



KATARZYNA DZIWIREK

ORCID: 0000-0001-9401-2421

University of Washington

dziwired@uw.edu

## *Wola* and *wolność* in Polish

### Key words

semantic change, freedom, will

### Słowa kluczowe

zmiana znaczenia, wolność, wola

## *Wola*

*Słownik języka polskiego* defines *wola* as “dyspozycja psychiczna człowieka do świadomego i celowego regulowania swego postępowania, podejmowania decyzji, przyjęcia pewnych postaw a odrzucenia innych”<sup>1</sup> [‘human psychological predisposition for conscious and purposeful regulation of their actions, decision making, adopting some positions while rejecting others.’]. Merriam-Webster defines *will* as “volition, i.e., mental powers manifested as wishing, choosing, desiring or intending”.<sup>2</sup> Sharing a common Indo-European ancestor, \*uel- ‘to wish, to desire’,<sup>3</sup> Polish *wola* and English *will* appear to be near synonyms. This is further supported by common expressions in both languages: *ostatnia wola* ‘last will’, *dobra wola* ‘good will’, *zła wola* ‘ill will’, etc. And yet, *wola*, unlike *will*, appears to have connotations not directly related to intention or wish.

<sup>1</sup> Mieczysław Szymczak, ed., *Słownik języka polskiego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1981), 747.

<sup>2</sup> Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Wiesław Boryś, *Słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2005), 707.

The word *wola* is a Slavic protoword, which exists in all Slavic languages primarily in the meaning of will, but in Russian also in the sense of a particular type of freedom.<sup>4</sup> Boryś cites the Common Slavic (CS) noun *\*vol-ja* as the source of *wola* and gives both will and freedom as primary meanings.<sup>5</sup> He notes that it is related to the CS verb *\*velěti* ‘to want, to wish’. Długosz-Kurczabowa claims that the meaning of will is primary but that the meaning freedom from taxes is also attested since “the early middle ages”.<sup>6</sup> Urbańczyk,<sup>7</sup> however, cites the Lord’s Prayer (1391) as the first written occurrence of *wola*. It gives its meaning as independent, unassisted decision or will (Lat. *voluntas* ‘wish, desire, choice’).

*Bwncz thwa wola*

Let there be your will (thy will be done)

A related sense of *wola* is intention, agreement, permission, either one’s own (Lat. *proposition*), or another’s (Lat. *mandatum, consensus*).<sup>8</sup>

*czom szgrzessyl slq volq*

that I sinned with my will (part of General Confession)

*Pisano jest o mne, bich vczinil volo twojo, bosze moy.*

It is written that I am to do your will, my god.

*Czo clouek zabit pana Vancenczef, to ne s ma vola ani rada.*

Whatever man killed Sir Vancenczef, it was not with my will nor advice.

*Wola* in the meaning of freedom or the ability to decide freely (Lat. *licentia, libertas*) is first recorded in *Kazania gnieźnieńskie* ‘The Gniezno Sermons’ from 1409. This sense of *wola* can be clearly seen in the following chapter title from a land statute from the fifteenth century:<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Anna Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words. English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 145.

<sup>5</sup> Boryś, *Słownik*, 707.

<sup>6</sup> Krystyna Długosz-Kurczabowa, *Nowy słownik etymologiczny języka polskiego* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2003), 533.

<sup>7</sup> Stanisław Urbańczyk, ed., *Słownik staropolski* (Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk–Łódź: Ossolineum, 1977–1993), 285. The history of Polish is typically divided into four periods. Pre-literary, until 1136; Old Polish, from 1136, considered to be the probable issue date of the *Bull of Gniezno*, a papal letter written in Latin, but which contains over 400 Polish names, till the turn of the 16th century. This is the beginning of the Middle Polish Period and the beginning of the “golden era” in the history of Polish. Modern Polish is assumed to start at the end of the 18th century. Zenon Klemensiewicz, *Historia języka polskiego* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1961).

