

Spanish and Polish social language conditions in the eyes of students: linguistic politeness and conversation

Hiszpańskie i polskie społeczne uwarunkowania językowe oczami studentów:
grzeczność językowa i prowadzenie konwersacji

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to present some of the results of the contrastive analysis of selected aspects of Spanish and Polish social language determinants based on research conducted among students of the University of Silesia in Katowice going to Spanish universities under the Erasmus program and Spanish students coming to the University of Silesia as part of didactic placements. The author discusses the most important differences in linguistic behavior between Poles and the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, which are sometimes the basis of pragmatic errors and may contribute to the formation of negative stereotypes. The subject of the presented research results includes the broadly understood linguistic politeness and conducting a conversation.

Keywords: cultural differences, linguistic politeness, pragmatic error, stereotype, intercultural competence

Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie części wyników analizy kontrastywnej wybranych aspektów hiszpańskich i polskich społecznych uwarunkowań językowych na podstawie badań przeprowadzonych wśród studentów Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach wyjeżdżających w ramach programu Erasmus na hiszpańskie uczelnie oraz hiszpańskich studentów przyjeżdżających na Uniwersytet Śląski w ramach praktyk dydaktycznych. Omówione zostają najważniejsze różnice w zachowaniach językowych pomiędzy Polakami, a mieszkańcami Półwyspu Iberyjskiego, które bywają podstawą błędów pragmatycznych oraz mogą wpłynąć na tworzenie się negatywnych stereotypów. Tematyka prezentowanych wyników badań obejmuje szeroko rozumianą grzeczność językową oraz prowadzenie rozmowy.

Słowa kluczowe: różnice kulturowe, grzeczność językowa, błąd pragmatyczny, stereotyp, kompetencja interkulturowa

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1. Introduction

The aim of every academic discipline is to look for norms ruling the world and explain them. Linguists, who have chosen language as the subject of analysis, try to find in it regularities which are reflected in syntactic, semantic, morphological, phonetic, phonological and pragmatic rules. Pragmatic studies concerning different languages are especially interesting, showing slight differences in social behavior. They indicate that what seems natural for one language community does not necessarily have to be perceived in this way by users of another language. The studies show that an objective approach to reality, at least in this respect, does not exist, and an average language user perceives the world through the prism of linguistic habits existing in his/her culture.

The article is to identify the most important differences in linguistic behavior between Poles and Spaniards in students' perspective, that is why it mainly concerns the university environment. It will present social determinants of generally understood linguistic politeness and conversational styles. It is worth mentioning that differences in linguistic politeness have an impact on making pragmatic errors by foreign language learners, that is why they should be taken into consideration in glottodidactics in developing intercultural competence of foreign language learners². Results of the research may have another, very important application – in translator training, interpreter training in particular: translators as cultural mediators not only convey the meanings of particular words and expressions but also help properly interpret linguistic behavior of representatives of different cultures.

2. The state of research

Cross-cultural comparisons involve various topics and are very popular, it is no wonder that they are the research aims of scholars in many academic disciplines. Cross-cultural comparisons are conducted by representatives of Cultural Studies, sociologists, anthropologists, historians and, what is especially important for this article, by linguists and glottodidacticians. In such contrastive analyses, culture is defined, the knowledge of human behavior is systematized, and relations between linguistic behavior specific for a particular cultural community and problems in language teaching are investigated.

² A detailed explanation of the concept of pragmatic error, related to cultural competence, was presented in Tatoj (2021).

It should also be added that in spite of great popularity of Contrastive Studies and many Polish-Spanish studies in various disciplines³, there are still relatively few Polish-Spanish linguistic contrastive studies concerning verbal social behavior. Among Polish researchers comparing selected Polish and Spanish linguistic behaviors, we should mention Marek Baran (2007, 2010, 2017, 2018), discussing linguistic pragmatics in a cross-cultural perspective; Anna Nowakowska-Głuszak (2009), who compared expressing requests in Polish and Spanish; Małgorzata Spychała-Wawrzyniak (2010, 2012, 2016)⁴, focussing on intercultural competence in the didactics of Spanish as a second language; Renata Majewska (2005), who conducted a Polish-Spanish contrastive analysis of nonverbal behavior; and Agata Adamska and Edyta Waluch-de la Torre (2005), who described Spanish politeness and compared it to Polish one. The most recent research is represented, inter alia, by Aleksandra Matyja's doctoral dissertation, "Kulturowe uwarunkowania komunikacji hiszpańsko-polskiej na podstawie doświadczeń imigrantów z Hiszpanii mieszkających w Polsce" [Cultural determinants of Spanish-Polish communication on the basis of the experiences of Spanish immigrants living in Poland], defended in the University of Wrocław in 2020.

