DOI: 10.24425/academiaPAS.2023.147017



Linguistic Purism

How can contaminations enrich a language? What determines how people react to them?

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The term "purism" (from the Latin *purus* "pure") refers to an oversensitivity to purity. Such an oversensitivity might manifest itself in sports, in a certain doctrine, or in literature, art, or language. A sporting purist, for instance, might refuse to recognize any disciplines other than those once practiced by the ancient Greeks. A doctrinal purist will doggedly defend the first principles of his or her particular doctrine, no matter how they actually function in today's world. A purist critic will rip to shreds any work whose creator dares to cross different styles or genres. And a linguistic purist will cry: "Down with all borrowings, neologisms, colloquialisms!" – railing against anything he or she feels to be undesirable, polluting the language's purity.

Aversion to things foreign

In scientific discourse, "purism" and "purist" are essentially objective descriptions, although even there they are sometimes used as epithets (the epithet opposite in polarity to is then "liberal"). In public debate, however, such terms are often used in order to depreciate one's opponents. A politician who pushes for some legislative measure with no heed for the broader legal implications, for instance, may ironically refer to his or her opponents as "legal purists" (real examples of this can be found in the proceedings of Poland's parliament).

In the public perception, a "purist" is often seen as a freak, a nitpicker on a mission, who tries to instill his or her obsessions in others, writing letters-to-the-editor (in the past) or online posts (nowadays), indefatigably appealing to various bodies.

In Poland, perhaps the most typical kind of purism – garnering the most public attention and becoming the subject of scientific research – is linguistic purism. This demonstrates the importance of the Polish language in our eyes: we consider it a value to be cherished and preserved. This, in turn, means that people might sometimes exaggerate the threat posed to the language, or project a false enemy.

One particular kind of linguistic purism is xenophobic purism – a strong aversion to words of foreign origin. Lesser-known varieties include traditional purism, elitist purism, egocentric purism (the names speak for themselves). The history of linguistic purism in Poland spans five centuries, stretching back to when the Polish literary language was first being formed. This is not surprising – purism is certainly closely related to linguistic standards, to norms of usage and their codification in dictionaries and grammars.

Conservative views

One could go on to describe numerous examples of linguistic purists in Poland, many of them quite interesting characters (often well-known for other achievements). There is no room here for nuanced profiles, but it is worth noting that there are not only different varieties of linguistic purism, but also different degrees of severity. To some extent, we are all purists, because it is hard to imagine that anyone is ready to approve of *everything* in the way people speak and

write. For example, the present author, though considered a liberal in terms of linguistic usage, is driven to nausea by the Polish phrase *pochylić się nad czymś*. Its literal meaning is "to lean over something," but is has become recurrent in the Polish media whenever there is talk of someone turning their attention to something or something, showing concern. Here's an example from a website: *Rząd pochyla się ponownie nad kredytobiorcami*. In modern media-speak this is intended to mean something like "The government is again graciously considering what it can do for mortgage-holders" (who are being squeezed by anguishing interest rates) but the literal sense of "The government is again leaning over mortgage-holders" remains highly salient. One can nearly picture the prime minister and ministers actually bending over the poor borrowers, as if breathing down on them.

What fosters purist attitudes, what is their source? We have already mentioned how linguistic purism is related to language standards and to a sense of one's language being under threat. Some other factors have been studied empirically. For instance, less tolerance for borrowed words has been found to be shown by people who strongly identify with their own ethnic group.

People who hold conservative views – who declare, for instance, that they are averse to divorce, abortion rights, and same-sex relationships – have also been found to show less tolerance for linguistic borrowings. It is appealing to conjecture that purism correlates with plasticity of mind, ease of adaptation to changing conditions, but such a relationship has not been captured in research.

Instead, numerous surveys show that less tolerance for linguistic borrowing is more common among people who are less educated, less familiar with foreign languages and rarely encounter borrowings in their everyday lives. This last correlation may come as a surprise and suggest a perverse conclusion: if we want to reduce the degree of social frustration caused by the influx of foreign words into a language, we should try to ensure that such words are used as much as possible. Psychologists describe a similar phenomenon they call the "mere exposure effect." For example, we tend to like the same melody more when we listen to it a third time than we did the first time around (although of course the individual tastes and musical refinement of the listener cannot be ignored).

The rationale of purist attitudes has been repeatedly challenged, for example, by pointing out that there really is no such thing as a "pure" language, and that it is difficult to identify any unequivocal standard of purity. Should it be the language of the royal court, the language of the capital city, the language used by prominent writers, or even an influential newspaper? All have been held up as such standards for various languages. The Icelandic language is more similar to the Norwegian spoken back in the Middle Ages than to either of its two main contemporary varieties, but does that mean Icelandic should be a model for Norwegian today?

A source of diversity

Paradoxically, purists often enrich their own language: they invent native words with the intention of replacing unwanted borrowings, yet often fail to achieve their goal. In Polish, for instance, we have both *biblioteka* "library" and also *książnica*, nowadays in a slightly different meaning – although the latter word originated as an attempt to replace the former. Similarly, we have *uniwersytet* "university" alongside *wszechnica*, also coined (incidentally, by a university professor and an active purist at the same time) as an attempt to remove the word university from the Polish language. Languages turn out to be capacious enough to accommodate such doublets – words often simply carve out specialized niches for themselves.

And as long as we are discussing the richness of a language, we must ask whether it is at all compatible with the notion of purity. There is no room for a longer discussion here, but let's note that while purity is generally seen as carrying positive connotations (cf. "purity" as sexual abstinence in Christian ethics, "pure gold", "a pure conscience"), it is also associated with uniformity, and therefore with monotony.

Purity can be an ideal, but it can also sometimes be a dangerous delusion (cf. "racial purity"), in the name of which people are prepared to do shameful deeds. Therefore, sometimes it is good to set lofty ideals aside and keep focused on more practical concerns – such as those the satirist Jerzy Paczkowski seems to have had in mind when he wrote (before WWII):

For two serious reasons
Poland leaves me without hope:
There's too much holy water,
Too little ordinary soap.

(trans. D. Sax) ■



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Further reading:

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