<sup>8</sup> Urbańczyk, *Słownik*, 285.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

*O woly y o slvszbie*  
Of freedom and servitude

It is not clear if the order of attestation of the two meanings is crucial. Writing in the Old Polish Period was done primarily in Latin, thus it could be a mere accident that the use of *wola* in the sense of freedom was not recorded before 1409.

*Wola* also designated a more specific freedom, namely, tax freedom for a time, or a place free from fees and taxes (Lat. *immunitas*). In this sense, *Wola* or *Wólka* is a very common place name in Poland. According to Gloger *Wola* is found in the name of a settlement for the first time in 1254.<sup>10</sup> According to Wikipedia, *Wola* as a name of a locality or a subdivision (most famously a suburb of Warsaw) can be found in 55 places in Poland.<sup>11</sup> There are also numerous towns where *Wola* forms a part of the name: *Żelazowa Wola* (Iron Wola, birthplace of Chopin), *Zduńska Wola* (Stovemaker's Wola, birthplace of St. Maximilian Kolbe), and countless others.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in the Old Polish Period (1136–1500), *wola* has two primary meanings: will/intention and freedom.

The corpus of baroque Polish (KorBa) includes texts from 275 sources written between 1601 and 1772, thus well into the Middle Polish period. Some examples of *wola* in baroque Polish are given below.<sup>13</sup> Perusing close to 500 examples of *wola* in KorBa I did not come across a single one which meant freedom. Thus, it seems that by the beginning of the seventeenth century *wola* has largely lost the meaning of freedom.

*Wy się też woli lmojej nie sprzecząjcie, Ale się raczej zarazem poddajcie.*  
You too do not oppose my will and surrender at once.

Stanisław Makowiecki, *Relacja Kamieńca wziętego przez Turków w roku 1672*

*Jadwiga z wolą się Boską mężnie zgadzając, nie płakała.*  
Jadwiga, bravely agreeing with God's will, did not cry.

Jan Kwiatkiewicz, *Roczne dzieje kościelne* (1695)

*Co to jest rząd Despotyczny? O. Jest ten, gdzie wola Monarchy jest prawem.*  
What is a despotic government? It is such where the monarch's will is the law.

Dominik Szybiński, *Atlas dziecinny* (1772)

<sup>10</sup> Zygmunt Gloger, *Encyklopedia staropolska* (Warszawa: Drukarnia P. Laskauera i W. Babickiego, 1900–1903).

<sup>11</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org>.

<sup>12</sup> An unofficial survey of native Polish speakers shows that they interpret *wola* in these place names as 'will', that is, they see, e.g. *Zduńska Wola* as a place where a stove maker wished to settle.

<sup>13</sup> Elektroniczny Korpus Tekstów Polskich z XVII i XVIII w., <https://korba.edu.pl>.

Before moving on to *wolność* let us consider a few expressions whose relatively high frequency in modern Polish might be contributing to *wola*'s continuing ambiguity. First, the expression *wola boska* 'god's will', which is an exclamation akin to Arabic *inshallah* 'if Allah wills it'. Next, *swawola*, lit. self-*wola*, whose translations include lawlessness, license (bab.la), playfulness, frivolity (context-reverso.pl), frolic, romp, caper, high spirits (pl.glosbe.com). This word seems to closely correspond to Latin *licentia*,<sup>14</sup> implying unrestrained actions driven by one's own will. But while *swawola* has a lighter side hinted at by the translations, *samowola* does not. This is another word that can be translated as self-*wola* and means lawlessness, arbitrariness (diki.pl), willfulness (context-reverso.pl), and anarchy (pl.glosbe.com). It suggests acting according to one's will without consideration for prevailing laws and norms. *Wola boska*, *swawola* and *samowola* evoke the will sense of *wola*, on the other hand *niewola* lit. not-*wola* 'bondage, captivity', *niewolnictwo* 'slavery' and *niewolnik* 'slave' conjure *wola* as freedom.

