

The ecology of a language under Hard Invasion: the Polish case, 1772–1918 (supplemented with visual material)

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Abstract: This article offers an interdisciplinary examination of the relationship between language and political power during the Partitions of Poland. It analyzes the fate of the Polish language as a linguistic system subjected to a process of “hard invasion” by the occupying empires – German, Austrian and Russian. Within an ecolinguistic framework, language is portrayed as a living organism functioning in a dynamic cultural ecosystem, exposed to domination, suppression, and adaptive resistance. The text introduces a theoretical model (IL-TL-SL) that illustrates the stages of linguistic subjugation and the mechanisms of resistance that followed. Drawing on historical evidence, it demonstrates how the Polish intelligentsia and the wider community preserved the vitality and identity of Polish despite external pressures. Ultimately, the article shows that Polish endured the Partitions not only as a means of communication but also as a core symbol of national memory and identity, regaining full autonomy after 1918. This contribution enriches the discussion on language ecology, linguistic imperialism, and the interdependence between culture, language, and political power.

Abstrakt: Niniejsze opracowanie przedstawia interdyscyplinarne studium dotyczące relacji między językiem a władzą polityczną w okresie zaborów Polski. Analizuje losy języka polskiego jako systemu językowego poddanego procesowi „presji językowej” ze strony języków państw zaborczych – niemieckiego i rosyjskiego. W ramach podejścia ekolingwistycznego język ukazany jest jako żywy organizm funkcjonujący w dynamicznym ekosystemie kulturowym, narażony na dominację, represję i przymus adaptacji. Tekst wprowadza model teoretyczny (IL-TL-SL), który ilustruje etapy podporządkowania językowego oraz mechanizmy oporu wobec niego. Na podstawie materiału historycznego pokazano, w jaki sposób polska inteligencja i szerokie warstwy społeczeństwa zachowały żywotność i tożsamość języka mimo zewnętrznej presji. Ostatecznie opracowanie dowodzi, że język polski przetrwał okres zaborów nie tylko jako środek komunikacji, lecz także jako podstawowy symbol pamięci narodowej i tożsamości, odzyskując pełną autonomię po 1918 roku. Tekst wnosi istotny wkład w dyskusję nad ekologią języka, imperializmem językowym oraz współzależnością kultury, języka i władzy politycznej.

Key words: language ecology, ecolinguistics, linguistic invasion, Polish language, Germanization, Russification, cultural identity, Partitions of Poland, linguistic imperialism.

Słowa kluczowe: ekologia języka, ekolingwistyka, inwazja językowa, język polski, germanizacja, rusyfikacja, tożsamość kulturowa, rozbiory Polski, imperializm językowy.

*Gentem lingua facit
(Languages create peoples)*

*In commemoration of the 230th anniversary
of the last Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1795–2025),
which took place on 24th of October, 1795.*

*O pieśni gminna, ty stoisz na straży
Narodowego pamiątek kościoła
Z archanielskimi skrzydłami i głosem
Ty czasem dzierżysz i miecz archaniola.
Płomień rozgryzie malowane dzieje
Skarby mieczowi spustoszą złodzieje,
Pieśń ujdzie cało...*

*(O you folk song,
you guard the temple of our national memories
With your angel wings and voice.
And you sometimes hold the angel's sword.
Flames will devour our painted history
And our treasures armed robbers will loot,
But the song will prevail...*

(A fragment of Adam Mickiewicz's poem *Konrad Wallenrod*,
published in Saint/Sankt Petersburg in 1828,
indicating resistance to 'armed robbers'. Translation mine, SP).

The prologue

In view of the necessity to abolish everything which would revive the memory of the existence of the Kingdom of Poland (emphasis mine, SP), now that the annulment of this body politic has been effected...the high contracting parties are agreed and undertake never (emphasis mine, SP) to include in their titles...the name and designation of the Kingdom of Poland, and which shall remain suppressed as from the present and forever (emphasis mine, SP)..." (A secret article signed by the partitioning powers of Prussia, Russia, and Austria in 1797. Source: Norman Davies. 2005. *God's playground: a history of Poland*. The original text of the Treaty of the Third Partition of Poland, signed on the 24th of October, 1795, in Saint/Sankt Petersburg, was written both in German and Russian).

