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SYMBOL AND LANGUAGE IN ACTION PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN POLAND IN THE CONTEXT OF UNCERTAINTY AND UNREST

Abstract

The paper critically analyses forms and structure of public discourse in Poland in the context of recent crises and uncertainty. By focusing on language, symbols and metaphors used by dominant media, the author draws attention to processes and trends emerging in contemporary cultural-political narratives in Poland in 2020–2022. The analysis invites for a broader and deeper study of strategies used by post-media delivering infotainment instead of objective information.

Keywords: language, symbol, public discourse, uncertainty, post-media, Poland

The events of 2020–2022 have brought major changes across the globe. The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine shook the world and societies, especially in the West, living for several decades in increasing prosperity and perceived physical and psychological security, even if the latter was occasionally and periodically violated by factors originating in so-called postmodernity.

Postmodernity, or late modernity, characterised by the accelerating pace of life, the atomisation of society, the fragmentation of individual and collective identity, the reformulation of basic notions such as family, community (including national community), gender, minority rights, etc., has created new conditions defined by Zygmunt Bauman as "fluid," in the process of constant change (2011). Faced with such a constructed reality, the degree of uncertainty about the future increases, generating temporary

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attitudes, living in the moment, here and now. This is further reinforced by a communication system that relies on short, simple information, transmitted quickly, using simplified slogans, and often also simplified graphic signs, symbols, images, photographs, etc., which – due to the limited time frame or space – are supposed to convey the sender's intentions as quickly and accurately as possible. The accelerated pace of transmission does not allow the recipient to reflect or think deeply about the content of the message. The state is worsened by limited competences of the receiver himself, who lacks the necessary skills to deconstruct the meaning of a message critically and reflectively.

The educational system, not only in Poland, does not seem to provide young people with sufficient skills to develop advanced competences of verifying the content of a message, its meaning and possible impact on the audience. An individual deprived of the ability of an in-depth analysis becomes defenceless in the face of a multitude of information delivered through various channels – traditional/printed, online, through electronic means, being at one's fingertips 24 hours a day. How, then, is he/she supposed to make a fully deliberated choice, not dictated by impulse? The ability to make a conscious choice is the result of upbringing and education. It is a reflection of the culture in which the individual grows up. Culture understood broadly, encompassing ways of thinking, acting, behaviour, values, attitudes. etc.

Culture in classical, ancient terms, is the nurturing of the soul and mind (Cicero), as well as the body (Kalokagathia, physical beauty and moral courage). In post-modern times, culture is understood as a collective "programming" or "formatting" of the mind (Hofstede 1984: 21). As the universe is based on symmetry, culture is reflected by anti-culture, in which the classic triad of *truth–beauty–goodness* has been separated from each other and deprived of their original meaning, becoming derogated and confused with ugliness, evil, lies, or, to soften: post-truth, post-beauty and post-goodness. All of these create a new construct of post-politics, which draws on elements taken from theatre, but particularly a distorted one (*theatrum*) in which the symbolic type, symbolic actions and emotions dominate (Banaś 2016). This consequently leads to the growing of an audience that is particularly responsive to a spectacle.

Society of the spectacle, as Guy Deborg (1994) pointed out, lives by images. This has happened as a result of, among other things, the distancing from individuals, of what they used to experience directly, living in small,

local communities with strong in-group ties. The mediation of experiences was influenced by processes initiated in the economy. New modes of production, brought about by industrialisation and later technologization, translated into an increase in the rate of goods and services produced, thus forcing an accelerated rate of consumption. Mass production, akin to mass reproduction, modifying the attitudes of consumers, has consequently also led to changes in modes of communication, appealing more and more to emotion than to reflection. Evidence can be found in forms of contemporary public discourse and narratives, often couched in emphatic language, arousing, for example, controversy, agitation, resentment, annoyance. This also applies to the areas once defined as politics and political culture (now post-politics and post-political culture).

When analysing examples of messages appearing in Poland in the leading media, one could observe (2020–2022) a polarisation of narration, focused on phenomena generating a high degree of uncertainty, anxiety, fear, limited causativeness caused by the influence of a stronger, external entity. This trend has affected both traditional and so-called new/digital media.

Two media houses, the daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* (GW) and the weekly magazine *Sieci* (S), were selected for the purpose of this text to highlight growing trends in media narrative strategies. Both media are characterised by large readerships, long presence on the market, are easily recognisable among other similar media and construct their content along a clearly defined line: liberal in the case of GW and conservative for S.

Events related to the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the migrant/refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine were presented by both media with a narrative characterised by a considerable emotional charge. Not only the language, but also pictures, comments, leads and headlines served to enhance the emotional load of the message. This was further enhanced by evocative metaphors, symbols and wordplay, leading not so much to inform readers of the facts as to tell them about the facts in a particular way. Such a procedure, being used increasingly widely, is transforming classical journalism into infotainment (information mixed with entertainment), even if it concerns critical, tragic, dangerous issues. After all, horror or disaster movies have their broad audiences (film productions by Alfred Hitchcock, Steven Spielberg or Francis F. Coppola being one of the many proofs of this). The universally applicable rule that the viewer's attention increases in direct proportion to the emotive content of

the message also applies to postmodern journalism, examples of which are given below.

Gazeta Wyborcza, reporting on the development of the COVID pandemic in Poland, used rhetoric captured in the following phrases:

How the health ministry flirts with anti-vaccinationists (30 September 2022). In this formulation, the word “flirts” indicates a certain game that the Ministry of Health is undertaking with those involved in the anti-vaccination movement. This particular relation is supposed to be *de facto* a game, a nice not necessary serious relationship for both parties. The reader is reinforced in the belief that there are some not-transparent-enough arrangements in the health sector that foster growing doubts and public mistrust in the government.

