MAGDALENA STECIĄG

Environmental Discourse on the Onet.pl Web Portal

Although ecology as a science possesses a long tradition, with beginnings in the 1860s, when a German biologist, Ernst Haeckel officially named it (etymologically from the Greek word *oikos* meaning home or place of life) and outlined its subject scope (as all the relationships between animals and their environment, both living and non)[1], the period of its intense development can be marked 100 years later. It was then when ecologic organizations entered the political scene (in Western democracies) and drew people's attention to the environment and threats to it. It was when environmental needs for the first time entered political party agendas. The mass media also became interested in the issue and they created interest in the environment and the ecological crisis among the greater masses. Since then, it can be said, ecology has been present in Western people's social consciousness not only as a field of science but as one of the most fundamental of human needs, the extension of human and other forms of life on Earth in general, a harmonious coexistence within the ecosystem[2].

The mass media devote a lot of attention to different environmental issues such as air pollution, the ozone hole, industrial illnesses, climatic changes, plant and animal life within ecosystems, species diversity and extinction issues[3] shaping society's ecological attitudes on a local and global scale. This is how communities of people thinking likewise are created and, what is more, communication communities using a specific discourse[4].

Since the term 'discourse' is somewhat ambiguous and it evokes methodological discussion, it should be noted that for the purposes of this article it is understood in a post-structural sense, as a tool of communication characterized by a specific to a given community use of language and tied to social context in a way that it functions within other competitive communication communities creating their own discourses[5]. The competition regards the attaining of hegemony in describing the world through the appropriation of signs and, what is more, the trend and encouragement of others to accept a certain way of thinking[6]. Communication, in this case, is about the clashing of different discourses in the negotiation of meanings, especially regarding the connotation understood as the pragmatic one regarding the relationships between the users of signs and the signs themselves. This kind of communication activities Jean-François Lyotard calls 'general agonistics'[7].

The aim of the paper is to show the impact of environmental discourse on the central discourse field[8]. In this case, the mass media are the carrier of content and meaning, with the basic function of informing. The information current in media discourse is considered to be the 'consensus sphere' in which the presented content is generally accepted within a given

---

[1] Cf. C.J. Krebs, *Ekologia*, Warszawa 1996, p. 3.

[2] Cf. W. Sztumski, *Zmiany ustrojowe i rozwój świadomości ekologicznej*, [in:] *Ekologia a procesy transformacji*, ed. J. Dębowski, Olsztyn 1999, p. 112.

[3] Cf. *The Reporter's Environmental Handbook*. Auth.: B.M. West et. al., New Brunswick–London, 2003.

[4] Halina Grzmil-Tylutki on the existence of environmental discourse, "It does exist as there a certain communities which create it and discourse formations or documents that prove it. Both discourse manifestations create the ramifications of environmental discourse or its subject space, the required and possible content scope, as well as space and time limitations and broadcast means, etc.". H. Grzmil-Tylutki, *Francuski i polski dyskurs ekologiczny w perspektywie aksjologii*, Kraków 2000, p. 27.

[5] Cf. *Słownik terminologii medialnej*, ed. W. Pisarek, Kraków 2006.

[6] Cf. M. Bugajski, *Język w komunikowaniu*, Warszawa 2006, p. 452–458.

[7] Cf. M. Kowalska, *Tożsamość i różnica. Lyotard – Levinas*, [in:] *Levinas i inni*, ed. T. Gadacz, J. Migasiński, Warszawa 2002, p. 172–174

[8] M. Fleischer, *Teoria kultury i komunikacji*, Wrocław 2002, p. 348.

culture and considered non-controversial[9]. The material analyzed comes from news bulletins published on the Onet.pl web portal.

The portal Onet.pl, aside from other characteristic features of this type of communicator, includes an information service with texts in the form of short notes or longer information pieces[10] from different sources (press agencies, press, radio, TV, and other Internet services, ie. chats, blogs) from Poland and from around the world. They are grouped into several different categories such as: Domestic, International, Economy, Science, Sport, Culture, Media, Internet and Trivia.