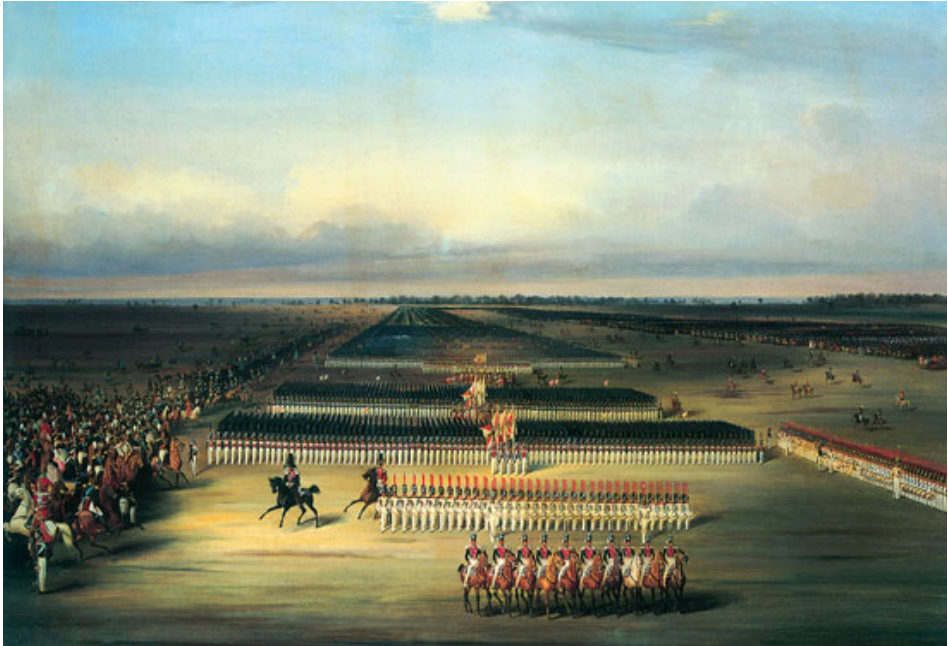


Figure 1. The Russo-Prussian military parade in Kalisz in 1835. It depicts the forceful massive (mass) and fast (velocity) military takeover of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth during its partitions (further abbreviated as the Partitions of Poland by Prussia, Russia and Austria and the brutal military and linguistic presence of Prussia, Russia and Austria on the Polish partitioned territories in the duration of the Partitions between the years 1772–1918.

Source: Wikipedia commons

1. Introduction

The present essay is not a historical essay *sensu stricto*, for the description and explanation of the spectacular fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth under the military invasion of its territory by the hostile powers of Prussia, Russia, and Austria is left to professional historians (see the attached bibliography). Instead, it is focused on the linguistic confrontation between the invading languages (German, Russian) and the invaded language (Polish) in the wake of the Partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795). The best way to commence the essay is by means of referring the reader to the above Prologue which demonstrates more than convincingly how the linguistic invasion of another language may best be executed. In the particular and historically unparalleled case of the Partitions of Poland, the huge military invasion (massive and fast, referred to here as ‘hard invasion’), followed by later merciless administrative and bureaucratic restrictions imposed by the invading language elites (in this case, German and Russian, hence IL) on the partitioned Polish language community. These restrictions have

done the job of turning a fully independent West Slavic language (referred to here as ‘target language’, hence TL) into a subjugated language (also referred to as ‘suppressed language’, hence SL). This really gigantic and unprecedented act of international plunder and banditry was, of course, not an act that was unfolding automatically in front of the eyes of passive European and Polish observers of that time, but was instead deliberately concocted and carried out by the political elite of the highest ranking individuals, including the emperors of Russia, Prussia and Austria, their advisers and the highest ranking military men in command of the three imperial armies. Together, they formed an overriding force and the Polish elite, as well as Poland’s dwindling military forces, were no match to the invaders.



Figure 2. Map of the Partitions of Poland, showing territorial gains by the invading empires of Germany, Russia, and Austria.
Source: Public Domain.

