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Acquisition of Polish among Foreigners in Bilingual Couples with Poles: Impact Factors

Abstract: The article considers bilingual couples of Poles with foreigners residing in Poland with a special focus on the acquisition of Polish by the latter. Foreigners from such couples function not only in their families but also in wider circles of the host society. Communication needs resulting from contacts outside a bilingual couple and job commitments lead to situations when life in the host society becomes a challenge if these needs are not met. Theoretical framework for the analysis and interpretation of this phenomenon is the Complementarity Principle (Grosjean) and the concept of a domain (Fishman). Data were obtained from 24 in-depth interviews with bilingual couples. Qualitative methodology made it possible to grasp the complexity of the researched cases and phenomena which unveiled specific trends. Findings of the study revealed major factors that had a direct impact on the acquisition of Polish among foreigners in bilingual couples with Poles. The key impact factors referred to (1) the way of communication in the couple, (2) the couple's language strategies towards children, and (3) the contact with the partner's extended family, including the type of professional activity.

Keywords: bilingual couples, immigrants language acquisition, Poland, qualitative methodology

Introduction

The number of bilingual couples in Poland has increased since its accession to the EU. Though bilingual couples or families belong to different settings, e.g. Japanese¹, German² or Swiss³, the Polish context appears to be quite original. Until re-

1 I. Hardach-Pinke, *Interkulturelle Lebenswelten: Deutsch-japanische Ehen in Japan*, New York 1988.

2 I. Piller, *Bilingual couples talk: The discursive construction of hybridity*, Amsterdam 2002.

3 K. Gonçalves, *Conversations of intercultural couples*, Berlin 2013.

cently mixed couples of Poles and foreigners decided to settle down outside Poland, but this trend has ceased to be so unidirectional. The growing number of bilingual couples has brought about specific changes in the awareness of Polish society. Recent years have shown that not only has the number of linguistically mixed couples grown, but so has the social acceptance of them. However, at the time of the recent migration crisis in Europe, the image of an immigrant has been supplanted by the image of a refugee, which is approached in different ways among the EU member states⁴. At the same time we become more and more aware of how little we know about such couples.

The article presents the findings from a study of bilingual couples in Poland, based on the data obtained via qualitative methodology⁵. The main emphasis of the article falls on the linguistic adaptation among foreigners in couples with Poles. The key question concerns the degree of adaptation by foreigners to the Polish language, including the level of its mastery. Linguistic and cultural adaptation is a multifaceted and long-lasting process influenced by at least three impact factors detectable from the collected data. The first one relates to the way in which partners communicate in the couple, understood as language choices. The second factor is the partners' decision about bilingual childrearing that enforces consistency in language use. The third factor refers to contacts outside the couple, including extended families, friends and the occupational milieu of bilingual couples. The main issues of the above-mentioned practices relate to motivation, personal experience and the consequences of language policies adopted by bilingual couples. Findings summarise the extent of the impact factors on the level of the mastery of Polish among foreigners in bilingual couples with Poles.

1. Theoretical Concepts for the Study

The main theoretical concepts in this study include bilingualism and bilinguals, the Complementarity Principle and the domain. The assumptions are based on a definition of bilingualism proposed by Grosjean, who described it as a regular use of two or more languages, and bilingual persons as those who 'use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives'⁶. Grosjean postulated a holistic view of bilingualism featuring a bilingual as an integral entity that cannot be split into two parts⁷. In other words, a bilingual is not a sum of two monolinguals but someone who

4 E. Kuźlewska and A. Piekutowska, 'The EU member states' diverging experiences and policies on refugees and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum', *Białostockie Studia Prawnicze* 2021, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 23–36.

5 A. Stępkowska, *Pary dwujęzyczne w Polsce*, Poznań 2019.

6 F. Grosjean, *Studying bilinguals*, Oxford 2008, p. 10.

7 *Ibidem*.

has a definite and unique language repertoire. The holistic perspective positions bilinguals as language users with competences matching their needs.

