# Linguistic Mistakes or a Distinct Variety? How L2 Speakers Influence English in International Contexts.

Mateusz Urbaniak

State University of Applied Sciences, Krosno, Poland

## Abstract

The study aims to examine the development of localised varieties of English within the Expanding Circle of World Englishes, as defined by Kachru (1992), based on an example of the Polish speech community. Employing a questionnaire consisting of translation and phonological items, the research explores how native Polish influences manifest themselves in L2 English language use. The translation task revealed common patterns of linguistic interference, such as calques and grammatical structures imported from the participants' native language, while the rhyming task highlighted phonological deficiency in distinguishing vowel length differences. Results indicate that Polish speakers tend to employ non-standard linguistic forms due to cognitive influences from their native language, suggesting that these recurring patterns, if properly identified, could potentially evolve into distinct features of a Polish variety of English. The findings underscore the need to adapt teaching methodologies to better address the specific challenges faced by learners. The study concludes that while the emergence of a Polish English variety remains speculative, acknowledging and addressing such linguistic interference could enhance both our understanding of language evolution and language instruction practices. Future research should incorporate more interactive tasks and larger samples to further investigate these phenomena and compare findings across different linguistic contexts.

*Keywords: World Englishes, varieties of English, Expanding Circle, linguistic interference, L2 English, native language influence*

## Introduction

The global proliferation of the English language as observed over the course of the past century has created demand for a standardised framework categorising its usage depending on a variety of geographical and sociolinguistic factors. According to Crystal (2007), there are currently over 75 territories worldwide where English is spoken either as a first language (L1) or as an institutionalised or unofficial second language (L2) in key fields such as education, law and government, with new varieties constantly emerging and being discovered. Kachru's (1992) 'Three Circles of English' model provides a better understanding of this linguistic diversity, classifying English-speaking populations into one of the three geographically-based concentric circles, i.e. the Inner Circle, which refers to countries where English is spoken as a primary langue by the majority of population (e.g. the UK, Australia); the Outer Circle, encompassing largely, but not exclusively, members of the British Commonwealth where it serves as a *lingua franca* for communication between multiple speech communities (e.g. India, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea); and the Expanding Circle, including countries where English has no official status and is widely taught as a foreign language (e.g. Poland, Italy). Countries of the first two circles can be described as 'norm-providing' and 'norm-developing' respectively, meaning that they either establish linguistic standards that are recognised and adopted globally (the UK, United States) or develop distinct national varieties of English by adapting the language to local cultural influences (India,

Nigeria). The Expanding Circle on the other hand is, in principle, 'norm-dependent', as it relies entirely on the standards set by native speakers from the Inner Circle (Jenkins, 2009). As a consequence, countries of the Inner and Outer circles develop their own national varieties of English (i.e. British English, American English, Indian English, etc.), whilst learners in the Expanding Circle are taught according to frameworks for teaching English as a foreign language, which are based on an existing national standard – predominantly British or American.

The theoretical expectation is that speakers within the Expanding Circle will infallibly adhere to the externally-imposed linguistic norms without developing their own distinct varieties of the language (Matsuda, 2003). However, the reality of teaching English as a foreign language does not seem to corroborate this presumption, with several studies arguing that localised varieties of English can and do emerge within the Expanding Circle, despite its lack of official status or widespread native use (Seidlhofer, 2011). It could be argued, that irrespective of the organised efforts to teach English in a uniform way across different countries, certain linguistic features and patterns can be observed among members of a single speech community in their effort to speak standard English. These include calques and grammatical structures imported from their native languages, as well as common mispronunciations of sounds that are absent in their own vernacular. The current paper seeks to investigate the emergence of localised varieties of English outside of the Inner and Outer Circles as well as the discrepancy between global language standards and local linguistic practices based on an example of native speakers of Polish. It will deliberately construe the most frequent grammatical, syntactic and phonetic errors committed by an average member of the Polish speech community not as linguistic mistakes *per se*, but as observable features of a potential 'Polish variety' of English. It will also argue, that repeated non-standard speech patterns among L2 speakers occur as a result of linguistic choices that are suggested by one's native language at a subliminal level, and as such should be examined through the lens of the categories whereby a speaker of a particular language formulates and verbalises their thoughts.

