

How predictable is linguistic change?

The Polish of Tomorrow

A solid awareness of general linguistic laws and trends enables us to venture predictions about what a given language may be like in the future. For instance, in a language like Polish, with an extensive and robust system of nominal cases, it is fairly easy to identify the "power of attraction" of certain case endings, gauged in terms of their uniqueness and dominance in the overall declension paradigm. In contemporary Polish, nearly all singular masculine nouns now take the ending *-owi* in the dative case, although back in early Slavic times that ending was only used with a handful of words. Because *-owi* is not used in any other slot in the declension paradigm, it gradually became identified with the masculine dative and spread to almost all masculine nouns. We should therefore expect the momentum of the process to continue until *-owi* finally spreads to the few exceptions still holding out against it, retaining the older ending *-u* such as *psu* ('to the dog') or *bratu* ('to the brother'). The fact that young children indeed often attempt to use more 'regular' forms of these exceptional words, incorrectly using *-owi* as in *psowi* or *bratowi*, adds further weight to our prediction: children's speech is after all a kind of window on the language of the future.

To take another example, long ago all masculine nouns in Polish used to take a zero ending in the accusative case, making the accusative always identical to the nominative. Then a subset of animate masculine nouns came to be distinguished, taking the ending *-a* instead (this time identical to the genitive). Here, too, the process gained a kind of inertia and some inanimate nouns now also take the *-a* ending, such as certain articles (*palę papierosa* - 'I'm smoking a cigarette') and makes of car (*kupuję fordą* - 'I'm buying a Ford'). All this leads us to predict that the accusative ending in *-a* may spread to all masculine nouns someday - this is moreover confirmed by its recent appearance with many new nouns, including technology-related phrases like *nadać esemesa* ('send an SMS') and *kupić laptopa* ('buy a laptop').

A similar process of shift and assimilation is also evident in the tension between the two feminine accusative forms of the Polish word for 'this/that': the form *tę*, which once reigned supreme, vs. the relative newcomer *tą*. Although *tą* was long frowned upon by prescriptive norms and only came to be accepted as an alternative relatively recently, its rise may be viewed as rational (in the sense that it parallels a similar shift from *-ę* to *-ą* in the ending for feminine accusative adjectives). So rational indeed that it seems inevitable that *tą* will ultimately win out over *-ę*.

Word stress is another domain where we can glimpse the future of Polish. Generally the accent in Polish falls on the next-to-last syllable in most words, although a sizeable number of exceptions, including Latinate nouns such as *matematyka* and inflected verbs such as *widzieliśmy* ('we saw'), are traditionally stressed on the third syllable from the end. But these exceptions, too, have been slowly succumbing to the penultimate-stress rule and it seems inevitable that they will all become assimilated for future speakers.

I would also like to point out three lexical phenomena which are linked to Poland's socioeconomic transformation since 1989 and which I expect to have a tangible impact on the future of the Polish language. Firstly, there is an increasing tendency to put a distinguishing modifier before a noun, as it is done in English or German, rather than after the noun as has been standard in Polish for centuries. Thus these days we encounter constructions such as *Kredyt Bank*, *Lutosławski Kwartet*, *biznesplan* rather than the more traditionally Polish formulations *Bank Kredytowy*, *Kwartet Lutosławskiego*, *plan biznesowy*. This process is undoubtedly gaining further ground as Poland opens up for foreign influence.

Secondly, the modifying morphemes *e-* and *euro-* are especially productive nowadays, bringing more and more new coinages as *e-biblioteka* ('e-library'), *e-faktura* ('e-invoice'), and *eurotransport*.

Thirdly, as the proliferation of new *e-* words suggests, the electronic reality is pervading our daily lives and Poles are also drawing upon it more and more as a source of interesting idioms. As a case in point, the loanword *reset* in Polish not only retains its English meaning of 'start up an operating system again' but has also gained a colloquial sense involving relaxation/recuperation, as in *muszę się zresetować* (literally: 'I need to reset myself') or loosely: 'I really need to take a break from it all').

And so, we can expect that becoming steeped in this *e-reality* will in fact stimulate our stylistic imagination even more. That seems to be quite an optimistic note on which to conclude our mind's-eye look at the Polish language of tomorrow! ■



Foreign influence
and becoming steeped
in e-reality will stimulate
Polish speakers'
stylistic imagination

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