Bilinguality of a couple is not tantamount to bilinguality of both partners, though at least one of them needs to use the other partner's language or both need to use a third language. Language repertoire is shaped by the motivation to learn the partner's language and its position and significance in the global language system⁸ as well as by the couple's language awareness and children's bilinguality. Bilingual couples make decisions about their private communication, thereby manifesting their language attitudes and various levels of awareness with regard to their own language behaviour. Most mixed couples become a specific type of a bilingual family when they agree on the bilingual development of children.

Communicative competence in two or more languages develops in everyday life depending on situations and interlocutors. Language needs and the level of language command tightly interconnect, though at the same time this correlation is unstable and subject to several factors. This interdependence is referred to as the Complementarity Principle, which says that the bigger the need, the higher the level of language skills⁹. Bilinguals learn and use languages for different reasons, in different domains of life and with different people. Different languages are used in different aspects of life. Some languages cover more domains of life and others less, while some domains are covered by two languages. It is rare to see all domains of life covered by all languages of a bilingual¹⁰. The Complementarity Principle has an impact on fluency, since language develops poorly if it is spoken in few domains and with a small group of people. Another impact of the Complementarity Principle concerns language dominance. Many bilinguals are dominant in one language, as opposed to 'balanced' bilinguals. Dominance escapes a clear definition because it depends on language fluency and use, as well as on the language distribution across domains of life. Bilinguals are globally dominant in one language but they may be dominant in another language for specific domains.

Fishman introduced the concept of domain to find purposefulness of language choices in the situation of stable bilingualism¹¹. In certain situations a given language is not used accidentally but connected with a given context, topic and interlocutors.

8 A. De Swaan, *Words of the world: The global language system*, London 2001.

9 F. Grosjean, *The bilingual individual*, 'Interpreting: International Journal of Research and Practice in Interpreting' 1997, no. 2, pp. 163–87; F. Grosjean, *Bilingual: Life and reality*, Cambridge, MA 2010.

10 F. Grosjean, *Bilingualism: A short introduction*, (in:) F. Grosjean and P. Li (eds.), *The psycholinguistics of bilingualism*, Malden, MA 2013, pp. 5–25.

11 J. Fishman, *Domains and the relationship between micro- and macro-sociolinguistics*, (in:) J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: Ethnography of communication*, New York 1972a, pp. 435–453; J. Fishman, *The sociology of language: An interdisciplinary social science approach to language in society*, Rowley 1972b.

He named such a context a domain which he defined as 'a cluster of social situations typically constrained by a common set of behaviour rules' and 'social nexus which brings people together for a cluster of purposes'¹². Fishman indicated five domains, namely family, education, work, acquaintance, and government and administration. Since domains are clusters of several factors, like place, topic and participants, the concept of a domain offers an analytical framework for language choices. In most bilingual situations it is the domain in which an event occurs that imposes a given language, thereby making it possible to describe language choices within linguistically mixed couples. In other words, the choice of language in any given situation is conditioned by 'the speaker's proficiency in language (zero proficiency normally preventing choice), the desire of the speaker to achieve advantage by using his or her stronger language and the desire of the speaker to derive advantage by accommodating to the wishes of the audience.'¹³

2. Methodology

The thematic scope of in-depth interviews was planned with the aim to capture a wide array of relations concerning different aspects of private language contact, which belonged to personal experiences of participants. The study aimed to obtain data about their language repertoires, language choices, identity in the couple and the family language policies with regard to bilingual childrearing. At a more detailed level, the focus of the article concerns the data about the command of Polish among non-Polish partners and their commitment to acquire the language. The study was anonymous and the names of participants were changed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed by means of NVivo11, software for processing qualitative data. The interview structure combined with detailed questions intended to elicit open-ended answers resembled a natural conversation with each target couple¹⁴. Participants were aware of their role of informants, and thus were prepared for the topics included in the interview instructions. During the conversation I adopted the role of a learner, someone of smaller authority than my interlocutors by using 'counter-strategy of the sociolinguistic interview'¹⁵. The emotional involvement of participants made them formulate statements less consciously by concentrating on what they were saying rather than how they were expressing themselves.

