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Propaganda[1] image of the social world in Polish children's songs

Summary

The aim of this paper is to present results of critical analyses of Polish children's songs. Having analysed the lyrics of more than eighty Polish children's songs, the author couched main categories construing the image of the social world presented in them. The qualitative research revealed propaganda role of the language used in children's songs: the features of social world (i.e. people, places, relationships, behaviours and values) that are presented in these songs often transmit strongly stereotypical and oversimplified vision of the social reality. In this sense, social education is based on manipulation in which lyrics are the main tool of symbolic violence.

Keywords: children's social knowledge, children's songs, cultural offer for children, propaganda means of language, symbolic violence

Słowa kluczowe: społeczna wiedza dzieci, piosenki dziecięce, oferta kulturalna dla dzieci, język propagandy, przemoc symboliczna

Introduction

Singing children's songs seems to be one of inseparable elements of childhood. From a young age one learns songs from family members and nursery teachers in order to fully participate in various social situations (e.g.: games, plays, scout meetings) and, therefore, to have a sense of belonging and cohesiveness, which appears in literature as a primal role of group singing (Blacking 1973; Jordania 2006). What is more, being contentful texts, children's songs tell stories: realistic or fantastic ones, so they may also serve as sources of knowledge about the world. Therefore, it is worth asking, what kind of knowledge they contain (and generate) – especially if we pay attention to the fact that children's songs' lyrics are mostly written by adults. Jerzy Cieślikowski, the Polish researcher of children's folklore, distinguishes three types of child lore products referring to their authors: 1) prepared by adults for children; 2) created by children themselves and 3) acquired by children from the adults' folklore (Cieślikowski 1975: 75–76). This research project focuses only

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[1] At the initial phase of this research project the author focused in her analyses on the general image of the social world presented in Polish children's songs. The final title that stresses the strongly manipulative function of the songs was formulated after a wide-ranging pilot study.

on the first group of songs, because they primarily make up the cultural offer for children, popularised via Internet, CD's, songbooks, handbooks and other sources. This paper is meant to reveal the hidden messages referring to various social issues in ostensibly innocent and ideologically neutral texts of children's songs.

The meanings given to children's songs

Children's songs are present in many educational theories and practices. First of all, a children song is well recognised as a glue that binds members inside a group. Referring to works from the area of children's folklore (Cieślikowski 1975; Opie, Opie 1985), one may receive much information about its integration and group-building potential, as well as about its entertaining function (Huizinga 1985). Subsequently, while singing the songs, children can learn new vocabulary, exercise their memory, polish their musical skills, motility and physical coordination, as songs consist of three elements: lyrics, musical setting and (usually) gestures (Przychodzińska 1989; Kołodziejski 2012; Kang Shin 2017). For these reasons, children's songs are often used in educational institutions like preschools or primary schools as tools of linguistic, musical and physical development.

In Poland children's songs provide downright an integral part of early education: their contents have to correspond with, or more precisely: 'reflect' current topic of the lesson. In 1999, the Polish government enacted a school reform that assumed substituting the subject-based programme of the early education with so called 'integrated teaching'. It was supposed to provide a deep, holistic knowledge; nevertheless, lack of clarification of the term 'integration' effected in various teaching misconceptions, reflected well by contents of then handbooks and activity books. Instead of knowledge integration, the pupils were only offered a plain topic associations, with absurd like counting votive candles on graves on the occasion of All Saints' Day (Klus-Stańska, Nowicka 2005: 195). The children's songs also had to thematically suit the lesson. In spite of the fact that the next school reforms abolished the obligation of the 'integrated teaching', the general shape of the early education has not yet changed much.

It seems that children's songs play only beneficial roles in early education; nonetheless, an in-depth insight into the lyrics of the children's songs imposes more critical reflection. Considering those songs source of children's knowledge, one should take into account the theories of linguistic images of the world that emphasise a close connection between the language used and the ways of perceiving the reality (Sapir 1978; Whorf 1982; Bartmiński 2007). Thus, it is useful to focus on children's songs lyrics from the perspective of linguistic means of manipulation (Reboul 1980; Stern 1980; Bralczyk 2001) and analyse them paying special attention to hidden messages (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990: 60–61). Being a part of cultural offer for children, children's songs do not belong in children's hands directly – first they are written by grown-up authors and then chosen by parents or teachers for children to sing and play.

