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FROM THE HISTORY OF POLISH LEXICAL ITEMS
KABAŁA ‘KABBALAH/CABALA, FUTURE-TELLING’,
STAWIAĆ KABAŁĘ ‘TO TELL FUTURE’, AND OTHERS*

The article discusses semantic shifts in the Polish lexical item *kabała* ‘Kabbalah/cabala’ and related units: *kabalistyka* ‘Kabbalism’, *kabalista* ‘Kabbalist, fortune-teller’, *wpaść w kabałę* ‘get oneself into a bad fix’, *stawiać kabałę* ‘to tell future’. With time, these items became dissociated from their primary meanings and changed the semantic domain from religious (or even mystical) to colloquial. The study shows the origin and the paths of semantic development of these word-forms, as well as transformations in the linguistic awareness (worldview) of the speakers of Polish.

KEY WORDS: evolution of meaning, semantic shift, history of Polish, phraseology, *kabała*

The Polish word *kabała*, recorded since mid-15th c. (*SBań*), comes from the Hebrew *quabbālā* ‘that which has been accepted’, ‘love received’, or ‘tradition’ (Kopaliński 2006: 495–496). Originally, the word denoted a doctrine¹ that was a combination of mystical and esoteric motifs.² The goal

* The article appeared in Polish as “Z historii polskich jednostek leksykalnych: *kabała*, *stawiać kabałę* i podobne” in *Etnolingwistyka* 28, pp. 245–255. The present English translation has been financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, project titled “English edition of the journal *Etnolingwistyka. Problemy języka i kultury* in electronic form” (no. 3bH 15 0204 83).

¹ Although in contemporary Polish the word is capitalised when it is used in this meaning, I will not be capitalising it – consistently – in the present work. In the light of its polysemic nature, the introduction of two orthographic forms would be a misguided decision.

² However, Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah are not the same, despite what is suggested in some sources (e.g. Mopsik 2001: 10).

of this philosophy, immensely popular in mediaeval Europe, was to elevate humans onto a higher, more perfect stages in their development. Kabbalah encouraged one to live according to the rules of the so-called “Tree of Life” (*Sephirot*), which showed the way for the human soul to ascend and for God to descend down twenty-two tree limbs linked with ten spheres (Scholem 1987: 18; Lancaster 2006: 37; Zalewski 2000: 3).

A significant component of this mediaeval philosophical doctrine was the so-called *gematria*, i.e. a system of alphanumeric calculations based on the Hebrew alphabet, a quest for words and sentences of a similar value. Words and sentences were exchanged for numbers, which were then compared for exoteric, homiletic, or mystical purposes – this was especially useful in explaining the names, attributes, and descriptions of God (Aveni 2002; Yedidya 2004). A very complex and for some a suspicious (or even a fraudulent) practice, *gematria* was used in Poland as late as in the 16th c.:

Some of our philosophers courageously defended Kabbalistic wisdom, and Jewish philosophers were even more zealous in doing so [...], for this Kabbalistic wisdom contains all Divine, human, and natural philosophy and all things scientific, but not through the arguments of other sciences and right causes but through numbers, figures, and signs. (*SPXVI*)

Many people regarded the philosophers initiated into the Kabbalistic mysticism with admiration and envy. Many did not probably realise that Kabbalah was more than just crunching numbers, but nevertheless they rushed to join the circles. Most of them were Judaists; however, records in Latin have also survived, which suggests that Christians were welcome as well.

The convents practised asceticism by disciplining the body, so that the soul would turn away from earthly matters. It was believed that thanks to fasting and trance-induced loud recitations of hymns and prayers, the Kabbalist can climb the ladder of seven heavenly palaces to the Merkabah (the chariot Throne of God) (Aveni 2002):

The second Kabbalah teaching is called the Merkabah, which concerns high things [...]. This, in turn, is divided into two: arithmancy and theomancy [...]. Theomancy deals with none other than the very Divine Mysteries – he who knows it, is obeyed by the devils, angels, and the elements. (*SPXVI*)

As follows from this quotation, the lexeme *kabata* initially received positive valuation, meaning ‘mysterious science, available only to a narrow group of followers’. Speakers of Polish at the time believed that practising the science affects the dealings of angels, devils, and demons, for it comes from the Creator. It was also believed that along with the Ten Commandments Moses received some additional knowledge that he was told not to reveal.