Obviously, the historical acts of the Partitions of Poland, which took place in the years 1772, 1793, and 1795 (see the map below), were first and foremost a cynical and political ‘enterprise’ on an unprecedented scale, but in its depth they were, above all, a brutal invasion of two major European languages, German (Prussia and Austria) and Russian (the Russian empire), into the ‘operational space’ (i.e. cultural-linguistic-communicative space) of Polish, a large European (West Slavic) and well developed language. It resulted in a brutal clash which took place between the two ILs and the TL and which was prolonged throughout the entire span of the Partitions.

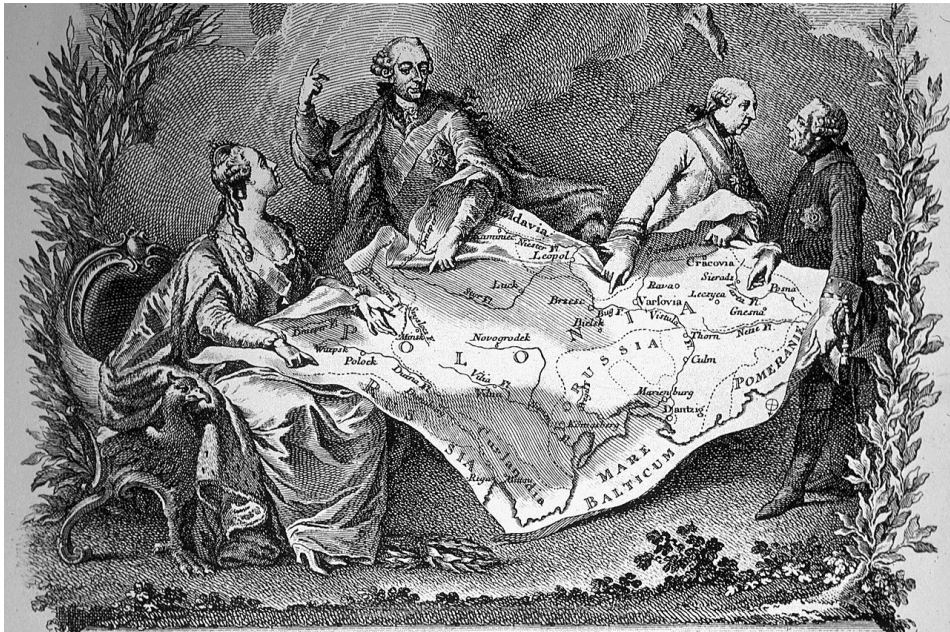


Figure 3. The Partitions of Poland, showing an allegory of the first Partition of Poland, with the Russian Empress, Catherine the Great, the Austrian Emperor, Joseph II, and Frederick the Great of Prussia, quarrelling over their territorial seizures of the Polish Kingdom

Source: Public Domain.

It must be emphasized that at the time of the partitions, Polish was indeed a well-developed national language, one of the most important languages within the European (post Roman) world, and a major language in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów*). As a major language of the Polish Kingdom, it was successfully represented in all possible walks of social life: it had its own rich national literature (both in terms of *belle lettres* and poetry and academic graphic (i.e. printed) discourse, with its rich legal and religious

contributions), as well as was undergoing further developments in the major academic institutions of the Polish Kingdom, such as the Kraków (Jagiellonian) University (established in 1364). Lvov University (established in 1661) and Vilnius University (established in 1579), but also the Lubrański Academy (1519–1780) and the Jesuit Academy (1572–1773), the latter two located in Poznań.

The dates of the Partitions are the following:

- the first Partition of Poland: 05. 08. 1772 (place of signing of the Partition Treaty: Saint/Sankt Petersburg, Russia)
- the second Partition of Poland: 25. 01. 1793 (place of signing of the Partition Treaty: Grodno, former Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth, part of Poland in the years 1921–1939, today in Belarus)
- the third Partition of Poland: 24. 10. 1795 (place of signing of the Partition Treaty: Saint/Sankt Petersburg, Russia).

