

# The Influence of the English Language on the Polish Youth Speak

Anita Jagun

Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce, Doctoral School  
Żeromskiego 5, Kielce, Poland  
Email: [anita.anna.jagun@gmail.com](mailto:anita.anna.jagun@gmail.com)  
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7209-7372>  
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**Abstract.** The aim of the following article is to discuss the impact of the English language on Polish youth speak. First, the paper demonstrates databases that can be useful while analyzing the language of contemporary Polish teenagers. Next, it presents the English-origin lexical units that were classified to the final stage of the Polish Youth Word of the Year 2022 plebiscite. Finally, it highlights the similarities and differences between the use of a specific term in Polish and English. The results of the study show that the English-speaking culture has an enormous impact on how Polish teenagers communicate and perceive reality. Twelve of twenty lexical units selected in the plebiscite can be linked to the English language. Some of them loosely refer to English expressions or sounds. Many words are directly transferred from slang. They often originate from the world of computer games or social media. In today's day and age, common access to the Internet makes them well-known in various parts of the world.

**Keywords:** youth speak; anglicisms; youth sociolect; Youth Language and Culture Observatory.

## Introduction

The notion of *youth speak* denotes the language variety that young people use during unofficial situations (Wileczek, 2021). *Youth speak* is ubiquitous. It can be heard on the streets, at schools, or on the Internet – everywhere where teenagers feel tranquil and secure. It is a distinct code adolescents use while talking to their peers – a manner to convey thoughts and emotions, challenge social norms, and express the complexities of juvenescence (Wileczek, 2018). Words and linguistic expressions that appear in *youth speak* reflect the nature of adolescence – they are ephemeral, dynamic, and illustrate the creativity of teenagers (Ibidem). They cover various topics, ranging from school problems to recreational activities, and embody everything that holds great significance for a given generation. The analysis of *youth speak* is crucial not solely from a linguistic but also

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from a sociological point of view. It helps to understand young people, their values, and their passions. It offers an insight into their world and reduces communication barriers between various generations. Thus, there are many publications all over the world that discuss the language of the youth (Dmitrichenkova, 2020; Nesi, 2022).

In Poland, a growing interest in the language of the youth resulted in the emergence of websites devoted to collecting and explaining words and linguistic expressions that appear in the young people's lexicon. For instance, *Miejski.pl* allows its members to add a slang vocabulary to the database and provide its definition with examples of its use. Other users can verify whether the expression functions in society in the described way by granting positive or negative points. The Youth Language and Culture Observatory (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży) at Jan Kochanowski University uses a different method of record selection. People who want to insert a certain lexical unit into the database need to fill in a special questionnaire in which they are asked not only about the form and the meaning of the expression but also about the context, circumstances, and situations in which it functions. Then, the term is analyzed by the researchers who are experts in the field of *youth speak* and discussed with teenagers. In the final stage, the linguists describe the expression and publish the definition on the website.

Another way of gathering knowledge about *youth speak* is offered thanks to the Youth Word of the Year plebiscite organized by PWN Scientific Publishing House. Every year the body of experts chooses the words that are the most widespread among young people (PWN, 2022g). The following article presents the results of the analysis of the vocabulary that was classified to the final stage of the contest to explore the impact of English on the language patterns of teenagers. This examination will lead to a better understanding of Generation Z and Generation Alpha – who are the creators and the users of contemporary *youth speak*.

## 1. English in the life of a Polish teenager

English is the most common foreign language taught at the first educational stage in Poland. According to Eurostat (2023), it is learned by nearly all (98.9%) primary school students<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, school is not the only place children and teenagers have contact with the English language. As a result of the rapid expansion of digital technology, the differences between various countries have become unclear. Teenagers all over the world have access to the same content and can interact easily with each other.