The above mentioned publications include information on cross-cultural differences between Poles and Spaniards, but they do not focus on any particular social group, and no particular social determinants are discussed, which may be observed in school and academic contexts. The article is to fill in the gap.

It is worth mentioning that Castilian linguists do not conduct Spanish-Polish contrastive studies, which seems to result from little interest in the Polish language displayed among Spaniards. While 162 044 Polish students learnt Spanish at school in 2018/2019⁵, in Spain Polish was not, and still is not, taught at school; those interested in Polish may learn it only at the university level: in the Polish Studies program in the Complutense University of Madrid and in the Polish course in the universities of Alicante, Barcelona and Granada⁶.

³ See e.g. Nalewajko (2012, 2016), Górski (2004) and Sawicki (2013).

⁴ See also Spychała, Hadaś (2013).

⁵ The data available on the official website of the Ministry of Education and Science.

⁶ The information retrieved from the official website of the Polish Institute in Madrid.

3. A description of the research

Since 2002, the research has been conducted among students of the University of Silesia in Katowice participating in the Erasmus Exchange Program in Spanish universities and Spanish students visiting the University of Silesia. Since 2015, Spanish students have started to come to the University of Silesia in Katowice for the teacher training. This year, the research has been extended and focused on the school and university environment. The article presents the results of the pilot study conducted in 2015-2020 on 20 Polish students of Spanish Studies, participating in the Erasmus Exchange Program in the universities of Cáceres, Granada, Cádiz and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria; and 13 Spanish students who participated in teacher training in the University of Silesia in Katowice. The latter were students of the University of Castilla-La Mancha, the University of Rovira i Virgili in Tarragona and the universities of Extremadura and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. As part of the teacher training, the students participated in Spanish classes in the University of Silesia as well as in Spanish lessons in selected primary and secondary schools in the Silesian voivodship.

All the research participants are students of language studies and know at least one foreign language at the B2 level or higher: the Polish students know Spanish, while the Spanish students know English. The main research method was deepened partly structured interview. The study concerned differences in verbal behavior observed during contacts with Polish students and university teachers and, in the case of the Spaniards, during lessons in the teacher training at school.

4. Research results

The main aim of the study is to look for the most characteristic cultural differences at the verbal and nonverbal levels. To make a list of such differences is particularly important for Poles having a very good command of Spanish (inter alia, students of Spanish Studies), as lack of the knowledge of sociolinguistic norms specific for the Iberian Peninsula often leads to pragmatic errors, which in turn may be perceived by native speakers of Spanish as bad manners. In addition, the situation of fluent speakers of Spanish differs from the situation of English speakers, as the English language is often used in communication between non-native speakers. In such a situation, both interlocutors have the same status. While an individual who is a fluent speaker of Spanish talking with a Spaniard is treated on equal terms. In such a situation,

as Portolés (2004, p. 25)⁷ claims, an individual who does not know pragmatic rules is perceived as ill-mannered.

The study concerned, on the one hand, linguistic politeness, on the other models of conversational behavior, i.e. conversation opening and closing and taking turns. These behaviors were mainly investigated in the school and university contexts.

Before a discussion of the research results, it is worth mentioning Poles and Spaniards have a positive attitude towards each other⁸, which is also visible in the behavior of the members of both research groups. It seems that the limited Polish-Spanish contacts over the centuries, which have been intensified since Poland became member of the European Union, have not caused mutual negative stereotypes to appear⁹.

5. Linguistic politeness

Investigating linguistic politeness among Polish and Spanish students, we find many differences, especially in the university environment. As Bisko (2014, p. 67) maintains, “[in] traditional Polish culture, apart from spontaneity, there is an element of ceremonial and ritualized courtesy, which is most vividly expressed in forms of address”, thus it also appears in address form used in Polish universities. While Spanish students may easily understand that academic teachers in Poland should not be addressed with a second person singular form, it is difficult for them to get accustomed to the use of professional and functional titles. Hence, they are surprised hearing the forms “Pan/ Pani Magister/ Doktor/ Profesor” [Mr/ Ms Master of Arts/ Doctor/ Professor] at university, or “Pan/ Pani Profesor” [Me/ Ms Professor] in secondary schools.

They get amused with the form “Jego Magnificencja Rektor” [His Magnificence the President of the University], generally used in formal situations. Our results agree with the results of the research conducted by Matyja, who explains that, according to the respondents, the form is an expression of significant social inequality, and, according to Spaniards, interpersonal relations should be “on equal terms, because this makes easier open, spontaneous communication, cooperation and the maintenance of good

⁷ All the translations from Spanish and Polish by the author.

