

T. XXIII (2020) Z. 2 (58)

ISSN 1509-1074

DOI 10.24425/rhpp.2020.133422

ROCZNIK

HISTORII PRASY POLSKIEJ

Prasowy dyskurs medialny.
Rzut oka na tradycję
i terażniejszość

**Media discourse:
The tradition and
the current situation
of the press**

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SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

dyskurs medialny, prasowy dyskurs medialny, dziennikarstwo, prasoznawstwo, tabloidyzacja, przemiany genologiczne

KEY WORDS:

media discourse, press discourse, journalism, press studies, tabloidization, genre change

ABSTRAKT

W tekście spoglądam na dyskurs prasowy jako na specyficzny, bo najstarszy rodzaj medialnego dyskursu. Wskazuję jego wybrane wyznaczniki i cechy, m.in. internetyzację, dyferencjację nadawczo-odbiorczą, „dziennikarstwo obywatelskie”, tabloidyzację i przemiany gatunkowe.

ABSTRACT

Press discourse is a specific — and the earliest — kind of media discourse. This article focuses on its most important characteristics, like internetization, sender-recipient differentiation, citizen journalism, tabloidization and genre change.

Summary

The article is an overview of chosen elements of press media discourse, treated here as a kind of broadly understood media discourse. Press discourse is examined as the oldest medium with well-developed tools and tradition, but tendencies redefining classic journalism and press are also highlighted. The author discusses the Internetization of press discourse, clear sender-recipient differentiation, “citizen journalism”, fake news, tabloidization and genealogical changes.

Streszczenie

Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy, jest szerokim spojrzeniem na wybrane elementy, aspekty medialnego dyskursu prasowego, który traktuję jako rodzaj szeroko rozumianych dyskursów medialnych. Na dyskurs prasowy spoglądam jako na najstarsze medium z wykształconym własnym instrumentarium i tradycją, ale równocześnie wskazuję na tendencje, które redefiniują klasyczne dziennikarstwo i tradycyjną prasę. Wskazuję na internetyzację dyskursu prasowego, wyraźną dyferencjację nadawczo-odbiorczą, zjawiska „dziennikarstwa obywatelskiego” i *fake-newsów* oraz na tabloidyzację i przemiany genealogiczne.

Modern studies of the media and media linguistics assume media discourse as the basic category. In this article, I define discourse, to quote Maria Wojtak, as “all communication practices related to a particular field of human activity. This way of looking at this concept allows us to interpret discourse as the use of language, communication situation or interaction”¹. In that definition the “field of human activity” is the institutionalised media, the sign of the modern culture space. There are many kinds of media discourse, but this article will only analyse the one related to the press.²

Media discourse itself, treated as a hyperonym, can be defined in various ways. Iwona Loewe believes that

media discourse is a specific kind of one-way communication, facilitated by mass media, where the sender is institutionalised [...] and the public (audience) is the recipient. Sending a message requires appropriate tools [...]. The aim of the sender is to direct the attention of society and to influence the opinion of the public. Within the media discourse, we can distinguish the following types, depending on the transmission mode: press discourse, television discourse, radio discourse and hypertext discourse. From the semiotic point of view, it is a type of communication belonging to the mediasphere and combining three fields of signs: iconosphere, sonosphere and the logosphere, excluding the fourth one — galenosphere.³

Simultaneously, Urszula Żydek-Bednarczuk sees media discourse as

a communication situation surrounded by social, cultural, and political circumstances. It is a tool of social practices and exercising power. It includes not only knowledge, but also ideology. It is defined predominantly through contextual factors, not structural ones. Discourses are open sets of mutually connected utterances, sharing topics, genres and functions.⁴

¹ M. Wojtak, *Rozłożone gazety. Studia z zakresu prasowego dyskursu, języka i stylu*, Lublin 2015, p. 3.

² This article is a modified and edited sub-chapter *Prasowa odmiana medialna* of the book: B. Skowronek, *Mediolingwistyka. Wprowadzenie*, Kraków 2013.

³ I. Loewe, *Dyskurs medialny — przegląd stanowisk badawczych*, „Forum Lingwistyczne”, issue 1/2014, p. 14.

⁴ U. Żydek-Bednarczuk, *Dyskurs medialny*, [in:] *Stylę współczesnej polszczyzny. Przewodnik po stylistyce polskiej*, ed. E. Malinowska, J. Nocoń, U. Żydek-Bednarczuk, Kraków 2013, p. 188.

