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**YOUNG POLES AND THEIR CASUAL SPEECH:  
THE PROCESS OF COLLOQUIALISATION OF THE CONTEMPORARY  
POLISH LANGUAGE**

*All slang is metaphor, and all metaphor is poetry.*

Gilbert Keith Chesteron (1874–1936)

**1 Introduction**

Language, like every other tool created by human beings is, ‘shaped’ by them for a particular purpose at certain moments in history. It seems reasonable to claim that the contemporary Polish language is influenced by its users and by the socio-political circumstances much more than before the year 1989 (the dawn of the ‘Transformation Process’). The process of globalization and the omnipresent need for language simplification have their reflection in changes in contemporary languages. People feel the necessity to express their thoughts, feelings, moods and intentions through the use of the smallest number of words. To achieve this, according to Ashley Montagu (2001), people turn to more unconventional (non-formal) solutions such as the use of an informal language register, which make the contemporary language more colloquial. Slang, swearing and derogatory language are becoming a convenient means of communication because they *do* enable people to express themselves with the use of a limited number of language signs.

The general aim of this paper is to present and describe the phenomenon of *colloquialisation* of the contemporary Polish language and the growing popularity of *slang*, *swearing*, *vulgarisms* and *derogatory terms* among their most fanatic followers, namely young Poles. In the theoretical part of this paper we intend to concentrate on the social and cultural aspects of colloquialisation of the Polish language. We will try to define hypothetical relationships between the sex of the speakers (text’s senders) and the particular items of the informal language register they use. The practical part deals with a detailed presentation of socio-linguistic research which was prepared and conducted on young Poles for the purpose of this paper.

## 2 Colloquialisation of the Polish language

The process of colloquialisation is strictly connected with language change but not necessarily with language oversimplification. Language users continuously vacillate over determining what is colloquial and what is not. Steward Flexner (1967: 190) claims that:

Colloquialisms are familiar words and idioms used in informal speech and writing, but not considered explicit or formal enough for polite conversation or business correspondence.

According to Michał Garcarz (2003) colloquialization of the Polish language is caused by the cultural and political changes which took place in Poland after 1989. Jacek Mazur (2000: 182) states that contemporary Polish cultural tendencies are shaped by 'aggressive' and 'attractive' cultural fashions copied from Western societies. The informal language register (slang, swearing, derogatory language) is preferred by young Poles as a direct, economic and precise tool of everyday communication, concludes Jennifer Coates (2003: 31).

### 2.1 The source of colloquialisation

Kazimierz Ozóg (2002) enumerates five basic cultural reasons for language colloquialisation:

- postmodernisation;
- consumptionism;
- media;
- Americanization;
- breaking of cultural taboos.

A *taboo* is generally a social phenomenon and, therefore, some terms are regarded as taboo by some people, but not by others. Taboo words are those that are considered in bad taste by some people or that are better to be avoided because they mention realities that are crude, stark or vulgar. They refer to nearly every activity of human beings but they also describe them with the use of unconventional, vulgar and abusive language (slang, swearing and vulgarisms). Maria Rosaria D'Acerno (2002) adds that language is a social organism which undergoes permanent changes and mutations under the influence of media and politics. Anna Dąbrowska (2003) goes further and claims that taboos are the foundation of social norms which enable people to keep a moral balance and exist in a given society in accordance with those norms.

### 2.2 The twisted nature of slang and swearing

*Slang* is neither a jargon, nor a secret code, nor a dialect, nor unacceptable usage of the idiom of everyday speech. Slang is a style category within a language, which occupies an extreme position on the spectrum of formality. Slang, swear-

ing and vulgarisms do not actually mean the same thing, even though they are used in similar situations or in comparable circumstances. Slang traditionally has a more universal character because of its broad application. Maciej Widawski (2003) points out that only 30% of the entire collection of slang words or expressions in every language have an abusive or vulgar character. According to Peter Trudgill (1992: 66) slang comprises:

Vocabulary which is associated with very informal or colloquial styles, such as English *batty* (mad) or *ace* (excellent). Some items of slang may be only temporarily fashionable, and thus tend to be associated with particular age-groups in the society. Other slang words and phrases may stay in the language for generations.