**Methodology**

For the purpose of the research, a group of 34 first-year English philology students from a Polish university (ages 18-20), accessible at the time of the study and taught in accordance with the British standard of the language, were requested to complete an online questionnaire comprising a selection of 12 contextually unrelated Polish sentences to be translated into English without contemplating grammatical and vocabulary choices. The participants were instructed to translate the sentences as naturally as possible, without delaying the answer in search for the optimal linguistic solutions. To elicit instinctive rather than deliberate responses, a 5-minute time constraint was applied, discouraging pauses between questionnaire items or backtracking in order to correct the original input. The choice of Polish sentences was designed to include components that are partially translatable, with their optimal English renditions using similar expressions that differ by a single element. These components include, among others: collocations that employ a different verb (e.g., EN: 'to make sense' – PL: 'mieć sens' [to have sense]); fixed prepositional phrases that employ a different preposition (e.g., EN: 'at first sight' – PL: 'od pierwszego wejrzenia' [from first sight]); and nouns that are plural in English but singular in Polish (e.g., EN: 'the police are' – PL: [the police is]). Additionally, several items included elements requiring revised syntax or unintuitive vocabulary choices to be correctly translated.

The latter includes presence of lexical pairs that exhibit similar orthographic and phonological forms but diverge in meaning (i.e. false friends), e.g. PL: 'aktualny' [up-to-date] and EN: 'actual'; and a phenomenon called lexical asymmetry, which refers to a situation where two different words in one language are rendered by the same word in another, e.g. EN: 'lend' and 'borrow' = PL: 'pożyczyć'. The purpose of this task was to observe patterns in the way the participants translate certain problematic linguistic items into English, as well as to record the frequency of common grammatical and lexical errors within a sample whose common denominator is the native use of the Polish language.

The questionnaire also featured a rhyming task consisting of 20 pairs of English words of varying degrees of similarity arranged in a random order, with the participants being required to mark those which according to their judgement rhymed perfectly (i.e. had identical vowel and consonant sounds in their final stressed syllables). The set of word pairs contained 5 perfect rhymes (e.g. snail – whale, dutiful – beautiful) and 5 slant rhymes, i.e. pairs which rhymed except for the vowel length (e.g. bit – beat, slip – sleep), with the remaining 10 pairs having entirely different vowel sounds (e.g. scratch – sketch, lemon – demon). To facilitate answers true to one's individual understanding of what constitutes a rhyme, the quantity of perfect rhymes included in the task had not been specified prior to its completion. The procedure was designed to elicit responses that demonstrate the degree to which each participant perceived short and long English vowels as separate sounds. A potential repeated misconstruction of vowel length differences, which is considerably more likely to occur in speakers of a language where such a distinction is absent, could indicate regularities in the way speakers of Polish mispronounce certain sounds and entire words based on their spelling.

## Results

For the translation task, each of the 34 responses was processed on an individual basis and analysed in terms of unique solutions to the linguistic problems contained in each question. For each item the focus was placed on specific translation challenges, disregarding any non-standard responses in areas in which they had not been anticipated by the questionnaire's design. The results are represented as the percentage of occurrences of the optimal solution and the most frequent non-standard solution to each sentence's focus problem. The research indicates varying degrees of grammatical and lexical compliance of the responses with standard English, with the non-standard response being predominant in 4 out of 12 items. Below is a summary of selected questionnaire items that are particularly relevant to the subsequent discussion. Structures and expressions that were the focus of each sentence were underlined. For the complete set of results, please refer to Appendix 1.

## Question 2 – Collocations Employing a Different Verb

PL: Uważam, że Twój pomysł nie ma sensu.

EN: I think your idea makes no sense.

Literally: [I think that your idea does not have sense.]

