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## Language as a Source of Liberation, and Language as a Source of Control

### Język jako źródło wyzwolenia i język jako źródło kontroli

#### Abstract

We think and act through language. It determines how we exchange ideas, express emotions and see the world. And as such, language has always been a motor for enlightenment and progress, but also a means of control. It expresses our identity, and that identity takes multiple forms, affecting and shaping our values and priorities, how we view the world and those around us. They also determine the language we use – and this, not surprisingly, often becomes a source of political, social, cultural and ideological struggle.

It also explains why, over the course of history, the wielders of power have sought to restrict or alter the use of language – by controlling education, culture, social customs, awareness of history and perceptions of identity. Poles have their own experience of this from the time of the Partitions, when imperial rulers attempted to curb transmission of the Polish language. Yet the efforts are being witnessed today, notably in Russia's portrayal of events in Ukraine.

Are there grounds for thinking struggles over language have become more extreme today, in the face of new ideological and social pressures, as powerful and well-resourced lobbies and interest-groups manipulate the confusion and self-doubt of the majority to advance their own agendas?

If so, we should remind ourselves that the spread of permissive, self-willed Western mindsets is very far from universal. Indeed, such mindsets are widely contested; and while social media and mass culture have been used as vehicles for promoting radical change, they are also being used increasingly as channels for a more integral, conservative vision of the world and humanity. We need to think and speak with critical precision, with a healthy empirical scepticism – and reject the lazy reliance on epithets, categorisations, stereotypes and simplifications which the new ideological orthodoxies so often rely upon.

**Key words:** *language, unpredictability, cultural outlook, Wittgenstein, communist disinformation, onslaught.*

### Abstrakt

Myślimy i porozumiewamy się dzięki językowi, który umożliwia użytkownikom wymianę poglądów i wyrażanie emocji. Bez języka nie byłby możliwy rozwój ludzkości – jest on bowiem źródłem postępu, ale też środkiem kontroli. Wyraża naszą tożsamość, która przybiera różne formy, odzwierciedla obowiązujący w danej społeczności system wartości, a także sposób, w jaki postrzegamy świat i otaczających nas ludzi. Często jednak staje się narzędziem nacisków politycznych, społecznych, kulturowych oraz ideologicznych.

Artykuł wyjaśnia, dlaczego na przestrzeni dziejów przedstawiciele władzy starali się poprzez język (tj. kontrolując edukację, kulturę) wpływać na kształtowanie poczucia tożsamości człowieka. Wystarczy wspomnieć o doświadczeniach Polaków z czasów zaborów – o procesach rusyfikacji i germanizacji, które miały doprowadzić do powolnego wynarodowienia. O tym, że język może być źródłem manipulacji politycznej, ideologicznej, możemy przekonać się także dzisiaj, obserwując choćby sposób przedstawiania przez Rosję wojny na Ukrainie. Czy można zatem twierdzić, że język jest obecnie wykorzystywany przez różne grupy interesu, które manipulują społeczeństwem, by zrealizować własne cele?

Należy także zwrócić uwagę na publiczne propagowanie modelu permissywnego (charakterystycznego dla kultury zachodniej), który nie spotyka się z powszechną akceptacją, a jego zasadność jest czasami wręcz kwestionowana. Mimo że wszystkie media, w tym społecznościowe, były wykorzystywane do promowania takiego stylu zachowania, dziś coraz częściej prezentują konserwatywną wizję świata. To pokazuje, że musimy wykazywać się sceptycyzmem, że nie powinniśmy kierować się uprzedzeniami, stereotypami czy przyjmować bezkrytycznie narzucanych nam opinii mających często źródło w ideologiach ortodoksyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *język, nieprzewidywalność, pogląd kulturowy, Wittgenstein, dezinformacja komunistyczna, atak.*

We think and act through language. It determines how we exchange ideas, express emotions and see the world. And as such, language has always been, inevitably, a motor for enlightenment and progress – a source of liberation – but also a means of restricting human interactions, a source of control.

