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English-sourced ordinal superlatives in contemporary Polish: An argument for the usefulness of syntactic loans

Superlatywy porządkowe angielskiego pochodzenia
we współczesnej polszczyźnie.
Argument za użytecznością zapożyczeń składniowych

Abstract

This article raises the question whether syntactic loans can be useful in the recipient language, i.e. whether they can exhibit advantages over their native counterparts. Polish ordinal superlatives (OSs), such as *drugi najwyższy budynek (w mieście)* ‘the second tallest (building in town)’, serve as the main source of examples, but two other syntactic loans are also briefly discussed in order to strengthen our position. It is not our aim to trace the history of OSs in Polish nor to provide their comprehensive description, but since they have been much underresearched, we have made preliminary queries in corpora and digital libraries to examine their structure, meaning, and origin. These queries suggest that Polish OSs were borrowed from German in the second half of the 19th century, yet their current abundance in Polish is due to the influence of English. We have put our research in the context of language contact studies and analysed the pros and cons of Polish OSs compared with their native counterparts. We have found contact-induced Polish OSs to show some advantage over their native equivalents, but to occasionally interfere with formally identical native constructions, and make the message potentially ambiguous. A further conclusion is that syntactic loans can be useful in the recipient language.

Keywords: ordinal superlatives, syntactic borrowing, language contact, English, Polish

Abstrakt

W artykule postawiono pytanie, czy zapożyczenia składniowe mogą być użyteczne w języku zapożyczającym, tzn. przejawiać zalety w porównaniu z ich rodzimymi odpowiednikami. Głównym źródłem przykładów są polskie superlatywy porządkowe, takie jak *drugi najwyższy budynek (w mieście)* ‘drugi co do wysokości, licząc od najwyższego’, ale dwie inne pożyczki składniowe też zostały krótko omówione, aby wzmocnić argumentację. Nie było naszym celem prześledzenie historii superlatywów porządkowych w polszczyźnie ani ich wyczerpujący opis, ale ponieważ dotąd ich nie badano, wykonaliśmy wstępne kwerendy w korpusach i bibliotekach cyfrowych, aby lepiej poznać ich strukturę, znaczenie i pochodzenie. Wyniki tych kwerend sugerują, że superlatywy porządkowe zostały zapożyczone z języka niemieckiego w drugiej połowie XIX w., jednak ich obfitość we współczesnej polszczyźnie jest spowodowana wpływem języka angielskiego. Badanie umieściliśmy w kontekście prac dotyczących kontaktów językowych i porównaliśmy badane konstrukcje z ich rodzimymi odpowiednikami. Jak się okazało, te pierwsze mają przewagę nad drugimi pod pewnymi względami, ale mogą być mylone z formalnie identycznymi konstrukcjami rodzimymi, co może prowadzić do niejasności. W konkluzji można stwierdzić, że zapożyczenia składniowe mogą być użyteczne w języku zapożyczającym.

Słowa kluczowe: superlatywy porządkowe, zapożyczenia składniowe, kontakt językowy, język angielski, język polski

1. Introduction

Syntactic borrowings are not normally thought of as indispensable for a language to function properly. While foreign words may be useful to name foreign concepts or extend the expressive power of language, it is far less obvious that syntactic loans might be equally needed. The syntactic component of a language seems to be complete and self-reliant (Kozioł-Chrzanowska 2012: 77), as well as stable, and this perhaps is why the traditional view held by historical linguists is that grammar is highly resistant to contact-induced change (Winford 2013: 179).

Contrary to this view, syntactic patterns are copied from one language to another. This paper focuses on ordinal superlatives (OSs), i.e. constructions such as *the second highest (mountain in the world)*, which have become popular in some languages under the influence of English in the last few decades (see e.g. Berruto 2017: 48). We explore the use of OSs in English and Polish, and compare Polish OSs with alternative means of conveying the same meaning, which are rooted in linguistic tradition. We show that contact-induced OSs in Polish have an advantage over their most common native counterparts in terms of clarity, conciseness and ease of use, but may occasionally be confused with other constructions that have a different meaning. We also point to less common alternatives to Polish OSs, which are free from the limitations of their syntactic equivalents, both borrowed and native.