The majority of participants (19 responses, 56%) correctly used the collocation *'to make sense'* in their translations. However, there was a notable tendency (14 responses, 41%) to translate the phrase as *'to have sense',* a clear calque of the Polish expression *'mieć sens'.* The remaining one participant employed an alternative

approach, replacing the collocation with a copular construction with an adjective, translating it as *'to be senseless'.*

**Question 2:** *Uważam, że Twój pomysł <u>nie ma sensu</u>.*
EN: I think your idea <u>makes no sense</u>.

senseless
3%

have sense
41%

make sense
56%

- make sense  - have sense  - senseless
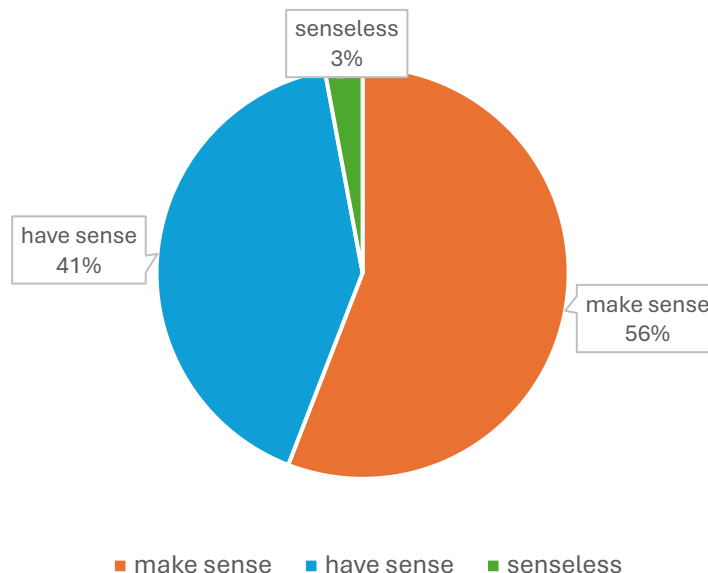
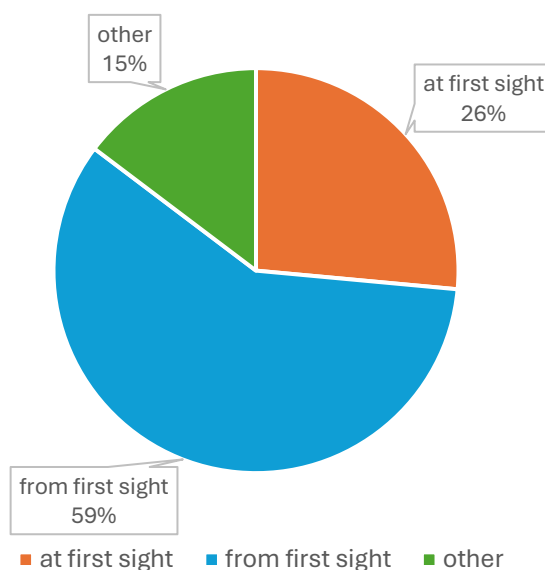## Question 3 – Prepositional Phrases Employing a Different Preposition

PL: To była miłość <u>od pierwszego wejrzenia</u>.

EN: It was love <u>at first sight</u>.

Literally: [It was love from first sight.]

**Question 3:** *To była miłość <u>od pierwszego wejrzenia</u>.*
It was love <u>at first sight</u>.

other
15%

at first sight
26%

from first sight
59%

- at first sight  - from first sight  - other

Item 3 saw the majority of the participants (20 responses, 59%) providing a literal translation of the Polish phrase 'od pierwszego wejrzenia' ('from first sight') as opposed

to the standard expression 'at first sight'. The latter response was the preferred one among only 9 of the respondents, amounting to 26% of the sample. Alternative solutions (5 answers, 15%) included the use of other prepositions and the replacement of the prepositional phrase with the predicative use of a noun phrase ('first-sight love').
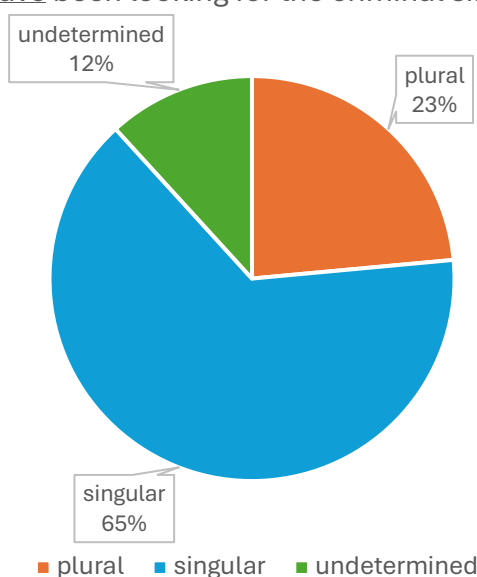
**Question 6 – Singular-Plural Asymmetry**

PL: Od wczoraj <u>policja poszukuje</u> przestępcy.

