

Poglish in England, the United States, and Poland

By **Frederic W. Widlak, Ph.D.**

Profesor Nadzwyczajny
Department of Organizational and Managerial Psychology
Wyższa Szkoła Biznesu--National-Louis University
Nowy Sącz, Poland

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Abstract

Poglish is a dialect that results from combining language elements from Polish and English. It is most commonly heard among people whose first language is Polish, but encounter the need to use English for practical situations in an English-speaking country, or to describe things using English words in Poland because there is no easily translatable equivalent term in Polish. The Poglish examples in this presentation will include those personally experienced by the author when listening to Polish immigrants in Chicago, some accounts of this dialect currently used by Polish immigrants in England, and the incorporation of English words or modifications of English words into the Polish lexicon in Poland. The implications of the use of Poglish on Polish immigrant traditions and the culture of present-day Poland are discussed.

Introduction

“Poglish”, also called “Polglish” or “Ponglish”, combines the words “Polish” and “English” to indicate a mixing of Polish- and English-language elements within a single speech production. It often occurs where native Polish speakers living in an English-speaking country swap certain Polish words or phrases for English ones, or add Polish pre- and suffixes, decline or otherwise modify English words to fit in with the rest of the (Polish) sentence.ⁱ

Sometimes the combining of Polish and English elements occurs in a single word, such as a “drinkować” (drink) with “frendy” (friends). But don’t drink too much if you are “drajwnić” (driving) your “kara” (car) on the “strity” (streets). Some English words are kept intact but spelled according to a Polish transliteration, thus someone can go “szoping” (shopping) for a “tiszert” (T-shirt). In some cases, substitutions of similar-appearing words are made in phrases or pairs of words, such as when “cashing a check” in an English-speaking country. A Poglish speaker might erroneously say “kasować czek” (to cancel a check) instead of the correct “realizować czek” (to cash a check).ⁱⁱ

Poglish in England

According to data from the 2011 census, 546,000 people in England and Wales speak Polish. Polish is now the main language spoken in England after English, but its growth may be slowing as immigration from Poland declines.ⁱⁱⁱ

Polish immigrants in Britain are creating their own special language that combines their native tongue and English—resulting in Poglish. This language has sprung up in Polish communities across the country and is growing in popularity. Magda Pustola, of the Polish Cultural Institute in London, says that the blending of words and phrases from the two languages is becoming so common that it is creeping into meetings at the institute. For many Poles in England, it is not a conscious, rational combining of languages, but appears to be a creative response to the need to communicate in a country that is English-dominant. Ms. Pustola pointed out that although Poglish includes some English words without changing the spelling, for example “highstreet” to indicate the main street of a community, she said that “At the institute, we are always trying to smuggle Polish words into English.” She referred to a campaign to promote Poland’s favorite drink: “There is no V in Wodka.” “We spell vodka with a W,” she said, “so we campaigned to change all words with V.” British people, accordingly, might be “vacuuming” or watching “wideos”. “You see,” she said, “it works both ways.”^{iv}

Poglish in the United States

There are about 11 million Polish-Americans, representing about 3.3 per cent of the population of the United States, but only about 667,000 report that Polish is the language spoken at home.^v The largest concentration of Polish-speaking Americans is in the Chicago area, where about 185,000 people report Polish to be their primary language.^{vi}

The local form of Poglish, called “Chicago Polish”, is also found in other Great Lakes cities such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Gary, Indiana; Detroit, Michigan; Cleveland, Ohio; and Buffalo, New York. All of these cities also share a common way of speaking English called the Inland Northern American English dialect.^{vii} Although linguists don’t appear to have looked into this coincidence, I think there might be evidence that Polish immigrants in these cities have in fact influenced the way that English is pronounced in these cities.

Some Chicago Polonia (members of the expatriate Polish community) speak Poglish on a daily basis, especially those who have lived there a long time. The most common phenomenon is the Polonization of English words. Instead of saying (in English), “A cop gave me a ticket on the highway,” or (in Polish), “Gliniarz dał mi mandat na autostradzie,” a Polonian might say (in Poglish), “Kap dał mi tiketa na hajleju,” (with “kap” standing for “cop”, “tiket” - with Polish declension suffix “a” added - for “ticket”, and “hajlej” (also with declension) for “highway”). This sentence is constructed by mixing Polish grammar (verbs, word order and noun inflection) with English nouns. A Polonian attempting to speak this kind of Polish-English mixture in Poland would have difficulty making himself understood.^{viii}

I grew up in Chicago listening to Poglish, as my grandparents and other immigrants from Poland tried to incorporate English words into their speech, but this was a slow and imperfect process, since it was, and still is, possible to survive in many areas of Chicago by speaking only Polish. One of my favorite Poglish words is “podsajdwałkiem”, which literally means “under the sidewalk.” It describes someone who is really in a bad way, for example so drunk that he is “podsajdwałkiem.” It was so popular that Polish people in Chicago referred to the mythical character, Joe Podsajdwałkiem, in friendly insults.