2. The military (hard) invasion of the Kingdom of Poland

The Kingdom of Poland as an independent state of long duration (established as an independent European kingdom in 1025 under the reign of the first Polish King, Bolesław Chrobry, 967–1025) and of established international recognition and respect was ‘quelled’, as it were, in the most brutal of ways, that is, by military force, preceded by a frenzy of diplomatic activities and followed by the orchestrated installation of Prussian, Russian, and Austrian absolutist regimes, respectively, for over a century (to be exact, 123 years). Such a long period of subjugation of the Polish people (i.e. their culture and national identity) to determined hostile foreign rule had left its stamp not only on the Polish mentality but also on the unperturbed development of the Polish language. This fact was especially visible in the area of the sciences, but also in various other walks of life, with numerous borrowings of both lexical items and phrases into the Polish language.

As a result of this ruthless and internationally acknowledged (also well described internationally) act of robbery and application of sheer military force (later on manifested so clearly in the construction of various military fortresses on the Polish partitioned territories, e.g. the Warsaw Citadel, the Modlin Citadel, the Poznań Citadel, the Przemyśl Citadel), the Polish language, once enjoying full autonomy, lost its stately independence and, as a consequence of implementing oppressive administrative policies by the invaders, was ferociously shifted to a state of subjugation/suppression. However, the state of subjugation in which Polish was found after 1795 did not terminate its fate in its becoming dead (moribund) or dormant, or even endangered (as was the case with Irish which was pushed into dormancy after Ireland had been conquered by Great Britain in 1603, as shown on the picture below).



Figure 4. An illustration from 1754 depicting the Earl of Tyssone's submission to Baron Mountjoy in 1603. The sheer military force with which Ireland was conquered by the English invaders is shown clearly in the background of the submission act

Source: Public Domain.

On the contrary, within the bounds of the partitioned Polish territories, a really forceful and merciless struggle for the survival of the Polish language vis-a-vis the invading languages of German and Russian began, led by the Polish intelligentsia (i.e. well educated individuals within the Polish society who were enlightened enough to be vitally interested in the maintenance and further development of the Polish language as an autonomous national language) and was prolonged throughout the entire span of the XIXth century to result in its really successful salvage. Success was more than apparent, for at the dawn of its independence in 1918, Poland was ready to take on an independent stately existence, secure its national language from demise and guarantee its further development, this time also in the area of the sciences owing both to the revival of the leading academic centres and an erection of a new academic centre (i.e. the University of Poznań in 1919) in the newly established Republic of Poland.

3. The mechanism of natural language (ethnic, national) subjugation to a brutal military (hard) invasion: the case of Polish

A forceful military entry of the surrounding absolutist powers of Prussia, Russia, and Austria into the Polish Kingdom brought a direct confrontation between the 'invading languages' (IL, German, Russian) and the 'target language'

of Polish (TL). In this way, the ILs became formally and politically dominant (hegemonic) thus shifting the status of Polish, once an independent national language, into the status of a ‘subjugated/suppressed language’ (hence abbreviated SL), as shown in the diagram below.

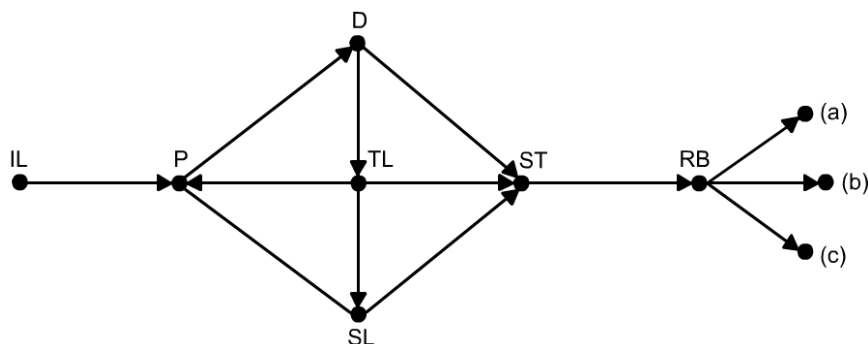


Figure 5. The diagram displays the dynamics of IL-TL relationship during a hard (military, political, administrative) invasion of a foreign territory. It is assumed to be of a universal character.

