

The Forms of Address in Contemporary Polish

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Introduction

In this paper we will attempt to describe the forms of address in present-day Polish and the patterning of their usage. Having no access to sources which could verify our hypotheses, we have thus based our judgments on intuition and experience alone. Therefore, our description will by no means be complete and well-documented.

Taking into consideration the political status quo of Poland one could naively expect the address forms to be fairly homogeneous, with a solidarity pronoun being extensively used. In an allegedly unstratified society, the dominance of the deferential forms of address over solidarity pronouns would seem surprising to the early Marxist-Leninist ideologist. Moreover, some instances of non-reciprocal forms of address are encountered.

It is our desire to show that the Polish system of address employs an extreme variety of forms and their usage is ruled by quite a complicated "code" (or set of rules). Furthermore, we wish to cast some light on the interdependence of the Polish system of address and the socio-political pattern. The observed phenomena will entitle us to put forward a hypothesis that politically induced changes do not necessarily affect social attitudes (as expressed in language).

Historical Background

Before describing contemporary forms of address, it might be worthwhile to look briefly at the historical development of these forms.

In Poland the gentry always constituted a uniquely high percentage of the country's population. Since over the centuries the nobility was the most prestigious class in the nation, its speech patterns were looked upon as language norms. It is thus conceivable that some of the current forms of address can be traced back to the gentry language. In particular, today's most frequently used forms of address: "Pan" (=Sir), "Pani" (=Madam), "Państwo" (=Sirs) originally meant: 'landlord', 'landlady', 'landowners', respectively. Hence, they were primarily reserved for the gentry alone.

These forms of address were often accompanied by appropriate titles, e.g. "hrabia" (=count), "podkomorzy" (=chamberlain) or "podstoli" (=steward of the King's household). Some of these titles

were fictitious and yet hereditary. The titles were further strengthened by epithets of reverence such as: "Jaśnie Oświecony" (=His Grace), "Jaśnie Wielmożny" (=the Right Honourable) and the like. The latter ones especially pertained to addressing a nobleman by his serf or representatives of the lower status gentry.

As the language of the 18th century was overwhelmingly influenced by French, the usage of "vous" became fashionable among the gentry and soon the similar form "Wy" (second person plural) was brought into Polish, but the older forms: "Pan", "Pani", were simultaneously retained. Off and on both forms appeared combined. But their use was confined to "inter pares" relations--between persons equal in the social hierarchy or spouses. Therefore, when addressing a person of high status the title alone was more suitable.

Other social strata employed among themselves the second person singular pronoun "Ty". This was also in asymmetrical use by a landlord addressing his serf, parents addressing a child and so forth. Toward the end of the 19th century, "Ty" gained the status of a pronoun of familiarity within the upper class.

It was not until the 19th century that peasants snobbishly following their landlords introduced to their speech "Pan"/"Pani". This course of the development of forms of address parallel with political democratization resulted in the wide-spread popularity of the latter forms and gradual deletion of the elaborated titles. Hence, until the outbreak of World War II, these forms were officially accepted throughout the whole nation even including the army and the police.

Conceivably, the only old-fashioned expressions that remain in present-day Polish are the letter headings (written in the abbreviated forms).

Present-Day Forms of Address

There is no doubt that in post-war Poland the following forms of address: "Pan", "Pani", "Państwo" have remained the most popular. They are used reciprocally between any two adults desiring to show respect or deference. Moreover, on numerous formal occasions, they are mandatory.

These forms do not usually function in isolation but can occur with proper names, official ranks, or academic degrees according to the situation. Some people may feel at a loss when addressing a person who, as is often the case, occupies several positions and hence can be addressed in different ways. One might feel extremely uncomfortable when meeting a person who is, for example, the Head of a Department and holds his Ph.D. and is also a Party member.

Fortunately, however, there are a number of informal rules existing within the Polish "savoir vivre" which help one find the proper solution to the problem mentioned above. First of all, one should choose the most prestigious or the highest possible rank or degree (e.g. professorship is appreciated more than the Ph.D.). Subject matter of the discourse also determines the address usage. For instance, a student wishing to apply for a stipend should address his Dean using the word "Dean" rather than "Professor". In our opinion, the example given above is closely related to the so-called "titlemania" that has unexpectedly re-appeared in post-war Poland. Since access to higher education has been considerably facilitated, academic degrees are nowadays very highly valued. Quite often those recently elevated in social status go to extremes to expose their academic achievements. It is the rule in Polish universities to put academic degrees on the doorplates. Some people go even further, however, and display the list of their academic achievements on the door of their private apartments.

Another form of address one often encounters is "Ty" (second person singular). Contrary to "Pan", "Ty" is employed between two persons of no (or almost no) social or age difference. Before discussing the constraints imposed upon the usage of "Ty", let us briefly describe a custom called "Bruderschaft" that initiates a "transition" from "Pan"-terms to "Ty"-terms. The usual scenario is a vodka party. When the degree of intimacy is high enough, the older or higher in rank of the two (or a female to a male) suggests becoming "Ty". Then these two people drink to each other's health with their arms interlaced. Obviously, first name of both are loudly pronounced. The cordial kisses on both cheeks soon follow.

Unlike other European languages, Polish has a solidarity pronoun which is the second person plural "Wy." Its usage was implemented in Polish by Stalin's zealous followers in the early 1950's. (For an analogous example see Bates and Benigni 1975). "Wy" was designed to replace the ambiguous "Pan," but the experiment was a failure. It has since been entirely abandoned by the working class. Sometimes it might be used by Party members among themselves (usually accompanied by "Towarzysz" (=comrade) or by a boss to workmen. In the latter case "Wy" has apparently lost its solidarity quality.