Since OSs in Polish have not been the focus of researchers' attention so far¹, we have researched corpora and digital libraries to determine their origin and use. The research has revealed that Polish OSs are older than one might suspect: they appeared in print in the second half of the 19th century, probably under the German influence. Available data and research tools do not allow for tracing their history in Polish, but the strong influence of English on contemporary Polish suggests that nowadays they are English-induced. As the history of OSs in Polish is beyond the scope of this study, corpora and digital libraries have been used only to a limited extent, mainly to help demonstrate that syntactic loans can be useful in the recipient language.

This article is organized as follows. We begin with the general characteristics of syntactic loans against the background of other types of linguistic borrowings. We then describe the structure and meaning of English OSs, and investigate English-induced OSs in Polish against their native counterparts. The discussion is illustrated with data sourced from English and Polish reference corpora (COCA, iWeb, Monco PL, NKJP), an English-Polish parallel corpus (Paralela), and digital libraries (Polona.pl). The paper ends with two more examples of syntactic loans that support our argument as well as with comments on the threats and opportunities posed by syntactic borrowing.

2. Syntactic borrowing as an outcome of language contact

In language-contact literature, syntactic borrowing has been referred to as a “contact-induced change in grammatical constructions” in the recipient language (Ross 2019: 121) and a “transfer of structural patterns, grammatical categories and functions” (Winford 2013: 179). Syntactic patterns seem to be borrowed far less often than words, which is an impression one gets having studied the classic works on loan typology (Haugen 1950; Weinreich 1953) and the copious literature on linguistic borrowing (e.g. Winford 2003; Haspelmath 2008; Zenner & Kristiansen (ed.) 2014), including the countless

¹ OSs have become the subject of two language tips: in the PWN Language Helpdesk and in the so-called *Dobry słownik* ('A Good Dictionary'), see <https://sjp.pwn.pl/poradnia/haslo/drugi-najlepszy;15276.html> and <https://dobrysloownik.pl/slowo/drugi/10276>. Though including accurate observations, these publications do not, strictly speaking, belong to academic discourse. As for the scientific literature, it is worth noting the absence of OSs in works on the grammatical category of degree (e.g. Laskowski 1977; Kallas 1998).

publications on Anglicisms². This predominance of lexical borrowing is often explained by the nominative function of lexical loans that serve to name foreign concepts (e.g. Weinreich 1953: 56; Matras 2009: 168). Yet, syntactic borrowing is always discussed as a possible outcome of language contact in general overviews of language contact literature (Hickey (ed.) 2013; Grant (ed.) 2019; Thomason 2001: 64).

Contact-induced change at the syntactic level has been argued to be more controversial than lexical change for a number of reasons; firstly, syntactic change may be of polygenetic origin, and secondly, its native origin often cannot be ruled out (Schendl 2017: 179). Unlike loanwords that “betray their origin directly” (Thomason 2001: 91), structural interference is non-material and schematic (Renner 2018: 6), and thus difficult to detect and still more difficult to prove. Perhaps these are the reasons why contact-induced syntactic change has been underresearched and limited to case studies focusing on single constructions (for bibliography see Ross 2019: 124). For the same reasons, some uncontroversial instances of syntactic borrowing have attracted little attention so far or have long been unrecognized, which pertains, among others, to OSs in Polish, up to now unnoticed by linguists.

While lexical borrowing predominates in contact situations of least intensity (Thomason 2001: 71), in high-intensity contact situations, syntactic borrowing has been found to be a frequent feature. Referring to the 5-degree borrowing scale (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 74–75; see also Thomason’s 4-degree scale, 2001: 70–71), ranging from “casual contact: lexical borrowing only” to “very strong cultural pressure: heavy structural borrowing”, “minor syntactic features” occur already at stage two, and they are restricted to new functions or new orderings “that cause little or no typological disruption”. The intensity of syntactic borrowing increases with the intensity of language contact, which, at stage five, involves “major structural features that cause significant typological disruption”, e.g. a change in the order of sentence elements or concord rules (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 75). Also, syntactic borrowing is more likely if the grammatical systems of the languages in contact exhibit sufficient congruence (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 52, 73; Winford 2013: 179).

