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RECEPTION OF ANGLO-AMERICAN CULTURE AMONG POLISH STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

Introduction

In a study *Imagining America* Peter Conrad (1980) traces a number of 19th and 20th century British writers' inspirations to their American sources. What is interesting is that each writer discussed in the study discovers a personal America for himself and each vision contradicts the others. For Oscar Wilde, for example, America is aesthetic, for Herbert George Wells it is futuristic, for Aldous Huxley psychedelic, to name only the most contradictory images. The other visions show the United States as a country which is institutional, epic, chivalric, theological or mystical. Thus Conrad seems to be justified in his opinion that: "The reality of America is selective, optional, fantastic: there is an America for each of us" (p. 4). A further claim that Conrad makes is stronger: "Because America offers [...] an incarnation of your most recondite and specialized fantasies, in discovering America you are discovering yourself" (p. 5).

Moreover, it could be claimed that in the process of studying the language and culture of a foreign country imagining the foreign reality plays an essential role. Studying the English language in Poland, especially at the university level, entails the study of the cultures of the English speaking countries, of which British and American cultures seem to be the most influential. Consequently, it could be argued that in the process of studying Anglo-American culture in Poland what is created is not only certain images of the countries but also a new identity of the discoverer. Indeed, it is perhaps one of the greatest virtues of the academic study of Anglo-American culture that it grants its discoverers the freedom to re-imagine themselves.

Another key word for this article is ideology, understood here as a particular mode of knowing the world through signs and texts, not only academic but also popular culture texts because the students' cultural preferences are shaped not only by their education at English departments but also by their interest in or even fascination with Anglo-American popular culture.

Such an understanding of the term is closely linked with the belief that "an ideology is a 'logic' of ideas, indicating that the groups who hold various ideologies perceive and understand the world in a certain consistent way" (Thwaites, Davis and Mules 2002: 158). It should also be mentioned that ideas are not mental events happening in the privacy of individual minds or personal choices but rather public meanings, produced and circulated in everyday life by members of a certain community or social group.

Aims

The main aim of this paper is to examine to what extent the ideologies represented by the students of English overlap, i.e. whether there exists some kind of group identity as "ideology is [...] enactment of common identity" (Thwaites, Davis and Mules 2002: 162). On the other hand, ideology is claimed to be "what binds us more or less closely into imagined communities of shared values, beliefs and identifications" (Thwaites, Davis and Mules 2002: 160). As the word "imagined" in the previous sentence suggests, the concept of imagination is of vital importance not only for British writers fascinated with American culture but also for Polish students in the process of becoming influenced by Anglo-American culture. The main focus of the paper is an attempt at defining the role that Anglo-American culture has played in shaping the cultural identity of almost 500 young Poles studying English at universities, teacher training colleges and state schools of vocational education.

Research Methods

The article is based on research conducted in 2003-2005 in Warsaw, Poznań, Lublin, Białystok, Zamość, Chełm and Biała Podlaska, which included a questionnaire entitled "Preferences in the reception of culture among Polish students," completed by 440 students, and in-depth semi-structured interviews on British and American culture conducted with 25 students. The research results were used to determine not only the body of ideas that the students associated with Anglo-American culture but also the origin and nature of those ideas. Special attention was paid to the role that university education at English departments plays in shaping students' knowledge of and preferences for Anglo-American culture. In order to provide a broader perspective, student perceptions of Anglo-American culture were analyzed in comparison with their attitudes to Polish culture and European culture.

The questionnaire: results and discussion

Student cultural preferences were examined though an analysis of the answers to seven questionnaire questions. The first one asked the respondents to enumerate at least 3 elements that they associated with each of the following cultures: British, American, Polish and European. The task proved to be relatively difficult as many students did not manage to give 3, 2 or even 1 element describing a particular culture. If we accept the assumption that the fewer elements there are referring to a particular culture, the more distant the culture appears to the respondents, we can analyze the results statistically. The results obtained in this way are as follows: Polish culture 1128, American 978, British 899 and European 714. Although, understandably, Polish culture comes first, the figures provide evidence for the popularity or even domination of American culture in the contemporary world. According to one respondent: "American culture is the most popular among Poles because of our "love" to the United States. We do not propagate Polish culture, as we are fascinated with what is going on across the ocean." On the other hand, in comparison with national cultures, European culture seems to be a much more abstract concept to define.

