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Polish Education in Opinion-Forming Weeklies. Discourse Analysis in Practice

The aim of this paper is to present the findings of a review of texts on education published between 2009 and 2010 in five Polish opinion-forming weeklies: *Polityka*, *Wprost*, *Newsweek*, *Gość Niedzielny* and *Przegląd*. The analysis included 522 issues of magazines in which 115 texts on school and education were published. The subject of my research interests was to identify the ways in which the press depicts school and education, for I assume that these portrayals play an important role in shaping Poles' perception of school, i.e. how they define its role and tasks¹.

In this paper I have identified metaphors used by journalists writing texts about education. I treat the metaphor as a linguistic measure consisting in intentional transformations of the meaning of words, which subsequently acquire a new significance. This treatment enhances expression, adds vividness to the statements and fosters recall. Metaphors are a useful way of directing the audience's thinking and conveying the author's intended meaning. The primary function of the metaphor is explanatory, in the sense that through the metaphor the way of thinking and the audience's worldview is shaped.

The analysis that was performed of the metaphorical descriptions of school and education allows us to conclude that the opinion-forming press is involved in changing the mentality of Polish society, shaped by tradition, and in reconstructing the way of thinking about education. The aim of this reconstruction is to gain acceptance for the reduction of state spending on education and at least a partial shift of this area of social life to the private sector.

I approached the press statements published in weekly magazines as a discourse and therefore I did not limit myself to reporting on the information and judgements presented in the articles, but I tried to investigate the intentions of the authors of the texts, expose the conflict – or, at times, open warfare – between different views and interests, bring to light hidden agendas, and sometimes also

¹ A detailed linguistic analysis is presented in the book entitled *Obraz edukacji w polskim dyskursie prasowym* [The Depiction of Education in the Polish Press Discourse].

expose the manipulation of information by the discourse participants, who seek to create the most desirable version of reality for themselves.

I subscribe to the opinion of T.A. van Dijk², who has identified two types of social discourse analysis, i.e. firstly, the descriptive-explanatory analysis, oriented towards an unbiased examination of statements, aspiring to objectivity, and secondly, critical analysis, examining the instances of the domination or inequality or some other hidden interests in the discourses. The texts published in opinion-forming weeklies dealing with the contemporary Polish school and, in a broader sense, the entire Polish education system, express so much emotion and so many different concepts of educational reforms and such contradictory opinions that it seems advisable to employ the second type of discourse analysis mentioned by van Dijk, i.e. critical analysis.

Such a research position obliges the author primarily to deal with the language of journalistic statements, to conduct a linguistic analysis of texts, to identify the means used at different levels of the language in order to convey the desired meanings, and especially to address the measures aimed at ensuring that the reader embraces a particular point of view.

The texts on education published in the weeklies under analysis contain a number of metaphorical terms for school and education, which can be assigned to two groups:

- school and education in the battleground metaphor,
- school and education in the market metaphor.

Battleground metaphors are already evident in the titles of the reviewed articles:

1. *Do szkoły jak na wojnę* [To School as if to War] (*Newsweek* 2010, 46).
2. *Szkoła seksualnego napastowania* [School of Sex Abuse] (*Przegląd* 2010, 49).
3. *Operacja „matura” z matematyki* [Operation “Maths Exam”] (*Przegląd* 2010, 12).
4. *Amnestia dla dwójarzy* [Amnesty for F-graders] (*Przegląd* 2010, 22).
5. *Ankieta w profesora* [Appraisal Surveys Aimed at Professors] (*Przegląd* 2010, 47).
6. *Mękamatyka* [Maths Torture] (*Polityka* 2009, 25).
7. *Dziewczynka z nożami* [The Little Knife Girl] (*Polityka* 2010, 39).
8. *Dzieci rewolucji* [Children of the Revolution] (*Newsweek* 2009, 20).
9. *Śmierć entuzjasty* [Death of an Enthusiast] (*Newsweek* 2009, 36).

In the articles themselves, war or battlefield metaphors appear much more frequently. Here are some examples:

When Alek enters the school building, cats [i.e. students of lower grades] cower in corners; once he knocked down a classmate and broke his nose; the boy was hit so hard, because in the hallway he dared ask the older pupil to stop pushing him. [...] In their [junior high school] environment there is a very clear hierarchy, on top of which there are four boys. They are the stars at school. Occasionally they extort money from the kids lower in the school pecking order³.

² T.A. van Dijk, *The Study of Discourse*, [in:] *Discourse as a Structure and Process*, T.A. van Dijk (ed.), SAGE 1997, pp. 31–35.