For both researchers, media discourse is a hyperonym, comprising a whole spectrum of possible specialised media discourses. Within media discourse understood as a whole, the researchers described another media discourses (as hyponyms). The basis for the distinction was the extra-linguistic component, i.e. the technical type of data transmission. When using that distinction, we can discuss press media discourse, radio media discourse, television media discourse, and the Internet media discourse (or, as Loewe would call it, hypertext media discourse).

The press is historically the oldest kind of media transmission. That is why virtually all of its aspects have already been analysed multiple times. The press discourse has been and still is described from various perspectives. There are many studies concerned with the press (especially its language).⁵ Therefore, this text is only a selection (both from the historical perspective and from the modern one) of important issues characterising the press discourse in Poland. Press studies, as a separate field of science, is certainly a well-developed one, with its own interest field and research tools. The press, right at the beginning of its history, developed genological traits, typical not only for it, but also for other types of mass media: regular appearance of particular issues (programmes, forms); consumerist attitude (especially because of the presence of advertisements), a mixture of information, political discussion, serious content, and entertainment; public and supra-individual character, dependence on the (public or commercial) sender's ideology, and shaping opinions based on a particular worldview.

In today's world we can clearly notice the crisis of traditionally understood press readership, dwindling dailies' circulation and numerous changes in functioning of particular titles. The crisis started in the 1970s in the USA because of publishers' ambition to maximise profits and obey the rules of capitalism and consumerism. It resulted in cost cuts, tabloidization and worsening quality of texts. When the Internet became popular, it only made the crisis more serious due to the creation of free news portals and the acquisition of ad senders. Internetization is characteristic for all kinds of media transmission, but it is especially well visible in the press. Almost all titles exist online. Some newspapers and magazines have stopped appearing in print and moved entirely online, and some of them treat the Internet as its main platform and a place to interact with its readers.

The Polish press market is divided between several large publishing groups.⁶ It is in the Polish press where we can see the phenomenon of shaping a particular vision

⁵ Cf. e.g. *Język w prasie*, ed. M. Kita, I. Loewe, Katowice 2019; M. Kita, *Dyskurs prasowy*, [in:] *Style współczesnej polszczyzny...*; M. Wojtak, *Rozłożone gazety...* Those books offer a good description of the topic. I will refer to some of them in this article. Obviously, I will not be able to quote all books about it. It is also important to acknowledge the work of the Press Research Centre in Kraków — from 1956. An interested reader may read about their research in the *Zeszyty Prasoznawcze* journal.

⁶ Cf. chapters devoted to press („Współczesny rynek prasowy”, „Prasa ogólnokrajowa po 1989 r.”, „Prasa regionalna i regionalistyczna”, „Prasa lokalna”, „Prasa parafialna”) [in:] *Słownik wiedzy o mediach*, ed. E. Chudziński, Bielsko-Biała 2007. Also: Z. Bajka, *Rynek mediów w Polsce*, [in:] *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów. Nowa edycja*, ed. Z. Bauer, E. Chudziński, Kraków 2008.

of the world and presenting news in accordance with the publisher's worldview. The worldview is then related to the expectation of specific audience groups. The connection often leads to certain negative phenomena such as differentiation of reader groups and functioning of separate discourse communities connected only by the common worldview confirmed by particular press titles. Another important phenomenon is that of the activation of readers and letting them become "journalists" publishing their texts online and leading various initiatives on social media. The journalist activity of non-professionals, known as "citizen journalism" is a part of "involved" media, a form of recipient activity of large groups of participants of modern culture. The professionalisation of amateurs, a sign of democratisation of the access to the main stream of the media, shows how the Internet has become a community. Obviously, the quality and form of texts counted as "citizen journalism" (mostly published online) varies: from ideological manifestos to distanced analyses. The phenomenon of citizen journalism is not easy to assess or characterise. There are many controversies. Is the Internet the only "citizen" medium? Is a press journalist a social role or just a profession? Will the turn towards the "ordinary" day-to-day life not lead to a topical shift interesting only for narrow groups? Zbigniew Bauer, media researcher and journalist, asked an important question: "What journalism are we talking about? Is what we consider "citizen journalism" really journalism or is it only production of 'infoids', prefabricates which can later be used to create texts, films, recordings or multimedia messages, and informative and assessing narratives".⁷ However, we can clearly see the populist slant of those utterances, a clear tendency to focus on the "ordinary man's" point of view (realisation of the model of colloquial rationality) which makes them closer to the tabloid view of the world. The gravest danger is the appearance of fake news at that moment and their more or less conscious spreading. I would like to remind that fake news and "post-truth"⁸ mean suspicious or untrue pieces of information or individual opinions clearly contradicting common knowledge about given events, which function in the media, especially of the social kind. I do not need to say how important they are for social communication. It is important to know that they shape the image of the public sphere for billions of readers. The vital role of social media in social communication — not the press, radio or TV — is also highlighted by the fact that they are used as main information sources in the public media. It has to be said, however, that the traditional journalism is still alive. Social media tend to simplify communication so utterances of journalists, accentuating their professional identity, and being aware of traits of the press medium, are more and more common.⁹

⁷ Z. Bauer, *Dziennikarstwo wobec nowych mediów. Historia. Teoria. Praktyka*, Kraków 2009, p. 244.

