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## The Polish language in Canada: selected factors shaping its ethnolinguistic vitality

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### Abstract

This paper offers a preliminary examination of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Polish language in Canada, applying the framework developed by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor to assess the interplay of status, demographic and institutional factors shaping language maintenance and shift. Drawing on historical migration data, census statistics and community observations, it traces the evolution of Polish settlement from the late 19th century to the present, highlighting the erosion of intergenerational transmission, high rates of exogamy and declining recent immigration as major challenges. While Polish retains symbolic prestige within its ethnic community, its functional utility in Canadian public life remains limited, reducing incentives for active use. The analysis underscores the critical role of institutional support – particularly heritage schools, Catholic parishes and Polish-language media – in sustaining linguistic continuity, even as these institutions face declining enrolment, resource constraints and generational disengagement. Additional factors such as parental education levels, ethnic pride and technological advances in communication are examined for their mitigating or intensifying effects on language shift. The paper concludes that maintaining Polish in Canada requires deliberate and coordinated strategies to strengthen both the objective and subjective dimensions of vitality, integrate local initiatives into broader networks and enhance community awareness of the heritage language’s cultural and identity value.

**Keywords:** Polish language in Canada; ethnolinguistic vitality; heritage language maintenance; language shift

## Introduction

The Polish presence in Canada is rooted in multiple waves of immigration, each shaped by distinct historical and political circumstances. From early arrivals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to the post-World War II refugee influx and the diminishing migration following Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, Polish Canadians have established a variety of communities across the country. Cities such as Toronto, Mississauga, Winnipeg, Vancouver – just to mention a few – have become cultural hubs where Polish traditions and language continue to thrive, although to varying degrees. However, like most European heritage language communities, Polish Canadians face challenges related to language shift, particularly among second- and third-generation speakers.

Historically, Polish migrants have placed great importance on language as a key element of cultural identity, successfully maintaining their heritage language across three to four generations in various host countries<sup>1</sup>. Within emigrant communities, a high level of Polish language use in the family has consistently aligned with a strong sense of Polish identity among both first- and second-generation migrants<sup>2</sup>, as well as with widespread support for the preservation of Polish culture. The family has been identified as the primary bastion of Polish identity abroad<sup>3</sup>. For the first generation in particular, the Polish language was regarded as a *core value* – one whose abandonment could risk social exclusion from the ethnic group<sup>4</sup>. While most second-generation individuals continue to believe that speaking Polish is essential to being considered Polish, the connection between language and identity in this cohort has weakened<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> J. Holmes, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Essex 2000.

<sup>2</sup> J. Lustański, „Czy warto uczyć się polskiego?” *Refleksje studentów kanadyjskich o polszczyźnie*, „Poradnik Językowy” 7 (2018), p. 39–58. About Polish in Australia see: E. Drozd, *They have come a long way: the settlement of the 1980s wave of Polish immigrants in Melbourne*, Footscray 2001; E. Lipińska, *Proces stawania się dwujęzycznym. Studium przypadku polskiego chłopca w Australii, rozprawa doktorska*, Kraków 2001; R. Dębski, *Dynamika utrzymania języka polskiego w Australii*, „Postscriptum Polonistyczne” 1 (2016), p. 133–150.

<sup>3</sup> J. Smolicz, *Language Core Values and Cultural Identity in Australia: Some Polish, Welsh and Indian Minority Experiences*, “Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society” 19 (1991), p. 115–17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> This weakening connection between language and identity has been examined in Dębski's works (2009, 2016) as well as in one of my own studies: *Polish Canadians and Polish immigrants in Canada: self-identity and language attitude*, “International Journal of the Sociology of Language” 199 (2009), p. 39–61.

The maintenance of a heritage language is often a key indicator of cultural continuity in immigrant communities. It supports identity formation, intergenerational cohesion and access to cultural inheritance<sup>6</sup>. Yet, maintaining minority languages in multicultural societies like Canada can be difficult in the face of assimilation pressures and dominant-language environments<sup>7</sup>. In this context, the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality – as proposed by Giles, Bourhis and Taylor<sup>8</sup> – offers a useful framework for understanding the factors that influence the long-term survival of minority languages. The complexity of intergroup relations between linguistic groups can be measured using three-related sociocultural factors which are status (prestige and institutional recognition), demography (population size and distribution) and institutional support (presence in education, media and public life). Vitality can be evaluated both objectively – such as measured by actual statistics – and subjectively measured by individuals' perceptions<sup>9</sup>. It is argued<sup>10</sup> that objective and subjective vitality provide a starting point from which the difficult link between sociological (collective) and social-psychological (individual) accounts of language, ethnicity and intergroup relations can be explored.<sup>11</sup>

This article offers a preliminary discussion of the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Polish language in Canada. Drawing on available demographic data, community observations conducted by the author – who has lived in Canada for more than two decades researching the Polish community – and the theoretical framework outlined above, this paper explores selected factors that contribute to or hinder the continued use of Polish within the Canadian context. The paper is structured as follows: it begins with a brief overview of the Polish community in Canada, followed by an explanation of the ethnolinguistic vitality model. Next, it examines selected elements –

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<sup>6</sup> See: W. Miodunka, *Moc języka i jej znaczenie w kontaktach językowych i kulturowych*, in: *Język polski w świecie*, ed. W. Miodunka, Kraków 1990, p. 39–49.