He only passed it on to the chosen few (the wise ones), who have been protecting it ever since like the most precious treasure:

Having abandoned the Holy Scriptures that [Moses] had left for others to follow, they rushed to practice another ungodly science, called *kabata*, that is the science of living speech, transmitted from one person to another by word of mouth, which they say God gave to Moses on the Sinai as admittance to his mysteries, through characters or written signs, which then Moses did not reveal to everyone but only to some. (*SPXVI*)

One notices here that already in the 16th c. Kabbalah was (mostly, although not always) viewed with some suspicion. A certain degree of distrust probably derived from the age-old aversion to the Semitic community. Ever since Jews settled on the Polish soil, they had been the perennial scapegoat and a target of aggression not only from the Polish side. Being religiously distinctive in a Catholic country, the Jews were approached with reservation, not least because in Catholic teaching they were portrayed as “God-slayers”. In the early periods of the cohabitation of Poles and Jews, tensions would also arise due to the cultural otherness of each side and the poverty of the Jewish community (Niewiara 2000: 40).

These historical facts left their mark on the meanings of *kabala* and *kabalistyka* ‘Kabbalism’. In some contexts they came close to idolatry (cf. the quote above), sorcery (e.g. *This is the sorcery that they call Kabbalah, SPXVI*), or even charlatanism (*Kabbalah is nothing more than a grave error, a perverse and hurtful knowledge, which subverts the words, names, and signs of the Scriptures in a wrong manner, SPXVI*). The word *kabalista* ‘Kabbalist’ sometimes meant ‘cheat’ or ‘heretic’ (always of Jewish descent):

And these errors would not have been sown in the world in numbers greater than by the Kabbalist Jews, foreigners, for with them it is so that the greatest liar is the master of all. (*SPXVI*)

... if only they let me say from the secret Kabbalistic signs that a woman’s name is closer to the tetragrammaton, the unspeakable name of God’s omnipotence, than a man’s name, which does not agree with the Divine name in letters, shape, or number. (*SPXVI*)

The stereotype of the cheat-Jew was especially lively in the 17th c. (Niewiara 2000: 15); consider e.g.: *thieves like Jews would always argue and bargain (SJPXVII)* or *And how can I alleviate my misfortune if these are dealings with Jews? He promised something to me but will probably give nothing, if he is such and such (SJPXVII)*. The second quote is especially significant, as it portrays the Jew as a schemer, a rascal who purposefully puts people in awkward situations. As a result of an association of the term *kabala* with the stereotypical image of its practitioners (i.e., Jews), the newly coined phraseological unit *wprawić w kabalę* acquired the meaning ‘put

someone in an intrigue, trouble', e.g. *I have said that already, the perveris Delatorum Consilis has also, to put in in the Moscow style, placed me in this innocent kabata (SJPXVII)*.³ Bańkowski suggests that this notion may have arisen under the influence of Russian, where it meant 'a slave-like dependence on someone, especially of insolvent debtors on their creditors' (it had probably been borrowed into Russian from French). The meaning may have possibly developed from an earlier sense (also present in Russian), namely 'something vague and incomprehensible' (*SBań*). However, according to Sławski (*SSław*), the units *kabata*⁽¹⁾ 'slave-like dependence on someone' and *kabata*⁽²⁾ 'something vague' were homonyms because they derived from different sources: the former from the French *cabale* 'intrigue, machination', the latter as a borrowing from Hebrew. Due to their phonetic similarity, the words were also semantically reinterpreted, that is, they began to be associated with each other (Pastuchowa 2008: 126–132). All things considered, irrespective of how the meaning 'slave-like dependence on someone' emerged, the influence of the Russian lexeme on the meaning 'get involved in an intrigue or trouble' is indisputable.⁴ The association, fairly common in the Middle Polish period (early 16th–18th c.), was aided by the progressively more widespread command of the Russian language, along with the 17th-c. stereotype of the Semitic usurer financially controlling many members of the nobility.

Although in the 18th c. the collocation *wprawić w kabatę* was no longer recorded, its semantics by no means disappeared: related meanings continued to be expressed through other units, such as *wykręcić się z kabaty* 'give up one's involvement in a scheme' (e.g. *Idźże teraz, wykręć się z tej kabaty, jak możesz* 'Go and back out of the scheme now if you can', *Linde*); *robić przeciw komuś kabatę* 'scheme against someone' (e.g. *Jestem pewny, że jakąś przeciw tobie robią kabatę* 'I'm sure they're scheming against you', *Linde*); *zrzec się kabaty* 'stop scheming' (e.g. *Wy członki niedotężne, ty gminie niestaty, przejdź w stan obywatelstwa i zrzecz się kabaty* 'Hey, you impotent members, you changeable rabble, be citizens and stop scheming', *Linde*). These units were neither phraseological (or collocational) variants of *wprawić w kabatę* (Lewicki 2003: 204–213), nor its synonyms (Buttler 1982: 27–36). Their usage was

³ It is important here to note that the new meaning can only be ascribed to the phraseological or collocational unit as a whole, for the word *kabata* alone probably had other connotations at the time, as exemplified in *Linde* (*SJPXVII* only records *kabata* as part of this collocation).