Political views strongly influence COVID 19 vaccination in Poland – a study shows (30 September 2022). In the article, we learn that a survey the text relates to was conducted by the well-known CBOS Foundation (sic!), established in 1982, before the political transformation of Poland, when institutions for public opinion research were strictly supervised by the communist state. In the referred survey, the question of “political views and attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccination” is embedded in a much broader spectrum of the assessment of the government’s activities to limit the negative effects of the pandemic. The title of the article does not reflect the full context of the study but only a small part of it. The *pars pro toto* method (or “card stacking”) allows to divert the reader’s attention from the full content of the study, focusing only on a tiny but politically powerful extract.

COVID cases: we’ve got more than enough – alarms a doctor. Patients fail to test themselves and spread the disease (28 September 2022). The article cites a medical opinion expressed by one expert. The increase in infection cases was, according the expert, due to the reluctance to self-test. Individuals questioning frequent testing appeared as spreading COVID. The lead of the text used a manipulation technique by pointing out a direct and unequivocal link between not testing and disease transmission. The message formed in this way exploits one of the basic emotions – fear, not only of the disease, but also of other human beings. A person who has failed to test for COVID is, through such a juxtaposition, equated with a potential risk.

In the fight against COVID-19 the Chinese are testing ducks (7 September 2022). The article informs on the methods imposed by the Chinese

authorities to stop the pandemic. The adoption of a zero COVID strategy, supported by significant organisational, infrastructural and financial input created opportunities for growing corruption. In order to cover illegal money transfers, some local authorities demonstrated extra costs on additional testing on ducks. The information, with an intriguing title delivered also a subtext understandable to the Polish reader. In colloquial language, the leader of the conservative party, Jarosław Kaczyński, would sometimes be referred to by the nickname 'Kaczka'/'Kaczor' (duck/drake).

Bill Gates: A cheap and simple method to reduce the risk of disease? Opening windows (5 September 2022). In this question, pretending to be a statement, delivered by an internationally recognised person, we receive a simple answer to a complex problem. The juxtaposition of the phenomena: the risk of contracting a disease and the opening of the windows (in the room) is supposed to be a simple and cheap method of coping with the infection. The title suggests that the high financial and organisational outlay spent on tackling the pandemic could have been significantly reduced and allocated to other sectors of the economy.

The above examples provide evidence for a strategy of simplifying, reducing important social problems to one-dimensional phenomena, formatting information so as to promote emotions, such as disapproval, contestation, surprise or fear.

Similar procedures, although not identical, are found in the weekly *Sieci*, exemplified below.

Biological weapon or freak of nature (20 April 2020). The title, suggesting a question but not being one, offers the reader two options: either-or. It also suggests that the pandemic could be caused by the use (intentional or accidental) of the virus as a biological weapon, which in itself generates additional fear of the disease and its tragic consequences, as well as of an attack by an unidentified enemy. The second option of "freak of nature" also generates increased uncertainty, the fear of uncontrolled development of the situation, the lack of control over the forces of nature against which one remains defenceless.

A time of great trial. Will COVID influence the presidential campaign (16 March 2020) refers to a time of test, not only for the ruling coalition and the opposition, but also for the society as a whole. This time, as the subtitle suggests, the epidemic may influence the presidential campaign. It will also provide verification of the solidarity attitudes in a society divided by internal ideological disputes. The foreshadowing of a great trial

suggests to the readers that they will soon face a crucial, fundamental (political) choice, affecting the future of the country.

Once the pandemic has passed, we will take off like a storm (quote by the President of the Polish Central Bank, 15 March 2021). The slogan heralds the accelerated development of Poland's economy once the pandemic has passed. The promise made by the President of the Polish Central Bank was meant to lend credence to the actions taken by the institution in the context of the global pandemic that has weakened the world's economy. The lead on the magazine cover can be interpreted as a wish and also as an indirect promise that this would come true. It is worth noting the persuasive strength of the phrase "like a storm," intended to convince the reader that there is nothing to fear because economic recovery will benefit everyone in the country.

COVID-19 Conspiracy theories. Between doubt and insanity (4 May 2021). In addition to the stated slogan, the cover provides a photo of Bill Gates, Chinese army soldiers, cemetery crosses, a graphic visualisation of the virus, and a vaccine. Such a compiled verbal and graphic message announces to the recipient the content which is not unambiguous and its interpretation depends on individual beliefs as to the actual genesis of the pandemic. Intriguing, casting doubt on the main narrative theses, combining Gates, the Chinese army, crosses, a virus, a syringe in a single image, it is intended to produce an effect of anxiety and heightened alertness.

It's hard but we will overcome it (The Prime Minister, 14 February 2022). The main slogan, the content of which is quoted here, is elaborated in sub-headings referring to issues such as the war in the East (annexation of Crimea in 2014), boosting the economy after the lockdown, financial support for vulnerable groups, regaining trust of sceptic groups in the society. The Prime Minister is pictured as an expert. Accompanied by slogans about the government's plan to stabilise the country's post-COVID economy, security, including social security, he delivers a simply message – there is nothing to fear, because the government has a great plan.

Feelings such as fear, existential anxiety, curiosity, disbelief, surprise, amazement are among the most frequently generated through the choice of vocabulary and graphic images. This combination or selection makes a strategy for post-modern media, which should rather be called post-media, as they have moved significantly away from the original provision of information to the telling of facts, events, phenomena, processes. Information has been replaced by indoctrination with varying degrees of

intensity – as power is (soft, smart, hard). Shrinking neutrality has been replaced by “loyalty” to certain political affiliations (liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* and conservative *Sieci*). This in turn fosters polarisation of audiences and readerships. An extensive use of emotional appeal has diverted hierarchy of values with a dominant pathos over ethos and logos.

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