<sup>7</sup> See: J. Chambers, *English: Canadian varieties*, in: *Language in Canada*, ed. J.R. Edwards, Cambridge 1998, p. 252–272.

<sup>8</sup> It was first published as the following paper: *Towards a theory of language in ethnic group relations*, in: *Language, ethnicity and intergroup relations*, ed. H. Giles, London 1977, p. 307–348.

<sup>9</sup> Subjective dimensions of vitality are out of scope of this paper.

<sup>10</sup> P. Johnson, H. Giles, R.Y. Bourhis, *The viability of ethnolinguistic vitality: A reply*, "Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development" 4 (1983), p. 258.

<sup>11</sup> There are other frameworks that identify other factors influencing language maintenance and shift, but they are out of the scope of this paper. One of them was presented in the book by Nancy Conklin and Margaret Lourie *A host of tongues: language communities in the United States*, New York 1983.

status, demographic trends and institutional support – before concluding with reflections on current challenges and suggestions for future research.

## The Polish Language in Canada: A Historical Overview

The history of the Polish language in Canada is closely tied to successive waves of immigration, each shaped by political, economic and social factors in both Poland and Canada. The earliest Polish presence in Canada dates back to the 18th century<sup>12</sup>, but large-scale immigration began in the late 19th century, with significant numbers of Kashubian settlers arriving in Ontario's Madawaska Highlands in the 1850s. A significant influx of Polish immigrants occurred before World War I, when approximately 60,000 individuals – primarily from Galicia and some other parts of Central Europe – arrived to work in agriculture, railway construction and mining. The interwar years brought additional settlers, many of whom carried strong national identities shaped by Poland's recent independence. After World War II, Canada welcomed more than 150,000 displaced persons from Eastern Europe, including educated elites and war veterans. There were about 50,000 Poles among them.

Another major wave followed in the 1980s and 1990s, when roughly 115,000 Poles immigrated in response to the repression of the Solidarity movement and political unrest in Poland. In the 21st century, Polish immigration to Canada has declined to about 2,000 people per year, with numbers in recent years dropping below one thousand.<sup>13</sup> The recent census by Canadian Statistics shows that in 2021 only 135,030 Canadians declared Poland as place of birth, among them there were 3780 immigrants who arrived in Canada in 2001–2021<sup>14</sup>.

The demographic composition and geographic distribution of the Polish community in Canada have evolved over time. According to the 2021 Canadian census, 982,815 individuals claimed Polish ancestry, represent-

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<sup>12</sup> A. Reczyńska, *Polonia kanadyjska*, in: *Polacy w Kanadzie. Słownik biograficzny*, eds. J. Kozak, T. Piwowarek, Toronto 2006, p. 13. See also: A. Reczyńska, *Polska diaspora w Kanadzie*, in: *Polska diaspora*, ed. A. Walaszek, Kraków 2001, p. 30–50.

<sup>13</sup> See: A. Reczyńska, T. Soroka, *Polska emigracja do Kanady na przełomie wieków XX i XXI w kontekście kanadyjskiej polityki imigracyjnej*, „*Studia migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny*” 39 (2013), 3(149), p. 5–18.

<sup>14</sup> Statistics Canada – <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810033801> (accessed: 20.01.2025); A. Reczyńska, *Polska diaspora w Kanadzie*, in: *Polska diaspora*, eds. M. Lesińska, A. Walaszek, J. Wojdon, Warszawa 2026 (in press).

ing 2.65% of the national population. While only 14% of these were born in Poland, the vast majority are descendants of earlier immigrants. Ontario is home to the largest Polish population, with over 461,000 people of Polish descent, including significant concentrations in Toronto, Mississauga and Hamilton. Alberta ranks second, with notable communities in Edmonton and Calgary, while British Columbia – particularly Vancouver – hosts the third largest Polish-speaking population. Most Polish Canadians reside in urban centers, with rural concentrations much smaller and largely historical. The 2021 data also reflect an aging population and declining use of Polish as a mother tongue, indicating both assimilation and reduced recent immigration.

The Polish language in Canada has been preserved and nurtured through the support of community institutions. Catholic parishes were foundational in early Polish settlements, with the first established in the 1870s in Hagarty, later renamed Wilno<sup>15</sup>. These religious centers often hosted not only worship in the Polish language, but also Polish-language education and community events. Over time, other Polish organizations were established and then flourished, including mutual aid societies, youth groups, choirs and cultural clubs<sup>16</sup>. The 20th century saw the development of Polish community centers, such as the Polish Cultural Centre in Mississauga and SPK veterans' halls across the country. Saturday schools and heritage language programs have also been critical, with over 100 such schools operating at their peak in the 1970s. Though many of these institutions face declining enrolment today, they remain key pillars of the Polish language vitality in Canada.

