

Catholic Church in Poland in the Face of Modernity (Discourse Analysis)

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a study on discourse (statements) of the Catholic Church in Poland on issues of contemporary culture. Scholarly reflection on the statements of the Church in Poland is very important, because in Poland it still is a significant actor in public life and has a significant impact on society.

The Polish Church expresses its views on many issues, among them some of the more important are those ethical and legal, such as in vitro fertilization, euthanasia, abortion and the entire complex of problems under the term *gender*: situation of women, legal status of civil unions (civil/domestic partnerships), and same-sex unions etc., as well as issues related to ecology.

Research into discourse of the Catholic Church in Poland shows that it perceives these issues as a major threat to Christian culture, the moral order of the world and the wellbeing of the humanity. Church discourse on these subjects is agonistic (confrontational), its function is to demonstrate — to expose — the evil nature of modern “utopias” and to defend Polish society against their adoption (especially in the form of legislative acts).

The paper uses linguistic discourse analysis, in which the starting point is linguistic means and textual strategies used by message senders.

Introduction

In the beginning, I would like to say that I am a linguist and the subject of my research are texts. Texts are applications of the language, therefore I deal with them as a linguist. I treat the statements of the Catholic Church as its discourse - hence the expression *discourse analysis* in the sub-title of my paper. Therefore, I deal with analysis of the Catholic Church discourse in Poland.

What is discourse? In contemporary science, there are obviously multiple concepts of the notion of discourse. I adopt this meaning where the discourse is: communication practice of a certain social entity, i.e. creation of texts by the said entity¹.

In my case, this social entity is the Catholic Church in Poland which is the only of the so-called particular Churches of the common Church. To a certain extent, its activity is compliant with the activity of the Holy See in Vatican and, to a certain extent, its activity is of local nature, limited to what happens in the country, in Polish culture, politics, economy, etc.

The Catholic Church creates an abundance of texts - both spoken and written. These are: sermons, pastoral letters (of one bishop or a group of bishops, i.e. episcopate), catechisms, theological works and many others. Popes deliver homilies and speeches and, first and foremost, announce encyclicals. The people of the Church officials speak also in various genres typical for the radio, television, Internet and press.

A very important aspect of the discourse is the fact that it has a purpose. Creation of texts must have a purpose. The Catholic Church propagates its religious doctrine and moral teaching, its own hierarchy of values as well as assessment of reality through its discourse. It aims at obtaining the greatest possible

¹ Vide: O’Sullivan T., Hartley J., Saunders D., Montgomery M., Fiske J., *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*, (Polish edition: *Kluczowe pojęcia w komunikowaniu I w badaniach kulturowych*), Wrocław, Astrum, 2005, 59-61 p.; Howarth D., *Discourse* (Polish edition: *Dyskurs*), Warszawa, ed. Oficyna Naukowe, 2008, 15 p.

impact of its point of view and manner of reality perception on the convictions of the Poles, their attitudes and behaviours.

In other words, the Church, by means of texts influences the intellect and emotions of the society in such a manner, so that in their private, public, professional, political, etc. life, people make decisions compliant with its teaching. It is worth mentioning that the Church is a religious institution, however – as shown both by history and the contemporary times – its objectives are directed not only at the world of *sancrum*, but also *profanum*.

What is a linguistic discourse analysis? A linguist examines the structure of actual texts produced by the given entity (also referred to as the speaker). The researcher examines such elements present in the texts like: topics, words, grammatical, stylistic, rhetoric, pragmatic and other means. What is, however, very important - the study of the text structure is not a purpose by itself, but it is the path to discovery of the world vision, convictions, axiological preferences, etc. on which the discourse is base and which it conveys². The linguistic discourse study is, thus, a discovery of the linguistic conventions applied by the speaker, used to propagate the said convictions and values. Therefore, the question the linguist poses is: what is the text structure and why it is such? What text organisation techniques were used by the speaker in order to have an effective impact on the recipients and to root his or her own ideas in their minds?

Let us add that the linguistic discourse analysis has to be, by assumption, inter-disciplinary. Due to reasons I mentioned, the mere knowledge of language is not enough. In order to understand why and what for the speaker used the given linguistic means, the analyst must look at the text in the context of historical, social, political, socio-psychological and other circumstances. Therefore, the linguist must use the knowledge gained through various disciplines of science, including sociology, political sciences or – as in my case – theology and many other.