Legend:

IL – invading language

P – point of impact (clash between IL and TL)

D – dominance/hegemony of IL over TL carried out by means of ‘external linguopressure’ (defined as an influx of invading language officials, e.g. the military and police personnel, different levels of administrators, educators, businessmen, later manifested in education systems of the invaders in which the dominant language is strongly prioritized (or goes into a phase of linguistic imperialism) and the SL is put into a sharp disadvantage, etc.)

TL – target (invaded) language

SL – subjugated/suppressed language (e.g. Polish which lost its independent status and was forcefully shifted by the invaders to the state of subjugation)

ST – struggle between IL and SL (it must be emphasized that the struggle was, in fact, a linguistic confrontation between two extensions of the imperative mood, namely, between the ILs negative formula: ‘destroy and subjugate’, and the positive SL language formula: ‘defend’. It lasted for three generations and was indeed very intense, heroic and uncompromising on the part of the Poles)

RB – rejection bundle, with three basic expansions:

(a) – rejection of IL (generally, most likely and least desired by the IL community, as was the case with German and Russian on the Polish soil)

(b) – rejection of SL (generally, least likely and most desired by the IL community)

(c) – pushing the SL into a state of dormancy (i.e. a state of the language being put into a quasi-dead condition and which often undergoes a more or less successful process of revitalisation, desired by the SL community, as was the case, among many other languages which were lost during military (hard) invasions in the course of human history (e.g. see map below), with Irish as an illustrative example, however, currently being dynamically revitalised).

The diagram illustrating the mechanism thus proposed (Fig. nr 5) places special emphasis on the node of ‘struggle’ (ST), the result of which is the final phase of the mechanism, referred to as the ‘rejection bundle’ (RB). As has been indicated on the diagram, the latter node has three internationally well-attested



Figure 6. The map shows some indigenous cultures in Central and South America invaded by the Portuguese and Spanish conquerors (Conquista), which are currently in danger of being lost
Source: N. Rojas, 2022.

extensions of which extension (a) had been most clearly demonstrated through the entire span of the XIXth century on the partitioned Polish territory. The dominant languages, German and Russian, were installed on the Polish soil by way of massive ‘external linguopressure’. That is, they were fortified by an introduction of the ILs to the most important areas of social and cultural life, such as: central and local administration, the judiciary system, the economic, the military, and, above all, the schooling system.

In all these areas and during the process of intensive colonization and under the severe anti-Polish conditions of language policy introduced by the invaders, the ILs had to be used mandatorily under the threat of various fines and bans, and even imprisonment or the most frightening forceful exile to Siberia, practiced so willingly by the Russian colonizers (especially after the January Uprising, 1863–1864, see the picture below).

Extremely special care on the part of the invaders was devoted to the schooling systems in all three Partitions, since the education of young Poles was regarded as essential to the invaders in turning the subjugated Polish population into obedient subjects prepared to function as such within the invading empires in the



Figure 7. A painting by Aleksander Sochaczewski (1843–1923), entitled *Good-bye to Europe* ('Pożegnanie Europy', or 'On the border with Siberia'), depicting a large group of Poles who are about to be exiled to Siberia (Source: Public Domain). The picture was painted in 1894 and is now exposed in Pavillion X of the Warsaw Citadel. The Citadel was built by Tsar Nicholas I between the years 1832–1834 and remains a strong symbol of Russian domination during the Partitions.

long run. That is why young Poles, in particular, were subjected to massive long-term germanization and russification processes, respectively, which, language-wise, were aimed at reducing the Polish language at least to the private domain of linguistic-communicative interactions. Although one must also remember that under the Austrian Partition, Polish enjoyed a more privileged position, as it was accorded greater autonomy. On the other hand, the ruthless Russian invader was extremely hostile to Polish and the Russian authorities went so far as to inflict a complete ban on the use of informal spoken Polish in all public places after the January Uprising of 1863–1864 (see the photo below).