Social media are among the most popular platforms among the youth – they are used by 98% of Polish teenagers and 92% admit that they visit the websites more than once a day. Teenagers usually spend time on several platforms. They mostly choose Facebook (89%), Instagram (68%), TikTok (64%), and Snapchat (51%), but they also use other

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<sup>1</sup> The Eurostat research has been carried out annually since 2012. It analyses the acquisition of contemporary foreign languages learned in European Union member states (Eurostat, 2023).

websites such as Discord (26%), Pinterest (16%), Twitch (15%), Wykop (8%), Reddit (5%), Tumblr (3%), and others (2%) (Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę, 2021)<sup>2</sup>.

A great number of social media platforms have an international reach. Thanks to them, teenagers can relax, contact their friends, learn languages, meet new people, and become acquainted with different cultures. The exposition of these platforms also leads to appropriating of certain expressions and incorporation of them into the Polish informal language. This process is facilitated by the fact that English being a carrier of Western culture (Przybylska, 2009)<sup>3</sup>. Kulesza (2010) claims that this trend has been visible since the 1990s due to the increasing knowledge of English and the popularity of films, songs and TV shows. Taking into consideration the possibilities that the Internet offers, it seems that the influx of English words into the *youth speak* is inevitable, and it becomes more apparent with every year.

## 2. The analysis of youth speak

The plebiscite for Youth Word of the Year is an initiative of the PWN Scientific Publishing House in cooperation with the University of Warsaw. The annual contest was organized for the first time in 2016 as part of the campaign *Ojczysty – dodaj do ulubionych*. Since then, the competition has become more and more popular. It helps to promote the Polish language among young Poles and track the evolution of their native language. The competition consists of two stages. In the first phase, Internet users submit a lexical unit that they consider to be interesting and commonly used within their environment. Then, the jury analyses the entries in terms of compliance with the rules set in the competition (e.g., words cannot be vulgar or offensive) and selects twenty expressions that most frequently appeared in the submissions. In the second stage, Internet users vote for the words from the final twenty and choose the word of the year (PWN, 2022g).

This year the list of twenty most popular youth words consisted of the following lexical units: “baza”, “betoniarz”, “cringe”, “essa”, “gigachad”, “kto pytał?”, “łymyn”, “naura”, “NPC”, “odklejka”, “onuca”, “pokemon”, “rel”, “robi wrażenie”, “siedemnaście”, “sigma”, “slay”, “sus”, “twoja stara”, and “uWu” (PWN, 2022h). Not all of them have English roots. For example, “Pokemon” originates from a popular Japanese multimedia franchise, while “siedemnaście” (Eng. ”seventeen”) refers to the lyrics of a Polish song (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2022c; 2022d). As the following paper concentrates on the impact of the English language on Polish *youth speak*, such expressions are excluded from the analysis. The results of the examination are discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> The research study was conducted in 2021 and employed both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The former applied the CAWI surveying technique. The research group consisted of 600 children aged between 13 to 17. The qualitative method, on the other hand, was based on in-depth interviews with ten teenagers aged 13–17 (Fundacja Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Anglicisms have become prevalent in various fields of life including advertising, marketing, and politics (Berdychowska, 2020). They are also a substantial element in the corporate vernacular which stems from the international nature of many companies (Cierpich, 2019).

## 2.1 Baza

“Baza” originates from the English word “based” (PWN, 2020a). This word, in turn, derives from the expression “basehead” created in the 1980s and used to talk about freebase addicts (Dictionary.com, 2018a). The meaning of the term altered when the American rapper Brandon “Lil B” McCartney defined it in the following way: “Based means being yourself. Not being scared of what people think about you. Not being afraid to do what you wanna do. Being positive” (PWN, 2020a; Complex, 2010). Nowadays, the word refers to something pleasant and acceptable, but also to express the disapproval of the so-called woke movement<sup>4</sup> (Know Your Meme, 2016a). In the Polish *youth speak*, “baza” is mainly used to suggest approval or admiration (PWN, 2020a). The word can also be used ironically (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021a).