Qualitative interviewing is about conducting conversations with a limited number of participants, i.e. bilingual couples in the case of this study. The main selection criterion was the linguistically mixed couplehood made up of Poles and foreigners,

12 J. Fishman, Who speaks what language to whom and when? 'La Linguistique' 1965, no. 2, p. 75.

13 B. Spolsky, Language policy, Cambridge 2004, p. 43.

14 L. Milroy and M. Gordon, Sociolinguistics: Method and interpretation, Oxford 2003, p. 65.

15 W. Labov, Sociolinguistic patterns, Philadelphia 1984, p. 40.

and their permanent residence in Poland. The study featured 24 bilingual couples, i.e. 48 individuals. Their relationships had lasted from one year to more than thirty. At the time of data collection, nine couples had lived in Poland for less than a decade, while seven couples had been together between one and two decades. Five couples had spent between 20 and 29 years together. Three couples had been together for 30 years or more. As a result, foreigners in these couples differed in terms of their competence in Polish, from near native-like fluency to very limited knowledge of the language. All interviews were qualitatively analysed. In total, the target couples represented 22 nationalities, came from six continents and communicated in seven languages, including Polish. The recruitment of participants was based on a judgment sampling, namely on the availability of bilingual couples. Some participants were helpful in recruiting new couples for the study, which was typical of a 'snowball technique'¹⁶. The recording of all conversations took about 25 hours, so the approximate time of one interview amounted to an hour. Interviews were conducted in Polish, though a few couples spoke in English. The transcription of the interviews was followed by a semantic analysis.

3. Discussion of the Impact Factors

Through language it is possible to accomplish many activities in private language contact between bilingual partners, though these activities are not reducible solely to language¹⁷. They include acquiring a language, expressing emotions, maintaining the bonds, and negotiating responsibilities with regard to bilingual childrearing. Language attitudes of bilingual couples in Poland were reflected in the quality of their everyday communication. A poor command of the Polish language among foreigners led to difficulties in the mutual understanding between partners and with the couples' family networks. Still, very problematic for such couples appeared to be their limited participation in social life, which resulted in the Polish partner acting as a lay interpreter. Therefore, couples applied 'strategies of power' by investing in the acquisition of the dominant language (of the host society) or resorted to the use of a *lingua franca*¹⁸.

16 L. Milroy, *Language and social networks*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1987.

17 J. Cenoz and D. Gorter, A holistic approach to multilingual education: Introduction, 'Modern Language Journal' 2011, vol. 95, no. 3, pp. 339–343; S. Colombo, A. Ritter and M. Stopfner, Identity in social context: Plurilingual families in Baden-Wuerttemberg and South Tyrol, 'Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht' 2020, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 53–83; A. Stępkowska, Identity in the bilingual couple: Attitudes to language and culture, 'Open Linguistics' 2021c, no. 7, pp. 223–234.

18 V. Ugazio and S. Guarnieri, A couple in love entangled in enigmatic episodes: A semantic analysis, 'Journal of Marital and Family Therapy' 2018, vol. 44, no. 3, pp. 438–457.

The study focuses on the acquisition of Polish among foreigners in bilingual couples with Poles in relation to the potential factors of impact. The study sample of 24 couples offered for the scrutiny the same number of foreigners, namely eight women and sixteen men. These individuals showed different levels of mastering Polish, thereby forming three discrete groups. In the biggest group there were 14 foreigners who had acquired a native-like proficiency in Polish. All of them worked professionally in business, education and culture. It was significant that this group had as many as six women out of the eight included in the whole sample. The other two groups had five individuals each. The second group referred to foreigners whose Polish represented the lower intermediate level, i.e. allowing them to meet the basic needs and get by in everyday life. The other two women were in this group. The third group of foreigners consisted of five men who did not know Polish and in terms of communication outside their couples they were completely dependent on their Polish wives.