⁸ Oxford Dictionaries named "post-truth" as the World of the Year 2016.

⁹ This is confirmed in the book by M. Ślawska, *Sztuka mediów. O świadomości gatunkowej dziennikarzy prasowych*, Katowice 2019.

Apart from social media and “alternative facts”, tabloidization¹⁰, understood as a common cultural phenomenon and one of main traits of media discourse is also a threat to the official, institutionalised press discourse. Walery Pisarek lists several characteristics of the tabloid style: 1. Bold lettering, 2. Interest in ordinary people’s lives, 3. Using colloquialisms and easily understood forms of language, 4. Using the strategy of dramatization which makes storytelling easier.¹¹ It is also important to mention Denis McQuail, who also discussed popular press and focused mainly on “real stories”, dramatic style of articles, and descriptions of scandals and events in lives of celebrities.¹² The linguistic dimension of tabloidization includes creating an unequivocal image of the world, personalising utterances (using personal pronouns frequently), lowering the level of formality, using many emotionally charged words, hyperboles, building contrasts built on antonyms and stereotypes, and shaping readers’ cognitive processes through the use of metaphors and linguistic games.¹³ According to Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz journalists creating the tabloid vision of reality use simplifications, seek sensation, close the texts in easily-digestible frameworks not requiring any mental effort.¹⁴

It is worth noticing that all definitions and descriptions of tabloids and tabloidization I mentioned above are clearly negative. Tabloidization is approached from the perspective of a researcher, an intellectual. However, the issue is not as simple as it seems. Tabloidization is a semantically multi-faceted phenomenon which utilises colloquial rationality. We need to remember that in today’s world, oversaturated with information coming from various sources (usually media) and which is also fragmentary, polysemic and hybrid, the direction is not shown by “big narrations” and simple visions of the world promoted by socially naturalised values, but by tabloids whose offer becomes an important point of reference for their readers. They sort out information and help people who are often simply not able to digest them. Such media, including the press, present a simple and coherent image of the world; they also explain complicated and unclear topics. However, the image is a result of simplification. We cannot underestimate human need to have a clear vision of reality. Paradoxically, the clearly negative axiology visible in definitions quoted earlier is not a proof of their authors’ subtlety in formulating them.

¹⁰ Cf. *Tabloidyzacja języka i kultury*, ed. I. Kamińska-Szmaj, T. Piekot, M. Poprawa, Wrocław 2010. One can read analyses of various definitions of the phenomenon and its manifestations in popular culture.

¹¹ W. Pisarek, *Wstęp do nauki o komunikowaniu*, Warszawa 2008, p. 134.

¹² D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego*, transl. M. Bucholc, A. Szulżycka, Warszawa 2007, p. 50.

¹³ Cf. D. Kępa-Figura, *Językowe wymiary tabloidyzacji — studium przypadku*, [in:] *Tabloidyzacja języka i kultury...*, p. 129.

¹⁴ M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Media powszednie. Środki komunikowania masowego i szerokie paradygmaty medialne w życiu codziennym Polaków u progu XXI wieku*, Kraków 2008, p. 193.

Quite the opposite: it fits perfectly within the framework of... colloquial rationality, the one typical for tabloids which accentuates unequivocalness, not complexity or ambiguity. It is in colloquial rationality where valuation and creation of semantic opposition is the starting point of each comprehension process.¹⁵ We also need to be aware of the fact that in a big group of readers, there will always be people who interpret and read tabloids' messages critically. During the process of reception, we can notice negotiation of meanings and feeling pleasure from disagreeing with opinions presented in a given text. Currently it is one of the most popular models of reception of all texts of popular culture.¹⁶

