

## THE POLISH CONCEPT OF 'ŁASKA' AND ITS COUNTERPARTS IN ENGLISH

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**ABSTRACT.** The aim of the present paper is to examine the uses and meanings of the word *łaska* in contemporary Polish. Some of its meanings seem to be culture specific and rooted in Polish history. To illustrate this, Polish expressions with the word *łaska* are contrasted with their English counterparts, including such words as *favour, generosity, kindness, grace, mercy, clemency* and *pardon*.

**KEYWORDS :** Polish; English; culture; lexicon; *łaska*; *favour*; *kindness*, *mercy*.

The lexicon of a language provides important insights into the values, attitudes and ways of thinking of the society which speaks it. Some words can be said to function as the 'key words' of a culture, as they are particularly significant and revealing about that culture. There is no finite set of such words in a language. In the case of Polish, scholars such as WIERZBICKA [1997], PISAREK [2002], BARTMIŃSKI [2006], have suggested such words as *ojczyzna* ('homeland'), *wolność* ('freedom'), *rodzina* ('family'), *sprawiedliwość* ('justice') and others. These words do have equivalents in other languages but their importance and meanings seem to be culture and language specific. A word which has not yet been suggested as a candidate for a cultural key word, but one which seems to be revealing about Polish culture is the word *łaska* (Eng. 'favour, kindness, grace'). The aim of the present paper is to examine its uses and meanings in contemporary Polish to establish whether the word is indeed language and culture specific. Polish expressions containing it will be contrasted with their English equivalents, and their meanings will be analysed with reference to facts from Polish social history.

While proposing a number of cultural key words for Polish and other languages, WIERZBICKA [1997 : 16] notices that “there is no ‘objective discovery procedure’ for identifying them. To show that a particular word is of special importance in a given culture, one has to make a case for it”. She suggests that the word in question should be a common word with a high frequency in one particular semantic domain. The word should also be frequently used in proverbs, sayings, popular songs, book titles etc, and it should constitute the centre of a phraseological cluster. BARTMIŃSKI [2006 : 223] adds that the meanings of such words in a given culture are also very important. The Polish cultural key words proposed by such authors as PISAREK [2002] and BARTMIŃSKI [2006] are names of values and, as such, are inherently positive. BARTMIŃSKI even prefers to call them ‘names of values’ (Pol. ‘nazwy wartości’), and PISAREK uses the term ‘słowa sztandarowe’ (‘leading, important words’). Even though BARTMIŃSKI [2006 : 223] does not differentiate between the three terms and provides one definition for all three, the term ‘key words’ used by WIERZBICKA [1997, 2006] seems to be broader in scope. WIERZBICKA herself also concentrates on names of values in most of her works, but she discusses related concepts as well. One of the key cultural words which she has proposed for Australian English is *dobbing* (‘informing against, betraying’). The word has negative connotations in Australian English because it violates the cultural principle of solidarity, which is an important concept in Australian culture and history [WIERZBICKA 2006 : 8]. It seems legitimate to argue that words such as *łaska*, which are not necessarily names of values but denote other concepts rooted in a country’s history and culture, can be considered as potential candidates for cultural key words as well.

According to the etymological dictionary compiled by BORYŚ [2006], *łaska* has been used in Polish since the sixteenth century. Depending on the context, it can be translated into English as kindness, favour, indulgence, generosity, forbearance, regard, grace, pardon, mercy, clemency, and reprieve [STANISŁAWSKI 1999]. The word is relatively frequent in contemporary Polish. The PWN corpus (korpus.pwn.pl), which contains 40 million words and has served as the basis of several dictionaries of Polish, includes 725 occurrences of the word. Some of the other words which have been proposed by linguists as candidates for Polish key words are significantly more frequent in the PWN corpus than *łaska*, e.g. *praca* ‘work, job’ (27,963 occurrences), *prawda* ‘truth’ (8,383), *rodzina* ‘family’ (8,349), *miłość* ‘love’ (4,903), *wolność* ‘freedom’ (4,699), *wiara* ‘faith’ (2,645), *sprawiedliwość* ‘justice’ (1,869), *ojczyzna* ‘homeland’ (1,289),

but some have comparable frequency, e.g. *honor* 'honour' (812), and there are also less frequent key words, e.g. *tolerancja* 'tolerance' (460) and *gościnność* 'hospitality' (115). Most of these words have been suggested as key words on the basis of questionnaires [BARTMIŃSKI 2006], for some (*ojczyzna*, *wolność*) linguistic evidence has been supplied [WIERZBICKA 1997]. The fact that *praca* has so many occurrences in the PWN corpus of Polish may be explained by economic rather than cultural reasons. From the change to capitalism in Poland in 1989, unemployment has been a serious problem for many people, and the lack of work is still an important subject to talk about. A related word, *pieniądze* ('money') has an even higher frequency in the corpus: 10,684. The word *łaska* is probably more frequent in colloquial Polish which is not recorded in the corpus than words like *ojczyzna* or *wolność*, because, unlike these words, it forms part of many colloquial expressions. Thus, the frequency of the word can probably be said to be comparable to the frequencies of most cultural key words proposed by other authors.

