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English words adopted and used by Polish graffiti writers : a review of socio-linguistic aspects

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ENGLISH WORDS ADOPTED AND USED BY POLISH GRAFFITI WRITERS. A REVIEW OF SOCIO-LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

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The following paper deals with identification of linguistic forms by means of which graffiti writers express their sense of belonging, attitudes, messages and feelings. It presents the categories, styles and techniques which one may distinguish in the art of graffiti writing, and which are mainly shaped and worked out by groups of young people who in this way try to communicate their thoughts and ideas. It also highlights the specific set of English words which have been adopted to the terminology of Polish graffiti writers, and which are most frequently used by them in their so called "crime work" speech. However, the investigation presented below does not only refer to the linguistic forms, which so far have rarely been analyzed and discussed in scholarly papers, but it also deals with some social aspects which are to be mentioned here in relation to the identified linguistic elements.

Graffiti as a form of linguistic and visual expression

Language in its written form is regarded as an important instrument of expressing one's thoughts and as a powerful system which allows people to communicate and reveal explicitly their personal approach, feelings and treatment of a given subject matter. It is exactly this instrument which is employed and used by graffiti writers in their works all over the world, and which sufficiently enables them to present in a co-dified form their attitudes and beliefs on the concerning them subjects. This sort of art, as Crispin Sartwell suggests, aims at concretizing of the text which is inseparably connected with the specific occasion, location and the bristling particularities of its inscription (Sartwell 2004). It is worth highlighting that although graffiti employs images, it is fundamentally seen as a form of writing, and indeed it is so, since even

graffiti artists refer to themselves as "writers". The medium of much of it is the name, which according to Sartwell, occupies an uneasy and ambiguous zone of the language (Sartwell 2004). This self-chosen item often illustrates how the writer wants to be perceived by those whom he most respects and from whom he demands respect. In this case, the name sets one apart from the others and becomes a mean of asserting identity, visibility, and power in a social context (Giller 1997). For the purposes of their work, many graffiti artists have actually invented a repertoire of letters and writing styles which they deploy in various places such as, for instance, trains or walls. They have also adopted some forms and styles from advertising, comic books and many other sources which seem to provide them with suitable frames of expression and reflection. The early forms of graffiti, as Sartwell emphasizes, comprised a fairly conventional set of lettering styles, especially "bubble letters", which later on started to become more and more elaborate (e.g. wild style), and therefore less and less comprehensible to outsiders. In fact, it shifted to a code which marked off those who could read the lettering as a special group with its own language and its own system of communication, which was analogous to the most slang-ridden varieties of rap (Sartwell 2004).

Sartwell claims that in order to understand graffiti, one should take a close look at the processes which lead to it. In his considerations on this issue, he enumerates a few of the fundamental features which present among others the agents, tools and final products of graffiti writing. Within his frame of reference he recognizes agents, that is, graffiti writers, as young and often poor people for whom fairly cheap spraypaint is the medium which helps to create large and visible forms that can be easily seen and spotted by others (Sartwell 2003). As Bradley Bartolomeo says, graffiti writers form "crews" which "represent" or "bomb" not only in big urban cities but also in local communities. The terms they use such as "bombing", "tagger", "crews", in fact, constitute a distinct dialect which seems to be reserved for members of the graffiti culture, and which may only be acquired through participation or repeated exposure to this cultural system. Taking this aspect into consideration, one may say that language and culture go hand-in-hand in this form of visual expression in which language creates culture, and similarly, culture creates language (Bartolomeo 2001). Interpreted in this way, graffiti can be seen as a communicative convention, whose quality, however, is a common feature of the "youth subculture".

From the above considerations it turns out that graffiti is a tool by means of which certain thoughts and ideas may be easily communicated to others. It is actually a form of public discourse which creates a special kind of reality that is filled with textual messages and pictorial elements. It is finally a form of demonstration for people who want to express their feelings and emotions towards some fragments of the world they live in.

