

# THE CODE OF YOUTH

Youthful creativity keeps language vibrant and evolving.

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**T**he way young people talk, or “youth speak,” offers unique insight into their ever-changing world and has long fascinated educators and linguists. In Poland, scientific research on the language

of young Poles has a strong tradition dating back to the early twentieth century. With the advent of the digital age, however, both the study of slang and slang itself have transformed significantly.

In the post-WWII years, Polish researchers first focused on the language of university students. In 1974, a dictionary of student slang (*Słownik gwary studenckiej*) was compiled in Lublin but was halted during printing by communist-era censors. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries brought a wealth of new research and new dictionaries of youth language and colloquial speech. The popularity of youth slang is also evidenced by the success of the “Youth Word of the Year” plebiscite (run by Polish Scientific Publishers PWN), user-driven online dictionaries like *miejski.pl* and *slang.pl*, and such academic-outreach initiatives as the Youth Language and Culture Observatory at Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce.

Defining the boundaries of slang and distinguishing the lexical resources of different youth sociolects is challenging, as the lines between colloquial Polish and sociolects that develop from it are fluid. Elements of slang often enter the colloquial vocabulary, and young people often make creative use of the resources



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of general Polish and other language varieties. Each speaker of a language (not just young people) simultaneously belongs to a variety of speech communities: peer groups, professional groups, hobby groups, etc., giving youth speak diverse lexicons to draw upon. Some vocabulary is common to teenagers and young adults regardless of their group. The vocabulary of various specialized speech communities – gamers, hip-hop enthusiasts, meme users, criminal circles – easily infiltrates into youth slang, especially in the era of the global Internet.

Youthful creativity prevents a language from becoming stagnant, keeping it evolving, leading to rapid changes in word meaning and expanding into everyday communication. For example, the borrowed English noun *diss*, which in Polish hip-hop subculture originally meant a musical track mocking someone (English “diss track”), is now used to refer to any insulting retort, humiliation, or satire. Similarly, the borrowed noun *tryhard*, originally referring to a very motivated gamer (a synonym to *spoceniec*, lit. “sweaty person”), can now refer to anyone who wants something very badly and persistently strives for it.

## Insidious as a virus

Contemporary generations regard the online environment as a normal living space, very much on par with the offline realm. They use social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Twitch, and gaming platforms as sources of knowledge and experience, massively producing and reproducing viral content. Emotionally engaging images or videos get widely shared and imitated online. This includes memes – humorous, typically sarcastic messages, creatively combining visual and verbal elements.

Virality plays an important role in generating and spreading new word meanings and multi-word phrases. These terms retain or enhance their expressive and playful qualities and are readily used in various contexts such as jokes, wordplay, retorts, or phatic expressions. Examples include popular expressions and phrases: *boczne oko*, lit. “side-eye” – meaning surprise, embarrassment; *idź dotknij trawy* “go touch grass” – calm down, come back to reality; *jak stary wróci z mlekiem*, “when dad comes home with the milk” – something unrealistic; *kto pytał*, “who (even) asked?” – who cares?; *wiem, co jest pięć*, “I know what’s five” – I know what’s what, etc.

These examples also illustrate another trend in youth speak: internationalization. Many structures derived from or modeled after English are entering youth varieties of other languages, albeit in a slightly modified form. In Polish, this has happened with words like *rel* – meaning understanding, agreement, from “relatable” (also giving rise to *reluję* “I can relate” and *relowa* “relatable situation”) or “gigachad”

– someone very good at something (from English youth slang “gigachad” – the ultimate alpha male).

Many young people feel a need to use linguistic expressions that differ from the standard language, words that express their urge for creative rebellion, comicality, mockery, sarcasm, biting irony, black humor. They use a wealth of word forms and morphological particles, sometimes in accordance with, sometimes in defiance of standard Polish word-formation and spelling rules. Bending the rules allows them to extract more emotion and expression. For example, the standard Polish augmentative suffix *-ówa* may be purposefully misspelled as *-uwa* in *smakuwa* “tasty dish” and *krindżuwa* “embarrassing situation,” or even further distorted, as in *lol00wa* “really funny joke” (from the English acronym LOL “lots of laughs”) or *spadUwa* “get lost” (using digits or capital letters for even greater expressiveness). Words can also be shortened in slang, such as *najgo* “the worst” (shortened from *najgorsze*), *niezręcz* “awkward” (*niezręczny*) *wzrusz* “feeling emotionally moved” (*wzruszenie*). Non-obvious abbreviations can also be used, e.g. *NTNR* for *no to na razie* “see you later, then” or *NW* for *nie wiem* “I don’t know” (akin to English *IDK* “I don’t know”). Young slang users enjoy playing with words, creating new ones, transforming existing ones, creating their own code of youth, individual and communal at the same time.

## Plebiscite

In the 2010s, Polish researchers began studying culturally salient key words and organizing a regular plebiscite to identify the Polish “Word of the Year,” organized by the University of Warsaw. In 2016, our team running this plebiscite expanded its focus to include youth slang. We partnered with PWN to begin organizing the Polish “Youth Word of the Year” plebiscite. The first edition garnered significant interest from the public and media, far exceeding that of the university’s plebiscite regarding the general language. The successive winning “Youth Words of the Year” have been as follows: *sztos* “awesome” in 2016, *XD* “a reaction to something funny” (an emoticon with squinting eyes and laughing mouth) in 2017, *dzban* “idiot” (lit. “pitcher, jug”) in 2018, *alternatywka* – “a girl who behaves and dresses unconventionally” in 2019, *śpiulkolot* “sleep, place to sleep” in 2021, *essa* “awesome, an expression of positive emotion” in 2022 (most likely ultimately derived from English slang *ez* “easy win”), and the aforementioned *rel* in 2023. No winning word was chosen in 2020.

