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The *Jasnopis* (“clear writing”) project and other recent endeavours to improve communication between public institutions and citizens in Poland

Abstract

Improving communication between administrative bodies and the public involves identifying and removing the barriers to mutual understanding. In linguistic terms, there are three main types of barriers: 1) ethnic, 2) stylistic, and 3) physiological. Since 1945, Poland has been a relatively unitary country linguistically (according to the last 2011 national census, 98.5% of the population speak Polish at home). **Ethnic** linguistic barriers in public communication in Poland were reduced by the Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and on Regional Language. Interest in **stylistic** barriers in public communication has intensified in Poland during the last decade. On the initiative of various state institutions (including the Ministry of the Interior, the Ombudsman, the Ministry of Culture and the President’s Chancellery), several events have taken place since 2010 including a Congress on Official Language, a social campaign on “Citizen-friendly official language” in 2012 and a public debate in the presidential palace entitled “Can official language be citizen-friendly?” (www.prezydent.pl/dialog). In this spirit, in 2015 the Prime Minister’s Chancellery launched a website – www.citizen.pl – and the Ombudsman continued to implement the recommendations of the Riga conference “ICT for an Inclusive Society” to improve conditions for the participation of people with physiological disabilities in digital communication. The growing interest in the comprehensibility of official messages has led to the development of automatic methods of measuring their accessibility, using “readability formulas”. Currently, so far as Polish texts are concerned, two programs of this type compete against each other in the network: the older *Logios* from Wrocław (www.logios.pl) and the newer, more advanced *Jasnopis* from Warsaw (<http://jasnopis.pl/aplikacja>).

Streszczenie

Poprawa komunikacji między urzędami a ludnością wymaga identyfikacji a następnie usunięcia barier utrudniających porozumiewanie się. Ujmując problem w kategoriach językowych, można wyróżnić ich trzy główne kategorie tych barier: 1) etniczne, 2) stylistyczne, 3) fizjologiczne. Od 1945 r. Polska jest krajem względnie jednolitym językowo (według ostatniego (z r. 2011) spisu powszechnego 98,5 % ludności mówi w domu po polsku). Ewentualne etniczne bariery w publicznym komunikowaniu się w Polsce redukuje ustawa z 6 stycznia 2005 r. o mniejszościach narodowych i etnicznych oraz o języku regionalnym. Zainteresowanie barierami stylistycznymi w publicznym komunikowaniu się nasiliło się w Polsce od roku 2010. Z inicjatywy różnych instytucji państwowych (m.in. Ministerstwa

Spraw Wewnętrznych, Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich, Ministerstwa Kultury i Kancelarii Prezydenta RP) odbyły się konferencje poświęcone urzędowej polszczyźnie, jak Kongres Języka Urzędowego i publiczna debata w Pałacu Prezydenckim "Czy język urzędowy może być przyjazny obywatelom?" (zob. www.prezydent.pl/dialog) oraz kampania społeczna "Język urzędowy przyjazny obywatelom" z roku 2012. W tym duchu w r. 2015 Kancelaria Premiera uruchomiła stronę internetową www.obywatel.pl, a Biuro Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich wprowadzało w życie rekomendacje konferencji ryskiej "TIK na rzecz społeczeństwa integracyjnego" w zakresie poprawy warunków uczestnictwa osób fizjologicznie niepełnosprawnych w komunikacji cyfrowej. Rosnące zainteresowanie zrozumiałością urzędowych tekstów przyczyniło się do rozwoju automatycznych metod mierzenia ich dostępności za pomocą specjalnych programów. Obecnie, jeśli chodzi o mierzenie zrozumiałości polskich tekstów, współzawodniczą ze sobą w sieci dwa programy tego typu starszy Logios z Wrocławia (www.logios.pl) i nowszy, bardziej zaawansowany Jasnopis z Warszawy (<http://jasnopis.pl>).

