many re-palatalised sounds (such as e.g. the palatalised *r* in *ring* ‘boxing ring’) are gaining phoneme status.