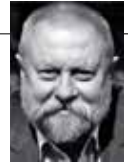


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The Ethics of Public Speech

Prof. Jerzy Bralczyk

Institute of Journalism, University of Warsaw Council for the Polish Language,
Polish Academy of Sciences



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Two metaphors are most often used to describe the Polish public discourse, especially with regards to politics: *wojna* (war) and *teatr* (theatre). These invoke the two concepts of *aggression* and *deceit*, transgressions certainly not limited to the communicative sphere. Contemporary Polish public statements largely manifest no consensus-seeking desire or concern for the truth – providing grounds for such public speech to be recognized as unethical, as dishonestly dictated by cold political calculations.

The style of language grows harsher when the *scena polityczna* (political stage) is perceived as an *arena walki* (arena of battle) between two sides – which may be variously defined, but are generally clearly recognizable. In this acute political conflict, each side accuses the other of communicative transgressions. Participants in the public discourse frequently focus their criticism of their opponents mainly on statements the latter have made. Many verbal attacks, therefore, are justified by pointing to the dishonesty and aggressiveness of others. A significant portion of the Polish communicative space therefore seems to be getting filled with aggressive and frequently deceitful statements about the allegedly aggressive and deceitful statements of others. Oversimplified formulas, pinning labels on opponents' behavior, are accepted as self-evident and simply ready-to-apply. Some public speakers may be accused of using hate speech, others of manufacturing scorn and disdain.

The use of certain words by one side limits their use by the other. Take, for instance the notion of *prawda* (the truth). The word is most often used in the context of political battles, in accusations leveled against one's opponents (or perhaps here even "enemies"), thereby giving rise to such mental-shortcut expressions as *prawda smoleńska* (the truth about Smolensk), in symmetrical juxtaposition to *klamstwo smoleńskie* (lies about Smolensk). Given that the truth, meant to liberate us, necessarily has to be painful, the notion of striving for the truth can therefore be used to justify even the most aggressive attitudes and actions. Such taking advantage of one of the most cherished values is something that particularly severely violates the ethical principles of communication.

Another dangerous phenomenon involves the use of such concepts and words whose emotional connotations prevail over and obscure their actual meaning – and as such they can now be used with respect to anyone, in any

context. For instance, the word *komunista* (communist) no longer has a clearly defined meaning for many speakers. It has become a widespread epithet, hardly even connected to the meaning of someone devoted, perhaps fanatically, to the ideas of equality and social justice. The cry *komuniści i złodzieje!* (communists and thieves!) even seems to be a natural phrase.

The standard-setting power of public language, including its perception as a kind of battlefield, can lead to the deterioration of linguistic communication in general. It justifies aggression and gives rise to a lack of belief in the usefulness of language as a tool for promoting understanding and mitigating rather than exacerbating conflicts. Mechanisms by which linguistic abuses are recognized and punished are useful and are indeed frequently effective, but it seems that public condemnation of ethical violations in verbal behavior is growing at least as important. Although such condemnation cannot be argued to be particularly effective against such violations, and may even be seen as involving a certain naivety, letting them go uncondemned would be strange and socially harmful. Especially since linguistic aggression is viewed by media outlets, not without justification, as being particularly attractive. Media sources therefore do not only participate in the political dispute, they even drive it: even whilst condemning the social consequences of verbal aggression, the media showcase the harshest such statements and thereby actually promote them. This leads to the increased use of manipulative linguistic gimmicks, not only rhetorical but also eristic techniques. We allow for our decisions as consumers to be swayed by skillful copywriters, for the statements made by politicians to be covertly devised by various spin-doctors – although we really should prefer to be persuaded by those who are not professional persuaders.

Because of the increasing recognition of basically obvious and intentional manipulation in unethical public speech, even genuine and honest statements may get interpreted as if they involved cunning, aggressive and deceitful tricks. Calling for consensus, after all, may be merely a perfidious maneuver, when the speaker is in fact merely seeking to underhandedly weaken the opponent.

Perhaps there might be a way to improve the situation, by recognizing and promoting positive phenomena in Polish public discourse? Including such statements as could be assumed to reflect good will and a desire for compromise, even when there might be justified suspicions to the contrary. ■