## Freedom in Slavic

The word for freedom common to all Slavs is *svoboda*. It can be found in Polish, Czech, Slovak, Upper and Lower Lusatian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Slovenian. Its variant *sloboda* occurs in Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian and Belorussian.<sup>15</sup> In Polish, *swoboda* seems to have become semantically specialized and somewhat marginalized quite early on. SSStp does not list it, which is at first quite surprising as it is a Slavic proto word, which has survived till modern Polish.

But given the nature of the Old Polish texts it is perhaps not so shocking after all. Those texts were primarily legal or religious in nature and *swoboda*, which in modern Polish means ease of manner or movement might not be a topic suitable for such writings. In the plural it occurs most often in the phrases *swobody demokratyczne* 'democratic freedoms' and *swobody obywatelskie* 'civic freedoms', concepts which did not exist in the Middle Ages. The corpus of baroque Polish also contains no examples of *swoboda* or *swobodny* and only two examples of *swobodnie* 'with ease'. The limited sense of *swoboda* in Polish is one factor contributing to the rise of *wolność*. In modern Polish, *wolność* appears to be a much more salient concept. In NKJP,<sup>16</sup> *wolność* occurs 10,434 times, while *swoboda* only 1,245 times. The adjective *wolny* is found 25,016 times compared to 5,162 tokens of *swobodny*.

<sup>14</sup> Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures*, 126.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Orel, "Freedom in Slavic", *Journal of Slavic Linguistics* 5 (1997): 144–149.

<sup>16</sup> NKJP stands for Narodowy Korpus Języka Polskiego ['the National Corpus of Polish']. It contains 240 million words.

## Wolność

The modern Polish word for freedom is *wolność*. ‘The Dictionary of Old Polish’ has very little to say about *wolność*. First attested in 1403, *wolność* has two meanings: independence, ability to choose and act according to one’s will/lack of subordination (Lat. *libertas*), and rights and privileges (Lat. *licentia*).<sup>17</sup> Looking at examples in KorBa, we find that in baroque Polish, this word was frequently used about Poland (using the terms *Polska* ‘Poland’, *ojczyzna* ‘fatherland’ and *Rz(ecz)p(os)p(ol)ita* ‘republic’).

*Da Bóg fortunne Uprzejmości Waszej starania o dostojęństwo Nasze, i wolność  
Ojczyzny trafiemy skutki.*

Let God render your highness’ efforts for our position and the freedom  
of the fatherland successful.

Jerzy Sebastian Lubomirski *Jawnej niewinności manifest* (1666)

*Jeśliże tedy to jest wolność Rzpltej, jakaż będzie niewola?*

If this is the republic’s freedom, what would its enslavement be?

*Libera respublica – absolutum dominium – rokosz* (1606)

It is also found with regard to taxes and civil rights, in particular the rights and privileges of the *szlachta* landowning social class. The expression *złota wolność szlachecka* variously translated as golden liberty, golden freedoms, nobles’ democracy, or the nobles’ commonwealth, referred to a set of laws governing Poland since the Union of Lublin in 1569 till the third partition of Poland in 1795.<sup>18</sup>

[...] *dawszy im wolność wieczną od podatków* [...]

[...] having given them eternal freedom from taxes [...]

Benedykt Chmielowski, *Nowe Ateny*, t. 4 (1756)

*Oprócz tego Tatarowie po wielu miasteczkach od dawnych czasów osiedli, i mają  
swoich obrządków sprawowania wolność.*

<sup>17</sup> Urbańczyk, *Słownik*, 291.

<sup>18</sup> The Partitions of Poland were three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that took place toward the end of the 18th century and ended the existence of the state, resulting in the elimination of sovereign Poland and Lithuania for 123 years. The partitions were conducted by the Habsburg monarchy, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire, which divided up the Commonwealth lands among themselves progressively in the process of territorial seizures and annexations. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partitions\\_of\\_Poland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partitions_of_Poland)). Andrzej Zajączkowski, *Szlachta polska* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Semper, 1993); Jakub Filonik, “The Polish Nobility’s «Golden Freedom»: On the Ancient Roots of a Political Idea”, *The European Legacy* 20 (2015): 731–744.