EN: The <u>police have</u> been looking for the criminal since yesterday.

Literally: [Since yesterday the police is looking for the criminal.]

**Question 6:** *Od wczoraj <u>policja poszukuje</u> przestępcy.*
The <u>police have</u> been looking for the criminal since yesterday.



The noun 'police', which in English requires plural verb conjugation when used collectively, is exclusively singular in the Polish language. This has been reflected by the results obtained in item 6, which sees as many as 22 respondents (65%) using the singular form of the phrasal verb 'to look for', with only 8 of them (23%) employing the plural. The remaining 4 participants (12%) provided answers that did not ascribe any grammatical number to the word 'police'.

**Question 9 – Lexical Interference**

PL: <u>Jak wygląda</u> Twój pokój?

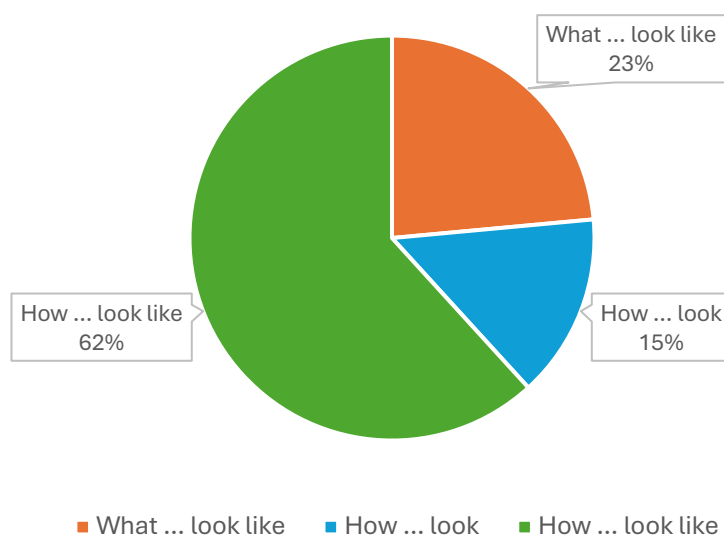EN: <u>What</u> does your room <u>look like</u>?

Literally: [How looks your room?]

The original sentence in question 9 can be rendered in two ways in standard English, either as 'What does your room look like?' or 'How does your room look?'. The Polish equivalent begins with the interrogative adverb 'jak' ('how'), to which the language offers no alternative solution. The results indicate that an overwhelming majority of the participants began their translated sentences with the word 'how' (26 responses, 77%) with only 8 respondents opting otherwise (23%). However, it is worth noting that only

5 of those 26 responses (15%) used the correct syntax ('How does your room look?'), with as many as 21 participants (62%) providing the non-standard 'How does your room look like?'. If one assumes that the primary choice in this sentence was in fact between the syntax employing the final 'look' and the one ending with 'look like', the 'How does your room look like?' response could be explained as a result of lexical

**Question 9:** *Jak wygląda Twój pokój?*
<u>What</u> does your room <u>look like</u>? / <u>How</u> does your room <u>look</u>?



interference, i.e. subconscious replacement of 'what' with 'how' in the sentence 'What does your room look like?', dictated by the original Polish structure.

**Question 11 – Lexical asymmetry**
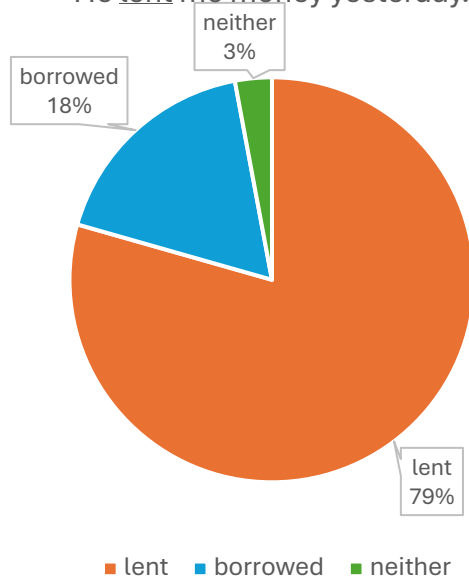
PL: Wczoraj <u>pożyczył</u> mi pieniądze.

EN: He <u>lent</u> me money yesterday.