In addition, slang is considered to be group-related whereas swearing is not. Almost every social group can be distinguished by the usage of a particular vocabulary, however, overlap between groups might occur. Anatoly Liberman points out that “slangs were the competitive” (2003: 109) element of language development. Slang and swearing evolve naturally as a result of specific situations. At first, they are brought into circulation in a language, then, they gain popularity and after a generation or two, they disappear from usage or become regular or neutral expressions. For a while, it is possible to promote a popular word or expression which apparently becomes slang, but after a given period of time the word or phrase undergoes the process of ‘neutralization’ (see Garcarz, 2003). Many language users deem slang and swearing to be nothing more but a by-product of a language change. However, there are three cultural conditions in which, according to Flexner (1967: 195), slang and swearing gain a very decisive position in the process of language development:

- openness to or acceptance of new objects, situations and concepts;
- existence of a large number of diversified sub-groups;
- democratic mingling between these sub-groups and the dominant culture.

Slang and swearing were never treated as a vital element of any language change. Nonetheless, nobody doubts the constructive and destructive character of informal language. Magda Kizewetwer and Jan Rusiecki (2003) add that swear words and vulgarisms work as ‘gap fillers’ which change their meaning according to the context in which they appear. Maciej Grochowski (2001) understands vulgarisms as words which are usually offensive and associated with a speech community rather than a social group. Iłona Biernacka-Ligieża (2001: 74) continues by saying that vulgarisms are those lexical units which act in the scope of the social taboo because of their semantic features and the element of subjective reference. Slang and swearing work like a weapon. Everything depends on the person who carries it. On the one hand, people can possibly simplify their everyday conversations when they continuously use slang and swear-

ing. On the other hand, a reckless and unlimited application of the informal language register distracts the listener's attention from the true content of the speaker's message, which consequently ceases communication.

### 2.3 Supporters of colloquialisation

Colloquialisation is not stimulated by language researchers, but by casual language users. Average members of a society have a profound influence on the real condition of the language they speak. Nevertheless, an individual is not in general capable of shaping the whole language. It is the task of a group of language users. Joanna Szczęk (2002: 231) observes that:

Język i kultura wywierają na siebie wzajemny wpływ. Język, jako struktura podlegająca ciągłym przemianom, jest odzwierciedleniem istniejących w danej społeczności poglądów, jej mentalności, sposobu myślenia i spostrzegania świata.

[Language and culture influence one another. The constantly changing language reflects the opinions, mentality, way of thinking and attitude toward life of speech community which exists in a particular language. Trans. M.G.]

Language colloquialisation is caused by the uncontrolled and unlimited inflow of slang, swearwords and derogatory terms into the concise vernacular of present-day language users. Youth, who may create certain speech communities, are considered to be fervent adherents of the informal language register.

### 2.4 Speech community

Young Poles create more or less coherent sub-groups which favor one system of communication common to all their members. They prefer slang, swearing and derogatory terms as a unified system of information exchange. They create speech communities, which Anna Duszak (1998: 260) defines as a group of people who use their communicative competence for the purpose of the entire community. Anna Duszak (1998: 260, quoted in Piotr Chruszczewski, 2002: 58) states as follows:

W kompetencji wspólnoty dyskursu funkcjonuje stosunkowo użyteczne pojęcie eksperta i nowicjusza. Oznacza to przyjęcie tezy o gradualności kategoryjnej, a więc o zróżnicowanym poziomie kompetencji merytorycznej i tekstowo-komunikacyjnej poszczególnych przedstawicieli danej wspólnoty. Pozwała to mówić o członkach zajmujących pozycję centralną oraz o członkach sytuujących się na peryferiach. Inaczej niż ma to miejsce w przypadku wspólnot językowych, 'pełne' członkostwo w danej wspólnocie dyskursu oznacza wysoki stopień czynnej aktywności komunikacyjnej. Zdolność odbierania nie świadczy o automatycznie o zdolności produkowania.

