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Polish has been influenced by other languages in a variety of ways – bringing in not only new words but also syntactic borrowings. Syntactic calques from English, increasingly common in recent years, often lead to unnatural-sounding or unnecessarily complex sentence structures in Polish.

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Many a word has been written about the influence of foreign languages on Polish (nowadays especially English) in academic papers, press articles, letters to the editor from upset readers or debates on online fora. The vast majority of these musings are concerned with lexical borrowings. Virtually every Polish speaker can name at least a few Anglicisms, e.g., *biznes*, *quad*, *leasing* or *Internet*. Some will also name some calques, including *mysz komputerowa* “computer mouse” in IT, *mapa drogowa* “roadmap” in political parlance, or the use of *definiować* in the meaning “determine sth” (as in *To zdefiniowało moją drogę zawodową* “That defined my career path”). Much less attention is given to grammatical borrowings, which may involve inflexion or syntax.

Syntactic borrowing can be defined as the reproduction of certain syntactic patterns from a donor language in a recipient language. A frequently cited example is the construction **brać się za coś* “set about doing something,” which is a syntactic borrowing from Russian that competes with the indigenous construction *brać się do czegoś*. Linguists have repeatedly cited various types of syntactic borrowings from English, including the following:

- Nominal modifiers: *biznes informacje*, *kredyt bank* – head nouns are modified by other nouns in the nominative form, as in English, rather than in the indigenous Polish structure modified by a post-nominal adjective (*informacje biznesowe* “business information,” *bank kredytowy* “credit bank”).
- Prenominal classifying adjectives: *obcy język*, *egzamin ustny* – the borrowed pattern involves placing the adjective before the head noun, as in English (“foreign language,” “oral exam”) whereas in Polish a classifying adjective should properly follow the noun (*język obcy*, *egzamin ustny*).

- Imperative forms in advertising language, such as *Weź udział w konkursie i wygraj 200 złotych!* “Take part in the competition and win 200 zloty!”. Such slogans would be more natural in Polish if rephrased as conditional statements (*Jeśli... możesz...* “If you... you could...”).

These three types certainly do not encompass all English syntactic borrowings in contemporary Polish. For example, something a bit odd is happening to phrases like *po raz drugi* “for the second time,” *nie po raz pierwszy* “not for the first time.” Instead of these, one is increasingly hearing a more complex pattern beginning with *to* “it”: *to drugi/nie pierwszy raz, gdy...* most evidently a calque of the English “it’s the second/not the first time that...”

Syntactic switch-ups

Yet another example is afforded by the use of the verbs *wykorzystać/użyć* “to use” to introduce a tool. Instead of the simpler construction native to Polish, with the tool in the instrumental case – *Otworzyli drzwi nożem* “They opened the door with a knife” – one is often hearing sentences like *Użyli noża, by otworzyć drzwi* “They used a knife to open the door” (a verbatim copying of the English structure). The use of the articles in English merits some attention here: there is an indefinite article preceding *knife* and a definite one before *door*. Thus, the sentence refers to a specific door that has been already mentioned in the text (all the example sentences cited herein are of course taken from longer texts, which we can sometimes partially reconstruct in our minds), and to a knife that is a new element on the scene. Unlike English, Polish has no articles at all, but word order provides clues as to what is old and what is new. A general rule in Polish holds that new information is best placed towards the end of a clause, whereas known, or given, information is best found sentence-initially. This is the case with *Otworzyli drzwi nożem*, where the knife is introduced last, while the more complex borrowed pattern with *użyć* has *noż* introduced mid-sentence and *drzwi* appearing last, as if to say that the knife was a given and opening a door was new information. The borrowed structure, therefore, may be informationally confusing.

This last example is a good illustration of a more general trend: syntactic borrowings from English often alter the natural word order of Polish sentences. Word order plays a key grammatical role in English, determining whether a given clause is a question or a declarative clause and also the function of particular words in sentences: subject and object nouns, adjectives or even verbs may all look the same, and English speakers keep track of what’s what based on the word order (usually subject-verb-object). Word order in Polish, by contrast, plays quite a different role: it is relatively free, as grammatical endings clearly

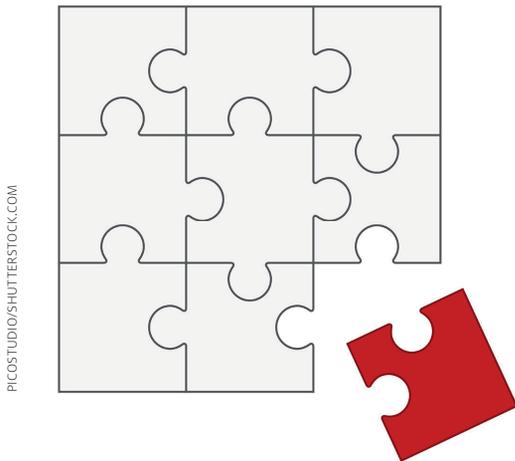
identify parts of speech as well as such clause functions as subject or object. More examples of borrowed syntactic patterns are listed below, all of them taken from Polish radio broadcasts or newspaper articles in the last decade.

Polish sentences introducing an event traditionally begin with phrases identifying the time and place of the event, followed by a description of what happened, as in *Wczoraj pod Warszawą rozbił się helikopter* (literally: “Yesterday over Warsaw crashed a helicopter”). Headlines found in the press and on the news-tickers featured on TV often apply the unnatural order subject-verb-adverbials (time/space), identical to their presumed English counterparts: *Helikopter rozbił się pod Warszawą* (literally: “A helicopter crashed over Warsaw”). Similar examples may be found in the main body of press articles: *Kilka incydentów miało miejsce od tego czasu* “Several incidents have occurred since that time,” *Trzy rzeczy wydarzyły się w tym roku, o których naprawdę warto mówić* “Three things happened this year that are truly worth talking about.”