The second question, "Which culture do you prefer?" was aimed at verifying the hierarchy established in the previous question. However, as it was an open type of question, it gave the students an opportunity to express fuller and sometimes unpredictable answers. The hierarchy of cultures revealed here differs dramatically from the previous one. Although Polish culture still occupies the first position on the list (49,5%), the second place is taken by European culture (14,1%) and the third by British (8,0%), closely followed by American culture (6,4%). This result could probably be connected with the current political events – Poland entering the European Union ("especially now we should feel a part of the old continent"; "I'm dreaming of becoming a citizen of Europe") and taking part in the war in Iraq ("I don't have much in common with America and my associations are rather negative – they're too big-headed"). It is noteworthy that a high percentage of respondents (15%) gave no answer here and the rest (7%) provided answers similar to the ones below, all of which were classified as All cultures/No one culture. The category included for instance the following unexpected responses:

1. I don't feel only a Pole, the borders of such kind are insignificant
2. I don't identify with the preferences of Poles or Americans
3. In every culture there are some elements that I cannot accept
4. I choose elements from different cultures
5. I'm still looking for a culture to which I would like to belong

The above quotes could be used to illustrate the postmodern erosion of group and individual identities, which has recently been given a lot of atten-

tion to by a number of scholars (Bauman 1997: 190-192; Matthews 2000: 23-24). Increasingly, cultural identity does not necessarily follow from the place of birth in a particular country, but rather is the effect of a never-ending search for identity, which could be compared to shopping in the global supermarket of styles and attitudes.

The phrasing of the third question: "If you had a chance, in which country apart from Poland would you like to study?" theoretically did not allow the option "Poland," however, this was the exact response from 2 students (0,5%). Yet it was the countries lying on the British Isles – Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland – that were chosen by the majority of the respondents as the most preferable locations to study, which obviously is a consequence of the geographical proximity but perhaps also because of the fact that those states were the first to open their labor markets to Poles. Among the other English speaking countries the United States was the most popular choice, with almost a quarter of all answers, while all the remaining English speaking countries constituted a mere 6%. Interestingly enough, locations in Continental Western Europe attracted twice as many (13%) students, which, again, could easily be explained by the geographical proximity to Poland. In this category the students of English favored the countries in the Mediterranean (7%), Scandinavia (4%) and Benelux with German speaking countries (2%). It is noteworthy that while virtually no one wished to study in an ex-Communist country, Western Europe attracted almost two thirds of the sample.

The answers to the fourth question: "In which country would you like to live permanently?" revealed a rather different hierarchy, which is understandable, as there is a profound difference between a relatively short period of studying and settling down in a particular country. In this category it is again Poland that takes the lead; nevertheless, the fact that fewer than one third of the respondents (33%) declared the will to remain in their home country may sound alarming. Apart from that, it seems that the student responses show a hierarchy similar to that established in the previous question i.e. the British Isles followed by the United States and the Mediterranean countries.

The fifth and sixth questions – "What is your attitude to British culture?" and "What is your attitude to American culture?" – refer directly to the two main English speaking cultures and offer the students a limited choice of 4 answers:

A) I like it
B) I don't like it
C) I have mixed feelings
D) It's hard to say.

The responses reveal that student attitudes to British culture seem to be compatible with their field of studies. The results may provide evidence for the claim that studying at the English department naturally stems from a positive approach to the home culture of the English language. Over half of the respondents liked British culture, more than a quarter saw its positive and negative sides, while only 5% declared definite antipathy. Thus it could be claimed that the main aim of foreign language education according to Michael Byram (1997: 61), i.e. adopting a positive attitude to members of a foreign culture has been accomplished.