As far as quantity regarding the number of environmental issues, four sub-headings were compared, Domestic, International, Science and Trivia, between July 9th and August 10th 2007. In total, within that month there were 4097 different information notes, of which 134 (3.3%) were regarding the environment. Looking at the sub-divisions, the Domestic section presented the least amount of this type of information, out of 2240 pieces, there were 28 on the environment (1.25%), 10 of which were on the Rospuda Valley issue. This is when this issue was a hot news topic, the conflict between ecologists protesting the building of the Augustów bypass through this ecologically unique peat bog (protected by the "Nature 2000" project) and those in favour of it. The dominant issues in the Domestic category then included domestic politics (creation of the LPR and Samoobrona alliance, upcoming elections), the tragic Polish bus accident in Grenoble, the tornado near Częstochowa (what is interesting, there was not any information explaining this abnormal weather phenomenon tied to global climatic problems).

In the International section, there were 1421 information bits of which 48 were about the environment (3.4%). The major issues reported on were: the outbreak of the foot and mouth disease in Great Britain, ecologists' protests in different parts of the globe, the phosphorus leak in the Ukraine, bird flue in Russia, EU decisions regarding Rospuda, oil leaks in Ibiza, and radioactive waste in Japan.

In the Science category, there were 178 information notes, of which 14 (7.8%) regarded scientific research on different animal species (baboons, foxes, bison, eagles, eels and rats) and their newly discovered skills and habits. Presented were also new nature protection programmes, ie. on the Galapagos Islands or new environmentally friendly technologies such as syngas, a Chinese fuel from bituminous coal without carbon dioxide. However, the greatest amount of information on the environment was present in the Trivia sub-division, out of 258 notes, there were 44 (17.05%) or one-fifth of printed texts. This section generally presents specific and unusual types of information, including various nature wonders, ie. a seven leg lamb from New Zealand, starlings fighting locust in China, the Knut bear – a favourite in the Berlin zoo, Californian sea lions, "the stars of Opole zoo", a competition for herb of the year won by passion flower, 12 Italian resort rescue dogs or kangaroos storming a military base in Australia. Since it was this type of information that was dominant in the environment category on the Onet.pl portal, it is worth taking a closer look at it, especially from the genealogical point of view.

Trivial information is usually presented in the *fait-diverse* form or in such a way that the extraordinary nature of the event is presented via a narration characteristic to an anecdote[11]. The texts are comprised of a headline and three or four paragraphs of text. The analysed materials included headlines of information character, without plays on words or other methods of drawing attention, ie. "A two metre lizard in Lubanice", "A seven leg lamb is born", "Starlings fight locust", or "The Knut bear should go on a diet". This is due to two

---

[9] Cf. P. Allan, *Kultura newsów*, Kraków 2006, p. 68–69.

[10] Taking into consideration Internet journalism specificity, these texts can be classified as news (hot, agency, press), according to Leszek Olszański, written in the press, rather than dispatch, style. Cf. L. Olszański, *Dziennikarstwo internetowe*, Warszawa 206, p. 78–85 and 141–152.

[11] Cf. *Słownik terminologii medialnej…*, p. 55.

factors. One is Internet specificity, being the fastest available medium, with the time period between the event happening and its projection on the Web being close to zero, with decentralised and often anonymous Internet broadcasters. There is also hypertext specificity with non-linear structure meaning that it is the headline that determines whether the reader goes on to read the rest. It is no wonder then that headlines must be informative in character and non-redundant. The other reason is trivia specificity, its extraordinary content lures readers in and, hence, there is no need to additionally encourage people to read.

