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## **50 years of doing things with words – the Polish way**

**Motto:**

*Der Mensch ist nur Mensch durch Sprache*

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767 – 1835)

*Czy mówisz po polsku?* – *Do you speak Polish?* – this seemingly straightforward question has been guiding the activities of the School of Polish Language and Culture at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow for 50 years now – at this very moment of the opening of its 50<sup>th</sup> Summer Session in 2019. The word ‘*Polish*’ in the English version of the question stands for ‘*Polish language*’ and the meaning created here may be analysed in terms of a classical SVO structure: Subject (*you*) – Verb (*speak*) – Object (*Polish*) – pretty straightforward also. However, the meaning created in the Polish original is more complex and may be analysed in terms of an intriguing VSA structure: Verb-Subject (*mówisz*) – Adverbial (*po polsku*). The intriguing feature of the Polish version is that there is no Object, no such ‘thing’ as ‘the Polish language’ there! The adverbial phrase ‘*po polsku*’ means literally ‘*the Polish way*’ thus leading us towards a considerably different concept of language than the nominal phrase in the English version. ‘*Do you speak the Polish way?*’ – would be the correct English translation of the Polish opening. The concept of ‘language’ as an object, ‘a thing’ to speak is replaced by a concept of ‘language’ as ‘a way’ to speak indicating that there may be many ways to speak – English, German, Swedish, etc. – and there is one we identify as Polish.

Moving from the nominal concept of language in the English version of our opening question to the adverbial one well rooted in the Polish equivalent may be used as a metaphoric synthesis of the developments in the discussions around language and language education (learning, teaching, and assessment) over at least the last hundred years. Both concepts – the one based on the nominal ‘what’ and the one focused on the adverbial ‘how’ – may be related to the classical de Saussurian distinction between ‘*la langue*’ and ‘*la parole*’, to the one introduced by Chomsky – ‘competence’ and ‘performance’, as well as the one that initiated the communicative movement in language education – ‘usage’ and ‘use’ offered by Widdowson. In my view, the initial excitement with the nominal aspects of language and

language education dominant in the first half of the last century studies slowly but steadily gave way to the adverbial ones, mostly due to a growing appreciation for making meaning as the core aspect rather than studying structures. The groundbreaking observation was offered by John. L. Austin over 60 years ago that what we say (*locution*) is only the starting point in any instance of language use, subject to interpretation of what we mean, intend by saying it (*illocution*) and verified by interlocutor's reaction that follows (*perlocution*). The attention was turned to meaning rather than structure and the point was that meaning is always shaped and made in a social context rather than being enclosed in a given structure. The conclusion that I personally draw from the discussions that followed and are still under way is that today, we seem to be more and more aware of the fact that at the core of language study and language learning is its function to shape, make, and handle meaning. In Austin's words we may say that there are many different ways of doing things with words – we call them languages. Thus, the Polish adverbial formula for 'language' as 'a way' to speak, seems to be astonishingly adequate.

Based on this conclusion, I would like to encourage learners of Polish, participants in our courses in Polish language and culture to try to find out what this specifically Polish way of making meaning or doing things with words may be, and to what extent does it differ from other ways: English, German, Chinese etc. And, if it does differ, does it say anything about its users – the millions of people who developed it as the primary linguistic ability of their mind. The idea that brings together and relates the ways people make meaning and the ways people are has been with us for quite some time now. At least three names may be brought up here: the 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century American anthropologists Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir.

Let's then bring up some aspects of the specifically Polish way of doing things with words and try to draw conclusions as to the way of being of the Polish people. We may well start with the words themselves – the vocabulary of the Polish language accumulated over the millenium of its development in lively contact with other cultures and languages, not only the neighbouring ones but with those from afar, too. A meaningful starting observation may be the fact that at least 11% of the words in the contemporary Polish vocabulary stem from our common European Latin and Greek heritage shared by a number of other languages. Plenty of examples of such a common European way of doing things with words may be found in the domains of religion, education, science, medicine, law, and politics.