## Ethnolinguistic Vitality – Theoretical Framework

The concept of ethnolinguistic vitality was first introduced as a theoretical tool to explain the strength and survival potential of language communities within intergroup contexts. Rooted in Social Identity Theory<sup>17</sup>, ethnolinguistic vitality refers to a group's ability to maintain and assert its language and cultural distinctiveness in the face of dominant societal pressures. Vitality is thought to come from three primary sociostructural factors: status, demography and institutional support. These dimensions serve to assess a group's

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<sup>15</sup> A. Reczyńska 2001, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> See: H. Tajfel, J.C. Turner, *An integrative theory of intergroup conflict*, in: *The social psychology of intergroup relations*, ed. W.C. Austin, S. Worchel, Monterey, CA 1979, p. 33–53.

capacity to act as a collective entity and influence its environment linguistically and culturally. The framework distinguishes between objective vitality, based on measurable data (e.g. population size or institutional presence) and subjective vitality, which refers to group members' perceptions of their own vitality. Both forms can shape language behaviour and community cohesion, with subjective perceptions often predicting responses, such as linguistic resistance or revival, more accurately than statistics alone.

The status component encompasses a group's standing in terms of prestige, wealth, education and cultural recognition, both internally (within the group) and externally (in the eyes of society at large). Four specific types of status are typically assessed: economic (control over financial resources), social (general societal esteem), sociohistorical (whether the group has a respected or marginalized past) and linguistic (the perceived prestige of the group's language and culture). A group with high status is one that enjoys economic influence, cultural respect and positive visibility. Importantly, status is not simply a function of current position but is shaped by historical narratives and public discourse. For minority language groups, status can directly impact intergenerational language transmission – when the heritage language is viewed as valuable and prestigious, community members are more likely to pass it on.

The demographic dimension refers to the number and distribution of group members in a given territory, region or country. Key variables include absolute population size, geographic concentration, migration patterns, intermarriage rates as well as birth and death rates. Groups with high demographic vitality typically have large, dense populations that maintain strong internal social networks and experience relatively low levels of out-migration or assimilation. Conversely, groups that are dispersed, shrinking in number or experiencing high intermarriage rates tend to exhibit lower vitality. According to the framework, demographic strength enhances a group's ability to form stable institutions and sustain language practices over time. However, as Abrams *et al.*<sup>18</sup> caution, demographic indicators are often misestimated by individuals, which complicates their use in subjective assessments.

The third dimension, institutional support, captures the degree to which a language group is represented and supported in public and private institutions. This includes domains such as education, media, government,

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<sup>18</sup> See: J.R. Abrams, V. Barker, H. Giles, *An examination of the validity of the Subjective Vitality Questionnaire*, "Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development" 30 (2009), p. 59–72.

religion, business and cultural life. Groups with high institutional support are visible in national broadcasting, have access to bilingual or heritage language education and maintain political advocacy structures. Importantly, institutional support can be both formal (e.g. state policy, school curricula) and informal (e.g. community organizations, local events). Abrams *et al.* note that in practice, the status and institutional support factors often overlap, as visibility in institutions may also elevate group prestige. Nevertheless, a clear presence in institutional life remains essential for linguistic survival, especially for minority communities in multicultural or multilingual societies.

The presented concept of ethnolinguistic vitality offers a valuable framework for analyzing the position of minority language communities such as Polish Canadians. It helps explain the potential of an ethnolinguistic group to maintain its language and cultural identity within a broader intergroup context. In the Canadian context – where multiculturalism is an official policy – the framework is particularly relevant for understanding how heritage languages like Polish are maintained or eroded across generations. While Polish is not an official language in Canada, it is still one of the more widely spoken heritage languages, making it a compelling case for vitality analysis.

## **Selected Factors of Polish Ethnolinguistic Vitality in Canada**

### **Status of Polish in Canada**

The status of the Polish language in Canada is shaped by both the historical trajectory of Polish immigration and shifting perceptions of the language's prestige and functional utility. Although Polish has never held any form of official or institutional status in Canada – unlike English and French – it has enjoyed a form of symbolic prestige within its own ethnic community, closely tied to narratives of cultural resilience, national pride and intellectual legacy. Polish immigrants have long been perceived as hardworking and community-oriented, and those arriving in the post-World War II and post-Solidarity waves further elevated the group's socio-professional standing. Many among them were engineers, technicians, academics, clergy, artists and political activists, including refugees with strong anti-communist credentials. This influx contributed to a positive image of Poles as politically aware and culturally sophisticated, reinforcing the symbolic status of the language, especially among the older generation.

Despite this internal recognition, Polish has remained a peripheral language in the broader Canadian linguistic landscape. It lacks visibility in government institutions, mainstream media and the educational system outside of heritage and multicultural programs. Unlike some other heritage languages that have recently achieved greater public utility – such as Mandarin, Punjabi or Spanish – Polish is rarely used in business, politics or public services. Its presence in public signage or municipal resources is minimal. The language's instrumental status is therefore limited. Moreover, among younger generations of Polish Canadians – many of whom are English- or French-dominant – its perceived value is primarily cultural or emotional rather than practical<sup>19</sup>. This weakens incentives for active language transmission and use, even among families who maintain strong ties to Polish traditions.