*Łaska* is a component of numerous expressions used in everyday Polish, such as: *być na czyjejs łasce* 'to live on sb's generosity', *wkraść się w czyjeś łaski* 'to insinuate [worm] oneself into sb's favour', *być zdanym na czyjąś łaskę i niełaskę* 'to be [to lie] at sb's mercy', *wypaść z łaski/ stracić czyjąś łaskę* 'to fall out of favour with sb', *ubiegać się o czyjeś łaski* 'to seek favour with sb', *zostawić kogoś na łasce losu* 'to leave someone at the mercy of fortune', *robić łaskę* 'to condescend' 'to deign', *nie łaska?* 'why not?', as in: *A dzisiaj nie łaska?* 'Why not today?', *co łaska* 'I leave it to your generosity', *obejdzie się bez łaski /bez łaski/ łaski bez* 'I can do without', *z łaski swojej* 'if you please' / 'be so kind and', *jak gdyby z łaski/ z (wielką) łaską* 'with a bad grace, reluctantly, grudgingly', *artysta/poeta z bożej łaski* 'a born artist, a piteous actor', *zrobić coś z łaski na uciechę* 'just for the fun of it/carelessly, just because one is asked to do it', *akt łaski* 'act of grace', *zrobić coś w drodze łaski* 'to make an exception', *łaska Boska* 'it's a mercy!' 'thank goodness!' [STANISŁAWSKI 1999; WIELKI SŁOWNIK FRAZEOLÓGICZNY PWN Z PRZYSŁÓWIAMI 2005]. The word *łaska* is also found in proverbs. The most comprehensive collection of Polish proverbs published so far, *Nowa księga przysłów i wyrażeń przysłowiowych polskich* edited by KRZYŻANOWSKI [1969-1978], lists 28 proverbs and proverbial expressions containing the word. The most common proverb with the word *łaska* seems to be *Łaska pańska na pstrym koniu jeździ*, Eng. *A great man's favour is hardly got and easily lost/ Great men's favours are uncertain/Hall benches are slippery/ A nod from a lord is a breakfast for a fool* [PAJĄK 1998]. It is the only proverb with the word *łaska* included in the PWN corpus of Polish. There are 3 occurrences of the proverb

in this corpus, which is more than the number of occurrences of most proverbs belonging to SZPILA's [2003] paremiological minimum, i.e. proverbs most commonly used in Polish, such as *Kto pod kim dołki kopie, ten sam w nie wpada* (Eng. *Who digs a pit for another, falls into it himself*) or *Kto rano wstaje, temu Pan Bóg daje* (Eng. *It's the early bird that catches the worm*). As the Google search shows, the proverb *Łaska pańska na pstrym koniu jeździ* has numerous occurrences in various Polish internet sources, such as online versions of newspaper articles, political and social commentaries, interviews with famous people and blogs. Other proverbs with the word *łaska* seem to have a significantly lower frequency. Among others, they include *Łaska ta w ohydzie, co na żółtciu idzie*, *Łaska spóźniona jak lis bez ogona*, *Łaska poniewczasie na nic nie przyda się*, all three meaning (roughly) that 'łaska that comes too late is of little value'.

It seems that originally the word *łaska* was used in the case of unequal status between interlocutors, the person with the higher status (such as the master) offering it and the one with the lower status (such as the serf) receiving it or asking for it. The bestowing part may also be God (Pol. *łaska Boska*, Eng. *God's mercy/grace/favour*). In such cases, *łaska* refers to the act of showing good will, unusual kindness and generosity. *Łaska* may also mean 'the act of giving freedom from punishment performed by a ruler or a court', as in: *Prezydent skorzystał z prawa łaski w stosunku do Jana S. i w ten sposób zwolnił go z odbywania kary* (Eng. *pardon, reprieve*, as in: *His pardon came through only three hours before he was due to be executed* or *The Home Secretary granted him a reprieve the day before he was due to be hanged*), or 'willingness not to punish or to punish less severely', e.g. *Sąd okazał łaskę. Uznał, że oskarżeni są jeszcze bardzo młodzi i zasługują na szansę* (Eng. *mercy, clemency: The general showed no mercy, and killed all his prisoners*). Another meaning of *łaska* rendered by a similar expression in English is 'powerless against', as in: *Zaginęli na morzu, pozostawieni na łasce wiatru i pogody* (Eng. *They were lost at sea, at the mercy of wind and weather*). In some other contexts, the Polish concept of *łaska* corresponds to the English *kindness*, as in the case of the expression *Z łaski swojej*, 'be so kind and'. Both may be used to show impatience and annoyance (Pol. *Odlóż tę książkę z łaski swojej*; Eng. *Will you kindly put that book back?*). Another equivalent of *łaska* in English is the word *favour*, in particular when it means 'approval', as in: *He did all he could to win her favour*, which can be translated into Polish as *Robił wszystko, żeby wkraść się w jej łaski*, or in the expression *out of favour* ('unpopular'), as in: *I'm afraid I'm out of favour at the office at the moment*, Pol. *Wypadłem z łaski u kolegów z biura*. A similar meaning is rendered in English by the word