Syntactic borrowing is intensified in cases of strong cultural pressure and its intensity depends on the degree of bilingualism of the recipient language speakers (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 52). Significant structural interference requires full bilingualism of at least some speakers; it may also

² See extensive bibliography on the GLAD website at: <https://www.nhh.no/en/research-centres/global-anglicism-database-network/publications/>.

be shift-induced, when the change occurs rapidly as a result of imperfect adult language learning (see Matras 2009: 237; Ross 2019: 139).

It has been suggested that syntactic borrowing is mediated by lexical borrowing (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 78; Winford 2013: 174) or that it may stem from lexical calquing (King 2000). We assume that OSs in Polish were not copied as a ready-made syntactic pattern. They are more likely to have resulted from a series of translations of individual sentences. As a rule, only when a sufficient number of translations have been fixed in the minds of the speakers, does an abstract pattern emerge and can be used freely in novel sentences.

3. Ordinal superlatives in English: structure and meaning

OSs have attracted little attention so far. There is no mention of them in the impressive English grammar (almost 1800 pages) by Quirk et al. (1991), at least not in the sections dealing with ordinal numbers and superlatives, including superlative adjectives. Downing and Locke (1992) do not mention OSs either. It is only in later, corpus-based publications that the analysed construction is included but receives little attention. Sinclair (1995: 142) spots ordinal numbers that “are used with superlatives to say that something has more of a quality than nearly all other things of its kind or in its group”, and illustrates this with *the second highest mountain in the world*, i.e. ‘higher than any other mountain except the highest one’. In their corpus-based and descriptively-oriented grammar, Biber et al. (1999: 90) mention the adverbial use of ordinals, as in: *Michael Schumacher was fifth fastest in his Camel Benetton Ford*. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 453) list ordinals as early pre-head modifiers (e.g. *the second brightest child*), as well as pre-head dependents in the structure of superlative phrases (e.g. *Kim’s the second youngest in class*), in which they “indicate position in a rank ordering, counting from the top (or from the bottom in the case of comparisons of inferiority, as in *the third least expensive model*)” (2002: 1169–1170).

Among older grammarians, Jespersen (1933: 228) gives OSs some attention, without referring to them by this name. They are placed under the heading “Limited superlative”, together with constructions such as “The next best (= better than all the others with the exception of one)” and “The largest but one (but two, three, etc.)”. Similar remarks can be found in his other work (Jespersen 1924: 245–246).

The term we use to refer to the analysed constructions, i.e. *ordinal superlatives* (OSs), is not widely known, but has already been used by e.g. Yee (2010), Bylinina et al. (2014), and Berruto (2017). The following characteristics of OSs in English are partly based on the literature quoted above and partly on our own corpus-based research.

In English, an OS is usually composed of three parts: the definite article, an ordinal numeral, and a superlative adjective. The adjective defines a scale and the numeral indicates a position on this scale. For example, *the second highest mountain in the world* is the mountain taking the second position in the decreasing order of the world's mountains in terms of their height. Likewise, *the sixth most popular female name in Poland* is the sixth one on the decreasing scale of popularity of female names in Poland.

This definition requires several comments. Though gradable adjectives usually denote a continuous scale where any position can be chosen, the scales used in OSs are discrete, with steps marked with successive natural numbers, except for *the first* (one says *the highest mountain* rather than *the first highest mountain*). Multi-word numerals are not excluded, e.g. *the twenty-first highest mountain in the world*. OSs can be coordinated, e.g. *the second tallest and the third longest (building in town)*.

Authentic data in the COCA and iWeb corpora (Davies 2009; Davies, Jong-Bok 2019) show variation in the orthography of the English OS construction, which is spelled with or without a hyphen that links the ordinal to the superlative. A quantitative iWeb-based search points to the hyphenless spelling being on average three times more frequent, consider the following:

Vanilla is the second most expensive spice in the world after saffron.

Livingston achieved this feat while living in New York, the second-most expensive city in the world.