However, within the framework of Canada's official multiculturalism policy, Polish is acknowledged as one of the country's heritage languages and this recognition has enabled certain forms of institutional and symbolic support. For example, at the peak of multicultural programming in the 1970s and 1980s, Polish language instruction was incorporated into certain public and Catholic school systems, while community-run Polish-language newspapers, libraries and cultural festivals benefited from federal and provincial funding. The main Canadian services, like the Canadian Dental Care Plan, Employment Insurance and public pensions offer flyers and information booklets in Polish.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, some organizations supporting newcomers, like Culture Link, offer services in Polish. They do have not only free settlement services, like employment assistance and school navigation, but also mental health support, mentorship and community connection programs<sup>21</sup>. Some public libraries and community centers in areas with significant Polish communities (e.g., Toronto, Mississauga, Brampton) offer Polish-language materials or programs, though availability varies by location. Together, these resources help preserve Polish language and culture in Canada, while also supporting community members in navigating life and accessing essential services in their heritage language.

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<sup>19</sup> J. Lustański, „Czy warto uczyć się polskiego?” *Refleksje studentów kanadyjskich o polszczyźnie*, „*Po-radnik Językowy*” 7 (2018), p. 39–58.

<sup>20</sup> See: [canada.ca](http://canada.ca) (accessed: 10.07.2025).

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.centralhealthline.ca/display/service.aspx?id=133272> (accessed: 12.07.2025).

### Demographic Characteristics

The demographic profile of the Polish Canadian community reveals trends that are both supportive of and challenging to language maintenance. According to a statistician René Houle who provided a longitudinal comparison of the 1981 and 2006 Canadian censuses<sup>22</sup>, Polish mothers in 1981 passed their language on to 34% of their Canadian-born children under 18, a figure that increased to 64% by 2006. This notable rise in first-generation transmission suggests that Polish retained a certain vitality within immigrant households, despite competition from Canada's dominant languages. However, when examining intergenerational transmission – specifically the ability of second-generation women to pass the language to their own children – the percentage dropped to 17%, highlighting a steep decline between generations. By the third generation, only 6% of grandchildren retained Polish as their mother tongue, placing Polish among the heritage languages with the lowest long-term retention rates<sup>23</sup>.

Several factors help explain this pattern of erosion. Houle emphasizes the role of endogamy as the strongest predictor of language transmission: the more likely a person is to partner with someone who shares the same mother tongue, the greater the likelihood of passing that language to children. For the Polish group, high levels of exogamy among Canadian-born descendants significantly reduced intergenerational transmission. In 2006, many Polish-Canadian women were in relationships with partners who spoke English or French, limiting opportunities for sustained language use in the home. Demographic dispersion has also played a role. Although large Polish populations exist in cities like Toronto, Mississauga, Edmonton and Vancouver<sup>24</sup>, these communities are often scattered across neighborhoods, which limits the density of Polish-language interactions in public or informal settings. In smaller communities, where Polish groups are older and more rural, e.g. in Arvida, Quebec, and Sydney, Nova Scotia, assimilation has been especially pronounced<sup>25</sup>. In such places, spatial diffusion lowers the chances of creating reinforcing environments for the language,

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<sup>22</sup> R. Houle, *Recent evolution of immigrant language transmission in Canada*, "Canadian Social Trends" 11-008 (2011), pp. 3-12.

<sup>23</sup> A similar pattern for the Polish ethnic group was observed in Clyne's studies in Australia. M. Clyne, *Community Languages: The Australian Experience*, Cambridge 1991.

<sup>24</sup> A. Reczyńska, *Polska diaspora w Kanadzie*. in: *Polska diaspora*, eds. M. Lesińska, A. Walaszek, J. Wojdon, Warszawa 2026 (in press).

<sup>25</sup> See: T. Urbaniak, *The Survival of Polish Communities in Small Canadian Industrial Cities. A Comparative Study of Arvida, Quebec, and Sydney, Nova Scotia*, "Polish American Studies" LXIX (2012) 2, p. 59-77.

weakening both family and communal language transmission. This contradicts the general statement that resistance to language shift tends to last longer in rural than urban areas<sup>26</sup>.

Additionally, the Polish community – unlike some newer immigrant groups – had low levels of recent immigration, which meant there were fewer new speakers to reinforce community use of the language. As already mentioned in this paper, census data from 2021 supports this trend: while nearly 983,000 Canadians reported Polish ancestry, only 14% were born in Poland, and a much smaller subset – about 160,400 individuals – reported Polish as their mother tongue<sup>27</sup>. Taken together, these patterns illustrate how Polish in Canada faces a gradual but persistent decline, particularly beyond the first generation. Without renewed demographic influx or concentrated community networks, the long-term vitality of the language will depend heavily on conscious efforts to sustain it within families and community institutions.

### **Institutional Support**

In terms of institutional support, this lack of demographic renewal contributes to the declining presence of Polish in public and private spheres over time. In the past decades, Polish has benefitted from a historically strong and diverse network of educational, religious and cultural organizations, however this has changed in the last two decades.