Structuralists and post-structuralists have debated, helped by doses of Wittgenstein and other theorists, how words gain sense in different social and cultural contexts. (Wittgenstein, 2009; McGinn, 2013, pp. 95-144; O’Sullivan, 2017, pp. 55-73) So have writers of every description. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* are full of humorous but serious observations about the fluidity, unpredictability and elasticity of language, with the character Humpty Dumpty apparently insisting that words have no objective meaning: “When I use a word... it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less”. (Carroll, 1872, p. 124) The word-play of riddles, proverbs and tongue-twisters exists in all languages, from the English “She sells sea shells on the sea shore” to the Polish (which I’ve adapted, in the spirit of Tuwim and Witkacy): “*Król Karol kupił królowej Kamili korale koloru koralowego*”.

By contrast, in George Orwell’s 1984, we see efforts underway by Big Brother and the Party to create an ever shorter dictionary of Newspeak, whose restricted vocabulary (already in its eleventh edition) will increasingly limit the capacity to think freely. The meaning of words is changed according to need and context: if the Party demands it, a citizen will be ready to say that black is really white. Some of the terms in Orwell’s Newspeak have entered the English language today, such as Doublethink, Thoughtcrime and Non-person. (Orwell, 2000, p. 65; Young, 1991; Green, 1985)

Language expresses our identity, and identity takes multiple forms – national or ethnic belonging, social class, cultural outlook, political affiliation, profession, social status, leisure activity, even sporting loyalty. We may speak the same language, but in ways which are completely impenetrable to other speakers. I speak what is known as King’s English; but if I travel to Glasgow or Aberdeen in Scotland, I may barely understand what is being said to me – and the same may be true if you live in Krakow or Lublin and converse with a Tatrzan or a Kaszub. Our multiple identities affect and shape our values and priorities, how we view the world and those around us. They also determine the language we use – and this, not surprisingly, often becomes a source of conflict and division, of political, social, cultural and ideological struggle.

It also explains why, over the course of history, the wielders of power have sought (like Orwell’s Party) to restrict or alter the use of language – by

acting to control education, culture, social customs, awareness of history and perceptions of identity. Poles have their own experience of this from the time of the Partitions, when imperial rulers attempted to curb transmission of the Polish language – and we can find echoes of it in my own country, in past efforts to restrict the use of Gaelic, Scottish and Irish.

It gained a graphic ideological application under communist rule, with programmes to give terms and concepts a new application and meaning, and to suppress language and identity in the name of a new internationalism and social consciousness which looked for its prototypes to the French Revolution and republican movements in the Nineteenth Century. Building a new world order meant controlling, often with great force and brutality, the language through which that world was conceived. (See: Luxmoore, 2016, pp. 53-62; Luxmoore, 1999, pp. 2-8; Kucharczyk, 2004, pp. 131-132; Gildea, 2009, pp. 118-140, 143-144) Justice was now “revolutionary justice”, morality was “revolutionary morality”, legality was “revolutionary legality” – while concepts such as truth, beauty, loyalty, honesty, happiness were given a new functional meaning – in ways described by Czesław Miłosz in his famous work (still much admired in the West) *Zniewolony umysł* (The Captive Mind). (Miłosz, 2009) So, right up to the end, were words such as freedom, democracy, rights and duties.

It would be tempting to say this gulf in the use of language reflected a bipolar East-West division. Of course, this was not the case. New ideological forms of language also had their adherents in the West, linked to 1960s radicalism and the anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist movements which accompanied it. The Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky famously remarked that the first time in his life when he met real Marxists was when he was deported from Moscow in 1976 and stepped off the plane in Geneva. (Tismaneanu, Shapiro, 1991, p. 221; See: Bukovsky, 1979; Bukovsky, 2019)

It is still a largely untold story how efforts were made between the 1950s and 1980s, by writers, artists and cultural figures, to counter communist disinformation and neutralise the attractiveness of Marxist ideology – to prevent what the French philosopher Julien Benda called the *trahison des clercs*, or betrayal of the elites. (Saunders, 2000; Scott-Smith, 2002; Benda, 2006) We know the key contribution made by the Polish Pope, St John Paul II, to foster a Christian alternative to key ideological tenets of the communist programme, and to restore a true meaning to words, concepts, ideals and values which had been corrupted and abused as tools of coercion and control.