On the other hand, it might appear that the students' responses to the question regarding American culture suggest that the aim of making students pro-American has not been accomplished, for the number of positive responses was much smaller. Only a quarter of the sample declared pro-American sympathies, whereas as much as 14% chose the negative answer "I don't like it." The most frequent response given by 53% of the students, though, was "I have mixed feelings." Consequently, more than half of the respondents saw both the pros and cons of American culture, or, in other words, had a critical attitude. At this point, we could wonder if such a consciously critical approach, seeing both the advantages and disadvantages of a foreign culture, rather than unconditional admiration is not a more feasible educational aim in the long run. If we accept that the answer "I like it" as well as "I have mixed feelings" signify an acceptable level of the cultural competence of the future teachers of English, then the results for British culture and American culture are surprisingly similar: 79% and 78% respectively.

At this stage it seems necessary to make a generalization concerning the overall cultural preferences of Polish university students of English. The results of the questionnaire show that the responses to each question revealed a slightly different configuration of the analyzed cultures, although Polish culture invariably dominated. As far as the question of identification with a particular culture is concerned, Polish culture was closely followed by European culture. Moreover, Western Europe was the third most attractive location both to study and settle down in. The fact that it has won in this category with the United States seems to prove a strong identification of the respondents with the Old Continent. American culture, on the other hand, proved to be the second best known after Polish one. The United States was also the second most attractive country in which the respondents wanted to study. And yet the smallest number of students would like to live permanently in the USA. Anti-American attitudes were also expressed through the lowest identification with American culture and less direct sympathy than that expressed for British culture.

What were the reasons for such perceptions of American culture? In order to discuss this issue we need to analyze the material in a more detailed way, applying not only quantitative but also qualitative methods. All the responses to the seventh question "What are the 3 elements defining American culture?" were carefully examined and the 978 answers were grouped into 9 broad categories that the students associated with American culture: Entertainment (201), Fast food (151), Politics (149), Everyday life (130), Materialism (104), Futurism (78), Problems (71), Spiritualism (69) and Aesthetics (25).

The respondents mainly associated American culture with entertainment and consumption. The most numerous category of student perceptions, Entertaining America, is based on three pillars: the film industry, dominated by Hollywood productions; pop music, represented by the styles popularized by MTV, mainly rap and r'n'b but also country, neo punk and new metal; and sport, which included baseball, basketball, American football, hockey, surfing and skateboarding. Consumption, on the other hand, was primarily associated literarily with fast food chains, especially McDonalds and the products served there (hamburgers and Coca-Cola) but also with obesity and plastic surgery as consequences of the couch potato lifestyle. Related to the theme of consumption were also materialism and hedonism. Very often the United States were seen as a country where the two predominant driving forces, the cult of money and the cult of the body, result in not only workaholism but also extravagance. One of the most frequent metaphors used in this category was that of "fast life," which could probably be summarized by one student's list defining American culture as "sex, drugs, consumerism."

The other main theme which recurs in student perceptions is Political America, a strand reflecting the political struggle for power within the country (the Bush/Kerry electoral campaign or Arnold Schwarzenegger for the governor of California) and on the international scene. The latter is especially evident in the subcategory dubbed Bushism, including the personal references to George W. Bush but also the whole theme of war against terrorism, starting from the 9/11 attacks and ending with anti-war demonstrations. The polarized student opinions on the matter could succinctly be summarized by the quotes "idiot president leading a great nation" and "we'll show the world who is right."

Similarly polarized opinions were expressed in the marginal category of Aesthetic America, where appreciation for the artistic achievements of American culture (literature, theatre and art) was not as great as the dismay at a lot of mass culture productions (film and pop music). The category of Everyday America, on the other hand, includes 3 subcategories (Everyday life, Geography and Multiculturalism), which present a number of images of

living in the United States but cannot be easily classified as positive or negative. As far as Geography is concerned, New York and its parts like Manhattan, Central Park, Wall Street, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the Metropolitan Museum and the ruins of the World Trade Center are by far the most frequent references and each of them can be treated as a sign loaded with ideological meaning depending on the context in which it is used.

More straightforwardly negative were the responses categorized as Problematic America. Here the students presented highly critical opinions not only about the social problems in the United States (rat race, break-up of the family, violence and crime, low educational standards, homelessness and drug addiction) but also about American culture (banality, superficiality, bigotry, immorality) and American attitudes towards the rest of the world (hypocrisy, imperialism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism). It is worth stressing, however, that even though the responses were anonymous and thus presumably honest, they constituted a small minority, about 7% of all the answers.