As is indicated in the picture shown below, Russian became the compulsory language of instruction in the Russian-dominated part of Poland and any reference to Polish national literature (especially to Mickiewicz and other outstanding Polish poets of the Romantic period) was banned. In addition, corporal punishment was frequently used and any disobedience on the part of a student was punished on the spot by a teacher by hitting the student in the palm with a stick. Various other means of punishment were also used (with the most radical one in the form of expulsion from school or being placed on a black list).

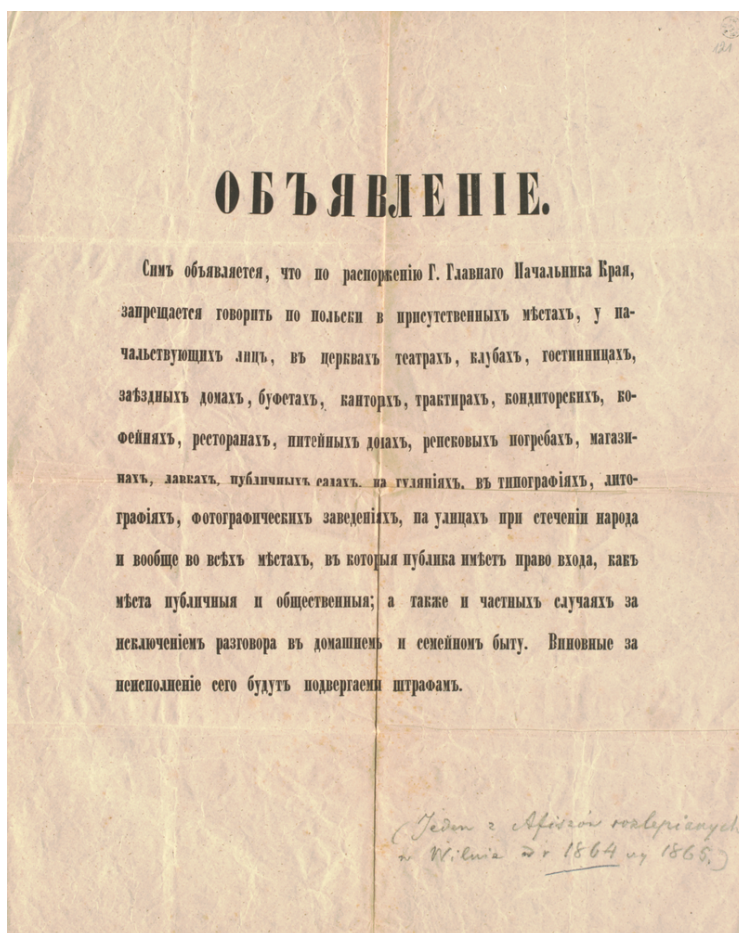


Figure 8. The picture shows an administrative announcement (*Objawlenije/ Obwieszczenie*) issued by the general-governor of the Vilnius District informing the Polish population in Lithuania of imposing a total ban on the use of the Polish language in all public places

Source: Public Domain.



Figure 9. The picture shows a typical lesson in a class in a Russian-controlled high school (gimnazjum) in the Russian part of partitioned Poland. The Russian imperial emblem and a portrait of the tsar are hanging on the front wall. The teacher is about to hit the student in the palm with a stick
Source: Public Domain.

Figure 10. The front page of the monograph authored by Łucja Borodziej (1972, see the bibliography below), depicting the oppressed status of Polish learners at the time of *Kulturkampf*, a strong anti-Polish campaign initiated by the German and strongly polonophobe Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898). He once stated that the only solution to the Polish question in the Prussian State (after the unification of Germany in 1871 changed into the German Empire) was by the extermination of the Poles
Source: Wikipedia Commons.



4. The *dramatis personae* of the demise of Poland

As mentioned above, the Partitions of Poland were not automatic acts but were ‘manufactured’ jointly (that is, in a very orchestrated manner), as it were, by very concrete personalities. In the following part, the *dramatis personae* (both those opposing the Partitions and those actively engaged in their execution, also, unfortunately, on the Polish side) who were playing a part in the demise of Poland are mentioned. They include the following major historical personages:



Figure 11. Stanisław August Poniatowski (1732–1798), the last King of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Despite his enlightened efforts to save Poland, he finally ‘lost’ his country to the surrounding powers of Prussia, Russia, and Austria

Source: Public Domain.