Literally: [Yesterday he lent/borrowed me money.]

**Question 11:** *Wczoraj pożyczył mi pieniądze.*
He lent me money yesterday.



The Polish verb 'pożyczyć' is an illustration of lexical asymmetry, with its meaning encompassing that of both English verbs 'to lend' and 'to borrow'. It was therefore reasonable to expect the linguistic interference to result in a roughly equal distribution of participants opting for either verb in their translations. The obtained results however do not align with this assumption, as 27 of the respondents (79%) correctly translated the original verb as 'to lend', with only 6 of them choosing 'to borrow' (18%). Whereas the latter choice can well be attributed to the effect of interference, other factors, including insufficient language proficiency, cannot be ruled out.

**Rhyming task – Phonological Interference**

The results of the rhyming task indicate a significant tendency to disregard the differences between short and long vowels in English, with all but one pair of slant rhymes having been marked as perfect rhymes by over a half of the respondents (from 41% for bit - beat to 82% for glitch - beach). A significant majority of the participants correctly recognised all 5 pairs of perfect rhymes, with results varying between 70% (beautiful - dutiful; snail - whale) and 97% (rabbit - habit; dog - frog). 9 out of 10 pairs of words which do not rhyme due to divergent vowel sounds were correctly construed as non-rhymes by a vast majority of the respondents, with results ranging from 26% (trick - track) to 0% (bright - bread). The only remarkable exception within this group was the pair lemon - demon, which was marked as a perfect rhyme by as many as 24 participants (71%). The latter is a case of phonological interference, as the Polish equivalent of the noun 'demon' is pronounced with a short /e/, which does rhyme with the English 'lemon'. It could be argued, however, that this effect may have been amplified by the two vowel sounds being graphically represented by the same

character 'e', which given the scarcity of time available to complete the task, may have acted as a distracting visual cue.
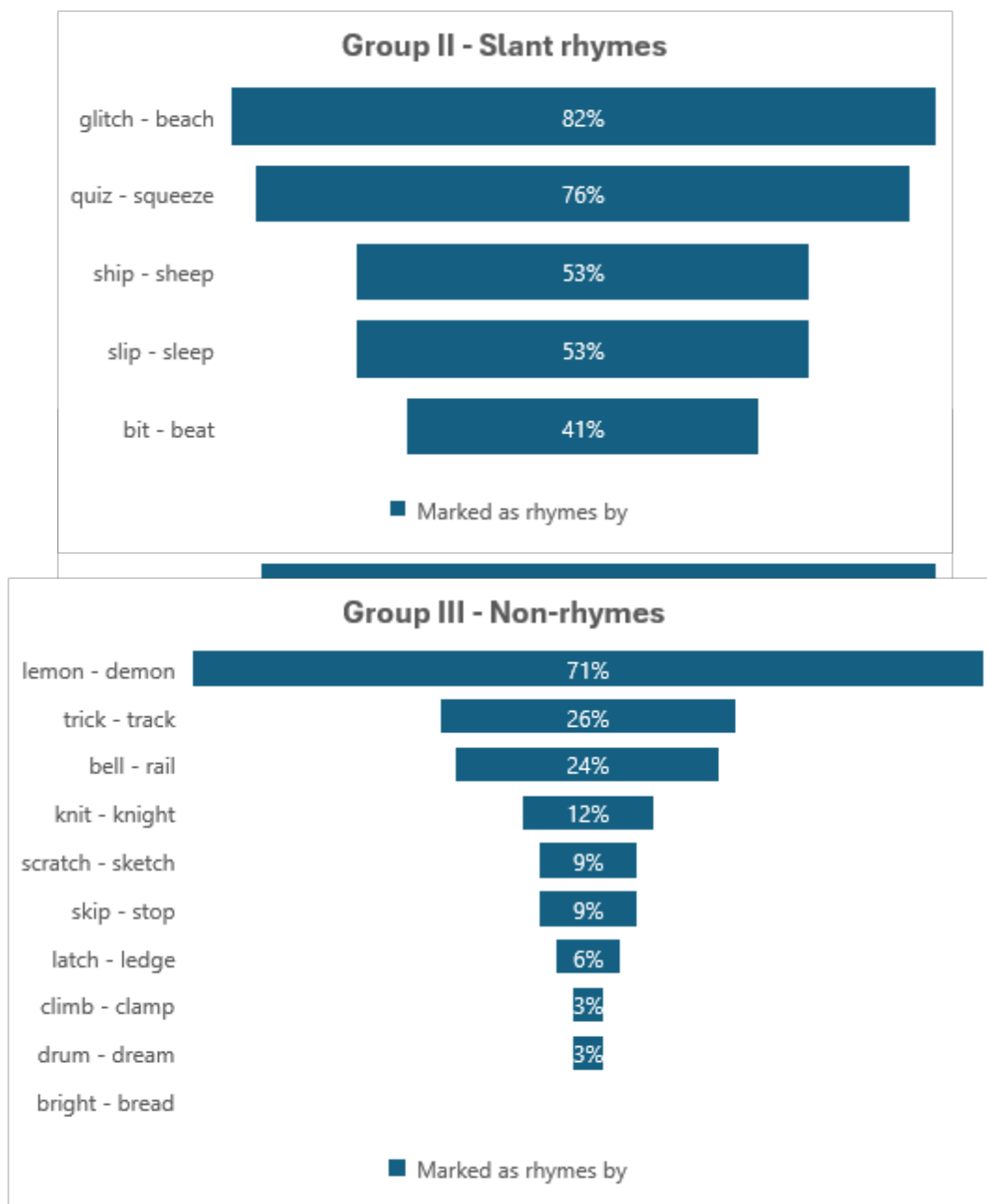