In the initial part, I would like to briefly characterise the current situation of the Catholic Church in Poland. Catholics are the most numerous creed group - they account for 87 per cent of the entire population. 40 per cent of Catholics attends church regularly for the Sunday mass. Religious education is conducted within the framework of the national education curriculum. The Church is the owner of a Poland-wide television and radio channel, has a number of press titles and multiple publishing houses. The catholic weekly entitled: “Gość Niedzielny” is placed on the list of the most read so-called opinion weeklies in Poland.

The discourse of the Church in Poland

As I have already mentioned, the Catholic Church makes statements not only in purely religious matters, but also in many other topics regarding social, political, historical issues, customs, morality, etc. My research covers statements that are the voice of the Church in discussions regarding such problems as: contraception, abortion, *in vitro* fertilisation, eugenics, euthanasia, homosexuality, feminism, *gender* ideology, sexual education, ecology and other. Discussions on these topics become particularly lively and hot when the Polish parliament is to enact or amend a law referring to any of these problems. One month ago the *in vitro* act was adopted; in May this year there were discussions over award of certain rights to the so-called partner relationships (that are not a formal marriage); in 2013 the Polish right wing was preparing a petition for complete prohibition of abortion. The discussions are also provoked by certain events, for example in 2013 there was a loud case of a doctor who refused to perform abortion to a woman, although the Polish law allowed her to terminate the pregnancy.

These types of facts make the Church give its statement. In 2013 a meaningful event was the pastoral letter of the Polish episcopate regarding the *gender* ideology. People can also learn about the Church's

² Vide: Dijk van T., (Ed.), *Discourse Studies. A multidisciplinary Introduction*, London, Sage Publication, 2011.

position from the sermons delivered by the priests in the parishes as well as, among other things, from the articles published in the Catholic press.

Therefore, what do Polish Church speakers say in relation to these phenomena? How do they react to them? What linguistic conventions do they use to convince the recipients to their addressees to their manner of assessment of these phenomena?

My answers to these questions in this paper will (for known reasons) be short and synthetic, and I will present them in detail in the version which (I hope) will be published.

Evil

All the phenomena and actions mentioned above are assessed by the Church decisively and unambiguously as evil. Texts on such topics are full of linguistic means that express negative axiological judgements and, along with them, negative emotional judgements. It is also significant that the Church speakers provide their recipients with ready assessments - the image of the presented reality is already valued. Catholics do not need to come to conclusions regarding what is good and what is evil by themselves, but they only have to acknowledge the assessments made by the Church speaker.

The discourse-directive regulating the content and style of texts is: indicate evil and "call it by its name".

It would be impossible to show here all methods for negative valuation used by the Church speakers. Not only are there many of them, but also of multiple types. There are multiple charges and accusations formulated against such actions as abortion, euthanasia, eugenics, ecology and other. I will show only several examples.

Abortion

The language convention to maximally emphasise (reveal) the moral evil of abortion is, among other things, use of such words and expressions as: *killing, murdering, murder, crime*. There are also always certain means used that expose the human ontic status of an unborn person - therefore, such words as *foetus* or *embryo* are never used, but a *child*. Such expressions as *mass murder of unborn children, sentencing innocent, defenceless* or *sick children to death* carry strong moral condemnation and a great load of negative emotions.

***In vitro* fertilisation**

Similar conventions are used in relation to *in vitro* fertilisation - here it is also spoken of: *killing embryos, murdering embryos*. In March this year the Polish bishops appealed to the Catholic parliament members not to vote for the *in vitro* act. In this appeal they wrote, among other things, that *the in vitro procedure threatens the child's life and health*. The Church speakers often put forth the arguments that this method of conception results in physical and mental diseases of the child as well as lack of stable family life (no father or mother if the parents are two men creating the partner relationship).

Gender

Recently, a notion that has been particularly drawing Polish society's attention is *gender*. In Polish this word functions in such an original sound, as an English citation. Therefore, it is commonly incomprehensible, strange. Except for the group of intellectuals, people do not really know what it means, but they believe there must be something evil behind it, since the Church condemns it. The Polish Catholics could learn from the pastoral letters of the bishops on *gender* that is an ideology that proclaims that biological sex has no social meaning and that what matters is, first and foremost, the cultural sex that people can model and define freely, regardless of the biological conditions. According to this ideology, people can freely determine themselves: whether they are male or female, they can also choose their own sexual orientation. I do not think I have to say that such a vision of the world and human is very strange to a regular person in Poland, deeply inconsistent with their convictions regarding

what is normal, natural and healthy. Therefore, it must give rise to anxiety and repulsion reflex. Furthermore, the letter describes *gender* with such words as: *completely contradictory to reality and integral human nature definition; weakening marriage; danger of this ideology; absurd ideology; utopian visions; its deeply destructive character towards the person, human relations and entire social life*. The bishops also write that the vision of the world postulated by *gender* opposes what God established for the good of people.