[There functions, within the concept of the discourse community, the quite useful notion of expert and novice. This categorized hierarchy is of a varying level of substantial and textual-communicative competence of individual members of a given community. Due to the above one can talk about members who take both central as well as peripheral places. Contrary to language communities, 'full' membership in a given discourse community means a high level of the communicative activity. The ability to receive does not automatically equal here the ability to produce. Trans. P.C.]

Young people who represent a particular speech community desire to sound fashionable. They have to be very industrious and inventive if they do not want to be excluded from the group they are the part of. In the opinion of Flexner: "the larger, more imaginative, and useful a group's vocabulary, the more likely it is to contribute slang" (1967: 193).

### 2.5 Sex and language preferences

Language is a system of social symbols which has to be simple for its senders (speakers) and understandable for its receivers (listeners). However, there is another minor element which plays a crucial role in the entire communication process, namely the speaker's sex. As we have mentioned earlier, young people are the most susceptible to the influence of informal language. For adolescents, the most relevant group is their peer-group, and for that group taboo language or slang expressions are not in any way offensive. Adolescents treat slang and swearing as a source of group solidarity because it is disapproved of by parents. According to Vivian de Klerk (1992) teenagers are very often unaware of the fact that they copy language patterns considered as 'bad'. "Many a teenager is blissfully unaware of the full import of the slang terms he or she uses, because the use of slang is often a vague hit-or-miss affair" (de Klerk, 1992: 288).

From that point of view, slang may be just like a non-standard grammar – a form of language that can coexist with more standard forms in a single speaker's head and produce code-switching. A remaining issue which deserves explanation is to what extend slang, swearwords and derogatory language are gender oriented.

#### 2.5.1 Male slang users

Language is a mirror reflection of the place that a given sex occupies in society. According to Robin Lakoff (1992: 79), men use rough language more often than women. Lakoff emphasizes the idea that men are instinctively biased toward informal language (slang, swearing, derogatory language) when they are referring to the sphere of sex. Coates goes further in her research and observes that "women and men belong to different subcultures" which are based on the concept of "the different approach" (1986: 13). Males favor slang words for sexual attraction and for a variety of sexual acts, positions and relationships among people because they are more common than the standard words. Flexner adds that:

Slang words for sex carry little emotional connotation; they express naked desire or mechanical acts, devices and positions. They are often blunt, cynical and ‘tough’. (Flexner 1967: 195)

Males use slang and swearing in a very precise way. They treat it as a practical tool of communication. Men understand that the greatest advantages of informal language are its popularity and its direct impact on the text (message) receivers (listeners).

#### 2.5.2 Female slang users

Females are very skillful users of slang and swearing too. However, women, according to de Klerk (1992: 288), declare themselves to be wise, responsible and economical slang users unlike men. If female language users find a given informal language item too crude or too vulgar, they exchange it with a euphemism which is not abusive. A euphemism is a perfect substitute for a taboo expression that is coarse, vulgar or abusive. Instead of ‘fuck’, women prefer ‘make love’; of ‘dick’ or ‘pussy’, ‘private parts’, etc. Euphemisms can even make harsh reality appear natural, and is used by politicians in order to take people in and endear themselves to the public. Moreover, women reduce the level of their language vulgarity because of some internal factors, such as an individual sense of taste toward the language of everyday communication. Urszula Giezek rightly observes that “what appears to motivate the use of euphemistic expressions is taboo” (2002: 117). Women avoid sounding controversial and, following William Labov (1998), women are afraid of being stigmatized on the basis of the language they use.

