

## Etymology as a vehicle for Polish-English cultural links

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**Abstract:** Etymology is one of the ways to demonstrate cultural links between Poland and England and can be used in glottodidactics. The cardinal objective of the article is to present the results of an etymological analysis of selected Polish and English words that derive from the same etymon. It also outlines the advantages and ways of using elements of etymology in language teaching. Since the languages share a common ancestor in the form of the Proto-Indo-European language, it is not surprising that a significant number of Polish and English words share a common origin. What seems intriguing and less obvious is how the shape and meaning of some of them have evolved over time, and this non-obviousness was one of the criteria for selecting the words analysed. For example, from the Proto-Indo-European root *\*gwen-* come both the Polish word *żona* ‘wife’ and the English word *queen* ‘wife of a king’, which used to refer to ‘woman in general’ in both languages.

**Keywords:** Polish-English cultural relationships, etymology, glottodidactics.

### Introduction

The main objective of this article is to propose a new perspective on etymology, which comes down to two aspects. The first one deals with showing how the cultural links between Poland and England/Great Britain<sup>1</sup> can be brought closer on the grounds of etymology. In order to achieve this, three pairs of English-Polish words have been investigated in terms of etymology. It is pivotal to mention that more pairs are intended to be looked into in future publications. The other objective relates to demonstrating advantages and ways of using elements of etymology in glottodidactics, understood as a field concerned chiefly with teaching and learning foreign languages. The need to realise the set goals is based on the assumption that some English-Polish etymological convergences can make teaching a foreign language more attractive and productive, since cultural proximity is a factor that increases the effectiveness of didactics.

Traces of research into etymology, treated as the study of the origins of words and their original meanings, lead to the Old Testament and the classical period, and one of the scholars of this discipline was Plato. Throughout history, societies that derive their identity from mythic narratives have consistently shown a keen interest in language-related matters, including etymology. This interest is connected especially with “the emergence, cultivation, critical analysis, and incorporation into the sacred dimension of myths linked to the origin

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<sup>1</sup> Although the English language under discussion is native in many countries, the article uses references mainly to England as the country where the language originally occurred.

of a specific culture”<sup>2</sup> (Sobotka 2011: 255). Yet, the lack of historical records and an adequate methodology meant that their interpretations were largely based on conjecture (Sobotka 2015: 25, 40; “Etymology” 2023).

Although the etymological reconstruction of many words poses a challenge for the modern etymologist as well, a significant amount of vocabulary has been etymologised and made available to the reader. From the output of Polish etymological lexicography – also used in this article – it is worth mentioning Aleksander Brückner’s *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (Etymological dictionary of the Polish language) (1927), Władysław Boryś’s work of the same title from 2005, or Witold Mańczak’s *Polski słownik etymologiczny* (Polish etymological dictionary) (2017). The equivalents of these sources for English are, for example, *A dictionary of English etymology* by Hensleigh Wedgwood (1859-1865), *The Oxford dictionary of English etymology* edited by Charles T. Onions (1966), as well as *The American heritage dictionary of Indo-European roots* edited by Calvert Watkins (1985).

## 1. Historical overview of Polish-English etymological relationships

The first borrowings from English appeared in Polish in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In the print called *Merkuriusz Polski Ordynaryjny* (Polish Ordinary Mercarius) of 1661, we find the following examples:

*Kwakier* ‘Quaker’, *lord*, *lord major* ‘mayor of London’, *mylord*, *par*, *spiker* and in the Latinised form: *iacobus* ‘English coin’ and *libra sterlińska* ‘pound sterling’. These borrowings are associated with the English reality, which is characteristic of the introduction of the oldest loans. A little later, in the second decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, another Anglicism can be noted in *Poczta Królewiecka* (Royal Post). It is *Jacobita* ‘supporter of King James II Stuart and pretender James III’ (Mańczak-Wohlfeld 2006: 18).