The improvement of communication between authorities and the public – indeed the improvement of public communication in general – requires the identification and removal of barriers on the road towards mutual comprehension. So far as language is concerned, these barriers fall into three broad categories:

- 1) Ethnic,
- 2) Stylistic,
- 3) Physiological.

I will discuss briefly the endeavours of the Polish state authorities and their institutions to remove each of these. Let us begin with the ethnic barriers, in other words with a situation where the authorities communicate in Polish but some citizens don't understand this language, as their mother tongue is German, Belarussian, Lithuanian etc.

Poland was for centuries a multicultural, multilingual, and multifaith country. However after World War II, under the Soviet model of Central European states, Poland became a unitary state, both nationally and in terms of language. Shortly after World War II, a programme of ethnic segregation began to be implemented in the eastern and western provinces of Poland within its new borders. Accordingly, the former pre-war legislation dating from 1924 on the state language¹ was replaced on 30 November 1945 by a Decree clearly stating that Polish was the state language of Poland, and the only language of public administration.

The planned ethnic segregation in Central Europe was not fully implemented, and individuals and families who had declared themselves to be Polish in 1945-1946 and remained within the Polish state began to declare themselves to be Ukrainian or Belarussian when this ceased to carry the risk of deportation from

¹ The laws of 1924 on the state language and on the official language of the courts, prosecution offices and notaries granted the status of an auxiliary language to some other languages (Belarussian, German, Lithuanian, Ukrainian) in some provinces of Poland.

Poland. And so, surprisingly, it started to become apparent that the population of the Polish state was not as ethnically homogeneous as had been thought; it has its own minorities.

Nevertheless, the latest National Census in 2011 recorded 38,522,000 Polish residents of whom 36,522,000 declared that they speak only Polish at home, and only 596,000 (i.e. less than 1.5% of the total population) who declared that they did not speak Polish at home. If we take into account that half of those who say that they do not speak Polish at home are people who use the Silesian language (which is considered to be a dialect of Polish), one can venture the opinion that – at least statistically – ignorance of the Polish language is not the most important obstacle in public communication between citizens and the administrative authorities in Poland. The interests of linguistic minorities are protected by the law of 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and on Regional Language. According to this law, a minority language or a regional language is used in 33 municipalities in Poland,² in addition to the Polish language, in communications between citizens and the authorities.

1. Against stylistic barriers

Complaints about the incomprehensibility of official communications in Poland date back to at least 1918, i.e. to the beginning of the Second Republic. Criticism about the difficulty of the language used in official documents and in many communications in the press and on the radio was heard in the 1950s, 60s, 70s and so on. From the 1960s we start to see psychological and linguistic studies and research on the intelligibility/difficulty of Polish texts used in public communication. Most of these studies and research were inspired by American publications on readability formulas, by the theories on elaborated and restricted codes of B. Bernstein or by the critical opposition of *bürgerliche vs proletarische Öffentlichkeit* of O. Negt and A. Kluge.

A reminder of these experiences would be interesting, but as the title of my contribution uses the word *recent*, I will confine myself to a discussion of key initiatives for the intelligibility of language in public communication in Poland in the last 5 years, i.e. since 2010. In that year, the Council for the Polish Language assessed, on its own initiative, the intelligibility of the websites of seven Polish ministries. The report which followed this assessment concluded that the texts on these sites are “written in the typical bureaucratic style”; that “the authors show no consideration for the users”; that “they abuse fashionable foreign words”; that “they don’t follow the rules of Polish spelling”; and so on.

² A list of these municipalities is published by the Ministry of Administration and Digitization: https://danepubliczne.gov.pl/dataset/urzedowy_rejestr_gmin__w_ktorych_jest_uzywany_jezyk_pomocniczy.