Figure 12. Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746–1817), a famous Polish general and statesman who was an ardent advocate of liberal reforms in Poland (among others, he advocated giving personal freedom to serfs and abolishing serfdom in Poland). Despite Kościuszko’s heroic struggle in what is known in history as the Kościuszko Insurrection, the third Partition of Poland was effected which ended the existence of the Polish independent state for 123 years

Source: Public Domain.



Figure 13. Catherine the Great (born Princess Sophie von Anhalt-Zerbst, 1729–1796). She was a major force behind all three Partitions of Poland which took place in the years 1772, 1793, 1795
Source: Wikipedia commons.



Figure 14. Austrian Empress-Queen Maria Theresa Habsburg (1717–1780). She was one of the ‘architects’ of the first Partition of Poland
Source: Public Domain.



Figure 15. Joseph II Habsburg (1741–1790). Holy Roman Emperor. For some time, he was a coregulator with his mother, Maria Theresa, and in this capacity he participated in the first Partition of Poland
Source: Public Domain.



Figure 16. Frederick II Hohenzollern (also known as Frederick the Great, 1712–1786), King of Prussia. Together with Catherine the Great he was a major force behind the first Partition of Poland and a ruthless advocate of the demise of Poland
Source: Public Domain.



Figure 17. Francis II Habsburg (1788–1835), Holy Roman Emperor. During his reign, the third Partition of Poland took place (Austria did not participate in the second Partition of Poland).



Figure 18. Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz (1711–1794), State Chancellor of Austria in the years 1753–1792. He was one of the guiding spirits of the Partitions of Poland

Source: Public Domain.



Figure 19. Nikita Panin (1718–1783), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Imperial Russia in the years 1764–1780. He was in favour of the installment of Russian protectorate over Poland and an opponent to Her partitions

Source: Public Domain).



Figure 20. Otto Magnus von Stackelberg (1736–1800), a Russian ambassador in Warsaw in the years 1772–1790. During his infamous service as ambassador of the Russian Empire to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, he was *de facto* the ruler of Poland in the name of Catherine the Great.

The concerted efforts of the surrounding powers' elites to abolish the Polish state were, however, not their sole responsibility, for a number of Polish personalities who belonged to the highest circles of the Polish society, were, unfortunately, actively involved in the Partitions of Poland. The Polish 'Hall of Shame' (Figures 21–24) includes the following persons:



Figure 21. Franciszek Ksawery Branicki (1730–1819), a Polish magnate (count) and one of the leaders of the infamous Targowica Confederation. He is considered to have been a traitor and one of the 'architects' of the Polish Partitions and was keen to overthrow the Constitution of the 3rd of May, 1791 (the first European constitution.

Source: Public Domain.



Figure 22. Ignacy Massalski (1726–1794), a Polish magnate (duke) and a clergyman of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. Bishop of Vilnius. As an active supporter of the Targowica Confederation and an ardent opponent of the Kościuszko Insurrection, he was accused of treason and was hanged by the rebellious populace of Warsaw on June 28, 1794, in the aftermath of the Warsaw uprising in 1794

Source: Public Domain.



Figure 23. Stanisław Szczęśny Potocki (1751–1805), a Polish magnate (count) who opposed every project for reform in the Polish Kingdom. He was a major figure in forming the Targowica Confederation whose goal was to maintain the infamous *liberum veto* as a major source of Poland's weakness and political demise.



Figure 24. Seweryn Rzewuski (1743–1811), a Polish magnate (count) who opposed all reforms in the Polish Kingdom. He was one of the founding leaders of the Targowica Confederation.

5. Some conclusions

Owing to an extremely active pro-Polish language attitude of the Polish intelligentsia (as defined above, see Section 2) demonstrated during the entire span of the Partitions, the Polish language successfully avoided the fate of becoming a dormant language which would, therefore, find itself in the need of its awakening and was, instead, firmly placed in variant (a) of the mechanism of natural (ethnic, national) language subjugation to a military (hard) invasion on the part of Prussia, Russia, and Austria presented above, followed by the dominant languages' (German and Russian) imperial and (strongly) anti-Polish language practices.