In the second half of the twentieth century, multiple education courses for Polish immigrants and Saturday schools for children were established at Polish parishes and organizations. According to Reczyńska<sup>28</sup>, by 1950 there were 20 such schools, and by the 1970s, the number had grown to about a hundred, the largest concentrations being in Toronto and the province of Ontario. As of recent data, only half of the school still operate. Most of them are managed by local parent associations, parishes or diaspora organizations. They typically offer classes once a week, focusing on Polish language, history, geography and cultural traditions. These schools rely on minimal provincial funding, volunteer effort and occasional support from the Polish government. Within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), there is also a bilingual school “Quo Vadis” and a small, privately owned “Alderwood Academy” of a similar kind. Finally, Polish language is highly supported by

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<sup>26</sup> Holmes, p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> After: Reczyńska 2026.

<sup>28</sup> Reczyńska 2026.

two schools supervised by ORPEG (Ośrodek Rozwoju Polskiej Edukacji za Granicą) who oversees Polish schools established at Polish diplomatic missions. They deliver a free supplementary educational program – covering Polish language and knowledge of Poland – to children of Polish citizens temporarily or permanently residing in Canada. Instruction is offered from kindergarten through secondary school, adopting the Polish curriculum and awarding Polish school certificates, including credit recognition within Ontario's school system for high-school level students.

All these schools function as cultural and linguistic anchors, allowing students to experience Polish heritage in a social setting that reinforces ethnic pride and language use<sup>29</sup>. While their instructional time is limited, they are seen as crucial in supporting intergenerational language transmission and fostering a strong Polish-Canadian identity<sup>30</sup>. The effectiveness and long-term sustainability of Polish heritage schools, however, depend on several intersecting factors, including generational status, family language practices and broader societal influences. First-generation immigrant parents are typically the most motivated to enrol their children and actively support the schools, viewing them as key to preserving their cultural and linguistic heritage. That interest tends to decline among second- and third-generation families, particularly when children begin to prioritize mainstream Canadian extracurricular activities over weekend heritage classes. The data shows that while 60% of respondents expressed strong support for maintaining the Polish language in Canada, only 27% reported enrolling their children in Polish schools, pointing to a gap between declared values and actual practice<sup>31</sup>. Additional challenges include a reliance on volunteer teachers, limited funding and variability in teaching quality. Despite these obstacles, for those families who remain committed to cultural transmission, Polish Saturday schools continue to serve as one of the most structured and accessible means of supporting heritage language retention in the Canadian context.

At the post-secondary level, Polish is currently offered at only a small number of universities across four Canadian provinces: British Columbia,

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<sup>29</sup> J. Lustański, *Sacrum i profanum w nauczaniu polszczyzny w szkole polskiej w Kanadzie – perspektywa tożsamościowa*, in: *Polszczyzna dla cudzoziemców – sacrum i profanum*, eds. P. Garncarek, B. Łukaszewicz, Warszawa 2025, 31–53.

<sup>30</sup> J. Lustański, M. Stroińska, *The Polish language and culture maintenance in Canada “scented with resin”*, in: *Polish as a Heritage Language around the World*, eds. P. Romanowski, A. Seretny, London 2024, 116–137.

<sup>31</sup> See: J. Lustański, *Język polonijny w Kanadzie*, Toronto 2009, pp. 109–114.

Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario. Enrolment in these programs is modest and has been declining, reflecting a broader contraction of academic infrastructure that poses challenges to long-term language maintenance, despite the symbolic value of such programs within the community. Students may take Polish either as an elective or as part of their program requirements. The University of Toronto remains the only institution in Canada offering full undergraduate and graduate degree programs in Polish language and literature. At the University of Manitoba, the Polish studies program was recently expanded and restructured into a minor, consisting of 18 credit hours (or six one-semester courses), thanks to the support of the Polish-Canadian community in Winnipeg. Polish language courses are still available at the University of Alberta and the University of British Columbia, although the number of offerings has been reduced in recent years. McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, which offered beginner and intermediate-level courses for more than forty years, continues – after a three-year break – to sustain its offerings through endowments from the local Polish community<sup>32</sup>.

Polish Catholic parishes in Canada have long served as key institutions for preserving both religious traditions and the Polish language. As noted by A. Reczyńska<sup>33</sup>, approximately 30 Polish Roman Catholic parishes currently operate across the country, functioning not only as places of worship but also as cultural anchors for Polish-Canadian communities. Major parishes such as St. Maximilian Kolbe in Mississauga and St. Eugene de Mazenod in Brampton hold regular Masses in Polish, while smaller parishes also maintain Polish-language services. Beyond liturgy, these parishes host cultural events, holiday celebrations and community gatherings that reinforce intergenerational transmission of language and identity. Their programming often incorporates traditional music, Polish-language announcements and communal prayer – all of which offer opportunities for passive and active language exposure in a natural, meaningful context.

Despite a broader trend of declining religiosity, particularly among younger Polish Canadians, attendance at Polish-language Masses remains relatively strong – especially among second-generation individuals. For many, the appeal lies less in religious doctrine and more in the emotional and cultural familiarity conveyed through the Polish liturgy. The Church thus functions as a symbolic space where the heritage language continues to carry personal and collective meaning. Some parishes actively involve

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<sup>32</sup> J. Lustański, M. Stroińska, p. 130.