When it comes to the origins of Polish-English cultural relations, they go back to the 7<sup>th</sup> or even 6<sup>th</sup> century, that is, several centuries before the formal establishment of both Poland (966) and England (829). For it is from this period that the Old English poem entitled “Widsith”, known in Polish literature as “Wędrowiec” (Eng. Wanderer) or “Daleka podróż” (Eng. *Far journey*), dates. In the poem, an anonymous Anglo-Saxon author presents both fantastic and real places and events, which include the territory of present-day Poland. The reader will find here, for example, the word *Wistla*, referring to the main river in Poland (see Laskowski 2022).

Nonetheless, if one extracts the etymological aspect from the broadly defined Polish-English cultural relations, it turns out that common roots can be found long before that, as a significant number of Polish and English words share a common, though unrecorded and reconstructed, platform in the form of the Proto-Indo-European language.

## 2. Definitions and concepts of etymology

Following the approach of the 5<sup>th</sup>-century philologist Orion of Thebes, “etymology is to provide an interpretation of a name on the basis of the very means of naming a given thing, as well as to discover the reason why a thing has this or that particular name” (Orion 1820: 173 after Sobotka 2015: 324). This concept is characteristic of ancient scholars and here etymology is associated with an achronic approach to language and is classified by Sobotka

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from Polish into English including citations and titles of works are mine, ML.

(2011: 251) as functional-hermeneutic etymology or etymologizing. Another name connected with this concept is *Volksetymologie* (folk etymology), which, as Winer (1992: 238–239) puts it, can be reduced to popular but false hypothesis about the derivation of a word, usually based on phonological and semantic similarities between two or more words.

Modern linguistics classifies etymology as a subdiscipline of historical linguistics, also referred to as diachronic linguistics. Here, the tools of etymological analysis are culled from phonetics, morphology, lexicology, semantics and other disciplines (Sobotka 2011: 249). Accordingly, etymology in a modern approach can be defined as “the history often including the prehistory of a linguistic form (as a word or morpheme) as shown by tracing its phonetic, graphic, and semantic development since its earliest recorded occurrence in the language where it is found, by tracing the course of its transmission from one language to another, by analyzing it into the component parts from which it was put together, by identifying its cognates in other languages, or by tracing it and its cognates back to a common ancestral form in a recorded or assumed ancestral language” (Gove 1993: 782). This type of etymology is termed historical-comparative etymology and is associated with a diachronic approach to language (Sobotka 2011: 251).

It is also worth noting that etymological observations easily escape formalised descriptions and they cannot be brought down to algorithmic formulae, because, as Sobotka (2015: 323) informs the reader, “the human factor is one of the most crucial aspects of formal and semantic changes – a thing which frequently does not yield to schematisation and generalisation”.

### 3. Etymology in glottodidactics

As has been mentioned before, one of the goals of the subsequent work is a demonstration of advantages and ways of using elements of etymology in language teaching.

In addition to its function of communication *sensu largo*, a language is a treasury of the history and culture of its speakers, and etymology constitutes an important element in learning about and understanding the differences and similarities between languages and their cultural relationships. Etymological analysis is also very important in reconstructing the linguistic view of the world (Bartmiński 2013: 235), which acquires a deeper meaning. “It allows to discover the structures of human cognition, thinking, conceptualising, etc.” (Toporov 1986: 207 after Sobotka 2015: 175).

The interest in etymology (...) is not only related to the satisfaction of curiosity but also to the attempt to categorise the world through the original meanings of words. Underlying this approach is the conviction that words encode information about extralinguistic reality, and that reaching their origins can be equivalent to “returning” to the sources of human culture (Sobotka 2015: 12–13).

As Bartmiński (2013: 235) points out, the use of elements of etymology contributes to improving the knowledge of the mother tongue and also the common roots, norms and rules of other languages. Furthermore, introducing intriguing, fascinating and sometimes even uncanny examples of word origins into language learning will generate linguistic interest in the learner. What is more, aspects of etymology in the form of anecdotes or exercises can be introduced at any language level, at any stage of the lesson and for any length of time. They will provide a capital break from routine. As will be presented in the study, etymologies of otherwise uncomplicated words, both Polish and English, can be quite surprising and, so it seems, attractive and useful in didactics.