At that time, the issue of the intelligibility of messages in public communication had become a subject of interest in Parliament, in the President's Chancellery and in Government. In 2012, the Office of the Senate, together with the Ombudsman and the Institute of Public Affairs, launched a social campaign under the slogan "Citizen-friendly official language". Within this framework a web campaign, *Petition – your right*, was also included, which promotes the submission of demands by the public to the authorities at various levels; the main tool of the campaign became the website www.petycje.edu.pl.

In the interests of better communication with citizens the Prime Minister's Office began training civil servants to formulate written and spoken official messages in a simple manner. As a newspaper (*Rzeczpospolita* from 28.05.2012) reported, "The government has declared war on bureaucratic splutter". At the same time the University of Warsaw launched a postgraduate course, "Polish language in government and business", on the Internet.

In October 2012 a Congress on Official Language took place in Warsaw, involving linguists, lawyers, representatives of central and local government and of the media, and translators of EU documents. Its co-organisers were the office of the Ombudsman, the Senate, the Governor of Mazovia Province, the Head of the Civil Service, the Council for the Polish Language and the National Cultural Centre, under the patronage of the President of Poland, Bronislaw Komorowski. The Congress ended with the adoption of a Declaration which recommended the setting up of psycholinguistic training for officials in the field of intelligible public communication in speech and writing, the development of appropriate advisory publications, and – most importantly – instilling in officials a sense of responsibility for effective communication.

A key document for a modern model of communication within official departments and between official departments and the public is the "European Code of Good Administrative Behaviour" (ECGAB), which promotes the transformation of the role of government from controlling to supportive. The initiators of the Polish campaigns to improve public communication generally rely on Art. 22 of the European Code of Good Administrative Behaviour, prepared by the European Ombudsman in 2005:

1. The official shall, when he or she has responsibility for the matter concerned, provide members of the public with the information that they request. When appropriate, the official shall give advice on how to initiate an administrative procedure within his or her field of competence. The official shall take care that the information communicated is clear and understandable. (Art. 22 of the European Code of Good Administrative Behaviour)

A few months after the Congress on Official Language (25 February 2013), the presidential palace in Warsaw hosted a public debate with the aim of answering the question "Can official language be citizen-friendly?" (a record of this debate is available on the Internet at www.prezydent.pl). The participants in the debate,

invited by the President, answered “yes” and pointed to the causes and sources of the “unfriendliness” of official language, manifested in its “incomprehensibility”.³

At these conferences and congresses, or after them, the following jocular maxim could be encountered: “According to the Polish Constitution, the official language in the Republic of Poland is Polish, but this doesn’t mean that the Polish language is official (here: ‘bureaucratic’)”.

Perhaps the most recent government action to support “simple and user-friendly communication of officials with citizens and citizens with officials” is the governmental program “Citizen”, whose main tool will be a web-based service, <https://obywatel.gov.pl/>, launched on 31 July 2015.⁴ Prime minister Ewa Kopacz announced that the launch of this service fulfilled a promise she had made after taking office in 2014. Under the slogan *The end of official newspeak*, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister has prepared two publications containing guidelines for citizen-friendly communication. They are being sent to all directors general and will be promoted among officials throughout Poland.

2. Against physiological barriers

According to the Declaration approved unanimously on 11 June 2006 at the conference “ICT for an Inclusive Society” in Riga, Latvia,

Many Europeans still reap few or no benefits from ICT and there are resistant gaps in ICT use. For instance, 57% of individuals living in the EU did not regularly use the Internet in 2005; only 10% of persons over 65 used the Internet, against 68% of those aged 16-24; only 24% of persons with low levels of education used the Internet, against 73% of those with high levels of education; only 32% of unem-

³ It was pointed out that, inter alia, one of the factors leading to the incomprehensibility of official texts is a sense of power over reality, extending to a sense of power over words. So *cancellarisms* are invented and consciously put into circulation by officials. Lawyers are also subject to the temptation of organising reality using specifically defined words; their contribution to the blocking of communication between administration and the public is *jurisms*. The academics with their *scientisms* follow behind the lawyers. An important source of neologisms and neosemantisms in Polish contemporary bureaucratic lexis is the European Union with its *bruxelisms*. One can therefore expect that particularly difficult vocabulary will characterise official texts where bureaucracy, law, science and the influence of the EU combine; for example, the texts of the policy documents of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. My personal experience confirms these expectations.