## 2.2 Cringe

In standard English, the word “cringe” functions as a verb or a noun. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it means “to recoil in distaste”, “to shrink in a fear or servility”, “to behave in an excessively humble or servile way”, “to draw in or contract one’s muscles involuntarily”, or “a cringing act, specifically a servile bow” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). In slang, it occurs as an adjective in the context of something humiliating or shaming (Ibidem). The word has the same meaning in Polish *youth speak*, but it appears as a noun, and it can be spelt either as “cringe” or “krindź” (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021b).

## 2.3 Essa

The word “essa” is the winner of the Youth Word of the Year 2022 plebiscite (PWN, 2022h). Although the expression appeared in the Polish 1983 movie *Seksmisja*, it became popular years later thanks to the Polish rapper Winicjusz “Wini” Bartków, who used the term in his songs (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021c). According to the musician, “essa” was used as an exclamation during a party he attended (Malec, 2022). Later, the word became the title of a song by Stachursky and BBX (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021c). “Essa” can be used in many ways, e.g. as an exclamation that expresses joy or success, as well as a synonym for the word “easy” (PWN, 2018). The English word “easy” is probably the source of the term “essa” (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021c). Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that although the expression is extremely popular among the Polish *youth speak*, it is not present in English slang.

<sup>4</sup> The term “woke” is used in slang to describe the urge to draw people’s attention to social injustice or racism (Know Your Meme, 2016b).

## 2.4 Gigachad

In the manosphere<sup>5</sup>, the word “GigaChad” is used to depict an attractive, successful man who is a symbol of male perfection (Know Your Meme, 2018a). The linguistic expression is linked to another slang term – “Chad” (Ibidem). While “Chad” stands for a good-looking affluent young man, “GigaChad” is his superior version (Know Your Meme, 2012; 2018a). In the Polish *youth speak*, “Gigachad” is also seen as someone remarkable – an embodiment of an ideal or prosperous person, regardless of gender (PWN, 2022a). The word can not only be associated with its English equivalent but also with the Polish slang term “czad”, which means “great” or “wonderful” (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2022a). This lexical unit became widespread among Polish teenagers thanks to the online streamer Mandzio (Ibidem).

## 2.5 Kto pytał?

“Kto pytał?” (Eng. “Who asked?”) is a question that suggests no concern about what the interlocutor is saying (PWN, 2022b). Other versions of the expression include “Who?” and “Nobody asked” (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021d). Similar lexical units can be found in English slang – “Who asked, Nobody Asked” or “That’s Crazy, But I Don’t Remember Asking” (Know Your Meme, 2020b). They have the same meaning as their Polish equivalents and can be regarded as impolite or insolent (Ibidem).

## 2.6 Łymyn

“Łymyn” is derived from the English plural noun “women” – it refers to the phonetic version of the word, causing its meaning to change; however, the expression can also be used interchangeably with the word “women” (PWN, 2022c). The emoji of coffee may accompany it (☕) (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2022f). The popularity of the word is directly related to the game *Teams Fortress 2* in which two male characters say “women”, laugh and drink coffee (Ibidem). “Łymyn” or “women” is used in Polish *youth speak* to mock stereotypical women’s behaviour (PWN, 2022c). In English, “łymyn” functions with the same meaning as “Women ☕”, “Women Coffee”, and “Hmph, Women” (Know Your Meme, 2022b).

## 2.7 Naura

In the Polish *youth speak*, “naura” can be traced back to the slang word “nara”, which was a shortened form of “na razie” – Eng. “see you later” (PWN, 2020b). Despite the fact that this noun has Polish origins, it is not free from English influences. In this case, this

<sup>5</sup> Manosphere can be understood as „websites and internet discussion groups that are concerned with men’s interests and rights” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

impact is based on pronunciation factors, namely, the “r” sound is supposed to imitate the English “r” sound (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021e).