Different forms and styles of graffiti writings

As Jane Gadsby emphasizes in her report, the word "graffiti" comes from the plural of the Italian word "graffito" which means "scratchings". The common English usage of the word has evolved to include any type of public writing which refers to

pictures, symbols and markings of any kind. The word, in fact, encompasses a broad range of writings that are possible to be classified into several categories, the identification of which depends mostly on the place, time and form of the presented pieces of writing. The categories, according to Jane Gadsby, refer among others to:

- Latrinalia, which include all kinds of inscriptions and marks written on the walls of toilets and bathrooms.
- Public writings, which apply to graffiti written on exterior walls of buildings and trains so that the offered messages could be exposed to the public and seen by them quite easily.
- Tags, often regarded as a part of public writing, appear in the same locations and surfaces as the public forms but their message is meant to be directed only for the insiders of the community. Each tag is actually a unique item which represents a person in a very individualized way. It is usually based on blending several different elements which are introduced by piecing together a part of the writer's name or initials with the street he lives in and the symbols he identifies with, the illustration of which may be the following examples: CAY 161 or TAKI 183.
- Conversational writings are usually based on the "questions-and-answer" formula which mainly elicits written responses from either known or unknown people. This type of graffiti writing is commonly seen in toilets and on the walls of school and university buildings.
- Declarative writing, as opposed to the conversational form of graffiti, does not attempt to obtain any response from the reader but it rather states a particular point of view or a humorous comment on something or somebody (Gadsby 1995).

Taking into account the amount of time spent on each work, one may identify after Woodward, three distinct types of graffiti writings:

- Tag – is someone's assumed identity which appears in the form of a coded name. It is the quickest and simplest representation of the graffiti artist and his identity. The name chosen by the writer is a form of a word play based on preferred letter combinations (Woodward 1999).
- Throw-up – is defined as a name painted quickly with one layer of spray paint and an outline. A throw-up is an extended painting of an abbreviated form of the tag which comprises either the first two or the first and last letters of the name. It is meant to be thrown up, quickly and large (Woodward 1999). These are simple works done with 2 or 3 colours (many times black and white, or silver and black) which are written in bubble or block letters, and which are filled in with one colour and outlined in the other one (Element 1996).
- Masterpiece – is applied to all graffiti paintings that are more than tags or throw-ups. Pieces are the mural-like graffiti which require a detailed outline, many hours of completing, and sometimes collaboration with others (Stanchfield 2006). They are the multi-coloured forms of art which are seen as the most sophisticated type of graffiti (Wilder 2006). They depict a word or words, background, characters, quotes and messages (Element 2006).

At this point it has to be said that tags, throw-ups and pieces, at all levels of sophistication and technique, indicate and symbolise a human and creative presence on the street which, as Noble points out, is free from institutionalised markers of taste, appropriateness, and permission (Noble 2004).

Graffiti writers also venerate and concentrate on the evolution of artistic style which is mostly judged in terms of originality of design, smooth interweaving of forms ("flow") and images, sharpness and accuracy of lines, brightness of colours and the ability to convey feelings of spontaneity and dynamics (Giller 1997). In this area one may distinguish, for instance, differently styled lettering, background formations as well as fill-ins. Woodward (1999) in his considerations on this issue enumerates the following items: clouds (made up of circular forms of colour), shines and stars (used to represent reflected light), blockbuster (a very common straight letter style) and wild style (refers to a piece which is deliberately painted in an illegible and complex fashion, it is a form which is composed of complicated interlocking letters, arrows, and embellishment).

As Bartolomeo points out, in the types of letters, words and styles, graffiti expresses both a group and individual identity. In its vibrant colour and vivid imagery, graffiti makes a statement about the strength of diversity and a uniform system of symbolling. It universally speaks for both the individual artist and the crew for which it appears as a symbol and manifestation of shared identity (Bartolomeo 2001).

The process of lexical borrowing

Borrowing is viewed as one of the important sources of enlarging the lexicon. It occurs when a group of speakers has some contact with a foreign word and adopts it into their language either in the original or modified version. This modification usually involves assimilation of the item according to the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic rules of the recipient language (Burkhanov 1998: 32). As Nunzio Rizzi emphasizes, some borrowings seem to be more successful in certain semantic areas than in others. This is essentially due to the importance and the prestige that the country providing the borrowing has in a particular period (Rizzi 2006). Thus, the term borrowing may be used to designate the implantation of a foreign element in the receiving language (Lopatkin-Easton 1993).This process usually leads to the formation of a special category of words which can be placed under the heading "loanwords" or "borrowings". It is actually these items which are transformed from one language to another, mainly as a consequence of cultural contact between two language communities. As far as vocabulary is concerned, Britt Mize distinguishes three general types of borrowing processes. He identifies the situations when the word:

– is **adopted**, or borrowed with virtually no change in form;

– is **adapted**, or altered somehow to make it fit better with the native vocabulary of the recipient language;

– or is formed within the recipient language, either from separate borrowed elements which had never gone together to form that word in their source languages (a process called loan formation), or from native elements in the recipient language whose combination to create a certain meaning is itself an act of borrowing from another language (a process called **calque** or **loan translation**) (Mize 2006).