In that sense one may speak of doubled role of adult intermediaries and, therefore, of doubled control of information flow. That may arouse suspicion that children's songs, apart from being factors of childhood and early education, play a strong political role and can become tools of symbolic violence or even **propaganda**, defined after M. Szulczewski as "an intentional, persuasive influence on community, directed through forming human attitudes, towards provoking the wanted behaviours" (Szulczewski 1971: 5). According to the Kohlberg's theory of stages of moral development (Kohlberg 1981), the preschool children are incapable of deciding single-handedly what is right and what is wrong, which makes them particularly vulnerable to suggestions. The lyrics of children's songs, taught by the adults and frequently learnt by heart, may suggest a certain world-view and attitude towards other people.

The concept of the research project

The presented research project belongs to critical analyses of cultural offer for children, which is a wide area of pedagogical, sociological and intercultural reflections. The aim of such investigations is to describe the artistic, linguistic and functional quality of texts of culture prepared for children by adult people such as: picture-books (Nikolajeva, Scott 2006; Cackowska 2009), toys (Delamont 1996), films (Waller Hastings 2008), handbooks or school curricula (Chmura-Rutkowska 2002; Klus-Stańska 2002; Zalewska 2013). Simultaneously, the researchers concentrate on (hidden) messages (Rapley 2010: 26) that these various items transmit towards children: what they say about the world and about the people, which is an important source of children's social knowledge. Treating children's song equally – as an element of cultural offer for children and, therefore, as an agent of socialisation, one receives tools to reconstruct the social meanings they supply and to recognise the image of the social world they create.

The main subject matter of the presented qualitative research is: **What pictures of the social world do children's songs generate?** In order to fully refer to this complex issue, I decided to formulate the following auxiliary questions:

1. **What elements do the pictures of the social world consist of?** – focus on presence and absence of various motives.
2. **How are those pictures presented in children's songs?** – focus on the linguistic and artistic means of communication.

These two specific questions give direction to describe the quality of the examined children's songs in terms of contents and form. And the result of the detailed analyses became helpful while trying to answer the last question, a kind of meta-question, which is:

3. **What are the characteristics of an ideal recipient of those songs?** – focus on the underlying concepts of children and childhood.

What is important, the paper presents only chosen results and reflections on the research as it is a section of wider scientific project.

The survey sample consists of more than eighty texts of Polish lyrics, chosen on purpose from CD's, websites (such as Youtube), songbooks and handbooks dedicated to children. There were two main criteria of the choice that embraced: 1) the presence of social content and 2) being counted among the children's music, as far as a music genre is concerned. Additionally, I paid attention to the category of 'popularity', interpreted in this place as 'ease of access', which refers in the first place to songs available on the Internet and included in various rankings (page views, high ratings etc.), and in the second place to songs recommended by the authors of school and pre-school handbooks and guidelines for teachers. This criterion seems to be important because the so called 'popular' songs are very likely to be presented and taught to children at home or in educational facilities. However, in order to see a fuller picture of the social world presented in Polish children's songs, I also focused on those texts of lyrics that are less well-known or can even be perceived as niche (special artistic projects, religious music etc.).

The results of the analysis

The analyses of the Polish children's songs were multistage and were conducted in accordance with the contemporary rules of discourse analyses (Rapley 2010; Flick 2011). At the initial phase I classified the collected lyrics into authorial four-element typology of the children's songs that embraces four various types of communication with children (from frontal transmission in 'laudatory songs' to interactive 'action songs'). The next step was to write down the words, phrases and statements that directly refer to the image of the social world (according to the list of auxiliary research problems). Among them were nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, collocations, idioms, as well as particles and onomatopoeias (if occurred). I also paid attention to contexts in which the phrases are located in songs' lyrics, and to emotional resonance of them. Having organised the obtained data thematically, I was capable of naming the main categories of description that revealed themselves. Basing on the most saturated categories, I made an attempt to reconstruct the general vision of the social world presented in Polish children's songs. In this chapter one finds more detailed information about each stage of the research.