It is worth noticing why such news draws people's attention with its extraordinary information. The answer is, it would seem, that it changes the way the world is seen, not only in every day human *face-to-face* communication but also in the mass media whose goal is to create a type of natural, similar to direct, contact with its audience. This is anthropocentrism or even 'extraordinary anthropocentrism'[12] of colloquial thinking and speaking. Jerzy Bartmiński points to the fact that people viewing themselves as superior and the centre of the world, interpreted solely from the perspective of human experience, is tied to a culture mind frame instead of a perception one, that is we see pigs via the prism of connotations and values that are generally connected with this animal, but tied to human behaviour (ie. the saying dirty like a pig). This way the term 'pig' gains negative connotation and pig the animal does not exist in people's consciousness as an animal having its own identity and characteristic. This could lead to a dichotomous perception of reality in which animals possess the most negative of people's character traits[13]. Eco-linguists present many other examples of 'polluting' the language with anthropocentrisms and consider this trend among the most dangerous as it strips different species off their identity[14]. What is more, hence for ages it has been rooted in our communication, it has become transparent and without need for verification[15].

Meanwhile, the informative headlines in the Trivia section make fauna and flora gain subjectivity, both on the formal and cognitive level. In almost every headline included is the name of the animal, often as the subject of the sentence, ie. "The bull calf goes to prison together with his owner", "Goats heading to save the Jura landscape", "Cat the harbinger of sudden death", "Man-eater shark in fishermen's net", or "Two metre lizard in Lubanice". This has got cognitive consequences as these sentences realize certain composition processes which, according to Ronald Langacker, are called situation construction. Among their more imperative factors are[16]:

- situation participants and their semantic roles, the trajector (primary figure in the event-sentence pattern, the singled out individual as an element which is described) and the landmark (secondary figure, another participant);

-situation schematic character (on the grammar level these convectionalised models are used to build 'compound phrases';

- perspective and point of view creating perception patterns.

---

[12] J. Bartmiński, *Styl potoczny*, [in:] *Encyklopedia kultury polskiej XX w.*, vol. 2, ed. J. Bartmiński, Wrocław 1993, p. 122.

[13] J. Zimnowoda, *Opozycja homo – animal w ekspresywnych zwrotach językowych*, [in:] *Opozycja homo – animals w języku i kulturze*, ed. A. Dąbrowska, Wrocław 2003, p. 114.

[14] Among the proponents of t looking at language this way of are: Jung, Gerbig, Alexander, Bang, Door, Halliday, Fill and others. Cf. Z. Wendland, *Ekologia lingwistyczna, czyli o możliwościach kształtowania ekologicznej świadomości za pośrednictwem zmian w sferze języka*, www.z-wendland.com/content/publikacje, p. 9 and A. Fill, *Ecolinguistics – State of the Art*, [in:] *Ecolinguistics: Problems, Theories and Methods*, ed. J.C. Bang, Odense 1996, p. 13–14.

[15] For more see: M. Steciąg, *Ekologia językowa: kształtowanie postaw ekologicznych w języku*, [in:] *Edukacja literacka wobec przemian cywilizacyjnych i kulturowych*, ed. M. Sinica, L. Jazownik, Zielona Góra 2008, p. 409–417.

[16] Cf. R.W. Langacker, *Wykłady z gramatyki kognitywnej*, Lublin 2001, p. 20-28.

The headlines mentioned above include the name of the species as the primary figure (the trajector) while in the background is the situation in which the event happens and other participants (secondary figures). It is a semantic order which emphasizes subjectivity of the different species. The animal is the central focus. This can be illustrated on the example of the "The bull calf goes to prison together with his owner" headline in which the bull calf is the primary figure and man is secondary. It is a different than usual way of portraying events or constructing situations. "In the normal course of describing events", according to Elżbieta Tabakowska, man is the subject and the central focus of the events[17]. Other headlines also portray animals as the centre of attention, the agent who does the action, the living being acting with a purpose, consciously, with an agenda[18], ie. the headline, "Goats heading to save the Jura landscape". More often, though, the animal/plant is the participant in the event. This is due to the fact that trivia present unusual, extraordinary events with the participation of animals or plants and therefore 'the event' is the primary subject of the news. The situation construction will involve the 'event' tied to the agent[19]. Of course, different headlines present different construction patters, however, the rule of species subjectivity is preserved with a grammar (and semantic) subject focus. The headlines in which the species is not the subject are non-subject sentences, ie. "Saved 270 crocodiles". In this case the activity/the verb is emphasized in the message and animals play a secondary role, they are, however, the sole mentioned participant. There are also headlines which begin with a gerund.