Lester Jacobson points out that borrowings are likely to appear not only in bilingual communities but also in specialized areas of the lexicon which are mostly influenced by the language of the people who hold a strong position either in the field of science, technology or social life (Jacobson 1993: 185). Elżbieta Mańczak-Wohlfeld enumerates the reasons why people introduce loanwords into their language. Among the extra-linguistic factors quoted by her is the need-filling motive which highlights the necessity of finding new designations that are more economical and less artificial than the native expressions. Another factor is the so called prestige motive which refers to the already discussed notion of adopting items from the language which has high standing and prestige. The intra-linguistic factors, on the other hand, take into account the low frequency of occurrence of certain words which are often forgotten and replaced by the new ones, the loss of expressiveness of some native lexemes and insufficient differentiation of certain semantic fields in one's own language (as contrasted with the source language). Lexical borrowing is also governed by one's need of being trendy, which is usually reflected in the incorporation of such lexical items that come from the culture, science and technology of a supreme and highly valued speech community (Mańczak-Wohlfeld 1995: 18-19), such as for instance of the English-speaking countries which are nowadays a source of many social, cultural and technological changes and innovations.

English words adopted by Polish graffiti writers

English considered as the international language has nowadays a huge impact on other world's languages, including Polish, whose vocabulary relating to specific areas of science and social life is often expanded by the process of borrowing English words and expressions. The predominating position of English is reflected in a number of items which are adopted to the vocabulary stock of many linguistic systems such as, for instance, to the jargon of Polish graffiti writers who use English terminology for their own specific purposes.

With regard to this aspect, the main objective of the following section is to present the items and mechanisms of incorporation of English words to the speech of Polish graffiti writers, and to signal the presence of these items in the specific utterances which have been provided by the examined respondents. It is also the aim of this section to introduce a classificatory system which will help to identify the types of English loanwords and the thematic categories which these words can be grouped into. The purpose of the research has not only been to look at the linguistic facet of graffiti writing but also to explore the range of socio-cultural issues which mainly concentrate on the identification of the motives that force Polish artists to use English words in their speech with other group members.

Of paramount importance for the investigation was the distribution of questionnaires among Polish graffiti writers (26 artists from different parts of Poland) as well as personal consultations with some of them at the turn of March and April 2006 (Robal, Banan, Haron, Rydzol, Gacek, Hiro and others). The data which was obtained due to the carried-out survey was possible to be grouped and divided to several categories which present English lexical items in various usages of Polish writers. The identified items have come to designate such semantic fields as producers, settings (places and surfaces), tools, acts and products (including different forms, styles and the linguistic content of graffiti works). This sort of thematic framing is presented in the passages below together with the most frequently mentioned English words (alphabetical order), their meanings and some exemplary sentences that have been quoted with these words by the examined respondents.

Producers (participants and creators of graffiti):

– **checker/czeker** (from the word **check**) – someone who assists you by checking the place and area where you are painting, e.g. *potrzebujemy czekera bo inaczej nie damy rady* (Robal), *porzebuje dobre spreje, kilka kapów i dwóch lub trzech czekerów do lukoutu* (Haron);

– **crew** – a group of writers, e.g. *chłopaki z madafaka crew wypierdolili zajebiste srebro* (Robal), *z kilkoma ziomkami tworzymy "LordsCrew"* (Haron);

– **dog** – a group mate, e.g. *wossup dog?* (Haron), *that's my dog* (Banan), *emano/ /respect dog* (Rydzol);

– **fejm/fejmowy** (from the words **fame/famous**) – a writer who is famous and whose works are appreciated by others, e.g. *ten writer jest fejmowy* (Robal), *gościu, jesteś fejmem w tym mieście* (Haron), *masz fejma wsród ziomali* (Łukasz), *trza walczyć o fejm w mieście* (Robal);