## Discussion

The research conducted for the purpose of this paper sought to provide an insight into how members of the same speech community tend to commit similar, and in many cases identical linguistic errors when speaking English, even when instructed in one of its standard varieties at an academic level. This presumptive tendency was particularly visible in the results of the rhyming task, which revealed a reasonably uniform perception of Polish speakers with regard to the distinction between long and short vowels in English, a feature that has been absent in the Polish language for several

centuries. The participants' consistent disregard of this phonological aspect suggests that native use of Polish not only impairs the speaker's ability to discern between sounds which in many cases determine meanings of words, but also causes them to mispronounce certain sounds in a predictable way. This finding points to one of the potential causes of reduced mutual intelligibility between L1 and L2 speakers of English, particularly those with little prior exposure to the native use of the language.

In as much as the translation task proposed in the questionnaire may not entirely replicate the settings in which participants are able to produce purposeful utterances of speech typical of a casual conversation, it does provide an understanding of the thought process behind the linguistic choices they make as they verbalise their thoughts. Not only does a large proportion of them apply non-standard solutions to the translation problems they encounter, but they also exhibit a strong tendency to solve them in a similar fashion. This is reflected in an overall low number of unique ways of translating the same linguistic items recorded for the entire sample. In the majority of cases, the participants were split between those who translated certain phrases and expressions according to the standard and a considerable fraction of those who opted for one single common non-standard alternative. Notably, they did so despite operating on a strict time limit and without conferring their answers among themselves.

While this phenomenon may be interpreted as a result of a varying degree of command of the language within the sample, undermining the validity of carrying out similar research in this specific context, an insufficient knowledge of English among the participants helps to shed some light on the mechanism of the emergence of common linguistic mistakes and their subsequent fossilisation in everyday speech. Proficiency gaps in an L2 English speaker require them to seek alternative ways to convey their intended meaning. If a missing portion of information cannot be swiftly paraphrased or substituted by a synonymous standard English phrase, the speaker may, more or less consciously, resort to means of expression known from their own native language. This semi-intuitive approach is also additionally reinforced in case of languages belonging to the same language family, which tend to share a substantial amount of translatable and partially translatable expressions between one another, of which speakers are, more often than not, fully aware.

Given the limited time allowed for the completion of the research questionnaire and other measures applied to elicit instinctive responses to consecutive questions, the participants could only rely, apart from their English skills and their ability to quickly rephrase their utterances using limited lexical means, on automated responses suggested by native language patterns. Since virtually no L2 speaker of English is immune to this effect, especially when producing speech under conditions where the pressure factor is present, complete eradication of thus created 'common errors' appears impossible on multiple levels. Assuming that the frequency of errors resulting from the interference of Polish is inversely proportional to one's proficiency in a foreign language, it appears reasonable to expect that an L2 speaker, irrespective of their degree of mastery in English, is considerably more subject to exposure to other L2 speakers using a set of non-standard expressions typical to members of the Polish speech community, than to the native use of the language. This in turn provides a partial explanation as to how non-standard expressions enter and become entrenched in the mainstream language. It also explains how communities which historically underwent a shift from the Expanding into the Inner Circle, as per Kachru's model,

developed their own idiomatic expressions and linguistic structures unique to their variety of English.