⁸ See Błuszkowski (2003), Arnal Sarasa (2004), Matyja (2020).

⁹ More on the topic may be found in Tatoj (2019).

social relations” (Matyja, 2020, p. 363). The research has shown though that changes in this respect may not occur too drastically.

The Polish students mention that they are inhibited from addressing and referring to Spanish teachers using a second person singular form and a first name (or its diminutive form), especially in the case of elderly interlocutors. In both cases, the problems concern speech as well as writing. When referring to a person that is present, in accordance with Polish politeness rules, the speaker should turn towards the person and use the form, e.g. “Profesor Kowalska” [Professor Kowalska] pointing to her, while, in Spanish, it will be natural to use the personal pronoun “ella” [she]. Both behaviors seem surprising to representatives of the other culture.

The difference in expressing requests to other students or a teacher is also surprising. In Spanish, requests are made with the use of imperative sentences with the second or third person singular subject, while, in the Polish academic context, the conditional sentence is preferred, e.g. “Mógłbyś” [Could you...], “Mógłby Pan/ Mogłaby Pani” [Could you [sir]/ Could you [madam]], or the form “proszę + bezokolicznik” [please + infinitive], e.g. “proszę powtórzyć” [Please, repeat]. Our respondents’ responses are similar to the conclusions formulated by Nowakowska-Głuszak (2009, p. 148), who explains that “the Polish speaker making a request and using the form “proszę + bezokolicznik” builds a distance between the interlocutors, and in this way makes the level of politeness higher than in the case of the use of an imperative sentence”. One of the Polish students commented on the way Spaniards make orders in the university cafeteria. One of them just said “dwie kawy” [two coffees]; as the attendant considered their behavior insufficiently polite, she responded with “proszę” [please] with a special intonation, hoping they will understand that they should have used the expression. Unfortunately, her intention was not interpreted correctly, she heard them only say “dziękuję” [thank you].

The Spanish students were surprised how often Poles use the word “przepraszam” [I’m sorry]. For example, persons who are late for a lecture often repeat it several times, making a docile face and trying to look small, when they are looking for an unoccupied seat nearby. Polish students also say “przepraszam”, when they want to say something during classes. For the Spanish students, the most surprising use of “przepraszam” in the Polish educational context is when it is employed as a response to the teacher correcting a linguistic error the student has committed. The Spanish students ask us why students say “przepraszam” on being corrected. Polish teachers and

students seem to be unaware of that and are astonished when informed about the Spanish students' observations. This proves to be a highly ritualized act.

Discussing politeness, one cannot omit the system of men-women relations. The results of our research have shown that Spanish women receive compliments much more frequently than Polish women; in both cultures, the receiver of a compliment is expected to downgrade it. For example, responding to a compliment concerning the receiver's hairdo, she may say "Nie, dzisiaj się nie uczesałam" [No, I haven't combed [my hair] today]. On return from Spain, Polish women say that Spanish men compliment them much more often than Polish men do; while Spanish women complain that they feel underappreciated in Poland. No one pays them "piropo" [compliment], e.g. that they look nice. Some Poles think that Spaniards pay compliments definitely too frequently, which makes them sound insincere.

The Polish female students do not share this view. The students see differences in communication and in building men-women relations between the two cultures. However, they have problem with identifying them. After a long discussion with the respondents, we may say that what they describe is in agreement with what Bisko (2014, p. 77) claims: the Polish men-women relations "[...] are characterized by the requirement of male protectiveness towards women, necessity to adore them and win their favor. While women are obliged to act like a lady, be haughty and look favorably on men's efforts". Spanish women are more direct in contacts than Polish women. The favorable look, which Bisko mentions, may be erroneously interpreted by Spanish men as an unambiguous expression of interest. It may be said that Spanish women more decisively manifest lack of interest in a particular man, without unnecessarily keeping his hope alive. The men-women relations are a broad topic and should be investigated separately, concerning also the categories of masculinity and femininity, which, as shown by Matyja (2020), differ in the two cultures.