– **king** – the best writer, e.g *ten gościu to prawdziwy king, bombie dużo i stylowo* (Robal), *to jedyny king w okolicy* (Haron);

– **master** – the best and most skilful writer in the area, e.g. *to wrzucił prawdziwy master* (Haron);

– **spreyowcy/sprejowcy** (from the English word **spray**) – those who write graffiti, e.g. *znowu ci sprejowcy coś mi tu nabazgrali, chuje jebane* (Robal);

– **toy** – not a very skilful writer, often a beginner, e.g. *jesteś toy w chuj, wypierdalaj i nie taguj na mieście* (Robal), *z początku toy, później writer teraz... master*!! (Haron);

– **writer/rajter** – someone who writes graffiti, e.g. *styl tego writera jest zajebisty (Robal), idź ty pierdolony writerze* (Banan);

– **xero boy/kseroboy** – a writer who evidently copies the style of another writer, e.g. te *kseroboye znowu jadą cudze style* (Robal), *tylko pionek, nic tylko zasrany kseroboy* (Haron), *ten koleś to jebany kseroboy* (Rydzol).

Settings (places and surfaces):

– **hall of fame/fejm hall** – the place or the wall for the most famous writers, e.g. *najlepszy w okolicy fame hall* (Haron);

– **train/trejn** – train, e.g. *kurwa zbombiemy tego traina w chuj* (Robal), *zajebiemy tego trejna* (Gacek), *dzisiaj molesta na trejna* (Haron);

– **yard/jard** – siding, a "depot" for trains, the place where trains are kept when they are not used, e.g. *wbijemy się na yard i zbombiemy żółtego* (Robal).

Tools:

– **can/ken** – a can with spray paint, e.g. *weźmiemy tylko duże cany* (Robal), *nie mam sosu na keny* (Hiro), *brak siana na keny* (Rydzol), *potrzeba hajsu – musimy mieć keny* (Haron);

– **cap/kep/kap** (e.g. fat cap) – a tip for spray, e.g. *dawaj same fat capy* (Robal), *gdzie są kurwa moje kapy?* (Banan), *fatem zajebać i chuj, musimy mieć dużo różnych kapów* (Haron);

– **maras** (from a **marker**) – a pen used for marking or drawing, e.g. *bierzemy marasy i idziemy potagować* (Robal), *biegnij z marasem* (Hiro);

– **shake/szejk** – another word for spray, e.g. *musze kupić więcej szejków* (Gacek);

– **spray/sprej** – paint which is used for making graffiti, e.g. *bierz sprej i na tagi na miasto* (Hiro), *weź spreja pod pache i pizgamy* (Banan), *spreje w papciuchy i jechana* (Haron), *bierzemy sprej i pizgamy na miejscówki* (Rydzol).

Acts (actions):

– **back jump** – attacking and working quickly by using the element of surprise, it is especially a common practice in the situations when the train stops for a few minutes at the station (usually a suburban one), e.g. *niech tu stanie tylko na 5 minut to zrobimy backjumpa* (Robal), *ej co powiecie na back jumpa* (Haron);

– **battle** – a fight between two writers or crews in which there is a judge and certain rules, those who lose the battle have to remove their works, or a meeting (competition) of writers and their legal painting, e.g. *musimy zrobić battle z tymi lamusami* (Robal), *w Poznaniu możesz obejrzeć niekiedy hardcore battle* (Haron), *chodź cipo na battle* (Rydzol);

– **bomb** – to paint illegally huge pieces, usually silver ones, e.g. *wbijemy się na yard i zbombimy żółtego* (Robal), *wybombiemy to okno i bedzie jazda* (Rydzol);

– **buff** – to remove graffiti works, e.g. *ale chuje zbuffowali nasze prace* (Robal), *zbufowali wszystko* (Haron);

– **cross** – to remove one's graffiti by putting paint on them, e.g. *te pipole scrosowali nasze prace* (Robal), *kto do chuja scrossował mojego grafa* (Banan), *te suki zrobiły crossa na naszej ścianie!* (Haron), *skrosuje temu dupkowi taga* (Rydzol);