The magnitude of the effect observed in the sample allows for a speculation about the potential for a distinct 'Polish variety' of English to develop, with the most common structures and calques from Polish serving as its core element. Whereas the current study did by no means attempt to compile a definitive list of features characterising this speculative variety, it endeavoured to demonstrate several speech patterns caused by linguistic interference which circulate among Polish speakers of English, and which could in certain, albeit unlikely circumstances become codified and institutionalised as the official national standard. Identifying the source of many linguistic errors committed by L2 speakers as a function of uncontrollable cognitive factors amplified by a number of individuals of average English proficiency contributing to the proliferation of non-standard structures and expressions, may call for a redefinition of what constitutes an error, or even for introducing a separate category to classify terms which originated in the Expanding Circle and which are in circulation within a particular local variety. This approach, though unorthodox and arguably lenient towards errors from the perspective of classical linguistics, could help identify areas for improvement for English teaching methodology by tailoring it to the unique needs of learners speaking a specific native language.

**Conclusion**

The research presented in this paper provides an insight into the phenomenon of linguistic interference and its fundamental role in shaping non-standard forms of English among L2 speakers. Through examining the specific grammatical, syntactic and phonetic patterns that emerge when Polish speakers translate and pronounce English, the study outlines how certain recurring linguistic errors ought to be construed as more than merely isolated mistakes, and that they reflect deeper cognitive processes influenced by one's native language. These observations challenge the conventional expectation that speakers from the Expanding Circle, as defined by Kachru's model, will strictly adhere to linguistic norms without developing their own variations of the language. In fact, the evidence suggests that even within this group there is potential for the development of distinct localised varieties of English. The implications of these findings are significant for both linguistic theory and language teaching practices. On the one hand, they suggest the need to reconsider what constitutes an error in the context of L2 English, particularly when such errors are widespread and consistent within a speech community. On the other hand, they point to the necessity of adapting English teaching methodologies to better address the specific challenges and needs of learners from different linguistic backgrounds. This may involve acknowledging and incorporating elements of the learners' native languages into the curriculum, rather than striving for an unattainable ideal of perfect conformity to native speaker norms.

While the emergence of a full-fledged Polish variety of English remains speculative, the study provides circumstantial evidence that linguistic interference can lead to the development of unique patterns and structures within L2 English. Acknowledging and addressing them not only enhances our understanding of language evolution but also releases the potential to improve language instruction in a way that is more responsive to the realities of global English usage. The current study, albeit informative within the context of linguistic interference, is not without its limitations, as the questionnaire

design based on rigid translations may not fully capture the complexities of actual spoken language use. To more effectively reflect natural speech patterns, future research could incorporate more realistic and interactive tasks, such as dynamic conversation simulations or multi-dimensional studies tracing language development over time. It should also focus on identifying a more robust and definitive set of characteristic features of L2 English among speakers of Polish, to be attained through larger and more diversified samples as well as adopting a contrastive approach to ascertaining the most challenging differences between the two languages from the learner's perspective. Comparing new findings with similar studies conducted in the context of other speech communities could provide a better understanding of how localised varieties of English develop and differ across various linguistic backgrounds.

## References

*Crystal, D. (2007). English as a Global Language (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.*

*Jenkins, J. (2009). World Englishes: A Resource Book for Students (2nd ed.). Routledge.*

*Kachru, B. B. (1992). The Other Tongue: English Across Cultures (2nd ed.). University of Illinois Press.*

*Matsuda, A. (2003). The Ownership of English in Japanese Secondary Schools. World* Englishes, 22(4), 483-496.

Seidlhofer, B. (2011). Understanding English as a Lingua Franca. Oxford University Press.

## Appendices

Appendix 1.