Classification of the children's songs

While listening to various children's songs and reading their lyrics, I noticed a repeating manner of speaking about the social world and decided to classify them at the early stage of the research. The differentiation factor taken into account was the type of message/communication that the examined songs represent. The focus on linguistic measures, as well as on sender-to-receiver relationship, resulted in constructing the following classification of the children's songs:
1. **Laudatory songs** – the lyrics providing detailed descriptions of people (characters) and behaviours that fully face up to generalised social expectations. Their

personalities and actions are presented as desired and set for good examples to follow. The main function of such songs is to be performed by the children to celebrate Mother's Day, Teacher's Day, and similar occasions. The phrases used in those songs have a descriptive nature (present tense) and, despite being opinions, they are used as indisputable facts, for example:

– *Our teacher is so beloved, she has always time for us*;
– *Our kindergarten is a family*;
– *We adore our mothers.*

2. **Instruction songs** – the lyrics providing direct clues how to act and behave (properly) in various social situations, e.g.: by the table, while crossing the street, while washing oneself. They also warn about (sometimes very severe!) consequences of non-conformism. The language used here is full of phrases that express duty, especially the imperatives (*do/don't*) and the modal verbs (*should, must, have to*), for example:

– *How to cross the street? Every student knows! This is very simple, do remember that: you look left, then you look right, then you look left and, when the street is empty, you can easily go!*
– *I brush my teeth because I know well: who doesn't do that, they have troubles!*
– *Who lies to mother, he hurts her heart. Who lies to father, he gets spanking.*
– *We all know the moral from this song: you should always listen to your mummy!*

3. **Song stories** – the lyrics that tell a story or a fairy tale. The characters and situations presented in these songs are fictional and, what is significant, these songs do not necessarily have to teach a lesson (in contradiction to the two above-mentioned types of children's songs). The images of the world resemble the children's 'upside-down stories' (Wasilewska 2013); their main role is to provide amusement, to provoke and to develop the imagination. The language used in these songs is full of artistic means, such as metaphors, oxymorons or nontrivial comparisons, for example:

– *Welcome to our fairy tale: an elephant will play the pipe, Pinocchio will sing for us, we'll dance around the trees.*
– *One day I thought to myself: I'll go far away and employ myself in a cave as a freebooters' cook. For forty thieves I'll cook plenty of pancakes and a huge cauldron of milk-soup.*

4. **Action songs** – the lyrics that are inseparably connected to movement (gestures). Singing and making gestures takes place simultaneously. The motor illustration of the content may be either literal (e.g.: *Head, shoulders, knees and toes*), or symbolic (basing on associations, e.g.: *There sail the banana-boats*). This kind of children's songs play a crucial role in (foreign) language development, especially in early education. What is more, they might be used to improve children's attention span and motor coordination.

The above-presented classification of the examined children's songs is just a draft. It plays, however, a very important, adjuvant role while reconstructing the image of the social world, because the four types of songs are prepared for two different kinds of recipients: 'laudatory' and 'instruction' songs are directed to young people, who need guidelines in almost every part of their social life. They are looked down on by adults who always "know better". One may say that these songs are strongly didactic. On the contrary, 'story-songs' and 'action-songs' treat children more partner-like, their authors leave space for individual interpretation and amusement (instead of scholastic learning). The language used in them appears to be inspired by original children's ways of speaking.

A five-element image of the social world

It may appear that every children's song is unique; nevertheless, the in-depth analyses of the lyrics revealed many similarities, as far as the constituents of the image of the social world is concerned. Basing on them, I managed to distinguish five main groups of elements that compose the general vision of the social world, which are:

1. **Image of people (characters)** – the list of characters (people or creatures representing people) that occur in children's songs: *mother*, *father*, *grandmother*, *grandfather*, *adults*, *child (children)*, *friends*, *teachers*, *preschool teachers*, *policeman*, *firefighters*, *boys*, *girls.*
2. **Image of places** – the list of places that provide background of numerous social acts, e.g.: *home*, *school*, *preschool*, *street*. What is important, however, these places themselves have a specific climax/character that determines the behaviour of the people spending time in there.
3. **Image of behaviours** – the descriptions of behaviours of the above-mentioned characters, which bases on the following contradistinctions: *good – bad*, *obedient – disobedient*, *calm – frisky*, *well-mannered – naughty.*
4. **Image of relationships** – the image of emotional relations between people or groups of people. These may be classified in terms of: *partnership vs. submission*, *kindliness vs. hostility*, *respect vs. contempt.*
5. **Image of values** – the hierarchy of values that the children's songs transmit and generate. The transmission takes place either literally – by explicit approbation or disapproval of some demeanours and behaviours, or contextually – by, for example, presenting only one ("perfect") vision of some elements of the social world (family, school-life, being a mother etc.), and omitting the others.