– **rush** – quick writing of tags, e.g. *dalej pizgaj rusha i spierdalamy (Rydzol)*;

– **tag** – to write tags, e.g. *trza troche potagować w nocy na mieście* (Robal), *Yo! Woss up! Idziemy tagować towna!* (Haron);

– **terror line** – running with a marker or a spray can along the wall and making different lines and scribbles on it, e.g. *pizgamy total destruction, napierdalamy po wszystkim i będzie terror line że ja pierdole* (Robal), *awesome terror line* (Haron);

– **scratch** – to write a tag on the window by using whet- or sandstone, e.g. *farb nie mamy, tusz w markerach poszedł się jebać, to bierzemy kamienie i scretchujemy* (Robal);

– **spray/sprej** – to paint, e.g. *chodźmy kurwa posprejować jebane żelazo* (Gajos).

Products (forms and styles):

– **blockbuster** – a huge piece of writing styled with block letters (already discussed in a section above), e.g. *ale wyjebali tu blockbastera* (Robal);

– **end to end/end 2 end** – the whole line of carriages painted below the level of the window frame, e.g. *razem z chłopakami z innych crew wyjebiemy end to enda* (Robal);

– **flow** – good style, e.g *moje grafy mają flow* (Rydzol);

– **highlight** – flash, light, shadow etc., e.g. *walnij tu highlight i będzie zajebiście* (Robal);

– **line (lajn), outline, inline** – different lines in the piece, e.g. *dalej robimy outline i spierdalamy* (Robal), *oldskulowe lajny* (in a good style – Haron);

– **masterpiece** – a piece of writing that is of very good quality, e.g. *ten wrzut to prawdziwy masterpiece* (Robal), *to jest wyjebany masterpiece* (Gacek);

– **panel** – a piece of writing which stretches on a train from door to door and which is made below the window line, e.g. *pizgniemy kilka paneli* (Robal), *wczoraj na yardzie widziałem świeże panele z Poznania* (——);

– **piece** – an individual piece of writing made on a train (usually covering the area of four windows), e.g. *niezłe piece na tej ścianie* (Robal);

– **shit** – a badly made piece of writing, e.g. *co za shit* (Robal), *to jest dopiero shit!* (Gacek);

– **scratch/skrecz** – a tag which is made on the window with whet- or sandstone, e.g. *nie pękaj, zrób scretcha, that's my scratch yeah!* (Banan), *zajebiemy kilka skreczów* (Haron);

– **silver piece/srebro** – a form of graffiti which is filled in with the silver colour, e.g. *zrobimy zajebiste srebro* (Robal), *ziom to po prostu zajebisty silver* (Haron);

– **tag** – a signature of a writer, e.g. *ale wczoraj wypierdolił taga* (Robal), *wczoraj na składzie wyjebałem z ziomem zajebistego taga* (Gacek), *zajebiemy kilka tagów* (Haron);

– **throw-up/wrzutka** (calque) – one of the forms of graffiti (already discussed in a section above), a quick contour of your letters made without filling it in, e.g. *idziesz dziś na throw-upy* (——), *bierz czterysete i idziemy pizgać throw-upy* (Robal);

    – **top to bottom** – a part of the carriage (stretching over the area of four windows) painted from the top to the bottom, e.g *wyjebiemy <u>top to bottom</u> i chuj* (Robal);

    – **toy** – a fucked up piece of writing, e.g. *ten wrzut to <u>toy</u> słaby w chuj* (Robal);

    – **whole car** – the whole carriage (including windows) covered with spray paint, e.g. *strzelimy dzisiaj zajebistego <u>whole car</u>a* (Robal);

    – **whole train** – the whole unit being painted (the train usually consists of three or six units), e.g. *będzie kurwa ciężko ale zrobimy tego jebanego <u>whole train</u>a* (Robal).