Ecology

Although the Vatican has recommended care for the environment for a very long time, and recently a new encyclical of pope Francis was published on this subject, ecology is not a favourite subject of the Polish priests (or bishops), and ecologists are certainly not their favourite group of activists. They are accused of multiple things, mostly of reversing the ontic God's order and put animals and plants higher than people. The ecologists also accuse humanity of destroying Earth, causing greenhouse effect, etc., and this is why they support abortion, contraception, euthanasia and other actions aimed against humanity.

Actions of the foe

Not only does the Catholic Church in Poland assess negatively many contemporary phenomena, but it also sees the foes' actions in them. What happens around the world, according to many Church speakers, is not an effect of spontaneous and complex civilisation processes, but a manifestation of somebody's intentional aware action that aims at destruction of faith in God, Church and Christian culture type. If we consider why a foe wants to destroy these values, the answer we will find might be that he or she does this out of hatred for God, Christ and human.

Who is the foe? The foe is indicated in various manners, sometimes in person and these are: *feminists, atheists, radical ecologists, modernists, technocrats* and others. More often the foe is determined impersonally and in abstract terms, and it is, for example, *the contemporary culture, contemporary world, contemporary trends, modernism, liberalism, atheism, secularism* and other. The figure of the foe also follows the word *ideology*, e.g. *gender ideology, homosexual, abortion, ecological, anti-family ideologies*, etc. In the Polish ears the word *ideology* sounds dangerous, as they can remember two especially genocidal of those: fascism and communism. The word *ideology* suggests that such phenomena as abortion or homosexuality are not only anthropogenic or social phenomena, but a manifestation and tool of activity of some organised forces that want to destroy the Church and all norms arising from its teaching. Here is one example:

*Homosexual ideologies, gender, radical feminism, abortion, child production technologies, sexual debauchery - all this strikes marriage and family.*³

In their letter on *gender* the bishops also used words suggesting that *genderism* is an attacking, offensive ideology: *it forces attempts to redefine marriage and family; increasing attacks of this ideology; pressure of communities*. Moreover, this attack is hidden, concealed and deceitful: *the gender ideology, without knowledge of the society and consent of Poles, has been implemented for many months in various structures of social life, such as education, health care...*⁴

The foe is also, in a way, typically religious, as Satan acting in the world, the God's antagonist. This is obviously an old biblical topos, present also in other religions. In these texts we can, therefore, find *the Devil*, e.g.:

*Why is sex a sphere so greatly possessed by the Devil?*⁵

³ Dariusz Kowalczyk SJ, *Synodalne zamieszanie [Synodial chaos]*, Gość Niedzielny no. 28 (July 12, 2015), 25 p..

⁴ http://episkopat.pl/dokumenty/5545.1,List_pasterski_na_Niedziele_Swietej_Rodziny_2013_roku.html

⁵ Marcin Jakimowicz, *Na linii frontu [On the front line]*, Gość Niedzielny no. 28 (July 12, 2015), p. 27.

Recently, the plot of combat with marriage, family and institution of the father has been developed with great intensity. Feminists are especially accused of destroying marriage and family, as they demand the so-called women's reproductive rights or even a new family model with more equal rights. The attempts of formalisation of partner relationships, especially homosexual, are also presented as an attack on marriage and family.