The above-mentioned list of constituents of the vision of the social world is focused in the first place on presence and absence of various motives in children's songs; nonetheless, the crucial matter of this research project is to describe and reconstruct, how these elements are characterised, considering linguistic and artistic measures.

The vision of the social world: a bucolic tale or a blatant propaganda?

Listening to children's songs, one may have an impression that image of the world presented in them fully meets the terms of happy, carefree childhood. However, what draws my attention in the ways of describing the social world, is the tendency to oversimplify the complexity of the social reality: the lyrics are full of **clichés**, defined by Josef Peter Stern as "masking oversimplification of features of description" (Stern 1980: 282) that offers **a fake vision** of people, places, behaviours, relationships and values. The abovementioned author explains: „[Taking about clichés] we are allowed to use the word 'fakery' because it refers to simplification that makes a described matters not only much more clear, but thanks to this clearness, it becomes something completely different than it originally was. It becomes namely acceptable, although in its initial form we found it absolutely unacceptable or acceptable only to some extend" (Stern 1980: 283).

Stanisław Kwiatkowski said: "The aim of every propaganda transmission it to deliver some ideological and theoretical information, which serves not only as a starting point to deeper reflection, but also as a background for **emotional experience** that is necessary to trigger permanent beliefs in people" (Kwiatkowski 1977: 9–10). That is why all of characters presented in songs are one-dimensional, either good, or bad, and their behaviours and demeanours are strongly connected to social roles they fulfil, which is particularly apparent as far as gender issues are concerned. Therefore, we find only loving, cooking and house-keeping mothers; big, strong and hard-working fathers; ever-smiling, pretty (pre)school teachers; obedient and sensible girls; naughty and frisky boys. The lyrics propagate stereotypes and may become a source of prejudices like sexism or ageism.

Children's songs are supposed to be sung – individually or in choir, but under control of the teacher. Every child has to sing the same, even if they do not agree with the contents. In this sense they remind much of **slogan**, the well-recognised propaganda mean, described by Olivier Reboul as follows: "A real slogan does not give opponents any chance of reply, it excludes any possibility of answer, any dialogue, and puts to face the only alternative: **keep silent or repeat it**. This is [slogan's] basic 'phatic' function: not only to draw attention, but just to end up communication, to prevent any interference" (Reboul 1980: 309). In contrast, social life is based on negotiating the meanings; people interact in order to broaden their perspective and to understand each other. Slogan-based children's songs exclude the existence of various viewpoints, offering only one, 'safe' – but still unreal – vision of the social matters. One may suspect that such a transmission has to infantilise the potential recipients, devaluate their personal knowledge, feelings and experience, in order to turn them into unaware, narrow-minded mass. And it all under the cover of sweet and romantic illustrations. Needless to mention that both clichés and slogans are **well recognised means of linguistic propaganda** (Kwiatkowski 1977; Bralczyk 2001).

Conclusions

The critical reflection on the Polish children's songs revealed ideological and political entanglement of the presented visions of the social world. The lyrics demarcate the children's horizons of interpretation (Hirsch 2013) by offering a cut-and-dried image of the social world. Basing on belief that the contents should be "close to children"[2], the authors of the children's songs offer a very simple, black-and-white vision of the social reality, which indeed is extremely complex and depends on many conditions. The lyrics namely construct the non-existing, utopian world. This world, however, is very poor, because it consists of only few elements that are believed to be appropriate for children (taboo issues like suffering, social inequalities, violence etc. are avoided), and there is no room for reflecting on and discussing the social meanings. The ideal recipients of these songs is someone naïve, unaware of social controversies and problems, and blindly following the rules given; a so-called *tabula rasa* devoid of personal experiences and emotions.

That is why it seems very important for teachers to pay attention to social contents presented in children's songs' lyrics, and to leave some place for children's personal reflection. It may turn out that their personal experience is much wealthier that the text of mediocre song.

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[2] The refers to Wygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) (Wygotsky 1980: 86), which describes the difference between the current abilities of a learner and the tasks that (s)he cannot do without help. In these terms, the contents of children's songs could become agents of development; nonetheless, if being 'close to children' is understood only colloquially, it may mean: 'childish', 'infantile', 'naive'.

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