### 3 The experiment

The main aim of this part of the paper is to give a thorough description of a language experiment and its outcome. A long time ago, when Hermogenes and Socrates discussed the definition of language correctness, they strived to establish the function that a particular word serves in the communication process. Today, we also desire to define the relationship between a word and its functions which determine the social conventions ruling language registers. According to Roy Harris and Taylor Talbot “all languages are held to share a common ‘underlying’ structure; namely, a structure consisting of names for simple situations” (1989: 145).

This part of the paper reports the outcome of the experiment which took place at the beginning of 2003, and which was carried out on a group of 60 Polish language speaking informants (30 males and 30 females). The informants, aged 17–19, were asked to complete (anonymously) a questionnaire in which they were supposed to write words and expressions in reference to three general categories which focused on: (a) greetings, attitude toward parents, friends and teachers; (b) positive emotions such as love, satisfaction, enthusiasm; (c) negative emotions such as wrath, hate, anger and disappointment. The main aim of this research was to delineate the linguistic preferences of young Poles as far as slang, swear-

ing and derogatory language are concerned. The dependency between sex and language (the use of slang and swearing categories) was another crucial aspect that we wanted to ascertain through our research.

The results of our experiment are presented in the tables below, which are followed by a statistical analysis. For the purpose of a proper statistical examination we had to provide an equal number of categories for each sex. Tables 1–4 list actual responses to the questionnaire items selected for the analysis, and included in the survey. They also contain answers that are ranked numerically in descending order. Those answers which were elicited only once are listed in alphabetical order below every table. Table 5 contains a summary of overall scores from males and females as well as their positive and negative answers.

The following sub-parts include a collection of slang words, swearing and derogatory terms which can also be found in a few dictionaries devoted to the phenomenon of vulgar or insulting language, entitled: “Słownik Eufemizmów Polskich” [A Dictionary of Polish Euphemisms] (1998) by Anna Dąbrowska, “Słownik Seksualizmów Polskich” [A New Dictionary of Polish Sexual Terms] (1999) by Jacek Lewinson and “Nowy Słownik Słangu i Potocznej Angielszczyzny” [A New Dictionary of English Slang and Colloquial Expressions] (1998) by Maciej Widawski.

### 3.1 Males' responses

Males, according to de Klerk (1992) and Labov (1998) use a great variety of slang words and swearing, and, in addition to that, males are more inventive than females when they use informal language. Males indeed pay attention to formulating coherent and succinct expressions. ‘Simple talk’ is much more natural and convincing if we take into consideration the requirement for language economy which must be satisfied in everyday communication. Tables 1 and 2 list males' positive and negative responses together with greetings and leave-talking.

**Table 1** Polish words and expressions used by males to express positive feelings and greetings.

Category		Category		Category		Category	
kurwa	36	(ja) pierdole	26	panieny	16	bajka	8
Cze (!)	34	spoko	25	pasi	14	git	5
cool	30	koło	24	fajowo	14	powitka	5
hello	29	wyjebiście	20	friendsy	12	laski	4
zajebiście	29	dziwki	18	starsi	1	czad	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Totals: 353 + 19</b>							

**Extra responses:** *anda, dziolchy, extra, fajowo, kumać, lasko-ciagi, o kurwa(!), o w mordę, lola, lolita, maniana, parents, rajt (Eng.: right), ranko, siemana, siemanko, super, witam, wykurwiście.*

**Table 2** Polish words and expressions used by males to express negative feelings and leave-talking.

Category		Category		Category		Category	
kurwa (mać!)	35	C.U.	30	palant	21	do dupy	11
fuck (you)	35	szit (Eng.:shit)	28	Do-Zo	19	goń się	10
ja pierdolę	32	chuj	26	zgreedy	14	Baj (Eng.: bye)	8
Na-Ra	31	pizda	24	cipa	12	dupek	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Totals: 340 + 14</b>							

**Extra responses:** *czuwaj, dem (Eng.: dammed), franca, ja pierdziele, ja pieprze, ja piernicze, niech to szlak, palancicho, staruchy, suck my dick, świr, torba, torebka, żegnam.*

Maria Paisert (1994) observes that males possess a tremendous potential to express themselves with the use of a limited number of slang or swearing items. At the same time they are always ready to make a compromise and they can avoid using vulgar or derogatory language if there is such a necessity.