Beginning learners of the Polish language may be surprised to hear that already at the start of their study they are offered a considerable bonus of at least 15% of the Polish vocabulary for free, in addition to the ones mentioned above – provided they are proficient users of at least one language from the two big European families of languages: Germanic, including the most popular one – English, and Romance. Native speakers of German learning Polish will be surprised how much of the Polish way of doing things with words – at least 5% – is based on vocabulary directly borrowed, adopted, adapted, or translated from their mother tongue. They may enjoy to find out how much in Polish is done with words of German origin, most specifically in the domains of trade, crafts, industry, mining, and administration. Proficient users of Romance languages will be happy to know that much of things related to love, war, and entertainment is done in Polish with French words. They may also smile to our use of Italian words denoting vegetables, but also in the domains of architecture and music. Speakers of Turkish or Arabic languages will be certainly curious to find out how come some things in Polish are done with words borrowed from their linguistic heritage. And, of course, over the last few decades, we have extensively expanded our scope of doing things with English words, previously prominently used in sports (tennis, boxing), now heavily extended to media, technology, business, and banking.

Do all of these examples of the ‘hospitality’ of the Polish language say anything about the native speakers of Polish? Can they be used as an evidence for the proverbial Polish hospitality, mobility, and entrepreneurship? I leave you with an invitation to reflect on it by yourself.

Now, is there anything in the structure of the Polish language that may be interpreted in terms of the Polish way of being? I would like to bring up just a few examples open to this kind of interpretation. We may start with the nominal declension system in Polish and the well-known legend that each Polish noun or even each nominal group of words (Pronoun – Adjective – Noun) may have – theoretically – up to 14 different forms (seven in Singular and seven in Plural). The fact that some of these forms are identical and not really different does not change much in the conclusion that the structure of the Polish language offers a much more differentiated repertoire of words in dealing with ‘things’ than many other languages. Does this say anything about the way native speakers of Polish look at things and handle meaning around them?

Let’s turn to the other ‘specialty’ of the Polish language – the frequent use of Diminutives. The system allows for almost unlimited creativity in adding a touch of ‘sweet’, ‘cozy’, and

‘tiny little’ to almost any ‘thing’, not just people’s names – and native speakers of Polish indeed love to make use of this – not just in the private domain but many times in public social contexts, too. Does this specifically but not exclusively (shared with other Slavic languages) Polish way of doing things with words impact on or – to change the perspective – reflect the way of being of the native speakers?

And how about the fact that each ‘thing’, not just nouns denoting people, has to be identified in Polish by its ‘gender’? It is either a masculine ‘him’ or feminine ‘her’ or neutral ‘it’. What consequences does it bring for the perception and description of ‘things’, especially in a metaphoric sense, e.g. in poetry?

As for the Polish verb – let’s consider the fact that almost all verbs denoting action have at least two (some may even have three!) optional forms depending on which aspect of the action the user wants to stress – the action itself or the result of it. Is the for some learners of Polish surprising ‘discovery’ that there is no way to escape from making this choice and right from the start learn two (at least) verbal forms for every action and make sure which aspect to highlight each time – is this saying anything about the way native speakers of Polish perceive actions or even act?

To sum up – learners of Polish may wish to consider reflecting upon these observations while integrating the Polish way of doing things with words into their plurilingual repertoire. I am sure it may become a fascinating ‘research project’ accompanying their course of studying the Polish language and culture with us at the Jagiellonian University.

An important observation to complement the picture: the Polish way of doing things at the School of Polish Language and Culture of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków goes well beyond the linguistic features outlined above. Over the last 50 years we have hosted over 35 000 participants from over 50 countries around the world. Our lecturers, teachers, administrators and partners have over all these years made every effort to provide them in a genuinely Polish way with the highest possible level of academic, social, and human quality, hospitality, friendly atmosphere, security, and family-like feeling, even at times when hosting foreigners, most specifically those from the western countries, in a socialist Poland struggling with both political and economic restraints, was not a straightforward business. We have invited them to join us today, for the inauguration of the 50<sup>th</sup> Summer Session, to pay tribute both to their idea to launch the Summer School and to their magnificent work with us over all these years – thank you all!