The ensuing discussion of the factors conducive to acquisition of the dominant language builds on three main categories of phenomena that were fateful for the development of second language skills. Section 3.1 deals with communication in the couple, section 3.2 discusses language strategies towards children, and section 3.3 emphasises the role of the couples' family networks in motivating non-Polish partners to learn the language. Each category, not least a combination of them, creates specific circumstances for the acquisition of Polish among the sampled foreigners.

3.1. Communication in the Couple

The collected sample of bilingual couples made it possible to distinguish three patterns of communication based on specific language choices of each couple¹⁹. The use of Polish (dominant language) did not turn out to be the most frequent choice among the target couples. Ten couples maintained Polish as the language of communication. This choice was typical of couples in which the non-Polish partner had lived in Poland longer than a decade. Nine couples used the first language of the foreign partner (minority language) and five couples relied on a *lingua franca* (LF). Language mixing was reported particularly by couples who resorted either to the minority language or to a LF in their daily communication. The decision of partners which language to use was liable to change as the relationship developed, though apparently most target couples were keen on retaining the language of their first meeting.

As the data showed, mutual understanding in the couple was informed by language attitudes and the second-language skills of either partner²⁰. In other words, language competence was directly proportional to the quality of communication in

19 A. Stępkowska, Language choices between partners in bilingual relationships, 'GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies' 2021a, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 110–124.

20 A. Stępkowska, Poles and their non-Polish partners: Languages, communication and couplehood identity, 'Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny' 2017a, vol. LXIV, no. 3, pp. 350–365.

cross-cultural couples. Linguistic and cultural barriers that were difficult to overcome caused much dissatisfaction among less proficient participants. They described their language deficiencies with serious concern and, as a result, found themselves excluded, alienated, isolated and frustrated²¹. A few couples stuck to a LF they initially used at their first meeting and made the language their tool of communication. The sample contained four such couples, namely Polish–Brazilian (English), Polish–German (English), Polish–Chinese (Esperanto) and Polish–Turkish (German). In each couple, both partners expressed a positive evaluation of their LF communication due to the fact that they saw the language as a common denominator putting them on a par with each other, thereby creating equal chances to negotiate meanings (e.g. the Polish–Brazilian couple). A LF may not be regarded as the best solution, unless continuously improved by both partners, which was not always the case (e.g. the Polish–Turkish couple).

Couples that chose a minority language, i.e. the first language of the non-Polish partner, strived to ensure a sense of ‘being in contact’ between partners and, in a way, to ‘compensate’ for migration for the foreign partner²². The possible domains reserved for the minority language in Poland included distant family, workplace and the circles of friends and acquaintances. All target couples in the study had relatives whom they contacted regularly and who were not bilingual. Therefore, most couples used their minority languages, not just Polish.

Referring to communication in the couple, all non-Polish women in the sample presented impressive language repertoires, with foreign languages known at B2–C2 level²³. Out of eight, five women were proficient in Polish, which was also the language of their couples, except for one case of a German woman. The other three women (American, Brazilian and Chinese) represented a lower intermediate level of Polish and used other languages in communication with their husbands. Despite that, women less fluent in Polish were independent enough to get by in all daily situations unsupported by their husbands. The analysis indicated that the main reason for all the women’s satisfactory command of Polish was explained by the fact of a marriage to a native-speaking Pole as well as having lived for years in Poland and being parents of children who had Polish as their dominant language.

3.2. Bilingual Childrearing

Every bilingual and cross-cultural couple faces a language dilemma in the context of children’s upbringing. Such couples differ in several respects, including the

21 A. Stępkowska, Language as a source of problems in bilingual couples, (in:) B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and M. Trojszczak (eds.), *Language use, education, and professional contexts*, New York 2022, pp. 99–113.