⁴ It is sobering at this point to recall the caveat expressed several decades ago by Maria Honowska: "All semantic analyses by definition vacillate; they are all indeterminate and carry with them a mark of arbitrariness, an ever-disturbing factor of subjectivity" (Honowska 1960: 248).

restricted to the political context. However, the word *kabała* meant the same as in the 17th-c. *wprawić w kabałę*, i.e. ‘intrigue, scheme, trouble, problem’. One could thus expect that 18th-c. lexical items such as *kabała*, *kabalistyka* ‘Kabbalism’, *kabalista* ‘Kabbalist’, *kabalistyczny* ‘Kabbalistic’, were only evaluated negatively. It turns out, however, that the recorded uses of these items include relatively few in which *kabała* meant ‘scheme’, ‘deceit’, ‘heresy’, or ‘idolatry’. Admittedly, Samuel Linde defined *kabała* as ‘secret games with numbers and signs’ (*Linde*), but in a later fragment he regards it as

... a tradition, tale, secret theology of Hebrew provenance, elevating the mind to considerations of heavenly matters and to a communion with spirits by apprehending God’s nature, the hierarchies and offices of the angels, the numbers of the skies, the proportions between the elements, the efficacy of herbs and rocks, as well as animal instincts and people’s innermost thoughts. (*Linde*)

This excerpt indicates that Kabbalah in the 18th c. was well-known and enormously attractive both among Judaists and some Christians because, among other reasons, it helped one raise one’s soul towards an understanding of God (Aveni 2002), in an ecstatic and emotional manner, under the assumption that it belongs to the chosen few, capable of the self-discipline necessary to obtain wisdom. It was believed (cf. above) that the Universe is composed of seven parts, the heavens are arranged into seven spheres, and angels are grouped into seven hosts.

It must be noted, however, that towards the end of the Middle Polish period the lexeme *kabała*, beside ‘Kabbalistic philosophy in the sacred Kabbalist book of Zohar’, also meant ‘alchemy’. Alchemy was set on finding the philosopher’s stone containing alkahest, with its power to protect people from illnesses and endow them with long lives. Dealing with herbs and stones was thus the domain of alchemy, rather than Kabbalah. The fact that Linde nevertheless includes this sense in the semantics of *kabała* suggests that the latter was in the 18th c. undergoing the process of extension.

Also the lexeme *kabalista* ‘Kabbalist’ can semantically be placed in that period between the semantic realms of *kabała* and *alchemy*; cf. *I got into a conversation with a certain wróżek, or a Kabbalist* (*Linde*). The term *wróżek* was used in reference to an alchemist, a practitioner of white magic, fending off evil forces (*Linde*; Moszyński 1934: 345). It is therefore beyond doubt that in the 18th c. the meaning ‘alchemy’ was very much a part of the semantics of *kabała* and its derivatives.

The question now arises, however, when and how the word obtained a new (and now prototypical) meaning of ‘cartomancy, palmistry, numerology’. Interestingly, the first reflexes of this semantic shade were already recorded in the 18th c., cf.:

Kabbalah is a science full of mysteries among Jews. Its beginnings go back to the conversation between God and Moses on the Sinai. It then developed into fortune-telling, i.e. arriving through sorcery at necessary conclusions from indifferent causes, that is from combinations of calculations to judgments and solutions. (*Linde*)

The association of Kabbalah with sorcery should not be surprising. Apart from gematria (which described the future of individuals and the whole nation) it dealt with astrology, except that in Jewish mysticism, in contrast to regular astrology, one's fate was not determined by the stars but by spiritual worlds that exerted their influence on both humans and heavenly bodies. Each planet was thought to control two zodiac signs, whereas configurations of stars and planets were believed to impinge on the fate of specific individuals (*Yedidya 2004*).