⁴ Administrators of the portal “obywatel.gov.pl” invite potential users to use it as follows: “Each time you want to carry out a transaction, we regard it as our service for you. We want you to conduct your business quickly and efficiently, that’s why we have collected our services together in one place. We describe in a simple and accessible way what you have to do; what you need to prepare; where you need to go; and what you can do without leaving home.” Obywatel.gov.pl is “a good source of information about the services that the state provides to you”.

ployed persons used the Internet, against 54% of employed persons. Only 3% of public web sites surveyed comply with the minimum web accessibility standards and guidelines, hindering access to web content and services for people with disabilities, who comprise some 15% of the EU population. ("ICT for an Inclusive Society" Declaration 2006)

There are specific issues characterising those portals dedicated to overcoming communication barriers which arise not so much from the closed and obscure nature of the messages, or from physical causes such as distance, walls, storms etc., as from the disability or partial disability of users. Among this group are two Polish portals: the community service "dostepnestrony" ("accessible pages")⁵ and the Polish Academy of Accessibility, supported by the government. Both of these portals and the government program "Obywatel" ("Citizen"), mentioned earlier, go back to the conference in Riga and its ambitious target to reduce by half the differences in Internet usage between the women, lower education groups, unemployed and "less-developed" regions etc., between 2005 and 2010.

Since the emergence in Poland of the digital exclusion problem, the Office of the Ombudsman has monitored issues relating to the accessibility of websites for people with disabilities, and undertakes interventions within its jurisdiction.

In 2010 for the first time the Office of the Ombudsman estimated the accessibility of public administration websites for people with visual disabilities. The results of this evaluation (done with the participation of blind and visually impaired consultants) revealed a failure of public authorities to comply with accessibility standards when creating and editing services. (Office of the Ombudsman)

The most recent public report on the accessibility of the websites of public institutions ("The accessibility of websites of public institutions") was produced by Piotr Witek and Michał Dziwisz in 2013 and made available by the Office of the Ombudsman in December 2014. Their report includes a double test of approximately 3,000 objects created between 2012 and 2013:

The report shows the most common irregularities in website construction and the barriers faced by people with disabilities. The report also includes a summary of the qualitative changes and trends occurring over six months in the availability of online public administration services, and, on this basis, forecasts and estimates the state of accessibility of public websites at the end of May 2015.⁶

Taking into account the results of comparative studies from the years 2012 and 2013, the authors conclude:

⁵ The portal "dostepnestrony.pl" ("accessible pages") was created as the result of cooperation between the Friends of Integration Association and the State Fund for the Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities. It is co-financed by the European Union.

⁶ *Dostępność witryn internetowych instytucji publicznych dla osób z niepełnosprawnościami. Analiza i zalecenia.* Warszawa 2013, 6.

Based on the survey, analysing the pace of the changes made over six months and assuming that the speed of the processes remain unchanged, it can be assumed that on 31 May 2015 – at a time when **all** public bodies should be available at all online services for the disabled and otherwise digitally excluded – **only 7.8%** of sites owned by public bodies will be considered accessible, and **32.3%** of portals will have intermittent problems with access to public information.⁷

But in spite of this:

Comparison of the results of research conducted in the last quarter of 2012 and in July 2013 allows the following conclusions:

- More and more public websites are being made accessible to the digitally excluded.
- There was an increase of 1.5% in the number of accessible sites over the six months.
- The increase in the number of services with intermittent problems with access to public information over the six months amounted to 2.3%.
- The direction of change is positive, but the pace is clearly insufficient.
- **If the current growth rate is maintained in 2015, only 7.8% instead of the assumed 100% of public services will be available to those digitally excluded.** [emphasis added]
- Awareness of the obligation to provide information in forms adapted to the individual needs of citizens with disabilities is still too low among government employees.