#### 4. Research method

In order to fulfil the task of presenting Polish-British cultural links by means of etymology, an etymological analysis of a historical-comparative nature was undertaken. The material basis consists of three pairs of words, each of which contains a Polish and an English word.

The basic criterion for the selection of etymologised Polish and English words is their common etymon. Since, as mentioned, these languages share the same Proto-Indo-European ancestor, it is not surprising that a vast number of Polish and English words have a common origin. What seems intriguing and less obvious is how the form and meaning of some of them have evolved over time, and this non-obviousness is the second criterion for selection. As a result, the analysed English-Polish pairs in terms of etymology are examples that appear attractive enough to be worth citing in the article and implementing in the classroom. There is cause to think that the employment of these particular word pairs will constitute an innovative addition to language teaching and learning. This attractiveness and innovation are both another reason for selecting the pairs.

The next motive for the selection is ‘etymological transparency’, i.e. the possibility of tracing the etymology of the selected words on the basis of available sources.

The final factor determining the choice of individual word pairs is their applicability in glottodidactics. It was assumed that the examined vocabulary items should be not only attractive but also applicable at different levels of language learning - in this case, English among Polish speakers. Thus, these should be words characterised by a high degree of recognition, frequency of use and/or assimilation. Then, the use of the word pairs in question is not part of typical vocabulary learning. Instead, it will help learners to immerse themselves in both of the languages and in both of the cultures in which these languages are spoken – in this case the cultures of Poland and England – and language as a whole.

#### 5. Research

##### 1. *Queen* and *żona*

1.1. QUEEN. The English words *queen* and Polish *żona* ‘wife’ derive from the Proto-Indo-European root *\*gwen-* denoting ‘woman in general’.

From the Proto-Indo-European stem *\*gwen-* comes the Proto-Germanic *\*kwēniz*. The replacement of the initial *g* by *k* is due to the so-called Grimm’s Law, according to which all voiced consonants were transformed into voiceless ones. Subsequently, in Old English the word evolved to *cwēn*, in Middle English to *qwen* and then *queen* - owing to the replacement of the diphthong *cw* by *qu*. Interestingly, at this time the word was pronounced according to the spelling, and therefore with a long *e* - /kwe:n/. However, towards the end of the Middle English era, the Great Vowel Shift took place, a process whereby all long vowels began to be pronounced differently, resulting in the current discrepancy between English orthography and pronunciation. Thus, for example, the pronunciation of the word *goose* has transformed from the previous /go:s/ to /gu:s/, and *meet* from /me:t/ to /mi:t/. Therefore, today’s *queen* is pronounced /kwi:n/.

1.2. ŻONA. The same Proto-Indo-European root *\*gwen-* gave rise to the early Proto-Slavic *\*gena*. And if in the Proto-Slavic language a front vowel, for example *e*, stood after *g*, then *ge* was softened to *že*, hence, for instance, Czech *žena*, Slovak *žena*, Russian *žena*<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> This process also occurred in other languages, which contributed, for example, to the pronunciation of French *géographie* with /z/ at the beginning.

Nevertheless, thanks to the so-called Polish apophany - the transition of *e* into *o* - the word took on the form *żona*.

It seems to be an compelling question why *żona* in Polish denotes ‘wife’, and *queen* in English only ‘wife of the king’, if the Proto-Indo-European *\*gyen-* denoted ‘woman in general’. It turns out that the old *\*żena* in Polish also denoted ‘woman in general’, but by the 16th century also ‘married woman’, and over time the latter meaning came to dominate (but the adjective *żeński* ‘pertaining to a woman in general’ still functions today). The main word for ‘woman in general’ in Polish became the word *niewiasta*, and then *kobieta*. In contrast, the English word even at the stage of the Proto-Germanic *\*kwēniz* began to mean mainly ‘wife’, and over time the meaning narrowed to ‘wife of the king’<sup>4</sup>.

## 2. *love* and *lubić*

2.1 LOVE. The Proto-Indo-European root *\*leubh-* ‘to give affection, to care for, to desire’ is the common ancestor of the English word *love* as well as the Polish word *lubić* ‘to like, to feel affection for someone, to find pleasure in something’.