## 2.8 NPC

The acronym “NPC” represents a “non-player character” or “non-playable character” programmed in a game to perform certain tasks and is independent of a player (PWN, 2022d). In Polish *youth speak*, the expression refers to a stranger, a person who is enigmatic and mysterious, or to someone who behaves unusually (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2022b). In English slang, “NPC” is also known as “NPC Wojak” and is associated with a graphic picture of a bald male adult (Know Your Meme, 2018b; 2015)<sup>6</sup>. In English slang, “NPC” or “NPC Wojak” is used to refer to someone manipulatable who does not use his/her mental faculties (Know Your Meme, 2018b).

## 2.9 Rel

In Polish *youth speak*, “rel” is used to agree with the statement of another person (PWN 2020c). Teenagers use this word on social media, but also in real-life situations. “Rel” is not an English slang word, but it originates from the English adjective “relatable” (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021f).

## 2.10 Sigma

“Sigma male” is an English slang term that pertains to a man who is fortunate and independent (Know Your Meme, 2021). Although “sigma males” are often admired by society, they do not feel the need to be praised but rather prefer to follow their own life path (Ibidem). In Polish *youth speak*, the expression has the same meaning (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2022e). It functions either as “sigma male” or “sigma” (PWN, 2022e).

## 2.11 Slay

In standard English, “slay” appears as a verb or a noun and it is connected with murder or annihilation (Dictionary.com, n.d.a). Interestingly, in the outmoded American informal language, it was used as a verb and meant “to delight or amuse (someone) very much” (The Britannica Dictionary, n.d.). In modern slang, the word also appears as a verb that it can be defined as “to strongly impress or overwhelm someone” (Dictionary.com, n.d.a). The term can also be associated with intimate relationships, compliments on someone’s style, or achieving success (Dictionary.com, 2018b). Nevertheless, the form and the meaning of

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the word “Wojak” alludes to the Polish word “wojownik” (Eng. “warrior”) (Know Your Meme, 2015).

“slay” is constantly evolving (see: Know Your Meme, 2022a). In the Polish *youth speak*, the word is used to express admiration for something or someone (PWN, 2022f).

## 2.12 Sus

“Sus” is a shortened version of the word “suspicious”, and it can be associated with the multiplayer game *Among Us*, in which players need to find a person who is an impostor (Know Your Meme, 2020a). The expression is used to express the lack of trust towards someone or doubts regarding his or her unusual behaviour (see: Dictionary.com, n.d.b). The Polish *youth speak* functions within the same context (Obserwatorium Języka i Kultury Młodzieży, 2021g).

## Conclusion

The research shows many interferences between English and Polish *youth speak*. Among the most popular words in the plebiscite Youth Word 2022, the majority is rooted in English-speaking culture. Sometimes these expressions form the basis for new lexical units (e.g., “essa”). In other cases, they are directly transferred from the English slang (e.g., “NPC”). There are also cases in which a particular word is adapted to Polish spelling (e.g., “łymyn”). What seems to be unusual is the fact that a Polish expression can be created based on English pronunciation (“naura”). Numerous English slang words are incorporated into Polish without any alteration to their intended meanings (e.g., “sus”, or “sigma”); some are characteristic solely to the Polish language (e.g., “essa”) while others have a broader (e.g., “slay”) or narrower (e.g., “gigachad”) interpretation in English.

Teenagers are under the enormous influence of the Internet, computers, and social media. Many words originate from games or Internet forums. This explains their popularity all around the world. Expressions such as “sigma” or “NPC” appear in the lexicon of teenagers coming from different countries, although they can be used in various contexts and situations.

It is crucial to understand that the words that appear in the language of young people have ephemeral nature. Therefore, the expressions mentioned in this article will not only change their meaning but also be replaced with other terms. Some of the new lexical units may still have English roots as English is a modern lingua franca.

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