One can thus assume that by the time the Middle Polish period reached its half-stage, *kabała* was associated with two kinds of divination, namely astrology and numerology. It is, however, surprising that this meaning of the word was not recorded in the 19th c.: *SWil* describes its semantics as 'Jewish tradition; a secret skill of communing with the spirits', 'scheme, intrigue, conspiracy', listing such collocations as *stawiać kabałę*, *układać kabałę*, *ciągnąć kabałę*, lit. 'put on/lay out (play)/pull *kabała*'. They can doubtless be treated as phraseological variants (*Adamiec 2007: 162*) that meant 'ask the cards about future events' (*SWil*). This meaning could have arisen from two sources: either as a generalisation of the sense 'astrology, numerology' or – which seems more likely – from the increased popularity of the tarot cards (earlier, in the 15th–16th c., dice poker was usually played to tell future).

Although the beginnings of the tarot date back to the 15th c., the real revival of this kind of fortunetelling took place in the second half of the 19th c. It was at that time that the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was established in Great Britain (*Christopher 2006: 40*), known for its use of esoteric knowledge, a synthesis of Kabbalah, tarot cards, and astrology. The group added Kabbalistic symbols to the tarot deck (*Idel 2002: 272*; *Greczyszyn 2009: 10–16*). Thus in the whole of the 19th-c. Europe Kabbalah began to be associated with the tarot, and so the card-playing associations of *kabała* emerged in Polish as well (cf. the aforementioned collocations *stawiać/układać/ciągnąć kabałę*).

The meaning of *kabała* 'Jewish tradition; a secret skill of communing with the spirits' shows that in the 19th c. Kabbalistic tradition was not so well known as before: it was treated as a form of spiritualism, which is a far-fetched simplification. Interestingly, however, *SWil* does not record the words *okultyzm* 'occultism' or *nekromancja* 'necromancy', which may

suggest that *kabała* was at the time the only synonym of *spirytualizm* ‘spiritualism’ that had been derived from a different root (cf. the same-root derivatives *spirytualizowanie* ‘the action of engaging in spiritualism’, *spirytualista* ‘adherent of spiritualism’, *spirytualizacja* ‘spiritualisation’, or *spirytualność* ‘spiritual aspect’). The other of the 19th-c. meanings of *kabała*, namely ‘scheme, intrigue, conspiracy’ (cf. *należać do kabały* ‘belong to *kabała*’, *SWil*), was in the 18th c. only present in conventionalised collocations of the type *robić przeciw komuś kabałę* ‘plot *kabała* against someone’ or *zrzec się kabały* ‘withdraw from *kabała*’. These collocations, however, must have been extremely widespread, given the fact that in the next century the meaning became entrenched in the semantics of the word *kabała* itself. As a result, in some contexts the word meant ‘guerilla activities’ and ‘counterforce to the rules of official politics’, whereas its verbal derivative *kabałować* was explained as ‘to plot, scheme, intrigue’. Other derivatives, such as *kabalista* (masc.)/*kabalistka* (fem.) ‘Kabbalist’, *kabalicki* (*kabalistowski* or *kabalistyczny*) ‘Kabbalistic’, were semantically closer to the word’s primary meaning ‘Kabbalistic science and practice’ (*SWil*).

However, *SW* records as many as six meanings of *kabała*:

1. ‘Jewish tradition of mysterious, Divine wisdom; first oral, then written and developed in two mystically-theosophical apocrypha’;
2. ‘cartomancy’ (*układać/ciągnąć kabałę* ‘lay out/pull *kabała*’, i.e. ‘tell future from cards’);
3. ‘numerology’;
4. ‘book with rules of divination’;
5. ‘scheme, intrigue, conspiracy’;
6. ‘difficult situation, predicament’ (*wpaść w kabałę* ‘get into a fix’).

Nearly all these semantic shades (except number 4) had been recorded much earlier, albeit without being registered in all sources. For example, although neither *Linde*, nor *SWil* record it, 17th-c. Polish probably contained the collocation *wprawić w kabałę* ‘get into an intrigue or predicament’ because in early 20th c. another collocation was recorded: *wpaść w kabałę*. It must have emerged as a blend of two earlier fixed expressions, *wprawić w kabałę* ‘put someone in an intrigue, trouble’ (*SXVII*) and *wpaść w tarapaty* ‘get into trouble’ (*SWil*), “semantically close and identical in tone”, with the resulting modifying contamination-type innovation (Bąba 1982: 19). As the next step, the content ‘difficult situation, predicament’ entered the semantic structure of *kabała*.

The sense ‘numerology, divination from signs’ seems to have gone through a similar development. In my opinion, the meaning is inherited from the 18th c., cf. the quote above, repeated here for convenience: [*Kabała*] then developed

into fortune-telling, i.e. arriving through sorcery at necessary conclusions from indifferent causes, that is from combinations of calculations to judgments and solution (Linde). Another possible path of semantic development is that the meaning emerged as a generalisation of the sense ‘cartomancy’.

