

Polish language: history and basic information

In this post I'd like to share with you some basic information about Polish language and its historical background.

Polish, or *"język polski"*, is a part of Indo-European family of languages, belonging to its Slavic group, which is further divided into three branches'

- East Slavic, including e.g. Russian
- West Slavic, including Polish and e.g. Slovak
- South Slavic, including e.g. Serbian

Thus, Polish belongs to the West Slavic language group and is said to be closely related to Czech and Slovak. In the past Polish was notably influenced by languages like Latin, French, German or Russian, which can be seen in a large number of loanwords. Nowadays, most borrowings are of English origin.

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The beginnings of Polish language go back as far as 1000 years ago. Around the 6th century different Slavic tribes that were dwelling on what's now Polish territory started permanent settlement. In the second half of the 10th century some of these tribes unified and formed Polish statehood. With time, linguistic differences between these tribes faded and Polish language emerged.

Usually, three main development stages of Polish are being distinguished:

- Old Polish – from 10th to 16th centuries
- Middle Polish – from 16th to 18th centuries
- Modern Polish – from the 19th century onwards.

The earliest known sentence written in the Polish language was recorded in the chronicle of a Cistercian abbey, the so-called *"The Book of Henryków"* from ca. 1270:

Day, ut ia pobrusa, a ti poziwai.

The corresponding sentence in Modern Polish is:

Daj, niech ja pomieję, a ty odpoczywaj.

It can be translated into English as: *Come, let me grind, and you take a rest.*

Comparing just these two sentences in Old and Modern Polish we can imagine how much Polish language has changed over the centuries.

Nowadays, there are approximately 50 million Polish speakers worldwide. 38 million of them live in Poland, but there are significant Polish communities in countries like e.g. USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany and Russia.

There are several dialects in Poland, the main being:

- Greater Polish dialect
- New Mixed dialect
- Masovian dialect
- Silesian language
- Kashubian language

The Polish alphabet is based on the Latin alphabet. It has 32 letters, including 9 letters used exclusively in Polish: *ą, ć, ę, ł, ń, ó, ż, ź*. The letters *q, v, and x* are only used to write foreign words. Due to the variety of sounds in Polish language, its pronunciation is considered to be very difficult. A good example is the below Polish tongue twister:

"W Szczepieszynie chrząszcz brzmi w trzcinie".

(English phonetic transcription: [ʃʲɛʦɛbʒɛʂɨjɲɛ χʂɔũʦʲɛʂ bʒmi ftʂɛjɲɛ])

Believe me, this sentence is difficult to pronounce even for native speakers!

Polish language is a highly fusional language. Nouns, adjectives and pronouns belong to one of three genders: masculine, feminine and neuter, their counting is singular and plural and they change their form, i.e. case, depending on their function in the sentence. Verb conjugation is complex as well. It changes form depending on the mode, tense (present, past, or future) and person. Also, although the dominant arrangement is SVO, there is relatively a lot of freedom in word order. That's a significant difference comparing to SOV in Japanese. I guess it's no wonder that Polish language has a reputation of being one of the most difficult languages in the world – one can imagine just from this basic information its complexity.

That's it for today!

I'll introduce some basic phrases in one of my next posts!

Hanna