³ V. Ozminowski, *Do szkoły jak na wojnę* [To School as if to War], *Newsweek* 2010, issue 46.

In an article published in *Newsweek*, a journalist is concerned about children starting school: “350,000 children born in 2003 will fall victim to the educational revolution. Minister Katarzyna Hall’s reform of primary education will do them unnecessary harm”⁴.

Joanna Podgórska in her article titled *Samotność katechety* [Loneliness of a Religion Instructor], while writing about religion classes in Polish schools uses battle metaphors of a slightly different nature. The article begins as follows:

Many religion instructors feel that the Church has sent them to the frontline and left them on their own; parent-teacher conferences are a nightmare, resembling something between a kangaroo court without the suspect-defendant present and an execution. [One of the religion instructors puts it bluntly:] my biggest problem when I go to school is that I am alone. No one has my back. I don’t have any working weapons or ammunition (textbooks or teaching aids), nobody to give me a hand, nobody to protect me⁵.

From the articles quoted above, a depressing image of a school as a dangerous, even threatening place emerges. It is hard to imagine that such a school could achieve the noble goals set out in ministerial documents. In an atmosphere of constant insecurity, or even fear of attack, one cannot introduce students to the world of values, teach respect for other people or develop sensitivity and empathy.

It should be noted, however, that the war metaphor is present only in the texts concerning free public education, which is not economically viable. Texts on private, community and Catholic paid schools show a completely different face of education. The manipulation of readers, who receive selective information: positive about private education and negative about public education, is clearly apparent here.

The *Gość Niedzielny* magazine published a text about the Private Catholic Junior High School and Secondary School in Sosnowiec. The article paints a very positive picture of the school, which, apart from high teaching standards, fosters the development of students’ interests, educates them, supports them and offers assistance in solving any difficulties they may have.

Depending on the students’ needs, study clubs are formed. A school theatre and a school schola have been in operation for years. Before or after lessons there are additional classes in subjects that young people have problems with. But they are also used by those preparing for the Olympiads and subject competitions. Every year the school has several competition finalists and Olympians – mainly in geography and history. In the past school year the school had such great exam results that it ended up among the best schools in Sosnowiec and beyond [...] That is why the school has no problem attracting students. They travel not only from the towns in Zagłębie Dąbrowskie, but also from Siewierz, Olkusz or even from as far as Katowice, Mysłowice or Silesia. The tuition fees are not a deterrent. If a given student comes from a poor background, we are willing to reduce the tuition fees, says the school headmistress⁶.

⁴ Z. Wojtkowska, *Dzieci rewolucji* [Children of the Revolution], *Newsweek* 2009, issue 20.

⁵ J. Podgórska, *Samotność katechety* [Loneliness of a Religion Instructor], *Polityka* 2010, issue 50.

⁶ B. Gruszka-Zych, *Sosnowiecki katolik* [Catholics in Sosnowiec], *Gość Niedzielny* 2009, issue 36.

In turn, Joanna Podgórska in *Polityka* describes community schools as:

open, friendly, and democratic. They nurture an intelligentsia ethos and civic attitudes. [...] For Dorota Dobroczyńska [mother of a pupil], community schools are not comfort bubbles, but places where the atmosphere fosters normal child development. Those children who feel supported and safe will be able to cope more easily with the world than those who are constantly having their wings clipped. A tough school of punishment, humiliation and pressure gives you a baggage that you have to deal with in adult life. [...] This is not a school for the nouveau-rich. For many parents, tuition fees are one of the most serious budget items. We treat it as an investment in our children. There are fantastic teachers who can naturally stimulate intellectual activity without the children feeling overburdened and pressured⁷.

Market metaphors, present both in titles and in the content of a number of articles, are as popular as the battlefield ones. Let us examine the headlines first:

1. *Dyplomy z zieleniaka* [Degrees from a Street Market], *Newsweek* 2009, 26.
2. *Głupio wydane pieniądze* [Money Down the Drain], *Newsweek* 2009, 34.
3. *Dorastający biznes* [A Growing Business], *Newsweek* 2010, 15.
4. *Szkoły z kasą* [Schools with Money], *Polityka* 2009, 40.
5. *Z dyplomem bez pracy* [Educated and Unemployed], *Przegląd* 2009, 40.
6. *Uniwersytet sp. z o.o.* [University Ltd.], *Newsweek* 2010, 8.
7. *Magister bez pracy* [Master's Degree and No Job], *Przegląd* 2010, 30.
8. *Uniwersytet z przeceną* [University at a Discount], *Wprost* 2010, 4.