*grace: in someone's good graces*, meaning 'in someone's favour' (Pol. [być] *w czyichś łaskach*) and *fall from grace* (*wypaść z łaski*)<sup>1</sup>.

Other meanings expressed by *grace*, *kindness*, *mercy* and *favour* are rendered in Polish by other words than *łaska*. Their most frequent meanings include: *favour* 'a kind act that is not forced or necessary' (Pol. *przysługa*), as in *Would you do me a favour and turn off that radio?* or *I want to ask a favour of you* (Pol. *Chciałbym cię prosić o przysługę*); *mercy* 'a fortunate even' (Pol. *na szczęście*): *It's a mercy the accident happened so close to the hospital* (Pol. *Na szczęście wypadek zdarzył się niedaleko szpitala*); *grace* 'a fine and attractive quality in movement or form, especially when this seems effortless and natural': *She danced with marvelous natural grace* (Pol. *wdzięk*, as in: *Tańczyła z naturalnym wdziękiem*). Such uses of these words are not related to the meanings of the Polish word *łaska*, which is why they will be omitted from the following discussion.

In addition to the expressions with the word *łaska* enumerated above, there are also phrases whose meaning is slightly altered when translated into English. These include *co łaska* 'I leave it to your generosity', *robić łaskę* 'to condescend' 'to deign', *obejdz się bez łaski /bez łaski/ łaski bez/* (the colloquial *bez łachy*) 'I can do without', *z łaski swojej* 'if you please', 'be so kind and' *jak gdyby z łaski/z (wielką) łaską/* (the colloquial *z łachą*) 'reluctantly, grudgingly', *nie łaska?*, as in: *A dzisiaj nie łaska?* 'why not today?'. There is also the word *łaskawca* 'a person who shows *łaska*', which is omitted in most Polish-English dictionaries [e.g. STANISŁAWSKI 1999] and which can only be translated descriptively into English. Its use in Polish may be illustrated by the following exchange found on the website of an electronic dictionary of Polish: 'może jak już wpisujecie jakieś słowo, to łaskawcy wpisujcie również znaczenie. – A co, jaśnie panu nie chce się samemu?', which can be translated into English as: 'When you include a word in the dictionary, *łaskawcy*, provide its definition as well. – Why? Is His Lordship too lazy to do it himself?' ([www.sjp.pl/co/bojer](http://www.sjp.pl/co/bojer)). With the exception of the first one (*co łaska* 'I leave it your generosity'), all these expressions with the word *łaska* and its derivatives are rather negative in meaning and are mainly used to express annoyance, impatience, and serve as unfavourable comments on someone's reluctance to do something.

The most common proverb with the word *łaska*, *Łaska pańska na pstrym koniu jeździ* (Eng. *A great man's favour is hardly got and easily lost/ Great*

<sup>1</sup> The English examples used here come from the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH [1987]. Polish examples come from WIELKI SŁOWNIK FRAZEOLÓGICZNY PWN Z PRZYSŁOWIAMI [2005], the PWN corpus of Polish or are the author's translations of English examples.



*men's favours are uncertain*), is usually used to mean that it is impossible to control life, and people have to accept what life offers. It seems to be related to another concept referring to passive acceptance of what life brings, expressed in Polish by the word *dola*, (Eng. roughly 'lot'). The word has been discussed by WIERZBICKA [1992] and BARTMIŃSKI [2006]. WIERZBICKA claims that the concept of *dola* is marginal in present-day Polish and suggests that the concept of *los* (Eng. roughly 'destiny', 'luck', 'chance'), which developed among the nobility and which combines an active attitude towards life with luck, is more relevant to Polish society as a whole, but BARTMIŃSKI convincingly argues that the word still functions in Polish, and its meaning applies in particular to the less successful part of the society. The attitude to life illustrated by these expressions is remarkably different from the emphasis on effort, action and an individual's responsibility for their life which is evidenced in English common expressions and proverbs, such as *Paddle your own canoe* and *It is a striking coincidence that the word American ends in 'can'* [MIEDER 1993]. The importance of hard work, emphasis on individuality, initiative and financial success are the ideals of Protestantism, and are typically associated with the Puritans. Polish Catholicism, on the other hand, is associated with collectivity, solidarity and equality rather than individual achievement [HRYNIEWICZ 2004]. It thus seems that religious practices may have been instrumental in shaping social attitudes related to the meanings of the word *łaska*.