OS phrases are potentially ambiguous, as illustrated by the subheading on a website: “What Was the First Tallest Building in the World?”. This is obviously not an OS sentence (otherwise the word *first* would not be used), and its meaning is simply: ‘Which of the tallest buildings in the world was the first one?’ (the answer offered on the site is the Tower of Jericho). One might ask analogically: “What was the second tallest building in the world?” and this question – asked to find out which of the tallest buildings in the world was erected as the second one – would not include an OS either. Note, however, that the same sentence with a present reference would yield an OS interpretation, which means that OS-like constructions can be ambiguous out of context.

The ambiguity inherent in OS-like constructions was noticed earlier by Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 453), who argue that *the second brightest child* is “the runner-up to the brightest child”, or the brightest child in a separate group “ranked for brightness”. The former is an OS interpretation, the latter is not. Constructions like these, including *the second highest (mountain)*, *the third tallest (building)* and others considered above, are usually true OSs, but they might be easily confused with other structures.

Usually there are lexical and structural cues which help to choose between an OS reading and a non-OS reading of an OS-like sentence, i.e. to guess its intentional meaning. One of these cues has already been mentioned (cf. the time reference), but the others, for space limitations, will not be discussed systematically in this paper. Let us just note that the introduction of a comma between the ordinal and the superlative changes an OS into a non-OS phrase, as in *the second, most widely accepted UN flag*, which does not refer to ‘a flag that comes second on the scale of acceptance’, but to ‘a flag number two which happens to be among the most widely accepted flags’:

There are a few differences between the emblem that was approved in 1946 and the second, most widely accepted United Nations flag.

Since the nuances of punctuation are not commonly known, OSs are prone to errors which can occasionally hinder the recognition of their intentional meaning.

Apart from the OSs described above, there is another type in which the present or past participle takes the place of an adjective and is premodified by an adverb in the superlative degree, e.g. *the second best-selling (book of all time)*, *the third most often cited (academic journal)*. Comments on the first type of OSs, made above, pertain to this other type as well.

Minor variants of the basic structures outlined above are permitted, e.g. *the world’s third largest economy in the world* (instead of *the third largest economy*) or *the second most expensive of these tours* (instead of *the second most expensive tour*). Although not discussed overtly in this article, such variations remain within the scope of our analyses.

4. Ordinal superlatives in Polish against their native counterparts

Queries in the digital library Polona.pl demonstrate that OSs appeared in Polish around 1870. They occurred mainly in the press, which indicates the role of journalists in their dissemination. At that time, OSs were adopted

probably from German³, since a large part of Poland was under the rule of the Kingdom of Prussia, another part was incorporated into the Austrian Empire, and German was the official language in both. The lack of OSs in earlier Polish texts suggests their foreign origin⁴.

English-induced OSs may have appeared in Polish occasionally long ago. They occur abundantly in “Dziennik Związkowy” (Polish Daily News), the oldest Polish-language newspaper, published in the United States since 1908, and prove how easily syntactic loans can be adopted in a foreign language environment without raising a suspicion of foreign origin. However, “Dziennik Związkowy” had no chance to influence the language used in Poland, so on a larger scale English-induced OSs entered Polish much later, probably in the 1980s, when at the end of the communist era Poland was becoming more and more open to the West and English was gaining in popularity as a means of international communication. This supposition is partly confirmed in NKJP and Monco PL corpora (Przepiórkowski et al. 2012; Pęzik 2020), where the ratio of OSs to their most common native counterparts almost doubles in the decade 2001–2010 compared to 1991–2000. Unfortunately, available data, in particular Polish language corpora, do not allow for tracing the dynamics of OSs in Polish, i.e. changes in their frequency, over a longer sequence of decades. Therefore our claim that the abundance of OSs in contemporary Polish is due to the influence of English has mainly extralinguistic motivation⁵.

An early attestation of an OS structure of that time (1985), is somewhat unclear at first sight:⁶

[...] dla gospodyni druga największa po mężu strata to Danusia.
‘... for the housewife, the second biggest loss after her husband is Danusia’

³ German OSs are compound words, e.g. *das zweithöchste Gebäude (der Stadt)* ‘the second tallest building (in town)’, *die am zweithäufigsten gestellte Frage* ‘the second most often asked question’.