Linguistic content of graffiti writings:

    – underground sayings such as *thug's life, ghetto, I Am What I Am, Fuck the Police, Welcome in/to ....* (the name of the place) (Banan);

    – pseudonyms of American rap singers (*2-PAC, DMX, Ludacris, 50 – Cent, Method Man, Snoop Dogg*) and quotations from their songs (*...This life is like a vicious cycle called fightin to live, ...On these cold streets, ain't no love, no mercy, and no friends... (2Pac)* (Banan, Matit);

    – words from the world of crime and violence: *I love koktaile, Molotov Cocktail, Wanted, Crime Scene Do Not Cross* (Banan), *Mary Jane, Grass* (Rydzol);

    – slangy and vulgar words: *Wossup?, rozjebie cie motherfuckerze, fuck off, oh yeaaah fuck meee, MF* (motherfucker), *sucker z ciebie w chuj* (Banan, Rydzol, Gacek);

    – signalization of the writer's own area: *witam w mojej cave* (cave as a hidden place), *welcome in hell, ta dzielnica belong to White Ghost* (Banan).

As for the reasons of using English words in their language, the examined graffiti writers enumerate first of all such aspects as the growing popularity of the English language in Poland, the role of the American culture in which graffiti writings came to be seen first and developed, as well as the need of young people to communicate in a special and discreet code which will be understandable only for the writers. The introduction of such lexical items to the speech of Polish graffiti writers is also governed by certain trends and styles which appear in the youth culture (e.g. nowadays one is considered trendy when he uses English words, slang and colloquial speech). Besides, it is perceived as a more efficient and effective way of expression which often does not find reflection in the colourless terminology of the Polish language.

Conclusions

From the conducted survey it turns out that nouns form a group of the most commonly borrowed items which are to be followed by verbs and adjectives. It is so because, as Bajerowa suggests, people think in nominal categories, which allow for naming new designates, processes and phenomena (Mańczak-Wohlfeld 1995: 54–55).

The above analysis of lexical items and social aspects suggests that graffiti writers form a special speech community which has its own system of shared understanding

and a distinct set of linguistic expressions which is used by them in their everyday speech with other writers. Much of this vocabulary comes from English speaking graffiti writers and hip hop musicians whose language has become a lending source for the jargon of Polish writers and a helpful tool for finding new ways of linguistic expression. From the examples provided by the respondents it is evident that Polish speakers adopt English words and modify them according to the inflectional patterns of their own language. This is usually done through different prefixes and suffixes which are added to the borrowed words (as exemplified in the quotations above). Certain items are also the examples of calques which are seen as the direct translations of the English terms and concepts (e.g. "silver – *srebro*"). Thus, borrowing processes in the case of the language of Polish graffiti writers correspond to the three stages which have been described in one of the sections above. In general terms, one may say that English lexical items are used by Polish writers either in the original form (speakers of the recipient language may pronounce and write the adopted words in the same way as they are pronounced and written in the source language e.g. *toy*) or in a modified version which involves alteration of spelling (e.g. *trejn*), pronunciation (e.g. *kapy*) as well as affixation (e.g *zbufować*) and loan translation (e.g. *wrzut*). The presented above mechanisms of expression actually show how language can easily be changed and created in order to meet the purposes and needs of a specific social group, in this case of graffiti writers, whose sets of socio-linguistic codes help them to remake and often attack the surrounding world and its authorities.

From the above quotations it also turns out that the language of Polish graffiti writers is a specific system which comprises different elements from the English language, slang, colloquial or even vulgar speech, which seems to help young people to express "themselves" and to show their attitudes to the notions which they are strongly concerned with. The question which, however, arises at this point is that if the identified set of English loanwords and the presented adaptation processes find reflection in other languages, and if so, how these words are introduced and integrated with the native items of these systems, the answers to which may be given in the further considerations on this issue.

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Summary

The issues presented in the article concern English loanwords and their role in the process of shaping a specific variety of the language which is characteristic of the subculture of Polish graffiti writers.

The article describes various forms, styles and techniques by means of which young people signal their presence and express their thoughts and feelings. The paper is, first of all, an analysis of the linguistic component and an attempt of classifying English lexical units which are borrowed and most frequently used in the conversations of Polish graffiti writers. This study also concentrates on the categorization of the linguistic content which is adopted from the English language to various forms of Polish graffiti writings.

The article presents the results of the survey which was conducted at the turn of April and May 2006. The obtained results suggest the widespread use of English words in the daily talk of Polish graffiti writers, the evidence of which comes from the quoted expressions and utterances that are applied by artists in their environment and their description of the so called "crime work".

The article in the final part also enumerates the main factors which are believed to have a significant impact on such frequent use of English words among Polish graffiti writers.