Once a person has entered the Communist Party, he or she is obliged to call the fellow members "Towarzysz," seemingly a translation from Russian. Members of other political organizations or professional associations tend to employ the form "Kolega" (=colleague) +FN, +LN or +"Wy." This sounds less formal than "Pan" and more Polish than "Towarzysz."

In our opinion the most democratic form of address in Polish is "Obywatel" (=citizen) which was introduced towards the end of the 18th century to symbolize the establishment of the egalitarian society.

Unfortunately, today it is not widely recognized as such. On the contrary, to a "common Joe" in Poland this word is associated with bureaucracy, army and the militia where it is formally adopted. It is still in parliamentary use, though.

Since Poland is a country with a Catholic majority, it might be worthwhile to look at the forms of address exchanged between clergy and laity. The Priest is addressed as "Ksiadz" (=priest) used in the Vocative. He, in turn, reciprocates saying in a somewhat euphemistic fashion: "My daughter", "My son" or "My child", "My children." Addressing believers "en masse" priests are inclined to make use of the old fashioned forms, e.g.: "The sheep of God" or "Beloved in Christ the Lord." It is interesting to note that priests when addressing believers carefully avoid using either "Ty" or "Pan/Pani".

Symmetrical and Asymmetrical Usage

Having thus delineated the most frequent forms of address, let us investigate their distribution. The main factor to be taken into account is the symmetry or asymmetry of the usage.

It is our belief that in most cases a choice of a particular form of address is strongly determined by subject-matter of the discourse, the context of the speech event, then age, sex and status of both speaker and addressee (Friedrich 1972). We attempt to consider these factors.

Mutual "Pan/Pani" signals a distance between any two adults. It is thus reciprocated by strangers or people recently introduced to each other. Unconditionally, one uses "Pan/Pani" when addressing an older person. Another standard example when "Pan/Pani" applies are customer-service relations. Being the most formal, this form expresses respect and deference. Accompanied by LN and/or title, it sounds more formal than when followed by FN alone. Reciprocated "Pan/Pani" + diminutive FN no longer expresses a distance but is perhaps intermediate between "Ty"-terms and "Pan"-terms.

Symmetrical "Ty" +FN is in Polish basically the pronoun of intimacy and familiarity. It by no means functions as the pronoun of solidarity while the corresponding second person singular pronouns in other European languages (e.g. German or French) do. Despite socio-political circumstances, this pronoun has never been extensively used within the working class. Workers in a big factory, for example, use "Ty" only as often as clerks in a bank or other social groups. To work in the same factory is not sufficient to exchange "Ty." (Compare with Paulston 1976.)

Except for students and youth, mutual "Ty" among adults is meaningful and implies intimate relations. Hence, it is employed between spouses, relatives and friends. We conclude then that it is

age or degree of intimacy that underlines the choice between reciprocated "Ty" and "Pan/Pani." It might be interesting to mention that FN accompanying "Ty" appears either in Nominative or in Vocative (e.g. "Jan" vs. "Janie"). The latter form seems to be regarded as more polite.

As regards asymmetrical forms of address, their usage is in principle evoked by a difference in age between speaker and addressee. Children are called "Ty" but usually address their parents and definitely their grandparents by kinterms built into more polite phrases, e.g. "Would mother pass me some sugar, please." An elementary school pupil addresses his/her teacher "Pan/Pani" and receives "Ty" +FN or LN. A secondary school student in turn calls a teacher "Pan/Pani +Professor" (presumably to honour an old tradition, since today "Professor" is only used for a university position) receiving "Ty" +FN or LN again. University students address their instructors with "Pan/Pani" + the highest academic degree held, and receive "Pan/Pani" in exchange. Incidentally, an adult chooses the neutral form ("Bachelor" or "Miss") when confused by the appearance of a youngster whom he does not know and still wishes to address.

The superior-subordinate relations supply us with more colorful examples of the asymmetrical address form usage. There is an unspoken rule in Poland that subordinates address all their superiors with "Pan/Pani" + title (highest possible) and receive "Pan/Pani" or just "Wy" +LN or (if young enough) "Ty." A respect for hierarchy is implemented very early, for example in the scout organization where an address form must always respect a power differential between two boys/girls.

Those professions which have acquired special recognition are also distinguishable by the forms of address required, e.g. name of a profession (or equivalent) following "Pan/Pani." These are: journalists, architects, lawyers, pharmacists, physicians, artists. Strange as it may seem, Party members are not recognized as prominent enough.

In our opinion the exaggerated respect for titles as reflected in Polish address forms, creates a "power-laden" atmosphere. See Brown and Gilman 1960. Due to repeated pronunciation of addressee's title by the "lower-ranked" speaker, the distance between both is further increased.

Conclusions

1. The forms of address used in contemporary Poland cannot be easily reconciled with the ruling ideology whose principles (at least) are based on the quality of individuals.

2. The existing social relations (as reflected by the address forms) are highly stratified.

3. Poles have repeatedly resisted assimilating more democratic yet artificially introduced forms of address ("Wy", "Obywatel") exhibiting by this not only a deep sense of tradition but, above all, conservatism.

4. Regarding address forms, the Polish language has remained out of the mainstream of linguistic changes that have occurred in other European languages.

References

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