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Connecting Polish families in Europe: changing dynamics in language and communication practices

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‘If you travel across Europe, the most useful language may be Polish’


‘You Poles are everywhere!’

(some of the frequently heard comments and jokes addressed to Polish migrants)

Polish migration to Western Europe, the United States and Canada has a long history, dating back to the political turmoil of the nineteenth century (Thomas and Znaniecki 1927). In the popular press, claims echoing the above comments and jokes are frequently made to suggest the spread of the Polish diaspora abroad. Polish migration is particularly significant for its large scale, geographical spread and history, as well as its profound influence on Polish cultural identity. Bargłowski (2019) observes that the rich history of Polish migration has contributed to what she calls a *Polish migration culture*. Indeed, Poles demonstrate an enormous capacity for settling into the conditions of a new host country, creating space for their own cultural practices and embracing new cultural values (e.g. Zhu Hua and Lyons 2017).

Poland’s accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 prompted an unprecedented, mostly economically motivated exodus from Poland (Grabowska-Lusińska & Okólski, 2008; Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). According to various statistical data, about three million Poles left Poland in the years after 2004 in order to work in another EU state. Current statistical information on the Polish diaspora in Europe is more of an estimate, based on population records in individual countries. Such records may not always take into account the ‘liquid’ nature of Polish intra-European migration; remaining mobile between Poland and (various) host countries is a way of life for many Poles (Goździak and Pawlak 2016).

Among the countries that have reported a significant increase in the number of Polish transnationals are the United Kingdom, Ireland, Sweden, Spain, Iceland and Norway (Wojnicz 2016). Initially, Polish migrations within Europe had a fluid and transient character, with few people planning to stay abroad permanently (Ryan 2019). Now, Polish communities are well-established in Europe and, in many countries, represent one of the largest minorities (e.g. in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Iceland and Norway), often traceable back to well before Poland’s 2004 EU accession. What is more, the reasons for migration have not been only economic: Poles migrate for better (higher) education opportunities (Wojnicz 2016), for romantic relationships (Ryan 2019), or to join their relatives already living abroad (SSB 2016).

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Goździak and Pawlak (2016, 107) observe that '[t]he sudden and largely unexpected mass movement of Poles across Europe has significantly impacted the ways migration is theorized, researched, and understood'. Polish migration and integration processes, Polish language learning and usage in migration contexts, and the formation of transnational familyhood are just some of the many topics that have received attention from scholars across disciplines. These studies have applied both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and ethnographic inquiries have recently been especially favoured. But the variety of contexts in which Poles live in Europe is so diverse and complex that even though Polish migration is considered to be an already established field of inquiry (Erdal and Lewicki 2016), there are areas that still call for further investigation. In this special issue, we focus on various aspects of the family life of Polish migrants, paying particular attention to language and communication practices.

Poles' transnational family life

The literature on Polish migration is theoretically and methodologically diverse, often reaching beyond the field of migration studies. In recent years, greater research emphasis has been placed on migrants' individual experiences, their attitudes and perceptions as well as social relations in the host countries (Erdal and Lewicki 2016). Researchers have turned their attention to Polish families in migration contexts, focusing on topics such as family reunification (Moskal 2011) or how they maintain distant family relationships (Bell and Erdal 2015; Ryan 2011), but also increasingly on family language socialisation in the host country (Machowska-Kosciak 2015), and children's and adolescents' (Polish) identity construction in migration conditions (Obojska 2017).

Studies on language learning and communication in Polish-speaking migrant families point to the changing character of these practices in the context of migration. The ubiquity of digital technologies and the huge variety of mobile apps and social media support communication between family members across state borders. This has further influenced both the dynamics of language learning (Palviainen and Kędra 2020) and the performativity of transnational familyhood (Kędra 2020; Share, Williams, and Kerrins 2018). On the other hand, the relatively cheap and easy travel opportunities across Europe enable frequent family reunifications and the maintenance of transnational family ties, and this has affected families' language choices and language learning processes. The possibility of remaining in constant touch with 'home', while conducive to language maintenance, brings with it tensions and challenges related to the construction of identities and ways of belonging. These issues are particularly prominent in the lives of young transnationals, who may also face tensions resulting from the differing majority and minority identity options available to them in addition to the usual age-related task of identity negotiation. In today's multilingual and multicultural society, young Polish migrants trying to establish their cultural identity have to find a balance between their heritage of Polish culture and language and the culture and language of the host country. Their identity negotiations are demonstrated, for example, in young people's approach to language learning and their communication practices (Machowska-Kosciak 2016, 2017; Moskal and Sime 2015; Nestor and Regan 2011; Obojska, 2018).

Aims of this special issue

The three research projects in which the editors of this special issue took part – (i) Multifam: Family Language Policy in Multilingual Transcultural Families in Norway, (ii) What's in the App? Digitally-mediated Communication within Contemporary Multilingual Families across Time and Space in Finland, and (iii) Translation and Translanguaging and Multilevel Investigation of Family Language Policy in the UK – have identified important patterns in language learning and communication among transnational Polish families. The findings of these projects have further inspired us to open up discussion on connection and connectivity building among Polish transnational families. The Polish migrant community forms one of the oldest and largest migration groups

within Europe, already widely researched. Recent studies have, however, paid scant attention to the changing dynamics in Poles' communication practices in the transnational context. These practices have been strongly influenced in recent years by socio-political turmoil, and by the more frequent use of digital technologies in family communication.