With this in mind it is necessary to increase the pace of adjustment of public web sites to the WCAG 2.0 standards and to the needs of people at risk of digital exclusion.⁸

For this purpose it is necessary to carry out systematic training and regular checks of the level of accessibility of public websites.⁹

Probably, Poland is not alone among EU countries in terms of delays in the implementation of the recommendations of the Ministerial Conference on “ICT for an Inclusive Society” in Riga.

⁷ *Dostępność witryn internetowych instytucji publicznych dla osób z niepełnosprawnościami. Analiza i zalecenia.* Warszawa 2013, 31.

⁸ *Dostępność witryn internetowych instytucji publicznych dla osób z niepełnosprawnościami. Analiza i zalecenia.* Warszawa 2013, 40.

⁹ In this connection the definition of “communication” in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 13 XII 2006 r. should be remembered. Art. 2 stipulates that: “*Communication* includes languages, display of text, Braille, tactile communication, large print, accessible multimedia as well as written, audio, plain-language, human-reader and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, including accessible information and communication technology; *Language* includes spoken and signed languages and other forms of not spoken languages”.

3. *Logios and Jasnopis*

The nationwide, pan-European and even global (bearing in mind the American "Plain Writing Act" of 2010) interest in the accessibility of messages in public communication has contributed to a renewed interest in the research on readability from the 1950s and 60s. I am thinking here about the American experiments, formulas and publications by Edgar Dale and Jeanne Chall, Rudolf Flesch, Robert Gunning, George Klare and Wilson L. Taylor. The methods and formulas which they developed to measure the readability of the media were adapted at the time (ie. in the 1960s) to the Slavic languages in Central Europe by Walery Pisarek in Krakow and Joseph Mistrík in Bratislava, among others. The idea of measuring the readability of administrative and commercial communication was revived in Poland at the time of discussions about the official language (Broda/Ogrodniczuk/Nitoń/Gruszczyński 2014; Charzyńska/Dębowski 2015).

At the beginning of the second decade of this century, young linguists from the University of Wrocław in collaboration with computer scientists from the Technical University of Wrocław transplanted onto Polish soil the ideas of the Plain Language Movement and offered their services to the state administration in assessing the intelligibility of official documents. In 2012 their activities were institutionalised as the Laboratory of Simple Polish Language at the Institute of Polish Philology at the University of Wrocław. Its head is Dr. Thomas Piekot. Under his guidance, a model or "formula" for measuring the "fogginess" of Polish language texts has been elaborated, based on Robert Gunning's readability formula (Gunning 1952). The original Gunning formula, designed to measure the readability of English texts, had to be adapted to the Polish language, which differs from English in, among other things, its inflections and the average length of words.

The Wrocław formula allows its users to categorise Polish utility texts¹⁰ into 7 categories, depending on their degree of "fogginess", from the simplest to the most difficult. The fog index runs from 1 to more than 22 and is associated with education measured by years of schooling. So texts in which the rated fog index is between 1 and 6 correspond to those with primary education, while texts whose index is 22 or more can only be fully understood by a person with a doctorate.

¹⁰ By utility texts are understood non-literary texts, intended to serve public information and instructions.