In early 20th c. the meaning ‘future-telling from tarot cards’ became more widespread. The items *kabalista*, *kabalistka*, *kabalerka*, apart from the (outdated) sense ‘proficient in Kabbalah’, above all meant ‘a person who engages in Kabbalah’, whereas the diminutives *kabałkować* ‘to do Kabbalah’ and *kabałkowanie* ‘doing Kabbalah’ (from the diminutive noun *kabałka*; Linde, SW) meant ‘cartomancy during play’. The diminutive suffix *-ka* expressed small size but also enriched the overall meaning of the unit with ironic connotations, undermining the value of its root (*SPrst*). Hence *kabałka* was probably used ironically in reference to superstitions, although the data are too scarce to draw convincing conclusions. The items *kabałkować* and *kabałkowanie*, derived from *kabałka* (and not from *kabała*) were thus only associated with ‘future-telling’, whereas the adjectives *kabałowy* and *kabalicki* were used in reference to tarot cards.

It should not therefore be surprising that the primary sense of *kabała* listed in *SJPDor* is ‘cartomancy’. At the same time, however, the examples used to illustrate this sense also evoke the sense ‘palmistry’, as a result of another generalisation process from mid-20th c., e.g.

Why is it, my lady, that you demand to be a fortune-teller?
 Why are you so curious?
 You do look into my palm once and again,
 what will the *kabała* foretell? (*SJPDor*)

The second meaning in *SJPDor* is ‘a book with rules of divination’, then ‘predicament, trouble, worry’, and the last one, ‘Jewish religious-mystical science’. It can be observed that already at this stage in the history of Polish, *kabała* was rarely associated with its primary sense: the lexemes *kabalista*, *kabalistka*, *kabalerka* were terms for tarot-proficient sorcerers, while the adjectives *kabalistyczny*, *kabaliczny* meant ‘to do with magic, mysterious, obscure’ (*SJPDor*). Only the item *kabalistyka* was used in reference to Kabbalah-related rituals, although the editors of *SJPDor* show substantial reservation in this respect. The word is defined as ‘Kabbalah-inspired pseudo-philosophical speculation, sorcery; Kabbalah together with its rituals’ (*SJPDor*) – a definition so framed evokes a range of negative connotations, linking *kabała* and its derivatives with charlatanism, humbug, or crookedness.⁵

⁵ A similar definition is provided in the same dictionary for the word *magia* ‘magic’; cf. Engelking (2000: 7).

It appears that this take on *kabała* is still valid, despite the fact that the editors of contemporary dictionaries, such as *ISJP* and *USJP*, avoid making evaluative judgments about the lexeme. The entry's definition, however, is structured similarly to that in *SJPDor*, the only sense that is missing is 'book with rules of divination'.⁶ The preserved collocations with the lexeme *kabała* include only *kłaść kabałę* 'lay down *kabała*', *stawiać kabałę* 'put on *kabała*' (both meaning 'to tell future'), *wpaść w kabałę* 'get into a fix', *wplątać się w kabałę* 'get oneself onto a fix', and *wpakować kogoś w kabałę* 'get someone into a fix'.

* * *

The primary sense of the lexeme *kabała* has now been forgotten. An average speaker of present-day Polish only associates the word with future-telling, although dictionaries continue to register such meanings as 'a set of doctrines developed in Mediaeval Judaism, concerned with metaphysical divagations on the nature of God or the creation of the world and living creatures, as well as with a hierarchy of beings intermediate between God and creation, or with the migration of souls to God, these ideas being accepted in Kabbalah' or 'predicament, trouble' (*USJP*).

The causes of this process of semantic narrowing include a series of sociocultural transformations. It is natural that along with a disappearance of certain aspects of life (e.g. the practising of Kabbalah as asceticism), the lexis associated with them also disappears (Kleszczowa 2000: 269). The precise time and the way in which the disappearance takes place is, however, problematic. In the case of *kabała*, one can notice a gradual semantic change, which shows that language is conservative in its nature and preserves traces of earlier thinking in the form of "dormant knowledge" (Pastuchowa 2008; Jawór 2011: 88–100).

translated by Adam Głaz

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⁶ Although that sense is listed in *PWJP*, it is marked as outdated. The dictionary also lists the now forgotten expression *kabała kucharek* 'chef's secrets', lit. 'the Kabbalah of the cooks (fem.)'.

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