⁴ There are relatively few OCR-ed texts in the Polona library from before 1800, but OSs are rather unlikely to have been used earlier in Polish. For one thing, they are absent from both old and contemporary historical dictionaries, at least from numeral entries. Besides, no OSs have been found in 17th- and 18th-c. Polish texts included in the large KorBa corpus (<https://korba.edu.pl>). A diachronic corpus of Polish could say more, but it has not been created yet.

⁵ Note, however, that English-induced OSs have been reported to appear recently in other languages, e.g. in Italian (Berruto 2017: 48–49). This supports the claim that their abundance in contemporary Polish is due to the influence of English.

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all examples in Section 4 come from the National Corpus of Polish (NKJP). Some have been slightly modified for the convenience of use, e.g. reduced to the nominative case.

The housewife lost the chance of having a normally developing child (her daughter, Danusia, suffers from developmental retardation caused by disease) and this loss is the second one on both the adjective-determined scale (i.e. with respect to how big it is) and the timescale (i.e. chronologically). However, the former meaning is more likely to be intended here, and it is practically the only possible option in this 1993 example:

Francja jest czwartym największym partnerem handlowym naszego kraju.
‘France is the fourth largest trading partner for our country’

Thus both sentences can be regarded as attesting the use of English-induced OSs in Polish.

The meaning of English OSs can be conveyed in Polish in various ways, not necessarily by means of direct translation. The most common way is by using prepositional phrases *co do* ‘as for’ or *pod względem* ‘with respect to’, followed by a noun in the genitive (the noun corresponds semantically to the adjective in an English OS). Thus, traditionally, the last example could be replaced with either of the following two:

Francja jest czwartym co do wielkości partnerem handlowym naszego kraju.
Francja jest czwartym pod względem wielkości partnerem handlowym naszego kraju.
‘France is the fourth trading partner for our country in terms of size’

where the literal translation is, respectively, ‘France is the fourth as for size trading partner for our country’ and ‘France is the fourth with respect to size trading partner for our country’.

Although in the NKJP corpus of Polish, registering pre-2010 texts, these native constructions, taken together, outweigh the English-induced OSs three times, the latter have recently become quite widespread in Polish, especially in the media and on the Internet.

Not unexpectedly, the ordinal used most often in Polish OSs is *drugi* ‘second’, followed by *trzeci* ‘third’, *czwarty* ‘fourth’, etc., with higher numbers being relatively rare. This order has extralinguistic motivation and is very likely typical of all languages using OSs.

As for the superlatives used in Polish OSs, *największy* ‘the biggest/largest’ is the most frequent, followed by *najważniejszy* ‘the most important’, *najlepszy* ‘the best’, *najwyższy* ‘the highest/tallest’ and *najpopularniejszy* ‘the most popular’, with various frequencies depending on the data source and details of the query. Adjectives can also appear in their base form, preceded by adverbs in the superlative degree, usually by *najbardziej* ‘most’ (e.g. *drugi najbardziej niebezpieczny* ‘the second most dangerous’), but also by *najczęściej* ‘most often’, *najchętniej* ‘most willingly’ and others. Strictly speaking, the latter serve to premodify adjectival participles, not adjectives,

and correspond to the second type of English OSs described in Section 3, e.g. *drugi najchętniej kupowany (produkt z tego segmentu rynku)* ‘the second most willingly-bought (product in this market segment)’.

Polish OSs have some advantages over their most common native counterparts based on prepositional phrases. As noticed above, in such phrases the nominal part corresponds to the adjective in an English OS, e.g.

the second	highest	mountain in the world
druga	co do wysokości	góra na świecie
‘the second	as for height	mountain in the world’
druga	pod względem wysokości	góra na świecie
‘the second	with respect to height	mountain in the world’

where *wysokość* ‘height’ is derived from *wysoki* ‘high’. Unfortunately, for some adjectives a suitable noun in Polish cannot be found, e.g. *the third best result in history* can hardly be translated by means of a prepositional phrase because no Polish noun corresponds in a straightforward way to the adjective *good* as used in this example. Using an OS instead of a prepositional phrase solves the problem, cf. *trzeci najlepszy wynik w historii* ‘the third best result in history’⁷.