Much more positive answers, in contrast, could be found in the categories of Futuristic and Spiritual America. The former included two broad subcategories: High technology, centered around the technological and economic growth, whose symbols seem to be fast cars and skyscrapers, and Media, with television perceived as the most popular medium in the United States, closely followed by the Internet. The latter subcategory, Spiritual America, presents a collection of values that Polish students associated with American culture. Freedom is by far the most frequent response, followed by patriotism, progress and optimism. The other frequently given answers are openness, mobility, tolerance and religiousness. Thus it seems that the respondents were not only impressed with the technological development of the United States but could also appreciate the spiritual foundations of American civilization.

The interviews: results and discussion

A slightly different insight into the perception of American culture in Poland was gained through an analysis of 14 interviews conducted with first and third year students of English departments. The questions asked by the interviewer were not necessarily identical in each case but they followed a similar pattern, starting from the most general (What is your general image of the United States of America?) and ending with the most particular (To what extent is your personal identity influenced by American culture?).

The differences in the level of cultural awareness and linguistic competence between first and third year students were much more noticeable in

the interviews. It was especially evident when the respondents were asked to give examples of distinct identities within American culture. While the first year students usually mentioned one category e.g. "ethnic" or "geographical" and were only able to list 1-3 elements, third year students generally distinguished at least two categories and managed to enumerate on average 6 items. Additionally, as could be expected, the students of university English departments represented a higher level (a record score was set by a third year student from the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, who provided 17 example of 4 categories) than those studying at teacher training colleges or state schools of vocational education.

Almost all the interviewed students revealed a positive attitude towards the United States. However, six of them expressed some reservations in the form "I like America/Americans but..." The objections included racism, superficiality, superiority, naivety, and arrogance (3rd year students) and snobbery, "their approach to their country and other countries" and "spoilt culture," which meant violence, sex and drugs in the mass media, (1st year students). The reasons for the predominant feeling of sympathy towards Americans were their open-mindedness, tolerance, self-sufficiency and relaxed attitude towards life. The United States was, on the one hand, presented in positive images as the land of opportunities, a unique melting pot of nations and cultures, a powerful global empire, a country of talented individuals and a multicultural state, "more colorful and complex" than both Poland and the United Kingdom. The greatest achievements of the United States were associated with its political ("the most powerful country in the world", "the greatest and the strongest... world-wide power in a relatively short time"), military ("since WWII they are dictating all the rules", "the main voice in global conflicts"), economic ("economic superpower", "very successful country in the way that for example there is not very high unemployment"), technological ("flying to space", "man on the Moon", monopolization of the IT market), democratic (The Constitution, The Declaration of Independence, minority rights) or cultural (literature, music, film, popular culture, "birth of rock'n'roll") position in the world. Unsurprisingly, the areas in which the United States exerted the greatest influence on the world were: economy (6), popular culture (5), food (3), the military (2), technology (2), fashion and art (1), all of which could be seen as different aspects of globalization.

On the other hand, the greatest failures of the United States were less considered to be connected with culture than with politics. Whereas only 2 students openly criticized American mainstream culture and mass media, almost all of them regarded American involvement in the recent international politics as a failure. Most commonly criticized were the political inter-

ventions and wars, especially the wars in Vietnam (4) and Iraq (3). The concept of Bushism is again present in the answers to the question: "What do you consider to be the greatest failure of the US?", not only in direct references to the war in Iraq and President George W. Bush but also in phrases like "allowing WTC to be destroyed," "hypocrisy," and "they have become a kind of totalitarian country." Moreover, it could be claimed that there is also a direct link between Bushism and the following negative comments on American civilization: "the right idea of democracy [...] went wrong somewhere," and "a great building with thin walls."