This way of situation construction is a result of a particular way of perception which can be called anti-anthropocentrism. What is imperative is the fact that culture influenced perception of animals/plants with connotations to the human world is not present and instead they are portrayed in a concrete way tied to a factual event. In such a perspective, according to Jerzy Bartmiński, the degree of name characterisation is almost inexistent[20]. Point of view, as an element of perspective, directly determines the choice of definition base and indirectly – the choice of category. For example, in the headline, "Cat the harbinger of sudden death", the cat is seen not as a regular cuddly domestic animal or an agile animal but as a species with an extraordinary ability. The same is with the lizard, being, in this case, unusually large.

Turning away from anthropocentric order in portraying the world evokes amusement and that is the goal. Trivia is a category of information which is curious and generally considered unimportant. According to Agnieszka Graff, "such anecdotes are usually followed by the question 'and what?' and there is no point in asking 'what is the point?' since, as we all know, such trivia do not have a deeper meaning"[21]. This is apparent not only in the headlines but also in the body of the texts. Here is one example from the Trivia section from the Onet.pl portal:

"A parrot flies through the window into the Senate building"

"Yesterday, into the Senate building through the window flew in… a parrot, writes Ryszard Czarnecki on his blog. The parrot, sex unknown (none of the Senators checked, although some wanted to), behaved politically correct as it headed toward the independent Senators. Hence, the parrot will not play the role of a peace dove for any of the parties, neither the coalition nor the opposition, jokes the EUP deputy. According to Czarnecki, today the independent Senators will vote on a name for the bird. Senator Kutz agreed to teach the parrot to speak but other Senators thought that it could be dangerous as the parrot would only know swear words, EUP deputy states and adds that he hopes that the new Senate bird will gain more popularity than the Sejm Speaker's dog, Saba."

[17] E. Tabakowska, *Kognitywne podstawy języka i językoznawstwa*, Kraków 2001, p. 115.

[18] Cf. Z. Zaron, *Tropienie agensa. Charakterystyka semantyczno-składniowa*, [in:] *W zwierciadle języka i kultury*, ed. J. Adamowski, Lublin 1999, p. 270.

[19] On event patterns see E. Tabakowska, *Kognitywne podstawy…*, p. 114–125.

[20] J. Bartmiński, *Językowe podstawy obrazu świata*, Lublin 2006, p. 80.

[21] A. Graff, *Świat bez kobiet*, Warszawa 2001, p. 101.

This article is a typical example of the genre. It includes its key characteristics:
  - structural (comprised of three paragraphs, inverse pyramid shape);
  - stylistic (colloquial, mostly neutral register, "according to X", "adds X", with some expressive phrases, ie. "peace dove"
  - pragmatic (aim to amuse the audience with detailed information on the unusual event, objective treatment of the animal as the subject, objectivity of narration, assertive reporting of content, humorous *fait-diverse* tone);
  - cognitive (anthropocentric perspective is preserved as a form of portraying reality, the fauna/flora representative is the focus of the narration and its actions or abilities are described and characterized in detail).

It should be noted that as a result of the anthropocentric perspective used in the genre, the model texts include a certain paradox – while the content is not colloquial, the language used to describe the event is. Resulting is a cognitive dissonance which is the source of amusement, the animals or plants are described like people. The strategy is apparent if we compare texts on the subject, the main characters only differ as they are animals and not people. Following are fragments of notes on Knut the bear and Knutomania and texts from the Sport section on Adam Małysz and Małyszomania:

"The polar bear from the Berlin zoo is beating all popularity records. Over a million people have already come to see it. This is real 'Knutomania'. Souvenir shops, kiosks and book stores are full of albums, postcards, T-shirts, mugs and pens with the Knut bear"
"Will Małyszomania return? Adam Małysz is again beating all popularity records. He is one of the most recognized Polish athletes. His media image is worth millions and still increasing after his latest successes".