Yet today too, we see the same forces at work through language in Vladimir Putin’s onslaught against Ukraine – the same instincts to create

what the French political scientist, Alain Besancon, called a “super-reality”, an Orwellian dystopia in which all recognisable senses, connotations and meanings have been altered, with the help of regime-controlled media and coercive methods for mobilising opinion. (Besancon, 2000, p. 376) This is not a war or invasion, but a “special military operation” – and draconian penalties await those who dare to state otherwise. It is not an occupation, but a “liberation”. Russia did not attack – it acted in self-defence (just as Hitler did in 1939). It is not overthrowing an elected government, but a “Nazi regime”. If this is a struggle of David against Goliath, then it is Russia which is the poor, threatened David – standing alone against the aggressive, corrupting, despotic, totalitarian, hegemonic Goliath of Western democracy. (*Address by the President of the...*)

We see Russia’s Orthodox Church, with Patriarch Kirill at its head, giving a spiritual and religious sanction to this same super-reality. Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians all belong to “the vastness of Holy Rus”: they come from “the one baptismal font”, and have a God-given mission to serve Him in a struggle for truth, morality and sanctity against falsehood, immorality and sin. (“Kirill’s sermons”, 2022; “*Apel o zawieszenie czlonkostwa...*”, 2022) If Patriarch Kirill is Putin’s man, Putin is also Kirill’s man, as was seen in his extraordinary attack on the West while announcing the annexation of four Ukrainian regions on 30 September.

“They do not give a damn about the natural right of billions of people, the majority of humanity, to freedom and justice, the right to determine their own future – they have already moved on to the radical denial of moral, religious, and family values”, Putin said of the West. “Their complete renunciation of what it means to be human, the overthrow of faith and traditional values, and the suppression of freedom are coming to resemble a ‘religion in reverse’ – pure Satanism. Exposing false messiahs, Jesus Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘By their fruits ye shall know them.’ These poisonous fruits are already obvious to people, and not only in our country but also in all countries, including many people in the West itself”. (*Signing of treaties on accession...*)

This is, of course, an extreme example. But we can see parallels, however less dramatic, in today’s Western democracies – similar struggles over language as a means of liberation and control, a means of asserting rival ideological projects and visions. Such struggles have always occurred, and there are many differences and variations. In Poland (as it seems to me), there is still a collective self-confidence, forged by bitter recent experiences, when it comes to speaking about national history, culture and religion. In

Britain, by contrast, this self-confidence often seems to be lacking. We have learned, for a whole host of reasons, to wear our identity lightly, and to avoid drawing attention to matters of religious conviction and political commitment. We feel uncomfortable with extremes and passions, and pride ourselves on our perceived moderation and inclusivity (indeed some would argue that our apparent obsession with talking about the weather is a social code for avoiding difficult subjects). (Fox, 2005, pp. 25-36)

Yet this collective self-effacement can cause problems. Should we celebrate our culture, or see it as a bastion of elitism and white privilege? Should we defend our open society, or deplore it as intolerant, racist and class-ridden? Should we be proud of our history, or be ashamed of its imperial, colonial features?

The last point, attitudes to history (including the teaching of history), provides a good example of how language is used and misused to support rival ideological priorities. Our views of the past can be highly contaminated – by the images and perspectives conveyed by novels, films, media discussions and inherited stereotypes. Professor Jan Kłós writes in his memoirs, *Stój*, about the problems, even the sense of guilt, we can encounter in seeking the right language to describe past events – in his case, he singles out the Wołyń massacre. (Kłós, 2021, p. 53)

Our views can also be channelled to the point of indoctrination. In Britain, the predominant Whig interpretation of history suggests a steady, optimistic and largely unbroken development of constitutional governance and personal freedoms from earliest times, helped latterly by a progressive, enlightened Protestant order. We were last invaded in 1066, by the Normans, this historical school insists. And although we were also invaded in 1688 – by William of Orange with 450 ships carrying 20,000 Dutch and German troops, this was not a “invasion” but a “glorious revolution”, because William was a Protestant and pledged to uphold a constitutional order favoured by the elites. (Sowerby, 2013, pp. 347-348; Childs, 1990, p. 175; Rodger, 2004, pp. 137-139) Mr Putin would no doubt understand.