Even if a noun can be used in a prepositional phrase to convey the meaning of an English adjective, it is often not the noun that first comes to mind, i.e. the one related morphologically to the translation equivalent of the English adjective in Polish. Thus, although *old* translates as *stary* in Polish, *the third oldest population (in the world)* is not rendered as *trzecie pod względem starości społeczeństwo*, lit. ‘the third with respect to oldness population’, but as *trzecie pod względem średniej wieku społeczeństwo*, lit. ‘the third with respect to the average age population’.

Another problem with rendering English OSs by means of prepositional phrases in Polish is that the latter are often less precise. For instance, the phrase *trzeci co do wielkości*, lit. ‘the third as for size’, usually means ‘the third largest’, but in principle, it could also render the sense ‘the third smallest’, e.g. in an article on microbes discussed in the order from the smallest to the largest. The rationale for using this phrase in both ways is that *wielkość* ‘size’, though related to *wielki* ‘large’, has a general parametric meaning, while the antonymic word *małość*, related to *mały* ‘small’, is currently most often used in the meaning of ‘meanness’, less often

⁷ As one of the anonymous reviewers noted, *trzeci wynik w historii* ‘the third result in history’ has essentially the same meaning. However, the omission of a numeral, as here, may sometimes be a source of ambiguity. OSs have their drawbacks, but also an important asset: they can always be used, releasing the speaker from looking for an adequate wording, possibly different each time. See more on this topic below.

‘smallness’, or ‘a small number’. Again, using an OS in place of a potentially ambiguous prepositional phrase solves the problem, cf. *trzeci największy* ‘the third largest’ and *trzeci najmniejszy* ‘the third smallest’.

The same holds for other adjectives denoting the lower end of a scale, e.g. *krótki* ‘short’: we do not normally say *trzeci co do krótkości* ‘the third as for shortness’, but *trzeci co do długości* ‘the third as for length’. Unfortunately, the latter construction is ambiguous (think of time intervals discussed in the order from short to long), while the OSs *trzeci najdłuższy* ‘the third longest’ and *trzeci najkrótszy* ‘the third shortest’ sound unequivocal.

In sum, English-induced OSs in Polish prevail over their most common native alternatives in terms of the ease of use and semantic clarity. However, they also have two drawbacks which make them misleading in some contexts.

First, like in English, Polish constructions such as *drugi największy* ‘the second largest’ are potentially ambiguous between an OS reading, in which the adjective defines a scale and the ordinal marks a position on the scale, and a non-OS reading, in which the scale relates, say, to the chronology of events. Most often the context helps to resolve the ambiguity, e.g. in the following sentence the knowledge of British reality tilts the scales in favour of an OS reading:

[...] wyścigi konne [...] w Wielkiej Brytanii to drugi najpopularniejszy sport po piłce nożnej.
 ‘... horse racing . . . in the UK is the second most popular sport after football’

A similar construction in the following sentence (from 1963, a time when English-sourced OSs were not used massively in Polish yet) represents a non-OS structure, in which *drugiego najgroźniejszego* means ‘the other most formidable’, not ‘the second on the formidability scale’:

Po Dawidzie, który przeszedł na stronę Filistynów [...] Saul pozbył się drugiego najgroźniejszego przeciwnika.
 ‘After David, who went over to the Philistines . . . Saul got rid of the other most formidable adversary’

Although in both examples above the context helps to infer the meaning, things are not always as simple as that. In Polish, just like in English, the position of a comma within an OS-like structure is significant, which may cause a problem when the comma is omitted or used unnecessarily. For example, while *Druga, największa pod względem liczebności grupa to dzieci* ‘The second and largest group are children’ (lit. ‘The second, largest with respect to number group is children’) does not contain an OS phrase, omitting the comma would turn the construction into an OS and change the meaning of the sentence into ‘The second largest group are children’.