Besides, the Tatars have long been settled in many towns and they have the freedom to conduct their rites.

Dominik Szybiński, *Atlas dziecinny* (1772)

Finally, as the following quotes illustrate, *wolność* is seen as an absolute moral value and something that can be given to others.

*Co droższego, co słodsze go tu na świecie nad wolność mieć? Niezdrowy to, zarażony człek, komu ten miód gorzkością smakuje, kto o ten miód, gdy mu go wydzierają, nie gniewa się.*

What in the world can be dearer and sweeter than beloved freedom. A person to whom this honey tastes bitter, who does not get angry when that honey is taken away from him, is a sick, infected person.

Anonim, *Defensio ac definitio rokoszu* (1606)

*Poganie bałwochwalczy psów kotki i ryby i ptaków mieli za Bogów poszanowanie im czynili pokarm dając i na wolność te zwierzęta nierozumne wypuszczając.*

Pagan idolaters treated dogs, cats, fish and birds as gods, they respected them, giving them food and letting those dumb animals free.

Joannicjusz Galatowski, *Alkoran Machometów* (1683)

I propose that as the meaning of *wola* tends to shift over time to will (compare the examples from Old Polish to those from baroque Polish), and as *swoboda* becomes less central, Polish speakers needed to come up with a word that meant freedom unambiguously, hence the creation of *wolność*. Why did they need such a word?

Wierzbicka claims that “the moral and public (national) character of the present-day meaning of this word [*wolność*] has developed in the course of the last two centuries, during which Poland’s history was dominated by uprisings, and other forms of struggle for national freedom.”<sup>19</sup> She goes on to say that “In the Polish concept of *wolność*, the public (national) and the individual element are fused together” and that the “word *wolność* clearly reflects the historical experience of a country where the personal fate of an individual was inextricably linked with the fate of the nation.”<sup>20</sup> Her explication of the meaning of *wolność* puts country at its core.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures*, 150.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, 151.

<sup>21</sup> Wierzbicka argues very persuasively that the concept of freedom is highly culture specific. She examines Latin *libertas* (no owner), English *freedom* (no boss) and *liberty* (public rights), Russian *svoboda* (no straight jacket) and *volja* (freedom to leave), and Polish *wolność* (national independence).

*Wolność*

- (a) everyone wants to think something like this:
- (b) when I do something I do it because I want to do it
- (c) not because someone says to me: “you have to do it because I want this”
- (d) it is very bad if people in a country cannot think this
- (e) it is very good if people in a country can think this

I believe that Wierzbicka is right and *wolność* has clear undertones of national independence, but would like to suggest that this link between the national and individual senses was present in the meaning of *wolność* much earlier than “over the past two centuries”. As we have seen in the examples from KorBa the idea of Poland’s freedom was very much a part of the discourse in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

*Wolny*

I believe that another reason for *wolność* to arise has to do with the adjective *wolny*. This adjective has always meant free and as *wola*’s freedom meaning was waning and *swoboda* and *swobodny* shifted, *wolny* needed another noun to correspond to.

*Wolny*, whose first attested occurrence is from 1401,<sup>22</sup> means “free” in several different senses, such as having personal freedom, independent (Lat. *liber*). For example, *wolny pan* ‘free lord’, a feudal title (Germ. *Freiherr*, Lat. *Dominus liber*), meaning a person who was not tied to land. It also means free in the sense of unmarried and free in the sense of unconstrained or not having to be paid for such as *as volna droga* ‘free road’, i.e., without tolls:<sup>23</sup>

*Ya mam lowysko wolne z moych othcow.*  
I have free (access to) hunting grounds from my ancestors.