From the Proto-Indo-European stem *\*leubh-* is also derived the Proto-Germanic *\*lubo*, which had lost its aspiration, and from which the Old English *lufu* next derived. In the Middle Ages, the word took the form of *luve*, because the *b* in some Germanic languages, including English, gradually changed to *v*, unlike in German, where this *b* remained. Hence, for example, the German word for ‘to love’ is *lieben*. The present form of English *love* is due to the Norman invasion of England in 1066. The invaders introduced continental writing in which, among other things, “u” resembled “v”. And so, if these letters stood side by side, it was decided to write “o” and “v” for the sake of more efficient reading, and so *luve* passed into *love*. Furthermore, the word was originally still pronounced with the vowel *u* - /luv/ and then /lov/, as opposed to the short *a* - /lav/, which is most often heard in Standard English (SE) today, which is also the result of the Great Vowel Shift. It is different in some dialects in northern England, where the earlier pronunciation /lov/ - closer to the pronunciation of Polish *lubić* - has been preserved. This is analogous, for example, to the sound of *some* /som/ or *cup* /kʊp/.

2.2. LUBIĆ. In the case of the Polish word *lubić* ‘like’ the semantic evolution seems more interesting than the orthographic one. It is significant that this word is somehow weaker in meaning than the English *love*, the German *lieben*, but also than its equivalents in other Slavic languages, for example, the Ukrainian *любити* or the Russian *любить*. Perhaps this is because in Polish this stronger meaning was taken over by the verb *kochać* ‘to love’. Equally interesting are the remnants of this meaning discernible in words such as *luby* ‘nice, loved’, *ślub* ‘vow, pledge, promise, especially to God’, *polubowny* ‘amicable, conciliatory’, *lubieżny* - formerly ‘nice, grateful’, but now ‘debauched, bawdy’ - or the conjunction *lub*, which is a shortened form of the Old Polish *lubo*, expressing a positive, ‘nice’ attitude towards something or someone. This lexical nest also includes proper names of places

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<sup>4</sup> The above description is based on the following sources: Długosz-Kurczabowa 2008: 755–756; Gloger 1903: 515–516; Brückner 1927: 666; Pawlicki 2022; Boryś 2005: 756; Mańczak 2017: 236; Donald 1874: 412; Partridge 2006: 2645; Onions 1966: 731; Wedgwood 1872: 509; Gove 1993: 1862; “Queen” 2022; Culpeper 2005: 28–29.

(toponomastics), for example, *Lublin*, *Lubin*, *Lubeka* and personal names (anthroponomastics) such as *Lubomir*, *Lubomysł*, *Lubicz*<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. *Halloween* and *całowanie*

3.1. HALLOWEEN. In harmony with the previous pairs, both the English name of the very popular holiday and the Polish *całowanie* ‘kissing’ have the same linguistic platform.

The word *Halloween* probably originates from a pagan ritual of the Celts, who inhabited mainly Scotland, England, Ireland, Wales and northern France. According to their beliefs, during *Samhain* - a ritual whose purpose was to bid farewell to summer and welcome winter - the spirits of the dead descended to their earthly homes in search of a warm shelter. The good spirits could count on food, which “was placed in front of their homes and all lights were extinguished. Furthermore, doors and windows were opened so that they could warm themselves inside the houses”. Scary costumes were used to keep the evil spirits away. In addition, frightening faces were carved from large vegetables, in which lighted candles were placed (Puczyłowska 2022).

The etymology of *Halloween* - a distinctly Christian name - refers to Scotland, where the word was known in the 16th century. It became popular in 1785, when the Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote a poem of the same title in which he described, among other things, dressing up and making pranks. *Halloween* is an abbreviation of the Scottish *All Hallows' Even*. Over time, the word *All* was dropped and *Hallow's Even* was combined to form *Halloween*. As for the word *hallow* (related e.g. to *holy*, *heal*, *whole*), it comes from Middle English *halwe* ‘holy person, saint’, which followed Old English *halgian* ‘to sanctify, ordain, consecrate’. In Proto-Germanic the word had the form *\*hailagon*, and its Proto-Indo-European ancestor was the root *\*koilos-* ‘unscathed, healthy, whole’.