<sup>33</sup> Reczyńska 2026.

children in the service by inviting them to read passages in Polish, which not only fosters literacy, but also builds a sense of ownership and pride in their linguistic heritage. Although the language level of these readings may exceed the children's proficiency, the effort to include youth demonstrates the Church's ongoing – if evolving – role in language maintenance. In an environment where other institutional supports for Polish are limited, Catholic parishes remain vital community spaces where the heritage language is heard, spoken and celebrated.

Polish-language media in Canada – both paper and digital – continues to play a key role in preserving the heritage language and fostering cultural continuity among Polish Canadians. Historically, newspapers like *Związkowiec*, *Czas* and *Gazeta* connected dispersed communities and provided a shared space for public discourse in Polish. While many print publications have ceased operation or been absorbed, newer outlets such as *Wiadomości*, *Goniec* and their online counterparts (*Bejsment*, *GoniecToToronto*) reflect efforts to adapt to changing media consumption patterns. Digital formats – websites, podcasts (e.g. *POLcast*) and social media – offer more accessible, bite-sized engagement with Polish, particularly beneficial for younger or less fluent speakers. Platforms such as *Culture Avenue* further enrich the linguistic landscape by offering virtual lectures and discussions that expose viewers to contemporary cultural and language trends from Poland.

At the same time, broader social changes – including assimilation, technological shifts and evolving ties to Poland – have transformed Polish-Canadian media. While the number of Polish-language print publications has declined, some media continue to innovate: *Gazeta* has transitioned fully to digital since 2019, integrating interviews and audio content, and *POLcast* reaches English-speaking audiences interested in Polish topics worldwide. Other long-standing outlets, such as *Głos Polski*, have become marginalized due to political shifts. Still, new initiatives persist, including online-only publications like *Polish Winnipeg*, *Komunikaty Ottawskie* and *Panorama Montreal*. Despite decreasing television and radio offerings, programs like *Radio Polonia* (Winnipeg), *Radio Bis* (Hamilton) and broadcasted on the Internet a long-standing *Radio 7* remain valuable spaces for heritage language use. Though fragmented and under-resourced, the Polish-Canadian media ecosystem continues to support Polish language maintenance by offering intergenerational, diasporic access to Polish content in both traditional and contemporary forms.

Taken together, these educational, religious and media-based institutions offer a robust – if uneven – scaffold of support for Polish language

maintenance in Canada. Within the ethnolinguistic vitality framework, they represent key channels of institutional support, balancing formal and informal mechanisms. However, challenges remain, mainly declining enrolment in schools and university programs, generational disengagement from traditional organizations and resource limitations – all impact the reach and sustainability of these efforts. Nevertheless, the diversity and adaptability of Polish institutional life – from Saturday schools to online platforms – illustrate a community actively negotiating the tension between assimilation and heritage preservation.

### **Other Selected Factors Contributing to Language Maintenance and Shift**

While the ethnolinguistic vitality framework provides a useful lens for assessing the structural and sociocultural conditions that influence the survival of minority languages, it does not capture the full range of variables affecting language use and transmission. Language vitality can also be examined through the sociological dimension of *linguistic capital*<sup>34</sup>, alongside additional factors that shape patterns of maintenance and shift. Some of these factors fall within the scope of the Subjective Ethnolinguistic Vitality theory, which emphasizes individual perceptions of group vitality; although this perspective lies beyond the focus of the present study, its insights remain relevant for understanding processes of language retention and decline<sup>35</sup>. In the case of Polish in Canada, these additional factors include socio-demographic variables such as parental education levels, attitudinal dimensions such as ethnic pride and affective ties to Poland, and contextual influences such as geographic distance from the homeland – each of which can either reinforce or undermine the transmission of the heritage language across generations.

Houle's analysis<sup>36</sup> highlights a clear relationship between maternal education level and the transmission of heritage languages, including Polish. In both 1981 and 2006 censuses, Polish mothers with lower levels of formal education were significantly more likely to pass on their mother tongue to their Canadian-born children. Specifically, mothers without diplomas had

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<sup>34</sup> See: P. Bourdieu, *La distinction*, Paris 1980; A. Prujiner, D. Deshaies, J.F. Hamers, M. Blanc, R. Clement, R. Landry, *Variation du comportement langagier lorsque deux langues sont en contact*, Montreal 1984.

<sup>35</sup> See: C. Husband, V. Saifullah Khan, *The viability of ethnolinguistic vitality: Some creative doubts*, "Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development" 3 (1982), p. 193–205; R. Landry, R. Bourhis, *Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality. An empirical Study*, "Journal of Language and Social Psychology" 16 (1997), p. 23–49.

<sup>36</sup> Houle, pp. 11–12.

the highest transmission rates, while those with university degrees were least likely to do so. This pattern reflects a broader trend among immigrant groups, where lower educational attainment is often associated with stronger adherence to traditional cultural practices, including language retention. In the case of Polish Canadians, this may also relate to earlier waves of immigration, where many immigrants came from working-class backgrounds and settled in culturally homogeneous communities, creating more favorable environments for maintaining the language within the family. Notably, other European-origin groups such as Italian, Portuguese and Hungarian mothers also exhibited declining transmission rates as education levels rose, reinforcing the idea that heritage language maintenance weakens when paired with high levels of integration and emphasis on official language acquisition.