We find many examples of *wolny* in that sense in baroque Polish as well.<sup>24</sup>

*Wojewoda, przysięgłszy z drugimi ichmości, wolny ma pas przejazdu w tamte strony.*  
The provincial governor having sworn with others, has free access to those areas.

Jan Sobieski, *Listy do Marysienki* (1665–1683)

<sup>22</sup> Urbańczyk, *Słownik*, 292.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> <https://korba.edu.pl>.

*Biały Bór [...] w którym jako i w innych: to jest Grzegorzowskich jako i Dąbrowskich pozwala się wolny wrąb.*

The White Forest, in which as in others [...] free logging is allowed.

*Inwentarze dóbr biskupstwa chełmińskiego (1723–1747)*

About people, *wolny* can mean freed from something, usually sins, rent or taxes.<sup>25</sup>

*Day aby pomoczo myloserdza twego wspomozeny y tesz od grzecha bylybychoom wolny.*

Let it be so that supported by the help of your mercy I would be free of sin.

*Tedy synovye są wolny od czynszu.*

Thus, the sons are free from rent.

About people, specifically about peasants, *wolny* means residing on the territory that has been freed from taxes, and about lands, it means used for a time without payments to the court. For example, *wolne dobro* ‘property received under fief law’. Finally, *wolny* can also mean freely given, often when referring to tithes. Thus, the adjective encapsulates various aspects of freedom and not of will.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusions

In this paper I argued that reasons for the rise of *wolność* in Polish were both linguistic and extralinguistic. The original Common Slavic words for freedom specialized: *wola* came to mean primarily will and *swoboda* ease and thus there was a need for a word which meant freedom. Also, the adjective *wolny*, which always referred to freedom and never to will, needed a noun to correspond to. The extralinguistic factors have to do with Poland’s geopolitical situation. Being sandwiched between two strong neighbors Germany and Russia Poland’s freedom has often seemed precarious, while at the same time being seen as something of great importance to Poles and thus requiring a name of its own. Hence *wolność* and its strong connotations of national independence.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Other meanings mentioned in *Słownik staropolski* [‘The Dictionary of Old Polish’] include lonely, deserted, uncontrollable and neither hot nor cold.



## Postscript: an interesting journey of *wolny*

In modern Polish, *wolny* is used in new contexts, such as *wolny czas* ‘free time’, *wolny rodnik* ‘free radical’, *rzut wolny* ‘free throw’, *wolny strzelec* ‘freelancer’, etc. All of those uses are, I believe, derivable from *wolny*’s original sense of free. It is harder to account for the fact that *wolny* has come to mean ‘slow’ in modern Polish. ‘The Dictionary of Old Polish’ does not cite it as one of *wolny*’s meanings. It does cite the adjective *powolny*, which now also means ‘slow’, but gives its meaning as ‘acting according to someone’s will, obedient, submissive’.

As far as I was able to ascertain the Old Polish adjective for slow was *leny*.<sup>27</sup> It was most likely related to *leniwy*, CS *\*lěnbъ*,<sup>28</sup> meaning lazy, dilatory, indolent, sluggish. While *leniwy* ‘lazy’ is a word in modern Polish (and in many Slavic languages),<sup>29</sup> no trace remains of *leny*.

Plungian and Rakhilina discuss the origins of speed adjectives in Slavic.<sup>30</sup> They note that “from a historical point of view adjectives that express HIGH SPEED represent a rather homogeneous class which appears to have two main sources: (A) Prototypically HIGH SPEED situations of rapid physical motion, and, by metonymy, (B) prototypically ‘quick’ agents in habitual situations.”<sup>31</sup> They go on to say that

as far as agents are concerned, the metaphorical strategies that apply to HIGH VS. LOW SPEED are rather different, at least for Russian. Human qualities are used to express ‘slow’ less frequently (cf. *lenivyj* ‘lazy’, *sonnyj* ‘sleepy’). This meaning is more often represented by words that express the general physical qualities of non-human referents. [...] However, there is a much larger set of non-anthropocentric metaphors for ‘slow’. In particular, in the Slavic languages this meaning is expressed by roots such as *mal-* ‘small’ *vol-* ‘free, loose’, and, less often, *tix-* ‘quiet’ and *leg-* ‘light’. In Czech, Polish and Ukrainian these roots derive adverbs used primarily to express ‘slow’, cf. Cz. *pomalú* ‘slowly’; Pol. *powoli*, *wolno*, *pomalú* ‘slowly’; Ukr. *povilno*, *povoli*, *pomalú*.<sup>32</sup>