If we look at more recent history, we can see how the main reasons for the collapse of communist rule in 1989 are still bitterly contested, between academics and politicians seeking to prioritise factors – economic implosion, social unrest, national rebellion, strategic confrontation, intellectual dissent – which best suit their interests and preferences, among which the role of the Church and the Pope is either played down or completely excluded. (Luxmoore, 2016, pp. 353-359)

We can also look to the recent resurgence of heated and often angry debates, particularly in the English-speaking world, over the relationship

between religion and science – during which the so-called New Atheists have insisted that all forms of truth and reality must be based on verifiable, scientifically tested evidence, and have encouraged harsh and uncompromising new forms of language to unmask and exclude any form of religious perception, metaphysics or subjective intuition. (Stenger, 2009, pp. 70-75; Dawkins, 2006, pp. 281-308; Amarasingam 2012, p. 35; Sacks, 2011, p. 11; Gray, 2019, pp. 53-70)

Once again, such struggles have always occurred. Are there grounds for thinking they have become more extreme and far-reaching today? If they have, this will, of course, have a lot to do with the media, the prism through which most of us see and experience the world. Whereas mainstream TV, radio and newspapers once monopolised and controlled public awareness, access to information and debate has been decentralised and democratised in the space of a generation, thanks to the spread to communications technology and rise of social media. And while this should, on the face of it, be considered a positive development, it has also generated new methods of ideological pressure and social control. Against today’s so-called “cancel culture”, any journalist knows that a single word or phrase, sometimes written long ago, misinterpreted and taken out of context, can be enough to shame the author, damaging and perhaps even destroying their career. (Murray, 2019, pp. 257-267; Norris 2021; *Academic Freedom in the UK...*)

Political correctness has been around since the 1960s, when a more open, pluralistic culture took root, and began to reshape and redirect public thinking in all areas of social, cultural, political and economic life. Today, the English watchword is “wokeism”. But the impact has been much the same, as powerful and well-resourced lobbies and interest-groups – self-appointed guardians of new orthodoxies – manipulate the confusion and self-doubt of the majority to advance their own agendas in areas from abortion and euthanasia, to family life and gender redefinition.

Here again, the use and abuse of language is crucial. Words such as “choice” and “consent”, a mantra of polite society, can now be used as an ideological justification for every kind of behaviour. Something may be questionable, even undesirable; but if it is based on free choice by consenting adults, society has no right to interfere, or even to express an opinion. Such illusions of personal freedom, an amoral free market of options and choices, are easily exploited. They offer benefits and opportunities for some, while condemning others to uncertainty and insecurity. They also offer the lowest possible ethical bar, which the rich and powerful can easily step over – a de-racinated anthropology which reduces everyone to atomised, autonomous,

choice-makers, stripped of the fallible, moral, relational personhood which makes us truly human. (Perry, 2022)

All of this sounds rather gloomy! But we can avoid the gloom by reminding ourselves that the spread of permissive, decadent Western attitudes is far from being a one-way direction of travel. Individualist, self-willed mindsets are very far from universal. Indeed, they are widely contested; and while social media and mass culture have been used as vehicles for promoting radical change, they are also being used increasingly today as channels for a more integral, conservative vision of the world and humanity. Since hostility to perceived corrupting Western influences is now having murderous consequences (not least in Ukraine – as Putin’s recent speech makes clear), it is important to understand this. There is, in the end, no single “Western model”, but many Western models – and the struggle to distinguish truth from falsehood, the valuable from the worthless, the genuine from the fake, is still very much continuing.

The Catholic Church is, of course, a major player in this effort – not only in Poland, but in Western societies as well. The late Archbishop of Lublin, Józef Życiński (a rather controversial figure), famously made the point that simple, uneducated Russian babushki often understood the illusions and dangers of communism better than the most august and elevated intellectuals. (Pięciak, 2003) More recently, the Albanian philosopher, Lea Ypi, has shown how, even against the harshest ideologically driven repression, ordinary people maintained their essential sense of moral values, their fundamental perceptions of right and wrong. (Ypi, 2022, pp. 212-226)

As always, language with all its liberating and controlling dimensions, will remain a battleground. We need to think and speak with critical precision, with a healthy empirical scepticism – and reject the lazy reliance on epithets, categorisations, stereotypes and simplifications which the new ideological orthodoxies so often rely on, particularly when it comes to political, social and cultural choices. We also need to be confident that the liberal conscience, in all its various manifestations, will prevail, along with the deeply rooted sense of a perpetual centre, and the commonsense and tolerant instincts of modern people.

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