### 3.2 Females' responses

Females are also great followers of informal language. The experiment reveals that there are not astonishing discrepancies between males' and females' informal language preferences. De Klerk claims that "the use of slang itself determines the speaker himself" (1992: 277), however, according to the following data (Tables 3 and 4) it seems problematic to verify which particular informal language items are favored only by females.

**Table 3** Polish words and expressions used by females to express positive feelings and greetings.

Category		Category		Category		Category	
zajebiście	26	kurwa	10	super	4	kumpela	2
Cze(!)	20	najs (Eng.: nice)	9	friends	3		
cool	16	wporzo	5	fagas	2		
czad	11	model	5	fajnie	2		
<b>Total</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Totals: 115 + 20</b>							

**Extra responses:** *bajka, extra, fantastic, haj (Eng.: hi), happy, homeboy, jolop, kumpel, kumpela, mamka, nieziemsko, o kurczę, papa, ranko, spoko, tutor (Eng.: tutor), typ, typiara, yes, YO.*

**Table 4** Polish words and expressions used by females to express negative feelings and leave-talking.

Category		Category		Category		Category	
popierdolone	24	fuck	10	starzy	5	wał	2
kurwa mać	16	take care	8	chuj	3		
Na-Ra	14	suka	8	pizda	2		
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Totals: 92 + 16</b>							

**Extra responses:** *buli, burak, cipek, czujka (!), dick, dupek, idiota, kretyn, narki (!), palancior, pingwin, pizda, pojebane, pryk (Eng.: prick), stupid bitch, torba.*

Females operate in the same cultural and language realities as men do and they are not striving to uphold the general truth that only men are free to use ‘filthy language’. Coates observes that “nowadays women are more aware that they do not have equal status with men, and they are less prepared to accept this state of affairs” (1986: 9). Nevertheless, women are fighting for equal status with men and every other change within language or culture is just a consequence of this fact. Lakoff points out that “if [...] women were in fact equal to men, we would make certain predictions about the future behavior of the language” (1992: 78).

Only one elicited answer; ‘yes’ (table 3) does not correspond to any key-category of the questionnaire. We are convinced that this particular item was used by a respondent in some peculiar context and carried some idiosyncratic meaning. The aforementioned results reveal that female informants were never at a loss for derogatory words to describe their emotions or attitude toward people, *etc.* According to the results (Tables 3 and 4), females appear to know and use a broad collection of slang words, swearing and derogatory terms in various contexts.

### 3.3 Concluding remarks

Indeed men and women talk differently; however, this difference between men’s and women’s speech becomes less and less visible. Table 5 contains the entire collection of answers elicited by all respondents.

**Table 5** Total categorization and frequencies of males' and females' positive and negative responses.

	MALES	FEMALES	MALES' TOTALS	FEMALES' TOTALS	TOTALS		
					POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	970
<i>positive responses</i>	353 + 19	115 + 20			507		
<i>negative responses</i>	340 + 14	92 + 16				462	
<i>OTHER</i>	0	(1)			(1)		
			726	243			

The first overall conclusion to be drawn as a result of our study is that there exists a noticeable socio-linguistic trend in the contemporary Polish language which determines the degree of popularity of slang and swearwords in the Polish language. It can be said that slang is imbedded in the society that produces it. Paisert (1994: 106) examined the linguistic relationship between the sexes in a very narrow area, analyzing members of both sexes and their colloquial spoken Polish. Maria Paisert (1994: 106) states that:

Użycie form bardzo mocno nacechowanych ujemnie jest współcześnie zapewne przykładem społecznego czy grupowego odżegnywania się od uczuć wyższego rzędu. Sądzę, że jest to spowodowane lansowanym przez literaturę i kulturę typem silnego mężczyzny i silnej kobiety, którzy są jakby ponad uczuciami.