Plungian and Rakhilina do not explain why roots such as *mal-* and *vol-* serve as the basis for ‘slow’ expressions.<sup>33</sup> *Mal-* ‘small, little’ seems to make intrinsic sense, as something that is happening ‘by little’ can be seen as happening slowly. *Vol-* ‘free, loose’ does not have such intuitive explanation. I propose that Polish *powoli* derives not from *wolny* ‘free’, but from *wola* in the sense of will and thus is at its core anthropocentric. That is,

<sup>27</sup> Urbańczyk, *Słownik*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Boryś, *Słownik*, 284.

<sup>29</sup> Russian *lenivyj*, Belarussian *ljanivy*, Ukrainian *leđačij*, Slovak *lenivy*, Czech *liny*, Croatian, Bosnian *lijen*, Serbian *lenij*, Bulgarian *mъrzeliv*, Macedonian *mъrzlivi*.

<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Plungian, Ekaterina Rakhilina, “Time and Speed: where do speed adjectives come from?”, *Russian Linguistics* 37 (2013).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, 352.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 355.

<sup>33</sup> Plungian, Rakhilina, “Time and Speed”.

as Old Polish *leny* became extinct and *leniwy* became increasingly specialized and human centered, *po woli* ‘according to (one’s) will’ (thus perhaps unhurriedly or in one’s own time) began to be used in the sense of slow. Thereafter the adjective *powolny* shifted its meaning from obedient and submissive to ‘slow’ and eventually became shortened to *wolny*. In contemporary Polish both *powolny* and *wolny* (in one of its senses) mean slow.

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## Wola i wolność w języku polskim

### Streszczenie

W artykule zostały zanalizowane powody, dla których w języku polskim powstał termin *wolność*, mimo że istniały dwa inne słowiańskie prasłowa o podobnym znaczeniu: *swoboda* i *wola*. Autorka artykułu uważa, że słowo to było potrzebne z powodu zmian semantycznych *swobody* i *woli*, a jego ostateczne znaczenie ukształtowało się na podstawie pozalingwistycznych warunkowań geopolitycznych. W języku polskim prasłowiańska *wola* z czasem zaczęła oznaczać głównie intencję, natomiast *swoboda* – lekkość, łatwość, brak skrupowania, brakowało więc słowa, które jednoznacznie odnosiłoby się do koncepcji autonomii, niezależności itp. Również zmiana znaczenia *woli* sprawiła, że przymiotnik *wolny*, który choć stworzony od tego samego rdzenia, od zawsze znaczył ‘autonomiczny’, a nie ‘wolicjonalny’, potrzebował korespondującego rzeczownika. Wydarzenia historyczne (rozbiory, wojny) spowodowały, że z czasem *wolność* zaczęła nabierać znaczenia narodowej suwerenności i niezależności. Artykuł jest oparty na badaniach korpusowych.

## Wola and wolność in Polish

### Summary

This paper considers two Polish words: *wola* ‘will’ and *wolność* ‘freedom’ and, more tangentially, their Slavic counterparts. In English, the two words are morphologically quite distinct and thus also seem distinct conceptually. The two Polish terms are clearly morphologically related and there are contexts in which *wola* does still mean freedom, though not vice versa. The main question I want to focus on here is why did Polish need the word *wolność* when it had *wola* as well as *swoboda*, another Slavic proto word which means freedom.

### Cytowanie

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