Similarity in describing animals/plants and people is not only on the lexis level but also regards text and genre patterns. The following note on the plant presents it as an individual, "it is its characteristic, its appearance, interests and accomplishments"[22]:

«Passion flower, herb of the year 2007»
"Passion flower (*Passiflora incarnata*) was named herb of the year 2007. As usual, the ceremony took place on August 15th, during the herb festivities in Klęka, Wielkopolska.
Passion flower grows in the tropical forests of the Americas. It was discovered by Spanish monks who considered it a gift from God and a sign to convert Indians to Christianity. The Spaniards associate Passion flower with Christ's torments. Its physical appearance can be compared to Christ's thorny crown or nails, said the chairman of the Polish Herbal Committee, dr Jerzy Jambor. This year's plant of the year is a climbing plant, similar to a grapevine. Its stalk is up to 10m long. It has got beautiful, three lapel leaves with tendrils. Thanks to these it can climb and rest on other trees and bushes. Its fruit is an edible berry, the size of a hen's egg".
The characteristic includes all elements of the genre model[23]. The chronological order of main character presentation is not exact but in this type of note information usually the first paragraph is devoted to the event followed by the subject characteristic. The second paragraph described the plant in detail, its name (etymology), discovery (birth place?), region (place of living?), appearance, type of growth (living?) and fruit (children?)

---

[22] Cf. *Słownik terminologii medialnej…*, p. 205.
[23] Cf. M. Wojtak, *Gatunki prasowe*, Lublin 2004, p. 134.

The presented above notes on animals/plants are an example of disappearing borderlines between people and other, inferior species. Moreover, it can be said that this way the animals/plants are drawn into the human world, its culture and civilisation. This, in turn, influences the way people view a particular species which is illustrated by the language used. In one of the notes, a veterinarian talks about a seven leg lamb, "It was a happy animal but keeping it alive would have been inhumane". The word 'inhumane' is used referring to an animal and not man, as generally used. In another note, "Dog – a three time voter", an American woman claims to have put her dog on a voting list since if 'everybody can vote, so can a dog'. Hence, the anthropocentric perspective in viewing the world results not only in cognitive dissonance but also axiological chaos, where people's values apply also to other living beings. It also shows that this way of describing fauna and flora in the Trivia section is shaped via another colloquial, anthropocentric content base; its starting point or category definition is not man (superior being) first and then other lower (worse) species. Here the borderline is blurry creating a continuum; man and the rest which can also be (without deeper reflection or in a humorous way) humanized.

In conclusion, it can be stated that environmental issues are, in fact, presented in central discourse field (the media), not only in the serious genre. At times, ie. on the Onet.pl portal during the summer months, they enter mass consciousness sort of 'through the back door' in the form of notes as presented in the Trivia section. Unusual and extraordinary events are described with animals/plants as main characters. The events are presented in a specific language form which only increases the amazement factor, as the form is far from the usual anthropocentric description. It does not mean, however, that the mass public is deeply influenced by such stories or gains a new perspective in looking at the world. *Fait-diverse* as a genre has a cognitive mosaic character, fragmentary, chaotic and non-systematic. It is not based on deeper analysis or logical argumentation to create a serious journalistic article. In effect, an impression may be created that environmental issues, especially those from the plant and animal world, are not serious but strange or simply funny, looking from the general dominating perspective. It goes without saying that this way of presentation is not advantageous to shaping environmental consciousness. Extended knowledge of nature, the ecosystem and harmonious functioning of man and nature should be accompanied by moral sensitivity (on the individual and society level) which influences relationships between people, civilisation and nature[24]. However, it cannot be denied that, although filtered by regulations of mass communication, our language habits are changing.

---

[24] Cf. A. Papuziński, *Modele świadomości ekologicznej*, [in:] *Światopogląd i ekologia*, ed. J. Dębowski, Olsztyn 1997, p. 100–109.