Generally, it is not good when too much depends on a comma, the more so that the peculiarities of punctuation are unknown to many language users and seen as too trivial to be worth learning. In Polish, both missing and superfluous commas in the OS-like constructions can be confusing and can make their interpretation problematic. Missing commas are more frequent, e.g. in *trzeci [,] najwyższy stopień zagrożenia pożarowego*, the intended meaning is obviously ‘the third, highest degree of fire hazard’, not ‘the third degree of fire hazard on a scale of decreasing importance’, but the punctuation may suggest the opposite. An example where a comma should be left out is *tenis jest drugim, najbardziej ulubionym sportem 14-, 18-latków w Niemczech*. Here the intended meaning is ‘tennis is the second most favourite sport of 14- to 18-year-olds in Germany’ (after football, as the context explains), but the punctuation suggests another reading: ‘tennis is the second (on an unspecified scale) and the most favourite sport of 14- to 18-year-olds in Germany’. (Incidentally, the construction *14-, 18-latków* is unfortunate, too.)

The interference of OSs in Polish with similar native constructions that differ only in the presence of a comma makes the interpretation of the former occasionally difficult. Given the potential ambiguity inherent in OSs, related to whether a scale is defined by an adjective or derived from the context, a conclusion can be drawn that OSs are not a useful innovation in Polish. However, as their most common native alternatives with prepositional phrases also have drawbacks, a question arises of how English OSs could be differently translated to satisfy the conditions of clarity and ease of use.

In search of an answer to this question, we made use of the English-Polish parallel corpus *Paralela* (Pęzik 2016), consisting mainly of journalistic texts and official documents, as well as samples of quasi-spoken language (e.g. transcripts of the European Parliament debates). Queries such as *the second largest* have shown that ca. 20 percent of English OSs are translated directly into Polish, i.e. turned into Polish OSs, 50 percent are rendered by using the prepositional phrases *drugi co do wielkości* ‘the second as for size’ or *drugi pod względem wielkości* ‘the second with respect to size’, while the remaining 30 percent are translated in other ways, usually by saving ordinals but omitting adjectives, e.g.

Vivien is the second oldest of four children.

Vivien jest drugim z czwórki dzieci.

‘Vivien is the second of four children’

This strategy works as long as the scale to which the ordinal refers is clear from the context. Unless this condition is met, the superlative cannot

be omitted in the translation. For example, if *the second largest university* and *the second oldest university* were both translated as *drugi uniwersytet* ‘the second university’, the target text might not be clear enough for the readers.

More often than not English OSs are not translated exactly in the Paralela corpus or are omitted altogether, e.g.

Poland is the fourth most forested country in Europe.
 Polska jest jednym z najbardziej zalesionych krajów w Europie.
 ‘Poland is one of the most forested countries in Europe’

Overall, as the corpus data suggest, translating English OSs into Polish may be a difficult task, requiring ingenuity and possibly a different decision each time. This is not surprising in itself and should remind us that translation is a creative work. Yet knowing a single and effective way of rendering English OSs in Polish (or conveying the same content independently of an English source, i.e. in an originally Polish text) would be useful. Polish candidates for a general translation scheme of English OSs are not numerous, but can be found among the results of the Paralela corpus queries. The best of them is exemplified with the equivalence pair: *the second largest problem* and *drugi z największych problemów*⁸, cf.

the second	largest	problem
drugi	z największych	problemów
‘the second	of the largest	problems’

Here, from the set of problems arranged on the decreasing scale of size the largest problems have been isolated in translation and arranged on a new scale to which the ordinal is applied. Thus the meaning of the target text is slightly different from the source but the difference is not significant in most cases. Occasionally, constructions such as *drugi z największych problemów* can oscillate between an OS reading and a non-OS reading (cf. *drugi z najstarszych domów* ‘the second oldest house’ or ‘the second of the oldest houses, e.g. in a row’), but true OSs, as we have shown above, are not free from this sort of ambiguity either (cf. *drugi najstarszy dom* ‘the second oldest house’ or ‘among the oldest houses the second to be mentioned’).

Despite their limitations, phrases such as *drugi z* ‘the second of’ can be used to translate English OSs to Polish in a wide range of contexts and are especially useful when there is no time to look for an individual translation of each particular OS. In addition, such phrases have structural variants which allow for a diversity of style and help to avoid repetitions, e.g. *drugi*

⁸ The actual translation pair in the Paralela corpus is *the second largest problem* and *drugi z najważniejszych problemów* ‘the second most important problem’. We have changed the adjective in the Polish sentence to make the translation more accurate.

wśród największych problemów ‘the second among the largest problems’ or *drugi w kategorii największych problemów* ‘the second in the category of the largest problems’.