22 I. Piller, *Bilingual couples talk: The discursive construction of hybridity*, Amsterdam 2002.

23 A. Stępkowska, Language experience of immigrant women in bilingual couples with Poles, *International Journal of Bilingualism* 2021b, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 120–134.

level of language awareness, language command and the determination to pass bilinguality on to their children. The strategies of language choice in families that lead to bilinguality in children are conditioned by several factors, such as the parents' first languages, the language of society and communication strategies adopted by the parents towards their children²⁴. The bilingual couples under study opted for one of two scenarios of bilingual parenting practices, namely 'one person – one language' and 'non-dominant home language'.

In the 'one person – one language' strategy, parents address children in two different languages. Communication in the family without excluding either parent is possible with this strategy if parents have at least passive knowledge of each other's first languages. Five out of nine couples in the study spoke a non-dominant language, i.e. the language of the foreigner. Two couples communicated in the dominant language (Polish), and the other two couples used a LF (the Polish–Turkish couple used German and the Polish–Chinese couple used Esperanto). There was also a group of six couples who either planned or had just begun to implement the 'one person – one language' strategy. Yet at the time of data collection those couples' opinions were rather avowals than reports of actual language practices. Still, if all the couples mentioned were put together, then they would form a group of fifteen couples that either applied or would start to apply the 'one parent – one language' strategy. Fifteen out of twenty-four represents nearly two thirds of the whole sample. This strategy did not guarantee unequivocal success and the degree of bilinguality in children achievable by this strategy was diverse and in some cases even disillusioning for parents.

The other most popular strategy of bilingual childrearing proved to be 'non-dominant language at home', which assumed the use of a minority language at home and the other language outside the home. The exclusive use of a non-dominant language at home brought quite satisfactory results of effective language acquisition. However, when children started school, the dominant language permeated into the home more easily, thereby putting at a disadvantage the non-dominant language. In the researched sample, the non-dominant language was used at home by two couples, the Polish–Brazilian and the Polish–Spanish²⁵.

3.3. Communication Outside the Couple

Communication in the couple may occasionally be influenced by the presence of other persons (family, acquaintances). Contact with the partner's family enforces taking the decision about which language to use depending on how frequent this contact is. In the study, English was chosen as a LF by couples where non-Polish partners spoke other languages than English, and Polish partners and their families did not

24 S. Romaine, *Bilingualism*, Oxford 2008.

25 A. Stępkowska, *Rodzinna polityka dwujęzyczności w Polsce na wybranym przykładzie*, 'Scripta Neophilologica Posnaniensia' 2017b, no. 17, pp. 329–343.

know these languages. This did not apply for couples where Polish partners were fluent in the languages of their foreign partners. Foreigners fluent in Polish used it for communication with the families of Polish partners, while three Polish partners used English when in contact with the families of their foreign partners (Indonesian, Brazilian and Ethiopian). Some participants had to resort to interpreting to facilitate the contact between the two families. Interpreting occurred in couples where one partner did not know the language of the other, and in couples where either partner had a poor knowledge of the other language. An impeded communication with the immediate family of a partner presented a burden for the one who needed to interpret and a source of frustration for the one who needed interpreting assistance.

Foreign partners who made efforts to learn Polish showed involvement, thereby symbolically entering the Polish culture. They demonstrated openness to tightening the family ties. Individual relations, above all, were relations of specific persons not cultures or typical representatives of nations. All couples outright rejected or discredited national stereotypes. In other words, partners refused to look at each other through a national lens or stereotypes related to nationality²⁶. The partners' resistance to differences informed by their languages and cultures stood in stark contrast to their parents' attitudes, which strongly relied on symbolic national differences²⁷. For parents of Polish partners, the stereotypical concept of foreign culture became the trigger for discovering and adjusting themselves to the individual traits of the foreign newcomers in their families.

Conclusions

Today adult learners acquiring Polish as a foreign language are mature individuals in many respects. They are aware of the goals and benefits of language knowledge. They are autonomous, motivated and well disposed towards the language and culture of a given country. Such individuals learn the language by choice, though at the same time may be obligated to do so by life circumstances or professional situation. Adult learners are not necessarily knowledgeable about relevant strategies, whereas bad habits and experiences may effectively hinder this process. On the other hand, life experience and the knowledge of other foreign languages facilitate the acquisition of another language. Basic needs are usually related to studies, work and the family context. Most foreigners in the researched sample (regardless of age) had a certain experience of learning foreign languages. Even when at the beginner's level, adult

26 A. Stępkowska, Identity in the bilingual couple: Attitudes to language and culture, 'Open Linguistics' 2021c, no. 7, pp. 223–234.