Writing about school in market terms leads to the widespread economisation of thinking about education and is now common; one could argue that it has become a kind of a standard. This is hardly surprising. The recognition of the free market and the laws that govern it as the most effective mechanism for the circulation of goods, leads to the creation of a free social market governed by the laws of economics and the principle of profit, where all goods are tangible and quantifiable, and what they have in common is money. Again, a few quotations:

Katarzyna Zych from Krosno invested over 200 thousand zlotys in her first kindergarten. [...] Today she has 40 children in her care, 6 employees and a monthly income of about 20 thousand zlotys, more than half of which is spent on staff salaries. She is yet to make a profit, but the business is viable nonetheless⁸.

A recent graduate is an investment for the employer, and at times an uncertain one. After all, no one can guarantee that a young person, once they learn the basics of operating in a given industry, will not soon run away and join the competition⁹.

In 131 state schools there are 807 thousand full-time students. One student's year of study costs the taxpayer PLN 14,000. This is surprisingly much, considering that at the best private universities in Warsaw – the Kozminski University and the School of

⁷ J. Podgórska, *Efekt cieplarniany* [The Greenhouse Effect], *Polityka* 2009, issue 14.

⁸ L. Grzegórska, *Dorastający biznes* [A Growing Business], *Newsweek* 2010, issue 15.

⁹ A. Grabau, *Z dyplomem bez pracy* [Educated and Unemployed], *Przegląd* 2009, issue 40.

Social Sciences and Humanities – tuition fees for the year of the most expensive full-time master's studies amount to less than PLN 8,000¹⁰.

Another article uses such phrases as “pumping money”, “productivity” and “economic coercion”.

The greatest return on investment is generated by pumping money not into those with the best or even average performance, but into those who are lagging behind. Educating the excluded would benefit not only themselves, but also entire economies, as it would increase labour productivity and the domestic product. [...] Harvard economist James Heckman estimates that pre-school programmes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds cost \$10,000 a year per pupil – and thus quite a lot – but they generate annual returns in the range of 16 per cent.¹¹

Some articles depict education in both market and battle metaphors. One such text was published in the *Polityka* weekly and was titled *Wyższa szkoła kuszenia* [The University of Temptation]¹². The authors of this article point out that in the situation of demographic decline “a fierce battle for students is under way”, governed by the tough laws of the market. “At many universities education is treated as a commodity, and therefore both marketing ideas and the rhetoric of promotion can be identical to those observed in hypermarkets”.

The economisation of thinking about education leads to widespread disappointment with its effects, blaming it for unemployment and undermining the sense of participating in it. Writing about education in the language of economics results in the prevalence of thinking about it also in economic terms, i.e. in the categories of investment and return. Investing in education means incurring costs in the form of effort, time and energy. On the other hand, the return takes the shape of a career and, consequently, economic success. In other words, the effort invested in education should return in the form of well-paid gainful employment. If we were to continue with economic nomenclature, one may conclude that education is today a high risk investment. The costs incurred in order to obtain education often do not pay off. Hence the increasingly common questions: why should I learn? Why should I study, since a diploma no longer guarantees employment? Until recently, education was an autotelic value: it provided people with wisdom, allowed them to develop their interests and gave them social respect. Today, this is irrelevant. The value of education depends exclusively on whether it prepares for proper functioning on the labour market. Education has become a “commodity”, which must be acquired (as is the case with cars and mobile phones), and more and more often it is only the lack of financial resources for which a diploma could be purchased that hinders people from gaining the status of well-educated individuals.

¹⁰ E. Barlik, R. Omachel, *Uniwersytet sp. z o.o.* [University Ltd.], *Newsweek* 2010, issue 8.

¹¹ S. Theil, *Głupio wydane pieniądze* [Money Down the Drain], *Newsweek* 2009, issue 34.

¹² B. Igielska, A. Listoś, A. Sterczyńska, *Wyższa szkoła kuszenia* [The University of Temptation], *Polityka* 2010, issue 32.

Until a few years ago, it was mainly those who started their professional careers in the third or fourth year of studies and who did not have the time to write their dissertation who were interested in purchasing [their master's thesis]. In many cases, these included also young mothers who had difficulty reconciling childcare responsibilities with their studies. Now there are more and more people who simply do not know how to write their dissertation. Their honesty is disarming: they admit that they have always cheated in exams, they have been buying credit papers for years and they are doomed to do so, says 45-year-old Paweł from Gdańsk, who has been making a living writing papers on economic subjects for 12 years¹³.