As the interviews were a part of a larger project whose aim was to examine the preferences for American and British culture, they included two questions (7 and 8) directly addressing the interrelatedness of the two cultures. The comparison of the cultures revealed that the interviewees felt that there exist strong linguistic, historical and cultural links between the two countries. The obvious answer to the question about the greatest similarity between the UK and the USA was "Language," but two third year students showed a heightened linguistic awareness, adding the comments: "although they sometimes can't understand each other" and "language is a bit similar, but, on the other hand, it is different." Historically, the two countries are perceived in kinship terms: "The US was created because of Great Britain," "The British were somehow... the fathers of Americans. The Pilgrim Fathers came from Britain to America, as far as I remember... [America was Britain's] greatest invention," "America is a kind of... well... maybe not a child of United Kingdom but sort of younger sister." At present the two countries are perceived as two multicultural superpowers that have similar interests and culture and they retain strong political and economic links. One student thought that the USA and the UK both have a belief in their uniqueness, while another, quite surprisingly, stated:

They both have a very big sense of patriotism, I think. They are very both proud of their countries. That's what I think. Well, of course I'm not saying because I know that some... might not like the Queen, but that's not the same thing. We might not like Bush or Clinton or... whatever. But the country, as the people of the country, are very proud of it.

Even if the comment fairly represents the predominant feeling in the United States after 9/11, it is not necessarily true about the situation in the United Kingdom. As another student observes, British people are not particularly patriotic:

Yes, my friend has been to the States lately and... erm... there's a lot of propaganda... like... erm.. support the government... support the wars... support the army... whatever. And in Britain most of the people just are not afraid to say that Tony Blair made a mistake and...you know.

Patriotism, or the lack of it, was not, however, the main feature that helped the students to distinguish between the two countries. The most frequent answer to the question about the greatest difference between the UK and the USA was the stereotypical belief that Americans are more open and the British more reserved: "The British are traditional and stiff, Americans easy-going and spontaneous." Along similar lines, Britishness was associated with history, monarchy, the Royal Family, sophistication, humor and irony. Americannes, in contrast, was imagined, as most of the interviewees had never been to the United States, in relation to its size, multiculturalism, rootlessness, informality, "not caring about tomorrow," stupidity, straightforwardness, American accent and form of government.

Interestingly, the criticisms inherent in some of the answers to the previous questions did not prevent the students from expressing preference for American culture and/or acknowledging its influence on their personal identity. Twelve of the interviewees professed a definite preference for American culture, one claimed that he preferred both British and American cultures (but favored the American accent) and the other said, "I don't prefer any culture. I just take what I like from each of these." The latter approach, taking elements from American culture and using them to build one's own personal identity, is present in virtually all interviews. Almost half of the interviewees spoke with an American accent, which was perceived as a way of expressing one's cultural preferences, an emblem of one's Americanization or even as a sign of a struggle against the never-ending attempts on the part of the teachers to convert the students to Received (British) Pronunciation. Each of the interviewees exhibited a fascination with a certain aspect of American culture: "outsider" literature and ambitious cinema, basketball and hockey, or black music (hip hop, soul and jazz), to list only a few. One student claimed that he tries "to be as Americans were in the 60s and 70s": another confessed that she likes watching American films and serials, while she hardly ever watches any Polish ones. Still another respondent, on the other hand, refused to admit a link between the fascination with American products and her identity: "Of course it's difficult to deny that I listen to American music or wear American brands, but I never confuse it with my identity. I'm a Pole."

The question of Polish national identity was the theme of the final question: "Which culture – British or American – is closer to Polish people?" Unsurprisingly, the majority of the respondents (9 out of 14) believed that it was American culture because of two main reasons. The most common answer saw the reason in Americanization as globalization through popular culture ("American pronunciation is very close to our... to our minds because of the influence of the movies, music"; "Whenever I switch on the TV

or read a newspaper or a magazine, something American is in it"; "We are all influenced by it. We... we can't help America... Americanization"). The second most frequent response referred to numerous Polish communities living in the USA ("And because so many people go to America, we feel like... like the politicians say 'the small brother of America'").