Pride in ethnic identity is another feature that adds to language maintenance or shift. Pride in being Polish among Polish immigrants in Canada plays a crucial role in heritage language maintenance by reinforcing emotional attachment, cultural values and the symbolic significance of the Polish language. As psychologist Paweł Boski<sup>37</sup> researching Polish immigrants in Canada demonstrates, a strong criterial identity – anchored in knowledge of and personal relevance attached to national symbols, including language – correlates with sustained use of Polish. While this attachment weakens across generations, the correlated identity, rooted in enduring cultural values such as family orientation and altruism, often persists and supports language retention in private and community settings. Affective involvement with Poland, especially among older and recent immigrants, further motivates intergenerational language transmission. Overall, pride in ethnic identity functions as both a psychological and sociocultural anchor that mitigates language shift in the Canadian context.

Geographical distance between the country of settlement and the country of origins is another factor shaping the status of the Polish language in Canada. In Stanisław Dubisz's classification<sup>38</sup>, the form of migration from Poland to Canada is categorized as overseas emigration, opposed to *continental* emigration within Europe where the prospects for language maintenance are generally stronger. The vast distance historically hindered the development of Polish-language social networks, reduced the frequency of visits to and from Poland and ultimately limited immigrants' direct

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<sup>37</sup> P. Boski, *Remaining a Pole or Becoming a Canadian: National Self-Identity among Polish Immigrant to Canada*, "Journal of Applied Social Psychology" 21 (1991), p. 41–77.

<sup>38</sup> S. Dubisz, ed., *Język polski poza granicami kraju*, Opole 1997.

contact with the Polish language. However, over time, the perceived gap between Canada and Poland has narrowed significantly due to advances in communication and digital technologies. The widespread use of the Internet, social media platforms, streaming services and instant messaging apps (e.g. Zoom, Messenger or recently retired Skype) has made it easier for Polish Canadians to access Polish-language content, engage with Polish media in real time and maintain regular contact with family and friends in Poland. These developments have created new opportunities for language exposure and reinforcement, especially among younger generations, and have helped mitigate some of the isolating effects of geographic distance<sup>39</sup>.

### **Preliminary Observations and Discussion**

The Polish language currently occupies a marginal position in Canada's public and institutional life. Unlike heritage languages tied to large and growing immigrant groups – such as Mandarin, Punjabi or Arabic – Polish does not benefit from strong demographic renewal or widespread societal visibility. As noted by Houle, recent immigration plays a critical role in the vitality of heritage languages, helping to replenish speaker bases and increase demand for language-specific services and education. However, Polish immigration to Canada has slowed significantly since the mid-1990s, and with no substantial new waves of migrants, the language has become increasingly reliant on second- and third-generation speakers. In this context, the intergenerational transmission of Polish has weakened, especially in environments where English, or French, dominate not only public life but also private and family domains.

This vulnerability is compounded by broader sociolinguistic and attitudinal trends. Heritage language transmission tends to be weaker in families where parents – particularly mothers – have higher levels of education, as they often prioritize dominant societal languages for their children's academic and professional success. Notably, women, who often serve as cultural transmitters within families, display patterns of bicultural adaptation that may support bilingualism despite broader shifts toward assimilation. In addition, Polish is frequently perceived within the community as less useful or prestigious than English or French. Importantly, some research-

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<sup>39</sup> On this topic, see the works by Robert Dębski as well as Lustański & Stroirńska 2024.

ers<sup>40</sup> highlight that Poles themselves are not fully aware of the value of the Polish language. This lack of awareness likely undermines motivation to actively maintain or pass it on, particularly among younger, upwardly mobile individuals. As a result, Polish is increasingly reduced to a symbolic marker of ethnic pride rather than a tool of everyday communication, weakening its chances of long-term survival within Canada's multilingual environment.

These developments are consistent with Mougeon and Beniak's *minority language restriction* theory<sup>41</sup>, which suggests that minority languages tend to become confined to fewer and less socially prominent domains over time. In Polish-Canadian institutions, this trend is visible in the growing use of English for annual reports and official correspondence – seen, for example, in organizations like the Canadian Polish Research Institute and The Association of Polish Engineers in Canada. Even in the Catholic Church, historically a cornerstone of Polish language maintenance, this pattern is observed. As the number of priests born and educated in Poland declines, clergy of Polish descent raised in the United States or Canada – often with limited fluency – prefer to conduct sermons, classes and community meetings in English, particularly when addressing younger generations who are more fluent in the dominant language.

The shrinking utility and visibility of Polish in both public and private domains suggest that the language is losing ground in the *linguistic market*, where its cultural and social capital has diminished<sup>42</sup>. This decline is not unique to Canada; similar observations were made in the Polish-Australian context, indicating a broader diasporic challenge<sup>43</sup>. While ethnic identity remains a strong component of Polish-Canadian cultural life, the weakening of linguistic competence signals a shift in how this identity is expressed. Without institutional support, community mobilization and a stronger awareness of the intrinsic value of the heritage language, Polish in Canada risks becoming a largely symbolic asset – valued in theory but no longer sustained in practice.