Leading readers to believe that education makes sense only when it helps them get a job can be considered harmful. After all, it is widely known that the causes of difficulties on the labour market do not lie solely in poor education and are not unique to the Polish employment market. All international surveys report on the global rise in youth unemployment worldwide, and forecasts for the future are not encouraging. It is predicted that soon the majority of the society will be forced to live without permanent employment. Today, education can no longer be treated as a kind of "springboard" which will allow the student to climb the social ladder and achieve economic success. Such a scenario will prove true only with respect to a small group of children. A realistic assessment of reality requires looking at contemporary pupils as potential job seekers and developing programmes that prepare them for a meaningful life despite the lack of full-time work. Meanwhile, the press reaffirms the reader's belief that education makes sense only when it leads to an attractive job. Otherwise, there is no point in learning. Today, education is governed by economic pragmatism. Effort, time and money invested in education should pay off as soon as possible, otherwise educational activity is pointless.

In a crisis everyone wants to demonstrate that they are the best. But under normal circumstances, studying for two or three majors is nothing more than an excessive investment in education. A graduate works in a specific profession anyway. The same is true of the doctoral degree. This may or may not be a signal to the employer that you are good. A doctorate makes sense if someone's future involves working in institutions and research centres. [...] Post-graduate degrees are also of little use¹⁴.

Another consequence of the economisation of thinking about education is the loss of the high social status that schools and teachers have always enjoyed and the broad public perception of the serious crisis in this sphere of social life, while the crisis of education is, by the press, identified only with the difficulties in the labour market. But school education is not capable of meeting the new requirements set by employers. Today's graduates, unprepared for the labour market, participated in education 10–15 years ago, when completely different standards of education were in force. At that time, the education acquired was sufficient for

¹³ B. Mikołajewska, *Pokolenie kopiuj-wklej* [Generation Copy-Paste], *Polityka* 2010, issue 21.

¹⁴ B. Igielska, *Co studiować?* [What to Study?], *Polityka* 2009, issue 13.

a large part of professional life. Nowadays the situation looks completely different – it is estimated that education becomes outdated already after 15 years, and soon this period will become even shorter. And the school is not to blame, this is caused by rapid technological changes.

Moreover, the crisis on the job market is constantly escalating and its roots go much deeper than education. As a result of technological development, the number of vacancies that can be filled is declining dramatically and it is not possible to “adapt” education to this continuously shrinking market. The economy is undergoing constant change and is always generating new needs, and education, despite continuous reform, is not able to meet those needs. This inevitably gives rise to widespread disappointment with education, blaming it for unemployment and undermining the sense of participating in it. In this state of affairs, fewer and fewer people feel embarrassed by cheating or plagiarism. Since there is a widely-held belief that “education is pointless”, from an economic point of view investing in activities that do not bring any return is hardly worthwhile. The reduction in costs is greatest when a diploma, certifying education, is simply purchased by a young person. Such behaviour seems rational, especially as it is accompanied by the conviction that there is no connection between obtaining a diploma and possessing knowledge and competences. In the traditional world, obtaining education was a consequence of personal development and the accumulation of knowledge, competences and qualifications. Today, for the majority of students, what counts is only a diploma, referred to in the press as “a piece of paper”.

Every month millions of users visit websites where they can outsource their homework or dissertation. – I have recently heard from my 12-year-old son: “Why should I do my homework myself? We have the Internet!”, says a teacher of Polish in one of the secondary schools in Łódź¹⁵.

If we consider the explanatory function of the metaphor to be of primary importance, we need to ponder how this way of writing about education changes the reader’s thinking about this area of social life.

It seems that a critical approach to the current school system should, first and foremost, serve to raise awareness of the state of emergency in Polish education and the consequent need for change. Such intervention by the press can be regarded as justified. The crisis of education (not only in Poland) makes it necessary to introduce urgent corrective measures. The school system created for the needs of the industrial society cannot prepare young people to function in the information society. This problem was discussed by the participants of the VI Civic Congress held in Warsaw on 5 November 2011. The debate paved the way for a conclusion on the need for fundamental changes in the entire school system, or rather for a new concept of education – education that would meet the requirements of the contemporary world. However, in order for such a change to be possible, there

¹⁵ B. Mikołajewska, *Pokolenie kopiuj...* [Generation Copy-Paste].

must be a social demand for an alternative schooling. Meanwhile, both parents and teachers cannot imagine a school other than the one which exists at present and which they have completed themselves.