Contributions

In this special issue, we introduce four contextually and methodologically diverse studies which explore the changing dynamics in language and communication practices of Polish-speaking families living in the United Kingdom (Koźmińska & Zhu Hua), Sweden (Lubińska), Norway (Obojska) and Finland (Kędra).

Each contribution offers us insights into the main theme, exploring it from its own country-specific perspective, methodological approach, and disciplinary background. The contributors explore families' linguistic and communication practices across the lived contexts of (i) political tensions at the time of Brexit (Koźmińska & Zhu Hua), (ii) intergenerational communication in multi-generational families originating in the old Polish migration to Sweden (Lubińska), (iii) the projected language and socio-cultural practices of two teenage siblings living in Norway (Obojska), and (iv) the digitally mediated, transnational communication practices of Poles living in Finland with their relatives in Poland (Kędra).

The topic of *connectivity* of Polish families in Europe, which is a recurring theme of this special issue, is present in each contribution, but is elaborated from different theoretical perspectives. One of the key factors that affect family connectivity is applied language policy. Dorota Lubińska, in her mixed-methods study of two families of three generations living in Sweden, discusses how family language policy reshapes across generations. Having moved to Sweden before Poland joined the EU, the participants have managed their multi-generational family life for over 25 years. Although Polish has been used as the main home language, tensions over language choice (i.e. Polish or Swedish) in daily family communication have arisen between the generations. The deciding factor is usually the need for connectivity and connection-building within the family. Lubińska concludes that '[e]ven if the necessity of choosing Swedish is negatively appraised, the desire to develop good intergenerational relations carries more weight than Polish language maintenance, suggesting a pragmatic rather than ideological orientation'.

Staying in the Scandinavian context, the contribution by Maria Obojska also thematizes the choices regarding language and socio-cultural maintenance across generations, albeit from a different perspective. In her case study, based on a close micro-interactional analysis of interview excerpts with two Polish siblings living in Norway, Obojska explores the teenagers' perspectives on language and socio-cultural practices in their (imagined) future families. Although the participants grew up in the same family, and so followed the same migration trajectory, their views on language and socio-cultural maintenance differ starkly. One of the siblings envisages their future family as a monolingual and monocultural Norwegian space, while the other sees it as inclusive, multilingual and multicultural. Obojska concludes that the ways the teenagers picture the maintenance of connections with the home language and culture result from their individual migration experiences, aspired imagined communities, and exposure to different societal discourses.

The influence of wider socio-political factors on family language policy is the focus of the contribution by Kinga Koźmińska and Zhu Hua. In their multi-level study (ethnography and survey data), the authors examine how Polish-speaking transnational families living in post-Brexit-vote Britain managed family language policy, and how socio-political changes impacted families' language ideology and linguistic practices. The authors indicate that the public attitude toward the Polish language and Polish speakers changed significantly after the Brexit referendum, with acts of discrimination and violence occurring especially among those in socioeconomically underprivileged positions. However, Brexit did not feature in participants' explanations of their linguistic practices. Instead, Polish-speaking families continued to hold on to the promise of multilingualism, continuing in their language

learning practices and language use, despite uncertainty about the socio-political situation in the United Kingdom after the vote. Koźmińska and Zhu Hua introduce the term *multilingual reality*, by which they describe ‘the lived everyday experience of multilingual families in the way they make use of multiple linguistic repertoires as well as the way they make sense of the symbolic value and role of each language’. The promise of multilingualism *connects* the Polish-speaking families living in the UK to the current and future opportunities that everyday life may bring.

Family connectivity can be understood in both the physical sense, for example, through frequent visits to Poland, as well as in a non-physical sense, by maintaining digitally mediated contact with relatives living apart. Joanna Kędra, in her ethnographically driven study with five Polish-speaking mothers and their children living in Finland, discusses the formation of transnational familyhood in digital habitats. Kędra elaborates on the issue of connectivity using the concept of *virtual proximity*, which refers to the emotional closeness between individuals afforded by digital technologies and mobile communication. In the study, Kędra identifies four thematic patterns in participants’ practices in an online environment: the creation of family WhatsApp (Polish) groups by children, the use of family in-app communication for language learning purposes, digital caregiving strategies and arrangements between geographically distant relatives, and the use of in-app photo-sharing as a form of visual co-presence with other family members. Kędra concludes that ‘[t]he communication afforded by digital technologies transforms ways of being together, and in consequence, family relationships may no longer require physical presence to ensure their emotional and social significance’.

Concluding remarks

The central theme of this special issue is connecting Polish families in Europe, both in terms of research and practices, through identifying similarities and connections that have emerged in the changing dynamics of communication practices in Polish transnational families across Europe. The four papers included in this special issue investigate the everyday lives of Polish-speaking families living in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway and Finland. They reveal how language choice and the mean of communication reflect and construct different ways of connectivity and connection-building in the families. These findings, while based on Polish families, are likely to apply to transnational families generally.

The language and communication practices of the families studied are in constant flux. Each of the four articles demonstrates that the mechanisms that stimulate change in these practices operate at one, or more, of three levels, individual, familial, and societal. Examples of these mechanisms include the different ways in which individuals’ experiences of migration are projected onto their imagined future, intergenerational tensions over language preferences, transformations of the larger socio-political contexts in which a family is living, or the integration of digital communication technologies into everyday family life.

Collectively and individually, the papers demonstrate the importance of studying ‘small numbers’ and individual cases in order to understand the complexities of language and communication practices in transnational families. The careful analyses of the ways in which transnational Polish families enact and envision their communication offer interesting insights into how connections are created within particular social, ideological, and interactional contexts.

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