The first plebiscite in 2016 had 2,500 participants; recent years have seen over 100,000. Participants submit proposals for “Youth Word of the Year” via an online form. Then the jury selects 20 finalist words, based on the frequency of submissions in the first stage (filtering out inadmissible submissions that are



vulgar, offensive, or represent hate speech). The final 20 are then voted on by the public in the second stage. The jury consults with and receives support from the Youth Council of the Youth Language and Culture Observatory at Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce.

The words and definitions submitted by the participants offer valuable insights into the current state of Polish youth slang. The most frequent type of words are those expressing positive evaluations and emotions, e.g., the aforementioned *essa* and *sztos*, as well as *masno* and *gituwa* (all of them meaning “fantastic, awesome”), and discursive particles used to maintain communication or indicate reactions, including greetings like *elo* and *eluwina* (both “hi”), *naura* “bye,” or addressative forms of endearment: *mordo* “you mug,” *byczku* “you little bull.” Personal descriptors are also numerous, mostly positive, with *dzban* “idiot” being a rare exception as a negative term among the winning words. The increasing use of feminine forms, including new ones without male equivalents, is also notable. Words like the aforementioned *alternatywka* (word of the year 2019) and *jesieniara* “a girl who likes autumn and styles herself accordingly on social media” (with sweaters, tea, candles, etc.) were frequently submitted.

A significant portion of the submissions are neologisms. New words are created in various ways. One popular word-forming suffix is the augmentative *-ówa* (sometimes spelled *-uwa*) signifying positive evaluation, e.g. *sztosówa* “fortunate situation” or *ziomówa* “girlfriend-pal.” Another is the feminine suffix *-ara*, added to nouns to yield such new words as *fitnesiara* “girl fixated on exercise,” *koniara* “girl who loves horses,” *romantyzjara* “girl who romanticizes everything in life” *baseniara* “girl who poses for swimsuit photos by the pool,” even *rzepiara* “girl taking photos against a background of flowering rapeseed fields.” The English plural ending *-s* is also used, albeit to create singular forms, e.g., *boomers* “boomer,” *dziaders* “old-timer” (from *dziad* “grandpa” – an older man unable to keep up with social change).

Another large portion of the submitted words are Anglicisms. In fact, this is true not only in the Polish plebiscite: the word “cringe,” for example, was chosen as the “Jugendwort des Jahres” in the similar plebiscite in Germany in 2021, and it came in second in the Polish plebiscite in 2022. Polish youth slang borrows not only from general English but also from specialized languages such as programming and video games, as is evidenced by the popularity of *NPC* “non-player / non-playable character,” and also from old Polish prison slang, e.g. *sztos* and *git*.

## War of Words

Youth speak often utilizes the rhetoric of putdowns – sharp retorts meant to end the discussion, e.g. *OK*,

*boomer* or *twoja stara* “your mom”, imitating dozens-style insults in American culture like “yo’ mom.” A prominent group of Polish youth slang words relate to a distinctive culture of social shame: words like *ženada* and *cringe* (with the variant *krindżowa*), all meaning “embarrassing situation,” are used to describe behaviors that may lead to ostracism or group exclusion – supplanting terms like *obciach*, previously used in this meaning by the boomer generation.

Slang changes rapidly over time. For instance, *forsa* was once the dominant Polish slang for “money,” but the 1990s it was dethroned by *kasa*. The latter likely gained popularity due to its phonetic similarity to the English “cash” and the metonymy of its original meaning, “cash register.” In the plebiscite submissions, however, neither *forsa* nor *kasa* appears anymore; the most frequently submitted term is now *hajs*. This old word from criminal jargon (also as *hajc*), related to the German word *heiß* “hot,” has become popular again in the twenty-first century. Its popularity may have been influenced by the English slang “hay” (incidentally, *siano* “hay” is also a Polish slang term for money).

What image of Polish youth emerges from the vocabulary collected in the plebiscite? As in public discourse, young women occupy more attention in this world than young men. Moreover, apart from this clash of genders, a conflict of generations is also evident, reinforced by sharp labels: the boomer generation (*boomersi*), Gen X, Gen Y (*mleńsi*), Gen Z (*zetki*). Distinct ideological-axiological profiles, such as *dziaders* “boomer / old-timer”, are also attached to age.

The world of today’s young people is prominently shaped by technology and social media, leading to flexible language conventions that both shape and evaluate reality. Words, relationships, and trends are fleeting and constantly changing. Success, both social and existential, is short-lived and relies on skillful and emotionally balanced communication. Youth language today mixes elements from various cultural niches, creating a dynamic blend of colloquial and written forms.

Understanding these new words and phrases requires more than familiarity with their cultural origins. Terms often swiftly change meaning in new contexts, especially in memes. References from music or video games, frequently used in the memosphere, can be repeatedly reinterpreted, altering their original meanings. Social media popularizes new words, making language a vibrant arena for wordplay and verbal sparring.

This research shows how youth language, by introducing new expressions and reinterpreting existing ones, drives linguistic evolution and reflects both cultural shifts and technological advancements. ■



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Further reading:

Chaciński B, Kołodziejek E, Łaziński M, Wileczek A, 2023. *Młode słowa – Obraz świata, kreacje, konteksty* [Young words – World image, creations, contexts] [https://msr.pwn.pl/media/Mlode\\_slowa\\_PWN\\_ebook.pdf?utm=7e0a97fc3c1d8198d7d818c5973d6635](https://msr.pwn.pl/media/Mlode_slowa_PWN_ebook.pdf?utm=7e0a97fc3c1d8198d7d818c5973d6635)  
<https://obserwatorium-mlodziyzy.ujk.edu.pl/>