**I Translation task**

**1. Czy mógłby mi Pan zrobić zdjęcie?**          Could you <u>take a photo</u> of me?

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| take a photo | 29 | 85,29% |
| make a photo | 3 | 8,82% |
| do a photo | 2 | 5,88% |

**2. Uważam, że Twój pomysł nie ma sensu.**          I think your idea <u>makes no sense</u>.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| make sense | 19 | 55,88% |
| have sense | 14 | 41,18% |
| senseless | 1 | 2,94% |

**3. To była miłość od pierwszego wejrzenia.**          It was love <u>at first sight</u>.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| at first sight | 9 | 26,47% |
| from first sight | 20 | 58,82% |
| other | 5 | 14,71% |

**4. W tej chwili piszę zadanie domowe.**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| do homework | 23 | 67,65% |
| write homework | 11 | 32,35% |

I am <u>doing homework</u> right now.

**5. Muszę porozmawiać z menadżerem.**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| to | 20 | 58,82% |
| with | 13 | 38,24% |
| other | 1 | 2,94% |

I need to <u>speak to</u> the manager.

**6. Od wczoraj policja poszukuje przestępcy.**

The <u>police have</u> been looking for the criminal since yesterday.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| plural | 8 | 23,53% |
| singular | 22 | 64,71% |
| undetermined | 4 | 11,76% |

**7. Bardzo lubię pływać.**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| really like / enjoy | 22 | 64,71% |
| … very much | 7 | 20,59% |
| very much like | 1 | 2,94% |
| very like | 1 | 2,94% |
| avoided altogether | 3 | 8,82% |

I like swimming <u>a lot</u>.

**8. Jutrzejsze zajęcia zostały odwołane.**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| tomorrow's | 24 | 70,59% |
| tomorrow | 10 | 29,41% |

<u>Tomorrow's</u> classes have been cancelled.

**9. Jak wygląda Twój pokój?**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| What … look like | 8 | 23,53% |
| How … look | 5 | 14,71% |
| How … look like | 21 | 61,76% |

<u>What</u> does your room <u>look like</u>?

**10. Ten harmonogram nie jest aktualny.**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| actual | 3 | 8,82% |
| is not | 23 | 67,65% |

This schedule <u>is not up-to-date</u>.

**11. Wczoraj pożyczył mi pieniądze.**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| lent | 27 | 79,41% |
| borrowed | 6 | 17,65% |
| neither | 1 | 2,94% |

He <u>lent</u> me money yesterday.

**12. Wiadomości w telewizji były nudne.**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| singular | 11 | 32,35% |
| plural | 23 | 67,65% |
| on | 7 | 20,59% |
| in | 17 | 50,00% |
| tv news | 7 | 20,59% |
| news | 3 | 8,82% |

The news <u>on</u> TV <u>was</u> boring.

**II Rhyming task**

*Perfect rhymes:*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| dog – frog | 33 | 97,06% |
| rabbit – habit | 33 | 97,06% |
| leather – feather | 31 | 91,18% |
| beautiful - dutiful | 24 | 70,59% |
| snail - whale | 24 | 70,59% |

*Slant rhymes:*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| glitch - beach | 28 | 82,35% |
| quiz - squeeze | 26 | 76,47% |
| ship - sheep | 18 | 52,94% |
| slip - sleep | 18 | 52,94% |
| bit - beat | 14 | 41,18% |

*Non-rhymes:*

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| lemon - demon | 24 | 70,59% |
| trick - track | 9 | 26,47% |
| bell - rail | 8 | 23,53% |
| knit - knight | 4 | 11,76% |
| scratch - sketch | 3 | 8,82% |
| skip - stop | 3 | 8,82% |
| latch - ledge | 2 | 5,88% |
| climb - clamp | 1 | 2,94% |
| drum - dream | 1 | 2,94% |
| bright - bread | 0 | 0,00% |

## Author Notes

**Mateusz Urbaniak** is an undergraduate student of English Philology and Translation Studies at the State University of Applied Sciences in Krosno, Poland. His primary areas of interest include translation of classical literary works and the problem of translatability of idiomatic expressions and proverbs. His academic endeavours revolve around English, German, Polish and Portuguese languages, in which he demonstrates varying levels of proficiency. He also aspires to explore the work of a translator from multiple perspectives and to establish himself in a field that is being increasingly menaced by advancements in AI technology.