27 A. Stępkowska, Family networking of bilingual couples: Reactions to otherness, (in:) B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (ed.), Cultural conceptualizations in language and communication, New York 2020, pp. 115–128.

learners had a number of competences acquired so far. For example, they were able to purchase essential products, effectively use a computer and the internet, could discover analogies and juxtapose the languages already learnt and known. They understood the necessity of obtaining linguistic qualifications and realised what should be improved to attain success in learning.

The present article aimed to contribute to our understanding of the key factors that keep motivating foreigners in bilingual couples with partners who are native to their host country on the example of the less studied Polish setting. By way of juxtaposing the obtained results with other studies pertaining to Poland, some of them need to be mentioned. There are a few up-to-date works featuring the Polish context or related to individuals of Polish ethnicity living elsewhere. The researched problems ranged from the areas of family language policy²⁸, bilingual or trilingual childrearing²⁹ to transnational families in Great Britain³⁰. The studies devoted to bilingual socialisation of teenagers of Polish descent in Ireland³¹ and Germany³² form a distinct line of linguistic investigation.

Lastly, the list of social needs is infinite, from more commonplace motives (Polish partner) to most prestigious (working in diplomacy), from learning for pleasure (maintain family tradition, travelling, entering into contact with people of other nationalities, spending free time etc.) to acquiring a language under pressure of life situations, such as the change of place of residence and the craving for integration with a community speaking a foreign language, the perspective of professional advancement or obtaining a certificate. Nevertheless, it is quite common to see the co-occurrence of several incentives, e.g. work, personal and family relations, studies and

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- 28 P. Romanowski, *Family Language Policy in the Polish Diaspora: A focus on Australia*, London 2021.
- 29 J. Murrmann, *Rodzinna polityka językowa: Strategie w wychowaniu dzieci trójjęzycznych*, 'Sociolingwistyka' 2019, no. XXXIII, pp. 193–207; P. Romanowski, *Early bilingual education in a monolingual environment: Showcasing Polish families*, 'Complutense Journal of English Studies' 2018, no. 24, pp. 143–164; S. Szramek-Karcz, *The success of non-native bilingualism in Poland*, 'Lingwistyka Stosowana' 2016, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 93–102.
- 30 E. Wąsikiewicz-Firlej E. and H. Lankiewicz, *The dynamics of Family Language Policy in a trilingual family: A longitudinal case study*, 'Applied Linguistics Papers' 2019, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 169–184.
- 31 M. Machowska-Kościak, *To be like a home extension: Challenges of language learning and language maintenance – lessons from Polish-Irish experience*, 'Journal of Home Language Research' 2018, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 82–104.
- 32 H. Pułaczewska, *Mütter sprechen. Erziehung mit Herkunftssprache Polnisch am Beispiel Regensburg*, Hamburg 2018; H. Pułaczewska, *Studying parental attitudes to intergenerational transmission of a heritage language: Polish in Regensburg*, (in:) B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk (ed.), *Contacts and contrasts in educational contexts and translation*, Berlin 2019, pp. 8–17; H. Pułaczewska, *Adolescence as a 'critical period' in the heritage language use. Polish in Germany*. 'Open Linguistics' 2021, no. 7, pp. 301–315.

the desire to learn about the culture of a given country. This is also indicative of integrative motivation demonstrated as a greater openness to foreign cultures and the wish to actively participate in cultural life. Lack of language knowledge pushes those people into the margin of society and causes a sense of exclusion. Thus, the prime motivation of language learning is to better understand the world. Nearly half of participants pointed out that their family members and friends spoke at least one foreign language. Ever better command of a foreign language was a motivating factor *per se* for the majority.

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