[The use of items marked with negative emotions is an example of group or social separation from feelings of high worth. I think that it is the consequence of literature and culture which promote the image of a strong man and a strong woman who never pay attention to feelings. Trans. M.G.]

Further conclusions pertain to the existence of little difference between male and female patterns of slang and swear words usage. Unlike the intuitive feelings present in the responses of our informants, the women's lexicon is getting closer to the typical male standards. Thus, our results are comparable with, and similar to, findings previously obtained in the other analysis carried out by de Klerk (1992), Lakoff (1992) and Paisert (1994). There is one aspect of this research which remains unmeasured, namely the influence of the social class which a particular respondent represents on the language he/she uses. De Klerk points out the decisive role of this factor: "The question of the effect of race and social class in the use of derogatory terms also deserves more attention" (1992: 288).

#### 4 Summary

Young people are constantly changing their vernacular by promoting entirely new language items in their everyday conversations. Young people ‘emit’ signals of language change which are caused by various reasons. Jan Miodek observes that:

Choć nieustanne zmiany, jakie dokonują się w każdym języku, są bardzo wolne, nie mam wątpliwości, że po roku 1989 uległy one wyraźnemu, przyspieszeniu, a spowodowała je zupełnie inna rzeczywistość polityczna i gospodarcza Polski. (Miodek 2001: 183)

[Despite the fact that language changes slowly, it is clear to me that this process of change has indeed speeded up recently. It is the effect of the totally different political and economic situation in Poland after 1989. Trans. M.G.]

Therefore, one could presume that the ‘Transformation Process’ which took place in Poland after 1989 also had a destructive character in terms of ‘deformalization’ of the contemporary Polish language. The non-standard language does not have to be vulgar and abusive. Young people and adults *do* speak differently. However, it seems difficult to determine who is a better conversationalist and who is not. Lars Anderson and Peter Trudgill (1990: 192) claim that:

It is often said that young people have small and poor vocabularies. We know for sure that their vocabularies are different from adults’, but this doesn’t mean that they are smaller or more restricted.

Women *do* swear more than in previous decades; however, they still seem to be more cautious in using obscenities. Nevertheless, every language change has its origin in the culture of a given society which alters its linguistic habits. Jadwiga Kowalikowa (2000: 130) characterizes the social functions of informal language in the following way:

Wulgaryzmy działają bowiem jak wentyl bezpieczeństwa. Rozładowują agresję, która mogłaby prowadzić do rozmaitych szkodliwych zachowań.

[Swearwords work like a safety valve. They reduce aggression which can lead to various harmful acts. Trans. M.G.]

The condition of a language represents the social conditions of a particular speech community which uses that language. Coates (2003: 195–196) claims that the dependency of conversational order on gender is *surprisingly traditional*:

Close inspection of talk in contexts reveals that gender demarcations are carefully maintained, with women colluding in constructing male domination. In family talk, men are positioned as significant members, with the power to evaluate other members' contributions, and fathers and grandfathers are given space to tell stories of the past, unlike women.

With regard to the aforementioned, it is possible to explain the invariable popularity of slang, swearing and derogatory language among contemporary Polish language users. Adults treat the omnipresent fashion for slang and swearing as an unwelcome and uninvited consequence of the dawn of the political liberation movements which took place in Poland over two decades ago. Young people behave in a belligerent way. Their language becomes more crude and offensive than it used to be before. Nevertheless, the process of language colloquialisation is unavoidable. The following generations will certainly aim at directness and economy in their speech and the issue of retaining the formal sound of language will probably be of secondary importance.

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