However, criticism voiced in the opinion-forming press does not in any way contribute to better understanding of the plight of contemporary schools and does not help to create a demand for a new type of education. This is because such criticism is not accompanied by an attempt to discover the mechanisms of the functioning of education or to find out the reasons for its ineptitude. When analysing the quality of critical texts on education, it is hard not to notice that the manner in which journalists write about this realm of social life reflects the pursuit in all today's media of a message that sells. In the world dominated by the media, this should not come as a surprise; today, the media must fight for the audience, and an attractive and sensational message guarantees success – for the survival of a given press title on the market depends on whether the texts it publishes capture and captivate the reader, i.e. whether they attract and retain the reader's attention. It is in the best interests of publishing companies that journalists construct texts in such a way as to make the greatest impression on the readers. Here are some examples of such criticism.

In 2004 the whole country learned from the media that an elementary education teacher in a remote village in Warmia and Mazury maintains that Christopher Columbus was a great Polish scientist, a whale is a fish, and a dive-bomber is a profession associated with going underwater. Anyone who questioned these words of wisdom was called a clod, a dunce, a backward bumpkin¹⁶.

A girl, who at the beginning of September this year nearly killed her friend during a break in one of the junior high schools in Krakow, was just 13 years old. The school surveillance camera recorded 13-year-old Agata stabbing her schoolmate several times with a knife. The video footage also showed that the teacher passing by, when she saw the fight, turned her head and walked away¹⁷.

Many teachers not only do not fight the epidemic of paid homework, but even earn money from it themselves. They write anonymous papers for money, as well as selling their students' secondary school-leaving papers without their knowledge and consent¹⁸.

And what happens [in religious instruction lessons] is easy to see in the videos uploaded to YouTube, which students record with their mobile phones during the class. Papers and inflated condoms fly around the classroom. The boys scream, dance under the blackboard, and jump on the desks. Someone pretends to be having an epileptic fit, another pupil is climbing out of the window, while yet another is trying to treat a completely helpless teacher to a joint¹⁹.

¹⁶ B. Igielska, *Nauczyciel non-fiction* [A Non-Fiction Teacher], *Polityka* 2010, issue 15.

¹⁷ V. Ozminowski, *Do szkoły jak...* [To School as if...].

¹⁸ B. Mikołajewska, *Pokolenie kopiuj...* [Generation Copy-Paste].

¹⁹ J. Podgórska, *Samotność katechety...* [Loneliness of a Religion Instructor].

The opinion-forming press does not help in raising demand for a fresh approach to education, but it trivializes its problems, suggesting a straightforward solution. According to the authors of press articles, the remedy for all evil in Polish education is a change in the way it is financed: limiting the financing of state education and expanding the area of private education – supposedly more friendly and effective, which guarantees students' success in life.

In the USA, there is a widespread belief that the state schools mainly educate children from less well-off families. Private schools enjoy a better reputation as they provide more choice of programmes, education in smaller classes and greater security. [...] For years, only private schools have been ranked first in the UK secondary school rankings. [...] The Swiss Federation of Private Schools has 260 establishments. These are some of the best and oldest schools in the country²⁰.

Therefore, the whole press discourse seems to corroborate the predictions of Tomasz Szkudlarek, who already in 2004 anticipated that the then ongoing debates on the streamlining of education management serve only to create social acceptance for limiting state spending on education²¹.

Summary

Polish Education in Opinion-Forming Weeklies. Discourse Analysis in Practice

This article presents the findings of a research project in which the author reviewed 115 texts about school and education published in five opinion-forming weeklies (*Polityka, Newsweek, Wprost, Gość Niedzielny, Przegląd*) between 2009 and 2010. This analysis has demonstrated which language instruments are used in constructing the education discourse in the Polish press. The author focused on two kinds of metaphors employed by press journalists, i.e. battle and market metaphors. She has attempted to investigate why journalists use these metaphors and write about school in this manner.

English translation: Anna Moroz-Darska

²⁰ A. Sijka, *Kuźnie elit* [Forging Elites] *Wprost* 2009, issue 1/2.

²¹ For more on the subject see: T. Szkudlarek, *Pozór i zmiana: o epistemologicznych unikach pedagogiki – dekadę i trochę później* [Appearances and Change. On the Epistemological Evasions in Pedagogy More than a Decade Later], *Ars Educandi* 2004, vol. IV.

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