Tabloidization is of course not the only aspect of the modern press discourse. Its multidimensionality and most important linguistic traits were exhaustively discussed by Maria Wojtak in her numerous studies.¹⁷ Her findings are crucial if we want to understand the history and the current state of media press discourse. The researcher presents the changes of this kind of messaging (her conclusions can also be applied to other media) and discusses the most important functions of the press: informing about facts, interpreting reality, accumulation of knowledge, mobilising society, and providing entertainment. Those functions are realised in various ways; the rule of syncretism can be applied here. They change positions and significance in specific types of press (or even in particular titles). The modern press discourse is clearly absorbent in character: it is open to other discourses, it swallows them, quotes or changes them, presenting them in a multi-aspectual and formally varied way. It is also characterised by many oppositions — homogeneity vs. differentiation; thematic and functional accumulation vs. thematic fuzziness and diffusion. Differentiation is visible in various fields and registers (also linguistic ones): in general press and the specialised one — specialised in terms of the territory (national, regional, and local titles), topic (monothematic press, titles with a specific profile, e.g. hobby magazines), readership (magazines for men, women or children) or the way of describing facts and opinions (quality press, popular titles, or tabloids). Those registers (I have only mentioned those most typical for the press discourse) overlap, influence and motivate each other. All of them are what makes the press multivocal, polymorphic and linguistically varied.

In her analyses of the contemporary Polish press Maria Wojtak highlights a few typical phenomena, such as the frequent use of colloquialisms, the use of regional variants of language, or using jargons typical for specific groups or professions and barbarisms. She also notices elements of communication practices utilising humour, concepts and linguistic games, original idiolects and all linguistic means which are

¹⁵ J. Bartmiński, *Językowe podstawy obrazu świata*, Lublin 2006, p. 20.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Fiske, *Zrozumieć kulturę popularną*, transl. K. Sawicka, Kraków 2010.

¹⁷ E.g. M. Wojtak, *Głosy z teraźniejszości. O języku współczesnej polskiej prasy*, Lublin 2010; idem, *Rozłożone gazety...*; idem, *Wprowadzenie do genologii*, Lublin 2019. These books contain a rich variety of articles of the Researcher related to many (almost all) aspects of the media press discourse.

a clear sign of the press trying to catch up with rapidly changing reality. It is important to mention that interactive communication style is one of the most important communication strategies in media press discourse. It builds or confirms already existing discourse communities (joined by a common vision of the world) through appropriate linguistic and communication formulas. Direct contact is feigned then (e.g. by appealing directly to emotions of particular groups of recipients, their worldview and ambitions) and communication games are employed to create an impression of “direct” discussion. Homogeneity of the press discourse is visible in its subordination to the discourse of entertainment and the creation of so-called infotainment. That phenomenon, so typical for contemporary media, is based on several processes: describing events as separate facts which cannot be interpreted in any broader context, referring to specific occurrences and not generalised rules or abstract models, personalisation (accentuating human emotions, not the intellect), and sensationalism, highlighting shocking or unusual elements.¹⁸ Tabloidization which I discussed earlier is an important part of infotainment. The effect of thematic and functional accumulation (condensation) applies predominantly to serious journalism focusing on socially important problems (or making some events look like problems — that is why the accumulation helps generate specific images of the world and indirectly manage people’s emotions). A reflection of accumulation is the diffusion effect, presenting serious topics in a light-hearted form or focusing on issues which are actually irrelevant but are presented as more important than in reality.¹⁹ Some press articles presented to readers can be treated as “fast news”: fast-food for information; many magazines or newspapers base their offer on low price, mass distribution, quick consumption, and standardisation.²⁰

A very significant trait of the contemporary press discourse (and other media discourses) — if not the most significant one — are its genological changes, sometimes quite radical. “Genre vagueness” of the typical framework (and its structural, pragmatic, stylistic, and cognitive aspects)²¹ becomes one of the main indicators of the press media discourse.²² Even though we can still read titles adhering to the classic division between entertainment and information, genre

¹⁸ M. Mrozowski, *Media masowe. Władza, rozrywka i biznes*, Warszawa 2001, p. 254.

¹⁹ M. Wojtak, *Styl dziennikarstwa prasowego w perspektywie dyskursywnej*, [in:] *Styl — Dyskurs — Media*, ed. B. Bogołębska, M. Worsowicz, Łódź 2010, p. 89.

²⁰ Cf. M. Laberschek, *Fast-newsy — nowa kategoria produktów informacyjnych*, [in:] *GorszeNIE w literaturze, języku, mediach i edukacji*, ed. B. Skowronek, E. Rudnicka-Fira, Kraków 2013.

²¹ M. Wojtak, *Gatunki prasowe*, Lublin 2004, p. 16–17.