In addition, the COVID-19 time marked a period of profound change for many ethnic communities, including Polish Canadians. During this period,

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<sup>40</sup> A. Dąbrowska, W. Miodunka, A. Pawłowski, *Wyzwania polskiej polityki językowej za granicą: kontekst, cele, środki i grupy odbiorcze*, Warszawa 2012.

<sup>41</sup> R. Mougeon, E. Beniak, *Linguistic consequences of language contact and restriction: The case of French in Ontario, Canada*, Oxford 1991.

<sup>42</sup> P. Bourdieu, *La distinction*. Paris 1980.

<sup>43</sup> See: R. Dębski, *Dynamika utrzymania języka polskiego w Australii*, „Postscriptum Polonistyczne” 1 (2016), p. 133–150.

some ethnic organizations dissolved or suspended their activities. Multiple heritage schools closed, e.g. S. Staszic's Polish School in Scarborough, M. Konopnicka's Polish School in Toronto, and participation in religious life declined significantly. Among the Polish community organizations that weathered the hardship, some have continued their activities, while some have gradually wound down (e.g. The Canadian Polish Research Institute), scaled back operations (e.g. The Association of Polish Engineers in Canada) or transformed their mission. A notable shift in their mode of operation is evident: most initiatives now have a distinctly local scope, often remaining unknown outside their immediate community. This trend reflects a process of specific deinstitutionalization, in which activities are carried out primarily at the local level, social networks are maintained within small circles, and interaction occurs mostly among Polish acquaintances with shared interests and perspectives. Paradoxically, the smaller and more localized character of these organizations may, in some cases, contribute to heritage language retention, as close-knit networks foster stronger emotional bonds<sup>44</sup> and more frequent use of Polish in interpersonal communication.

## Conclusions

The analysis of Polish ethnolinguistic vitality in Canada reveals a heritage language that, while historically resilient, now faces structural and demographic challenges that threaten its long-term maintenance. The absence of significant recent immigration, high rates of exogamy and the geographical dispersion of speakers have eroded both the demographic base and the density of Polish-language social networks. While institutions such as Saturday schools, Catholic parishes and Polish-language media continue to provide spaces for linguistic and cultural engagement, their reach is increasingly limited by generational disengagement, declining enrolment and constrained resources. All these factors reduce the opportunities for intergenerational transmission, relegating Polish to fewer domains of use and weakening its functional presence in everyday life.

Despite these constraints, one should note some important resources that can be leveraged to support language vitality. The persistence of Polish cultural pride, the symbolic significance of heritage institutions and the

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<sup>44</sup> K. Yagmur, M. Ehala, *Tradition and Innovation in the Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory*, "Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development" 32:2 (2011), p. 101–110.

adaptability of media to digital formats all suggest that the language retains both affective value and potential for revitalization. Close-knit, localized networks – often emerging in the context of deinstitutionalization – can foster frequent interpersonal use of Polish, creating micro-environments that reinforce language skills and emotional attachment. Furthermore, technological advances, particularly in digital communication and online cultural programming, have also mitigated the effects of geographic distance from Poland, offering younger generations greater access to authentic linguistic input and opportunities for transnational engagement.

Notably, Poland has become an increasingly active and reliable partner in supporting the maintenance of Polish as a heritage language in Canada. A growing range of high-quality teaching and learning materials (developed in Poland specifically for heritage learners and learners of Polish as a foreign language) are now widely available, often free of charge<sup>45</sup>. These resources enhance both the accessibility and the attractiveness of Polish language instruction. In addition, funding mechanisms introduced by Polish government institutions, such as Ośrodek Rozwoju Polskiej Edukacji za Granicą (ORPEG), Instytut Rozwoju Języka Polskiego im. św. Maksymiliana Marii Kolbego (IRJP) and the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA) demonstrate a strengthened *institutional engagement*, which constitutes a key factor reinforcing the vitality of Polish in Canada.

Lastly, to sustain Polish as a living heritage language in Canada, coordinated efforts from the community and institutions will be essential. These should aim to enhance both the objective and subjective dimensions of vitality by strengthening educational infrastructure, broadening institutional presence and raising awareness within the community about the intrinsic value of the language. Programs that connect local initiatives to broader national and transnational networks could amplify visibility and resources, countering the isolating effects of localized activity. Without such actions, Polish in Canada risks becoming primarily a symbolic marker of ethnic identity – preserved in cultural traditions but rarely used as a medium of communication – making it more urgent to invest in collaborative revitalization.

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<sup>45</sup> For instance: <https://www.gov.pl/web/udsc/-materialy-dydaktyczne-do-nauki-jezyka-polskiego>; <https://biblioteka.ceo.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/09/Darmowe-materialy-do-nauczania-je%CC%A8zyka-polskiego-jako-obcego-1.pdf>; [https://www.wspolnotapolska.org.pl/bezgranic/polski\\_5.php](https://www.wspolnotapolska.org.pl/bezgranic/polski_5.php) (accessed: 15.10.2025).

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