Analysing linguistic politeness, one should also mention lack of politeness, expressed in the use of vulgarisms. The Spanish students participating in the research, in spite of the fact that they did not know Polish, were sensitive to the most popular Polish swear word, "kurwa" [fuck], which is a homophone of the Spanish word "curva" [turn]. No wonder that Poles overuse this word, even at university, is a widely repeated view. These observations are confirmed by Szostkiewicz (2005, p. 99), who compares young people in English culture to Poles: "one can see young people who use vulgar words in conversations in public spaces, but it happens less often than in Polish

public spaces”. The students from the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula did not get such an impression as in this region vulgarisms are also used more frequently. For the Polish students, it was strange that some Spanish swear words are derived from religious terminology. One of the most frequently used ones is “hostia”, pronounced /'ostja/, which refers to what Catholics call “the Host”.

6. Participating in a conversation

The other research topic is conversational style. In the beginning, it is worth mentioning what some of the Polish students claim: it was difficult for them to interact with a group of Spaniards, because they felt as if nobody was not interested in what they wanted to say. Participating in a conversation, Spaniards take turns, interrupting each other, and a Pole who would like to join it does not know how and when to do so. When he finally manages to join the conversation, he feels ill at ease, when they start interrupting him, finishing what he wanted to say or asking questions. This seemingly impolite conversational behavior is explained by the theory of communicative ethos developed by Marek Baran (2008, 2010), according to which the Spanish sociocultural convention “may seem invasive and symbolically violate the interlocutors’ communicative territory [...] we deal here with ‘tender aggressors’ who deny Anglo-Saxon or oriental restraint, reserve and non-interference” (2018, p. 18).

However, this approach is often misunderstood by Poles, who are used to interlocutors’ non-interference in what they say. Hence, the expressions, such as “nie przerywaj mi” [don’t interrupt me] or “daj mi skończyć” [let me finish] may quite often be heard in Poland. A preferred reaction to someone else’s utterance is listening with concentration and head nodding. Interestingly, for Spaniards, such a behavior is perceived as lack of interest. They perceive Poles as taciturn and relatively “cool” persons. The latter trait is also mentioned by Matyja (2020, p. 366), who explains why Poles are perceived in this way: “very economical in gestures and facial expression, maintaining great physical distance and avoiding eye contact”.

Differences can also be found in beginning and ending a conversation. The Polish students described situations in which a Spaniard asked them “¿Qué tal?” [How are things?], which they interpreted as a willingness to start a conversation, while he did not expect a long answer, but just a symbolical one – “bien” [well] or “muy bien” [very well]. The Spanish students indicate problems with gestures accompanying greetings: they feel Poles’ resistance to

participate in the Spanish greeting ritual consisting in an exchange of two kisses on the cheek. They add that their approaching an interlocutor is often interrupted with his/her holding out the hand to be shaken. They perceive it as stopping them and clear marking the distance.

There are also differences in the time devoted to bidding goodbye in face-to-face as well as telephone conversations. The Spanish respondents maintain that Polish goodbyes are very short and, as such, they seem rather cool. One of the respondents said that whenever she ends a telephone conversation with a Pole, she gets an impression that her interlocutor feels offended, because he/she says “goodbye” and immediately ends the conversation; while she is used to goodbyes repeated several times, often together with an expression, such as “¡Cuídate bien!” [Take care]. While, for the Polish students, Spanish goodbyes seem to be too long and sometimes tiresome. These are slightly surprising observations, if we compare them with what Bisko (2014, p. 82) writes: “[...] foreigners unanimously claim that the Polish parting ritual is very complex and may last endlessly”. It should be added that the author quoted above describes home visits of rather elderly representatives of Polish society. Her description resembles Adams and Waluch de la Torre’s (2005, p. 139): “[in] regions of Spain (Andalusia in particular), “the parting ceremony” is generally expected to start half an hour before the guest actually leaves”.

7. Conclusions

The presented results of the research conducted in the university environment confirm the information on Polish and Spanish verbal and nonverbal behavior available in the literature. It should be stressed that, in the beginning of the interview, the students often had problems with describing the differences in this respect between the two cultures. In spite of apparent similarities, there are clear differences between them. It means that expectations that interlocutors should meet in a conversation are different, which may lead to many misunderstandings. Poles often perceive Spaniards as persons that do not use appropriate polite formulae and are often too direct; while, for Spaniards, Polish politeness rules often appear to be exaggerated and artificial, and build an unnecessary distance between interlocutors.

We think that Kita (2016, p. 193) with good reason ponders whether talking about politeness we should use a singular or rather a plural form. One can talk about Polish politeness and about Spanish one.

To conclude, the analysis shows the need for further research and systematizing the available knowledge of differences between Polish and Spanish cultures in the form of a guidebook or a textbook¹⁰. The knowledge may be directly used in teaching Spanish. It will help Polish students develop their intercultural competence and avoid pragmatic errors. It will also prevent negative stereotypes from being created.

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