4. Seven categories of Polish utility (i.e. non-literary) texts according to their “fogginess” (acc. to www.logios.pl)

Degree of “fogginess”	FOG index	Texts suitable as reading material for people with an education level ...
I	FOG 1-6	Primary school
II	FOG 7-9	Middle school
III	FOG 10-12	Matriculation
IV	FOG 13-15	Undergraduate (Licentiate)
V	FOG 16-17	Master’s degree
VI	FOG 18-21	Postgraduate studies
VII	FOG 20 or more	Doctorate

Wrocław readability researchers have developed a computer program to automatically measure the “fogginess” of Polish texts. This program is freely available on the Internet at “logios.pl”. **According to this program, the FOG index of the Polish version of my contribution is 18, and so it is a “very difficult” text, suitable for postgraduate students.**

In 2015 a similar, though more advanced, computer program to measure the readability of Polish utility (i.e. non-literary) texts has been announced and made available by the researchers from the University School of Social Psychology in Warsaw and the Institute of Computer Science of Warsaw University. That is the “Jasnopis”, mentioned in my title. It is the outcome of a project subsidised by the Polish National Science Centre in 2012-2015. The aim of the project was firstly to identify text peculiarities that hamper understanding by the reader, and secondly to create a computer tool to measure the degree of difficulty or readability of the Polish utility (i.e. non-literary) texts. Adopting this task – as the authors of Jasnopis explain – was justified by the enormous amount of very difficult texts in the public arena, the need to increase social awareness in this respect, and the wish to change the state of affairs in various institutions such as the Office of the Ombudsman, the Ministry of Regional Development, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Administration and Digitization, the Ministry of Education, the Agency for Enterprise Development, the Social Insurance Institution and others. In these institutions, a need was identified for an empirically verified tool that would be able to evaluate objectively and quickly the readability of a text, taking into account the specificity of the Polish language and providing results that could be compared with results obtained by other methods. According to the authors of Jasnopis, it meets those conditions satisfactorily.

From the linguistic point of view, a verbal text consists simply of lexical units (words or morphemes) and ways of combining them into larger structures. To simplify this, we can say that since in the text there is nothing but vocabulary and syntax, i.e. words and sentences, the causes of language difficulties in any verbal expression must be sought in hard ("difficult") words and tough sentences. Underlying all readability formulas is this simple truth. The differences between them in this respect boil down to differences in the criteria for "difficult" words, and assessing the part played by vocabulary and syntax in reducing the readability of the text. Most readability formulas assume the average length of a sentence in a text (measured by the number of words) to be a statistically reliable indicator of the difficulties of its syntax.

The indicator of difficulty of vocabulary in most readability formulas is based on the length of words, not on the average word length measured in syllables, but on the percentage of unusually long words in the text. In the English language, words which have three or more syllables are assumed to be difficult; in the Polish language, those having four or more syllables.

The "Jasnopis" program, in analysing a text:

- defines its difficulty on the seven degree scale;
- distinguishes its "difficult" words (four or more syllables, except for words considered to be generally known);
- distinguishes its over-long sentences;
- distinguishes its over-difficult paragraphs (relative to the difficulty of the whole text and in relation to the selected class of difficulty);
- suggests proposals for possible changes to difficult words (synonyms, hyponyms, hypernyms);
- also offers indexes of clarity, statistics, graphs of lexical similarity and a linguistic model of paragraphs, and assesses compliance of the style of the paragraph with the style of the entire text or its compatibility with the chosen style.

The authors of the competing programs – i.e. *Logios* and *Jasnopis* – say that both of them are still under development and construction. Both are used partly by the same institutions, among them the Government Legislation Centre, the Centre of Information of the Ministry of the Interior etc.

5. Final comments

In conclusion, it is impossible not to ask about the consequences of all these endeavours, efforts, treatments, examinations and prescriptions for understandable communication; "plain language movements"; programmes like *Logios* and *Jasnopis*; fora for accessible cyberspace; academies of accessibility etc., etc.

In my opinion, the situation gets worse with every decade, and probably the language used by the political or economic powers and by science will never be commonly understandable. But we have to strive for it, because without our efforts, public communication will become even more obscure.

There are 24 different official languages in the EU. Presumably nobody knows them all. Our Paneuropean communication is based on interpretation and translation. Maybe within each ethnic language, we will need each year more interpreters and translators from professional into the current (plain) language, and vice versa.

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