Finally, we should try to examine the origin of the ideas discussed above. There could be distinguished four sources of different ideologies shaping the students' perceptions of American culture. Firstly, the broadly understood ideology of capitalism that was officially accepted in Poland after 1989 and made possible the opening of a number of American, or global, companies, of which McDonalds was probably the most readily available icon in the popular imagination. Secondly, the much wider access to American popular culture through the mass media meant that Poles were "almost flooded by it," with the result that many perceived the images on the TV or cinema screens as true representation of the American reality. As a student of University of Warsaw who was born and raised in New York rightly observes, "The reason [why so many Poles try to copy Americans] is because... so many Polish people... like to watch television. Well, I know everybody loves watching television, but... each and every single movie almost... is American."

Moreover, the ideology that cannot be underestimated is the American Dream, connected with the Polish immigration to the United States. The opinion of a third year student of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University can be quoted to illustrate the point:

Well, I think that this admiration has much to do with... with considerably limited knowledge of... the history and the realities in the United States. [...] And perhaps this image that is so much admired in our country is only... erm... based on the economics...

The above quote seems to refer to a profound conflict between the very high expectations of Poles coming to the United States, who wish to realize their ambitions deriving from the American Dream, and the harsh reality of hard work and living in a Polish ghetto, even if the ghetto primarily refers to a state of mind rather than the physical conditions.

Furthermore, another ideology shaping student perceptions of American culture could be identified on the basis of an interview with a third year student of the Teacher Training College in Chełm, who preferred British culture. Perhaps that is why his opinions about the United States were much more critical than any of the ones presented above and could be regarded as an expression of xenophobia in the form of anti-Semitism. The student believed that the main problem of the United States was that:

the Zionists... [...] exploit this country... they have done it for some time already, murdering all those presidents, and... and all that stuff with...erm... with free masonry... and the presidents being Freemasons and members of the Skull and Bones... of the Yale University.

Alternatively, it could be argued that , although the student claimed to express only his point of view, the above passage could be related to a number of conspiracy theories, explaining the international success of the United States through the working of a number of secret societies. In the Polish context it seems that not only the popularity of Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* but also, perhaps more importantly, the disillusionment with the limited progress in the improvement of the conditions in life in the east of Poland might be held responsible for the spreading of the ideology of conspiracy theories.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it seems that in the majority of the cases analyzed for the study reported in this paper the students only imagined what Anglo-American culture was like since only a minority of the respondents had been to the United Kingdom or the United States. What the students based their visions of America on was the glamorous Hollywood imagery, the reality of visiting a fast food restaurant in Poland or limited contacts with their relatives living in the United States rather than the academic courses of American Studies. Thus it could be concluded that studying American culture in Poland is to a large extent only imagining America, at best a second hand experience. Although in many students' opinions the physical and cultural distance between Poland and the British Isles seemed much less considerable than between Poland and America, the perception of British culture among Polish students of English was also to a large extent superficial and stereotypical. The English were commonly perceived as reserved, boring and phlegmatic although at the same time sophisticated and superior. Consequently, it could be argued that in the student imagination the typical Englishman would resemble Prince Charles rather than Tony Blair. As far as the methodology of teaching Cultural Studies to students of English at the university level is concerned, the practical conclusion following from the present research study seems to be the necessity of raising the students' awareness of the limitations of their stereotypical views as well as making them see Anglo-American culture the way it is lived by native speakers of English.

Abstract

The article presents the results of research conducted in the years 2003-2005 among the students of English Philology in Warsaw, Poznań, Lublin, Białystok, Zamość, Chełm and Biała Podlaska. The quantitative part of the research consisted of a questionnaire "Preferences in the perception of culture among Polish students of English," which was completed by 440 respondents, while the qualitative part included 25 semi-structured personal interviews. The main aim of the study was to determine the students' linguistic and cultural preferences for British and American culture in the context of Polish and European culture. Moreover, the article attempts to answer the question to what extent the perception of Anglo-American culture is caused by the students' personal preferences and to what extent it is a consequence of being taught Anglo-American culture at the English departments. A relatively high rate of the answers indicating stereotypical attitudes to Anglo-American culture seems to suggest that it is the personal preferences and extra-curricular activities rather than classes devoted to British and American culture that have larger influence on the reception of Anglo-American culture among the students of English Philology.

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