An enormous success of Polish both in the ST node and in extension (a) of the RB node had its internationally acclaimed and demonstrably meaningful climax in awarding the Nobel Prize for literature to Henryk Sienkiewicz (1905). His and other XIXth century Polish giants' prolific literary contributions to literary Polish (that is, contributions made by numerous writers, both men and women, who shaped the Polish mentality and who were indeed of instrumental in maintaining the Polish language) have made Polish a very strong national language among all the languages of Europe. Subsequently, at the dawn of Poland's rebirth in 1918 (however, it is to be remembered, not without a significant assistance from Thomas Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States of America, whose famous Point Thirteen of his *Fourteen Points* really helped resurrect independent Poland after the cataclysmic World War I), Polish was strong enough to take on the status of an official state language again and later generations indeed held the language in very high esteem.



Figure 25. Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924). The 28th President of the United States of America. In his famous *Point Thirteen* of the speech delivered to The American Congress on January 8, 1918, he unquestionably favoured the resurrection of independent Poland (see Figure 26).

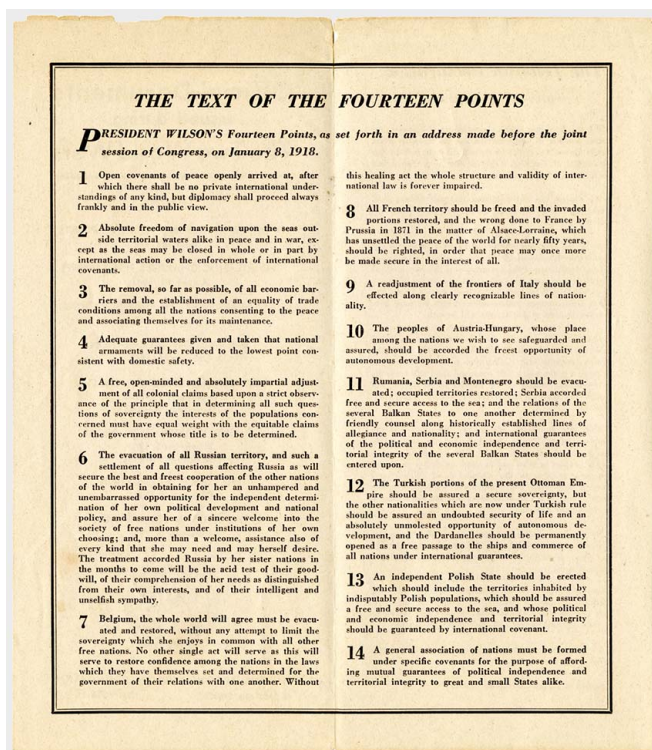


Figure 26. Thomas Woodrow Wilson's text of the *Fourteen Points*, with Point Thirteen stating that "an independent Polish state should be erected (...)"

Source: Public Domain.

At the same time and contrary to the socially positive attitude of the Polish population manifested towards their native tongue, the occupiers' languages (German and Russian) had been basically held in generally low esteem, although Polish could not avoid quite a large number of lexical and phrasal borrowings from the ILs, owing to the 123-year long Partitions as if a form of prolonged language contact.

The firmly established emotional axis: 'high esteem for the native language versus low esteem for the invaders' languages' – which language-wise resulted from the Partitions and the ferocious struggle (ST) between the ILs and the SL that took place at that time – has allowed for an easy recovery of Polish from the status of a subjugated/suppressed language (SL) to a fully independent state (official) language.

At the same time, owing to regaining a full operational status of the Polish language in the most important areas of public life, e.g. in the political, administrative, legislative, economic and military domains, but especially in all the

institutions of higher education, Polish could go ahead with its unperturbed autonomous existence. In particular, the academic career of the Polish language, this time unperturbed by the occupiers' pressure towards reducing its scientific status of being a non-existing language has provided an occasion for Polish (one must openly admit, somewhat belatedly) to join the other European nations in a further development of the academic register of Polish. In this way, Polish has been brought back to a full national language agenda (i.e. with all the registers of its daily operations firmly in place). In this way, its linguistic-cultural identity has been fully preserved.

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