The Awesome Polish Language – An Essay by Bianca Buff

My relationship with the Polish language and culture began because I was NOT spoilt for choice! Even though my university in Paderborn, Germany, offers a wide range of language classes from Swedish over Turkish to Chinese, when I, as a first-year student, tried to sign up for one of them in October 2015, there was only one class that was not yet oversubscribed: Polish. In retrospect, it feels like fate wanted me to learn Polish and I am glad that I did surrender choosing this language that was to accompany me through my Bachelor degree and even into my Master.

I've been learning Polish for more than three years now. If I had learned Spanish or Dutch for this period of time, I would probably be able to communicate on an almost native level now! This slight exaggeration shall by no means degrade languages other than Polish but merely illustrate that this language is very complex, and so different from the typical western European languages like German (my mother tongue) or English and French that I learned at school. I believe most speakers and learners of Polish will certainly agree with me that this language is specifically hard to acquire. Nonetheless, an enchanting charm resides in it, at times offering a perspective that turns anything familiar to me upside down. All this shall be enough of the reasons that motivated me to write this essay about the awesome Polish language!

First, a typical feature of Polish are the delightful sounds and consonant clusters that can easily be discouraging for learners who are unable to move their tongues in strange ways to produce for instance those unusual hissing sounds or my favourite sound symbolised by the letter *y*. In my very first Polish lesson, my teacher explained that this sound, not being part of the German sound inventory, roughly resembles the vowel we produce when saying the German word *Tisch* (*table*), but "slightly darker". Trying to transfer this "hint" to the pronunciation of actual Polish words was a matter of distress for me for some time: I was unable to spot a difference between the *good* adjectives *dobry* and *dobre* in the masculine resp. neuter form.

Never before had I been able to understand the Japanese who have trouble differentiating between the sounds /l/ and /r/, which – so obviously different to us Western European people – sound entirely the same to them. My High German background makes it impossible to skip the fact that trying to learn the flipping of my tongue to produce the trilled /r/ sound occupied me for some weeks while I was on my walk home. Luckily, it was winter and the sun set early, so I wasn't risking to be spotted by other passengers as crazy, enunciating in an endless loop the

words *dobra torba* into my scarf (*good bag*, why I chose this phrase? I cannot recall why, and it is still a mystery how it worked, but this phrase eventually did the trick for me).

While the problems I have described so far only concern single letters, the omnipresent consonant clusters make even the simplest *hello* a stressful effort for any learner of Polish with three hissed sounds stacked together (out of only four sounds in total, by the way): *cześć*. Another illustrating example I still recall from one of my first Polish lessons is the word *jabłko* (*apple*) that led me to make the effort of trying to clearly pronounce the three consonants /b/, /ł/ and /k/ one after the other until my teacher finally asked why I don't just drop the /ł/ sound… Exhausted from the exercise and flabbergasted by this revelation, my jaw dropped, good to know! Yet it makes sense to drop some sounds considering the immense speed with which the Polish talk.

And not only sounds get dropped in this crazy language, but also letters that vanish from one flexion to another. The easy word for the adorable, furry, four-legged and tail-wagging pet *pies* has to stand without its nice two vowels – which are by the way the most basic constituents of syllables for me as a speaker and reader of German – to form a group of them: *psy* (admittedly, it makes up for some of the loss by appending a word-final *y*). In Polish after all, it is no surprise that letters and sounds both appear and disappear seemingly out of nowhere whenever you want to talk about the plural or about something you do not have in comparison to something you do have (for the Polish, there is a difference between having a father (*ojciec*) and not having one anymore (*ojca*))… That's just something that you have to get used to when you want to dive deeper into this fascinating language.

The Polish intricacy that – to me – has opened a completely new perspective to see the world is the differentiation between the two aspects perfective and imperfective: There is clearly a difference between something that you did once like *You cleaned the bathroom (once).* and something that I have been doing multiple times, like *I have been cleaning the bathroom (ever since).* While the English strategy is to use another tense to express the two cases, the Polish have different words for them: *sprzątać* and *posprzątać* respectively. So far this does not seem so far-fetched as the two words look pretty similar, but again, the Polish have some curious exceptions to bring learners to despair: How the perfective *wziąć* and the imperfective *brać* for the single English verb *take* are related, is probably super easy when you look deep under the surface, turn some things upside down, remove others and finally add some extra letters. Despite this near obvious "simplicity", this digression should be postponed to a subsequent

essay… Anyways, it is these different ways of conceptualizing the world, relying on different strategies, that make learning a new language so interesting and mind-broadening.

Talking about all these peculiarities, we should not ignore that there are indeed some similarities between Polish and German. First of all, both languages have three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter) and unlike the weird German system that assigns a noun one of these more or less randomly, in this regard Polish is a bit more compliant. There are at least some guidelines in form of certain suffixes that determine the gender of a noun like the ending *a* for feminine nouns. Still, these rules do not imply a 100 per cent security and you have to be prepared for various exceptions like the following mystery: How can a masculine word end on the feminine suffix *a*, yet take a masculine adjective as modification, even though it behaves like a feminine noun in declination, and on top of all this have the meaning *man*? The Polish *mężczyzna* fulfils all these paradox conditions! Nonetheless, in comparison to German, the Polish deserve some credit for their system of assigning gender, even though its exceptions sometimes lead to confusion.

These were but some of the peculiarities of the Polish language, and I haven't even started talking about further curious aspects like the Polish word order! If English natives think that we Germans are free when it comes to ordering the words in our sentences, they haven't met Polish yet – believe me, they beat us by far! Or the differentiation between living objects and those that are not honoured with the breath of life (curiously enough, this distinction only applies to masculine nouns). Or the vocative case that transforms *Stefan*, the first name of a directly addressed man, to *Stefanie*, which looks like the name for a female to me… And getting a postcard by a Polish friend addressed to *Droga Bianeczko* is, understandably, startling at first and surely doesn't count as something I often find in my post-box when I think of all those letters simply addressed to *Bianca*.

Last, but not least, I hope this little essay could bring across some of the charm of the Polish language that is, despite its difficulties, entirely worth learning! Not only because it offers interesting perspectives on the world but surely also because it paves the way to get to know the Polish people and culture! What remains are what I find the cutest Polish words: *No pa pa!* (roughly meaning *well, bye-bye*)!