Many Catholic texts create an image of an on-going battle and the speakers willingly use military vocabulary and metaphors: *attack on the family, assault on the family, war with the family, we are on the frontline, we are going for the barricades*. And a longer example:

*Why is attack on family is the sphere of the bloodiest military actions?*⁶

Disease metaphor

Another method for negative evaluation of phenomena of the contemporary culture is employment of the disease metaphor. The metaphor of sin as a disease has been present in the religious language for a long time and was used throughout all ages of Christianity. The disease metaphor is effective in assessment *in minus*, since everybody knows very well that disease is evil. Thus, the Church speakers assume the role of doctors and imitate a medical discourse - they deliver a "diagnosis", enumerate "concerns". And so, for example, title of one of the articles in "Gość Niedzielny" weekly is:

*Godlessness. Description of the disease*⁷

The entire text develops a thesis that contemporary culture is sick and such phenomena as abortion, contraception, homosexuality, radical feminism or *gender* ideology are the symptoms of this disease. The author has also created the word (neologism) *sepsa-culture*, thus suggesting that our culture is like a body that developed sepsis, completely infected with bacteria and suffering from an inflammatory condition. One must add that some time ago in Poland there were several sepsis-induced deaths, and the media almost managed to cause panic. The knowledge on this disease and aura of fear can be, therefore, easily transferred into the abstract notion of *contemporary culture* and fill it with negative associations. Homosexuality is particularly consistently presented in the Church texts as a disease, pathology, departure from normality, deviation. I can also often find in texts such a collocation as: *sick ecology*.

The disease metaphor works well with – an also metaphoric expression – *civilisation of death*. This expression was introduced by pope John Paul II, and it has rooted particularly deep in the Polish Catholic discourse (the authority of the Polish pope is here of crucial meaning). Such actions as abortion, contraception, eugenics or euthanasia signify, according to the Church, a negative relation of the West towards life. In its opinion, the countries of the Western Europe abandoned the civilisation of life and rejected the conviction of its sanctity, and this will result in self-destruction of societies which - succumbing into egoism and hedonism - cease to reproduce.

I would like to mention that negative valuation of the contemporary culture employs a number of other metaphors, usually quite conventional in the religious language. This is, for example, a metaphor of poison that we can see in the following example:

*This where so many various ideologies come from which - even if proclaiming equality, tolerance, human rights, etc. - bring poisoned fruit.*⁸

Agonic (confrontative) style

The consequence of perception (interpretation) of certain phenomena of contemporary culture as an attack of enemy forces and a disease is taking a defensive stance. The main task of the Polish Catholic discourse is, therefore, protection of its own position, defending (and protecting) the endangered values. In the pastoral letter of the bishops regarding *gender* reads as follows:

In the light of increasing attacks of this ideology targeted at various areas of family and social life, we feel forced to, on the one hand, decisively and clearly make a

⁶ Marcin Jakimowicz, *Na linii frontu [On the front line]*, Gość Niedzielny no. 28 (July 12, 2015), 26 p..

⁷ Ks. Tomasz Jaklewicz, *Bezbożność. Opis choroby*, Gość Niedzielny no.23 (June 7, 2015), 30 p..

⁸ Dariusz Kowalczyk SJ, *Synodalne zamieszanie [Synodial chaos]*, Gość Niedzielny no. 28 (July 12, 2015), 25 p..

*statement in defence of the Christian family, fundamental values that protect it and, on the other, warn against the dangers arising from propagation of the new type of family life forms*⁹.

This is why the communication style is antagonistic, confrontative. When the foe (or a disease, which is also a type of a foe) strikes, one must focus on effective fight. This foe must be unmasked and defeated.

The agonistic type of communication is characterised, first and foremost, with consolidation of the position, meaning that decisive and clear assessments are formulated, not subject to any discussion. The reality is assessed in a simplified manner - something is only good or completely evil; ethical complexity of phenomena, their ambivalence, etc. are rather not considered. The image of world arising from this is strongly polarised and black and white. The world is divided into two: Church and *civilisation of love* built by it on one side, and the *evil, hostile and sick civilisation of death* on the other.

Indication of the foe is always connected with inducing negative feelings towards it. If, for example, homosexuality is considered a dangerous force that fights the Church and world order established by God himself, there are negative emotions induced towards such a phenomenon and, eventually - towards people, and that is really dangerous.

References list:

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2. Howarth D., *Discourse* (Polish edition: *Dyskurs*), Warszawa, Oficyna Naukowe, 2008.
3. O'Sullivan T., Hartley J., Saunders D., Montgomery M., Fiske J., *Key Concepts in Communication and Cultural Studies*, (Polish edition: *Kluczowe pojęcia w komunikowaniu i w badaniach kulturowych*), Wrocław, Astrum, 2005.

⁹ http://episkopat.pl/dokumenty/5545.1,List_pasterski_na_Niedziele_Swietej_Rodziny_2013_roku.html