5. Final remarks

The starting point for the above considerations was the view that syntactic loans, unlike lexical borrowings, are unnecessary for a language to function properly. From here there is only one step to the claim that they are redundant, useless, perhaps even harmful. However, the case of English-induced (formerly German-induced) OSs in Polish proves that syntactic borrowing may be useful: Polish OSs surpass their most often used native equivalents in terms of semantic clarity, conciseness and ease of use, even if occasionally they can suffer from ambiguity and be confused with other constructions that have a different meaning. Other, less frequent ways of translating English OSs into Polish are not general enough (i.e. inapplicable in some contexts) and sometimes lead to inaccurate translations. Only one of them has been found to work well in most situations and can be considered a reasonable option whenever the translator wants to avoid copying the English structure into Polish.

To illustrate these remarks, let us return to the example which opened this article and complete it with four Polish translations. The first two represent the most common way of rendering English OSs in Polish; the third one represents a seldom used translation pattern, yet worth considering; the fourth option is a word-for-word translation from English:

the second	highest	mountain in the world
a. druga	co do wysokości	góra na świecie
‘the second	as for height	mountain in the world’
b. druga	pod względem wysokości	góra na świecie
‘the second	with respect to height	mountain in the world’
c. druga	z najwyższych	górn na świecie
‘the second	of the highest	mountains in the world’
d. druga	najwyższa	górn na świecie
‘the second	highest	mountain in the world’

OSs are not the only example of the usefulness of syntactic borrowing. The topic cannot be fully discussed in this article, but let us briefly comment on two other examples.

In the 16th century, Latin structures known as *accusativus cum infinitivo* spread in Polish and remained in use until the 18th century (Klemensiewicz, Lehr-Splawinski, Urbańczyk 1955: 435–436). Like other syntactic loans from

Latin of that time, concerning chiefly word order, they are a proof of treating Latin syntax in the Renaissance Poland as a model. As such, they can be viewed as a stylistic alternative to native constructions, and as an instance of enriching the recipient language at a time when its standard variety was formed, rather than a threat to it. When the role of Latin diminished during the Enlightenment – the second half of the 18th century in Poland – *accusativus cum infinitivo* gradually disappeared from Polish.

In the 19th century, when a large part of Poland was under Prussian rule and another part under the Austrian Empire, terms referring to decades, modelled on German, penetrated Polish, cf. Pol. *w latach trzydziestych* and Ger. *in den dreißiger Jahren* ‘in the thirties’ (lit. ‘in the thirtieth years’). Despite the criticism they faced (e.g. Krasnowolski 1903: 91), they managed to survive to this day, largely because they are easier to use. Note that in German, just like in English, terms referring to decades reproduce the digital notation, whereas alternative Polish terms with the same function, e.g. *w czwartej dekadzie* ‘in the fourth decade’, are concerned with the sequence of decades, thus requiring the speakers to convert digital notation to verbal description in their minds. For example, the years between 1930 and 1939 are *dreißiger Jahre* in German, *the thirties* in English, but *czwarta dekada* ‘the fourth decade’ in Polish. The only drawback of the German-modelled decade names in Polish is that referring in this way to the first two decades of each century is problematic: terms such as *w latach zerowych*, literally ‘in the zero years’, and *w latach (kilku)nastych*, literally ‘in the teen years’, are not common and may raise doubts.

Syntactic borrowings may be considered more dangerous to the recipient language than lexical loans because they affect the very core of the language, its grammar. The case of OSs in Polish, together with the two additional examples quoted above, suggest that syntactic loans can also be useful and contribute to the enrichment of the expressive power of the recipient language. We do not claim they are always justified and deserve support. However, an opposite claim that all syntactic loans are, almost by definition, useless and potentially harmful is equally untenable.

This study, to the best of our knowledge, is the first analysis of OSs in Polish. It opens up paths for further research, concerning, in particular, the history of OSs in Polish and other Slavic languages.

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