Instead of phrases like *po raz drugi* “for the second time,” Polish speakers are increasingly using a more complex pattern with *to*, evidently a calque of the English “it’s the second time that...”

In each of these real-world examples, the Polish syntax follows closely that of the English equivalents. But in each case – just as in the sentence about a helicopter – the subject introduces new information. In Polish, as we have seen above, a sentence most naturally begins with known information, whereas new information is provided towards the end. One way given information is identified is with the demonstrative adjectives *ten/ta/to* (*this/that*). Thus, the phrase *od tego czasu* “since that time” certainly refers to a particular time mentioned earlier. The consequence is that such sentences would be much better if reformulated to align with the given-new pattern: *Od tego czasu miało miejsce kilka incydentów, W tym roku wydarzyły się ...* The impact of such English-influenced word order is it decreases the flexibility and natural expressiveness of Polish syntax.

The relative inflexibility of English word order means that different means have to be used in English to highlight certain sentence constituents. In English, new information can be brought to the fore using the *It’s X (who)...* construction, as in *It was Daniel I met yesterday*. The corresponding Polish sentence pattern is



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To X (czegoś dokonał), and the example sentence could be rendered as *To Daniela wczoraj spotkałem*. Note that the English pattern is more complex, requiring a subordinate clause, while the Polish equivalent just puts the highlighted element after *to* at the beginning of the clause. Given information in a sentence, in turn, can be highlighted in English using the construction *What... is that....*, which can be quite literally rendered in Polish as *To, co..., to...* Because new and given information can be easily signaled using word order in Polish, these two constructions (known as “cleft constructions”) are much more rarely needed in natural-sounding Polish. Nevertheless, under the influence of English, both of them are trending patterns in recent Polish usage.

Real-life examples include: *To, co jest niepokojące w naszym przekonaniu, to zaobserwowaliśmy...* “What is disturbing in our conviction is that we have observed...” *To, co uniemożliwia dalsze prace, to brak możliwości identyfikacji* “What is preventing further work is the inability to identify...” *To, czego chcieli, to stworzenie miejsca dla kibiców MU, które sami chcieliby odwiedzić* “What they wanted was to create a place for MU fans that they themselves would like to visit”. Sentences of this sort can often easily be reformulated to be simpler, more natural-sounding, and much more in sync with the natural functions of Polish word order: *Niepokojące w naszym przekonaniu jest to/fakt, że zaobserwowaliśmy... Dalsze prace uniemożliwia brak możliwości identyfikacji. Chcieli stworzyć miejsce dla kibiców MU, które sami....*

It was a nice day when...

Another area where English syntax is leaving its mark on Polish is the increasing use of time clauses instead of adverbial phrases. For instance: *Był ładny wiosenny dzień, kiedy James Bond wybrał się na wycieczkę za Londyn* “It was a nice spring day when James Bond made an excursion out of London.” Instead of mirroring the English syntax, which puts the time in a separate clause in order to make it come first, Polish can

simply use an adverbial phrase first: *Pewnego ładnego dnia wiosną James Bond...* “One fine day in the spring James Bond...” Much like the cleft constructions mentioned above, the syntactic structure in question here is not entirely alien to Polish – it has long been in use. Rather, the influence of English makes itself felt in the increasing frequency of this type of clause in sentence-initial position, leading to a decreasing use of prepositional time adverbials.

Another change in recent Polish is that sentences using adjectives to describe the speaker’s emotional response to some news or event are increasingly including *to* “it/that” as a semantically empty subject. For example: *Było to dla mnie szokujące dowiedzieć się, że był w siedzibie UB, gdy doszło tam do krwawej zbrodni* “It was shocking for me to learn that he was at the secret-police headquarters when a bloody crime occurred there,” *To było bardzo przygnębiające tak obserwować, jak przewodniczący Rady...* It was very depressing to watch how the Chairman of the Council...,” *To może zająć kilka dni, zanim uda się dotrzeć do wszystkich ofiar katastrofy*. “It may take a few days before all the victims of the disaster can be reached.” The more traditional pattern for expressing this kind of content in Polish does not use *to* and the word order is slightly different: *Przygnębiające było obserwować...* Sometimes more extensive changes are necessary, as in *Dotarcie do wszystkich... może zająć kilka dni*.

The various kinds of syntactic borrowing presented above are often plainly the result of “automatic” word-for-word translating of media texts from English. However, they are also occurring more and more in language produced spontaneously by Polish native speakers. Should they then be considered distortions of correct Polish? On the one hand, unlike lexical borrowings like *leasing*, the recreated sentence patterns are usually not something completely new in Polish grammar; speakers may sometimes opt to use them. Familiarity with the English sentence schemata merely facilitates their activation when speakers are forming utterances in Polish. However, while the constructions themselves do not sound unnatural in Polish, their growing popularity is certainly to the detriment of more traditional patterns which generally involve subtly manipulating word order within the confines of the simple clause.

Such changes are therefore not beneficial – but do they have an impact on the “authenticity” of Polish? To some extent, yes, because they reduce the significance of word order, which is a powerful tool for expressing communicative nuances in inflectional languages. On the other hand – just like the lexicon – the syntactic system of Polish also consists of both native elements and ones that were once borrowed, but which are no longer sensed as being foreign. Perhaps the innovations described in this article will end up becoming assimilated in this way. ■

Further reading:

Górnica M., *Wewnątrzjęzykowe uwarunkowania zapożyczeń technolektalnych w języku polskim* [Intra-linguistic Determinants of Technolectal Borrowings in Polish], 2019.

Witalisz A., *Przewodnik po anglicyzmach w języku polskim* [A Guide to Anglicisms in Polish], 2016.