Poglish in Poland

In Poland there is a trend to anglicize the Polish language. Young Poles in particular are using Poglish as a slang form to differentiate themselves from their parents and other older people. "English is being used more and more," said Aneta Prasal-Wiśniewska, a specialist on Polish and British cultural links at the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Warsaw. "It's connected to the rise of the internet and the fact that people are travelling so much more." "There are some small Polish towns and cities where huge groups left to go the UK, now when they meet up together back in Poland it's no surprise if they use slang with English words," she said.^{ix}

Polish translator Anna Lycett, from Leeds, England told about the phenomenon of 'Ponglish' and how Polish people visiting the UK are bringing the language home. She said English is often used in the office environment, adding: "Mostly English is incorporated into Polish in business speak, so terminology used in the office would be English rather than Polish: for example you would go to a 'briefing' [sic] rather than use the Polish word for it. Marketing is often referred to as 'marketing' and you would also say 'IT' rather than the 'technologia informacyjna' or 'TI' either. People tend to use these English words whether they fully understand what they mean in English or not. English can be seen in areas that are rapidly developing and changing in Poland, like the business world. I think Ponglish is happening in part because the Polish and the Polish government doesn't adopt the trend of Polonising things, in the same way that for example France does, instead it's very much a case of incorporating languages. It's also happening because so many English and American companies are based in Poland so it's easiest to speak at least some English. Young people are coming over here to travel or study and then going back and adopting words at home. For some people, Ponglish is seen as 'cool.'^x

In many instances, Polish people will use an English word either because it offers a meaning that doesn't have a Polish equivalent or because it cannot be directly translated or the translation simply doesn't work. The best example of the latter is the word “interface”. A literal translation, “międzymordzie”, doesn't work. “Interface” has become “interfejs” and many other English words have been adopted (and adapted) in the same way.^{xi}

Many businesses seem to believe that English words and phrases make them sound more sophisticated. At the Trzy Korony shopping mall in Nowy Sącz, we have businesses named Apart, Big Star, Carry, Diverse, Etiuda Travel, EyeMedica, Fitness Trzy Korony, H&M Home, Home & You, House, iSpace, Medicine, New Yorker, Play, Plus, Pretty One, Reserved, Simple-CP, Solar, T-Mobile, Texas Club, Top Secret, Volcano, Wrangler, and Yes.

Some of these are, of course, brand names that originated outside of Poland, but they promote the increased use of English in Poland and, along with McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, bring an English language-based culture to the shopping mall and its clients.

Endnotes

ⁱ The Polski Blog. More English in Polish?

<http://thepolskiblog.co.uk/tag/ponglish/#sthash.okayhasN.dpuf>.

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia, *Poglish*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poglish>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Booth, R. *Polish becomes England's second language*, 30 January 2013,

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/jan/30/polish-becomes-englands-second-language>.

^{iv} De Quetteville, H. & Leidig, M. *Polish Ponglish dialect arrives in England*, 2 July 2008,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/2235917/Polish-Ponglish-dialect-arrives-in-England.html>

^v U.S. Census Bureau. *Ancestry 2000*. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/c2kbr-35.pdf>.

^{vi} Polish American Association. *The Polish Community in Metro Chicago: A Community Profile of Strengths and Needs, A Census 2000 Report*. June 2004, p.18.

^{vii} Labov, William, Sharon Ash, and Charles Boberg (2006). *The Atlas of North American English*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

^{viii} Wikipedia, *Poglish*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poglish>.

^{ix} De Quetteville, H. & Leidig, M. *Polish Ponglish dialect arrives in England*, 2 July 2008,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/2235917/Polish-Ponglish-dialect-arrives-in-England.html>

^x Morse, F. A. *Census 2011 Reveals Spike In Polish Speakers - But Linguist Says Poles Are Taking Their 'Ponglish' Home*. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/01/30/ponglish-census-2011-english-language- n_2580973.html.

^{xi} The Polski Blog. More English in Polish?

<http://thepolskiblog.co.uk/tag/ponglish/#sthash.okayhasN.dpuf>.