²² Cf. W. Pisarek, *Nowa retoryka dziennikarska*, Kraków 2002; M. Wojtak, *Gatunki prasowe...*; K. Wolny-Zmorzyński, A. Kaliszewski, W. Furman, *Gatunki dziennikarskie. Teoria. Praktyka. Język*, Warszawa 2006; M. Wojtak, *Analiza gatunków prasowych. Podręcznik dla studentów dziennikarstwa i gatunków pokrewnych*, Lublin 2008; idem, *Wprowadzenie do genologii*, Lublin 2019; Z. Bauer, *Gatunki dziennikarskie*, [in:] *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów...*

hybrids, alterations, variants, making traditional typologies vague and the phenomenon of combining different genological traits are definitely much more common. Changes can be applied to the structure of a given utterance (but it is not very common), its pragmatic aspect, the cognitive one or the stylistic one.²³ Every genre develops more by introducing innovations than by exchanging redundant elements for different ones. This tendency functions well alongside the multifunctionality of the press discourse, the structural variety of its texts and their stylistic polyphony — almost all imaginable stylistic varieties with their new qualities.²⁴ Another important phenomenon is that of genological reductionism, typical for specialist press (e.g. hobby magazines). It means that certain forms of writing are omitted, and the hierarchy of genres is changed — some of them are treated as more important and other ones are devalued.²⁵

Metamorphoses of press genres are motivated by various cultural and linguistic processes, as well as those taking place in the media. Maria Wojtak highlights the following mechanisms as the basic ones: making a message more attractive (they apply to all genres); blurring boundaries between different types of messages (information or opinion) or specific genres; compiling genologically similar texts into monothematic and/or monofunctional collections and changing the genre type of a message and recreating it as a kind of text collage; transferring elements of utterances in a form originally typical for a different genre; and making graphic elements of the message more attractive (e.g. pictorial means used in tabloids). In her analysis of media genres and their linguistic realisations the researcher approaches the topic from the classic formal and textual perspective (initially used in literary studies): she analyses structural, stylistic and pragmatic aspects. Małgorzata Lisowska-Magdziarz, however, perceives media genres differently. She sees them as cultural experiences of a mediated world. She also accentuates the link between genology and economic assumptions of media institutions and functionality in the light of organisational, market, and production conditions and media and cultural contexts. Media genres (especially the press ones) are described by her as capable of satisfying certain expectations of the audience and allowing them to read their messages actively. In her opinion a media genre is a code, or even a collection of codes:

representative and presentational, technical, ideological, common for authors of particular texts in the media and groups of recipients [...] In order for a media genre to start existing as a code, not only do we need a group of characteristic texts built based on common

²³ Cf. M. Wojtak, *Metamorfozy gatunków prasowych*, [in:] *Współczesne media. Status. Aksjologia. Funkcjonowanie*, vol. 1, ed. I. Hofman, D. Kępa-Figura, Lublin 2009, p. 364.

²⁴ M. Wojtak, *Głosy z teraźniejszości...*, p. 183–185. Cf. T. Piekot, *Dyskurs polskich wiadomości prasowych*, Kraków 2006.

²⁵ Cf. M. Wojtak, *Gatunki mowy charakterystyczne dla prasy motoryzacyjnej*, „Prace Językoznawcze”, issue VIII/2006.

rules relating to form and content, but also specific systems of rules, expectations, and assumptions, brought to the reception process by the audience and which interact with media texts during the process and during reworking, reinterpreting, discussing and using them afterwards²⁶.

I would like to make it clear that the most important aspects of the media press discourse discussed above are definitely not an exhaustive study of the subject — it is very subjective, has many dimensions and changes rapidly. The contemporary press discourse is a very dynamic media field, with new forms and manifestations appearing all the time. There are certain aspects of the discourse, such as multimodality of press texts²⁷, use of ideology by some titles, creation of certain images of the world or vocabulary, varieties of language in the press, which require separate studies.²⁸ As long as the traditional press, does not become a “strange anachronism, doomed to become extinct in a short time”, as some people seem to think.²⁹

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²⁶ M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Media powszednie...*, p. 135–137.

²⁷ Por. M. Ślawska, *Pespektywa multimodalna w badaniu tekstów prasowych*, [in:] *Współczesne media. Media multimodalne. Tom I. Zagadnienia ogólne i teoretyczne. Multimodalność mediów drukowanych*, ed. I. Hofman, D. Kępa-Figura, Lublin 2018.

²⁸ Por. M. Kita, *Dyskurs prasowy*, [in:] *Style współczesnej polszczyzny. Przewodnik po stylistyce polskiej...*

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