3.2. CAŁOWANIE. As has been mentioned, The aforementioned root *\*koilos-* gave rise to the Polish word *cały*, because in Proto-Slavic the sound *k* in some cases passed into *c* (cf. Czech. *celý*, Croat. *cio*). This is how the Polish *ocalić* and *ocalić* ‘keep healthy’ appeared. Nonetheless, *całować*, also *pocałować*, *ucalać*, *wycalać* ‘to kiss’, originally, that is in the 15th century, meant ‘to greet’. People greeted each other by saying *ceł*, *cał!*, wanting the person to stay healthy, in one piece. Since the lips were often touched at the same time, the gesture was christened *całus*, *całusek*, *pocałunek* ‘kiss’, and since the 18th century *całowanie* has meant ‘touching the lips of another person with one’s mouth’.

The German *heil*, *heilen*, *heil sei* ‘to greet’ occur in etymological connection with and a similar function to the examples presented above and thus, for example, the greeting *heil Hitler!*. In spite of that, the word *całun* ‘shroud, cloth to cover a corpse, coffin, catafalque’, which may connote as part of this word family, does not belong to this family<sup>6</sup>.

As has been presented, the researched material basis is an example of rather unobvious, captivating, perhaps peculiar, phonetic and semantic etymological evolution. For example, phonetically close English-Polish pairs such as *brother* and *brat*, *thin* and *cienki*, *sun* and *słońce*, *smile* and *śmiać się*, *widow* and *wdowa*, and *water* and *woda* all have a common

<sup>5</sup> The above description is based on the following sources: Długosz-Kurczabowa 2008: 364–366; Brückner 1927: 302–303; Pawlicki 2021a; Boryś 2005: 290; Donald 1874: 301; Onions 1966: 521, 527; Gove 1993: 1340; “Love” 2023; Watkins 1985: 37.

<sup>6</sup> The above description is based on the following sources: Długosz-Kurczabowa 2008: 79; Brückner 1927: 55–56; Pawlicki 2021b; Boryś 2005: 51; Mańczak 2017: 17; Donald 1874: 221; Partridge 2006: 1444; Onions 1966: 26, 424, 445; Gove 1993: 1023, 1081; Burns 1786: 101–117; “Halloween” 2023; Puczyłowska 2022.

ancestral form, too<sup>7</sup>. However, the analysed pairs, i.e. *queen* and *żona*, *love* and *łubić* as well as *Halloween* and *całowanie*, appear more interesting and original, because their phonetic and semantic changes have led to differences that make identification difficult, surprising, and original. This fact alone, the inescapable reflection is, causes their implementation in the foreign language classroom to be worthwhile.

Above all, it is crucial to underline again that more results are yet to come, because an expansion and elaboration of other English-Polish etymological pairs is a postulate for the future.

## Conclusions

The Polish and English languages have a long history and a rich culture. Despite the differences between them, there are numerous similarities, which can be found, among others, by studying the origin of words. As can be seen from the analysis carried out, on the grounds of etymology it is possible to bring closer the cultural links between Poland and England and other English-speaking countries, as etymologies create a kind of dialogue between the languages and cultures of the countries in which these languages function. By looking at etymological peculiarities, we can find new, unconventional threads from the area of interest and open ourselves up to an enlivening of thought actually without limitation.

When it comes to the application of etymology in glottodidactics, there is a multitude of benefits, starting with broadening students' linguistic horizons, through reconstructing and conceptualising their linguistic world view, and finishing with an educational break from the routine. Then, it does not take much time or effort for the learner to assimilate elements of this field. One can present the etymology of one word in each English lesson or devote to it one lesson per semester, or both. It can be applied in principle regardless of the learner's educational level and age.

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<sup>7</sup> See Długosz-Kurczabowa 2008: 62, 604–605, 697, 723; Boryś 2005: 80; Mańczak 2017: 195; Watkins 1985: 9; Partridge 2006: 3408, 2000–2001.

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