The belief in the impossibility to control one's life expressed by both the word *dola* and the proverb *Łaska pańska na pstrym koniu jeździ*, as well as the pejorative meanings of the word *łaska* seem to be related to what HRYNIEWICZ [2004, 2006] considers to be the legacy of the socio-economic institution called *folwark* in Polish society. The *folwark* appeared in Poland in the sixteenth century. It was "a form of manorial estate specially adapted for the efficient use of serf labour, and (...) for the maximum production of grain" [DAVIES 2005 : 216]. As DAVIES observes, "[t]he folwark system worked on the assumption that it gave the serf a minimum of land and security whilst maximizing the noble owner's cash profit. (...) [I]t preserved and strengthened the worst aspects of the medieval economy whilst preventing the growth of that variety and flexibility which enabled stronger economies to ride adversity and grow" [2005 : 219]. The *folwark* was a total institution which enabled the landowner to control the activities of his serfs both in the workplace and at home. The system had long-lasting and harmful effects on Polish society. It created patterns of organizational culture in which the serfs (later: workers) were passive, apathetic, irresponsible and entirely dependent on their master (employer) and their favours ('łaski'), while the employers were unduly convinced of their

impunity and omnipotence. Such relations inevitably led to mutual disrespect of the two social groups. The *folwark* system was in existence for about 300 years, and its legacy was strengthened by communist institutions where the relations between employers (and, more generally, the socially superior) and their employees were very similar. It is only to be expected then that many patterns of the *folwark* organizational culture can still be identified in Poland despite the adoption of capitalism and democracy in 1989. The manifestations of the '*folwark* mentality' can be found in various types of interpersonal relations in Poland. HRYNIEWICZ [2004, 2006] has demonstrated its persistence in the workplace, where it manifests itself in the tendency of Polish employers to run their companies in an authoritarian way, and, on the part of employees, in ceding the responsibility for the company's success or failure entirely on their employers. The '*folwark* mentality' also seems to surface when Poles interact with people of higher or lower social status than themselves. As BROMBEREK-DYZMAN and EWERT [2007] have demonstrated, when Polish people say 'no' to people of lower social standing, they do not bother to give their reasons or to be polite, they seem to view their refusal as an act of generosity (or 'łaska'), as the *folwark* master would have done. When they say 'no' to their employers, they do it in a straightforward way, giving their reasons without trying to be polite, which may probably be interpreted as a demonstration of the lack of regard for the position of their superior. The only situation when Poles tried to be nice and polite while saying 'no' was when they talked to their equals. This sort of behaviour is entirely different from the reactions of Americans who, in similar social situations, tried to make all their interlocutors feel good and gave reasons for refusal. The differences in the behaviour of Poles and Americans in such situations are consistent with HRYNIEWICZ's [2004] findings regarding attitudes towards social hierarchy in Catholic and Protestant countries: in Protestant countries the attitude is positive while in Catholic countries it is rather negative. What Catholics seem to value more highly is solidarity with their equals.

The rather negative meanings of the word *łaska* in present-day Polish seem to go back to unfriendly relations between masters and serfs which originated in the *folwark* system. The appearance of the expression *Jaśnie Pan* ('His Lordship'/'master') next to the word *łaska* in one of the sentences quoted in the present paper suggests that the word still evokes the negative image of the master-serf relations in contemporary Poles. It seems that the *folwark* masters showed *łaska* sparingly and with reluctance (which is also evidenced in traditional proverbs quoted earlier, such as *Łaska ponieważś na nic nie przyda się*, meaning that 'łaska that comes too late is of little value'), and, in

consequence, the word started to denote unwillingness to do something for the benefit of others. In English, such meanings are expressed by other words than the dictionary translations of *łaska*, which suggests that the direct counterparts of the word evoke different associations in Anglophone people. The fact that the proverb *Łaska pańska na pstrym koniu jeździ* (Eng. *A great man's favour is hardly got and easily lost/ Great men's favours are uncertain*) is still in use in Polish seems to confirm the persistence of the association of the word with *folwark* masters and suggests that the passive attitude to life that it encapsulates is still an element of Polish mentality. It thus seems legitimate to argue that the uses and meanings of *łaska* reveal important information about Polish social history, and that, like the cultural key words such as *wolność* ('freedom') and *ojczyzna* ('homeland'), it is a significant concept in Polish culture.

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