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Literacy
of the young generation
in a diglossic environment

Contents

Introduction

This book came into being as an effect of research conducted by us since 2007 in two industrial regions of Poland: Silesia and Zagłębie. It aimed to make a preliminary diagnosis of schoolchildren's ability to create and read (understand) written texts, from secondary school to variously oriented high schools. The research concerned passive and active communicative competence in written form of the Polish language. The main reason for its undertaking was a progressing process of degradation of writing skills observed today among students admitted to Polish philology university studies.

1. Literacy

We discuss the category of literacy in the context of the opposition *orality – literacy*, best known in Poland in Ong's version, where it is understood as duality of culture functions, two cognitive styles, two ways of thinking, finally, two ways of coding and decoding utterances. Ong's book (1992) is a manifestation of the distinctly crystallizing theory[1], which fully comprehends the influence of communication systems on human beings and their culture.

Literacy is viewed by sociologists as a process of shaping of our western civilization that consists in abandoning the primitive and preliterate cultures' orality in favour of the modern civilization of writing. It has enabled and consolidated the development of the culture of the „modern man". This research is thoroughly diachronic

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[1] The foundations of the theory of literacy are connected with the scientific activity of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and Eric Havelock in the 1950s and 1960s at the University of Toronto. Another supporter of this theory is Jack Goody who, although not a member of this group, called it the "Toronto school".

and anthropologically inclined; it shows the development of a society based on communicative activity, as well as the phylogenetic development of human beings and their ability to communicate manifested in the conflict between the biological naturalness of speech as something inborn and acquired in the process of socialization and the artificiality of writing as something genetically unnatural (Ong 2009: 242). There can be observed a discernible similarity to the hermeneutic method, which discovers hidden layers of meaning in cultural texts; a kind of methodological palimpsest which, when uncovered layer by layer, reveals remnants of primal orality in the literarily shaped and written fragments of the Old Testament, Homer's epics or the Gospels. It is therefore the sort of interpretation, which „brings out" what has been hidden (Ong 2009). And what is hidden and of greatest interest to the modern people, is precisely orality as the primal way of conceptualizing the world; it is also the technological deconstruction of orality by the means of print, as well as the present secondary orality of electronic media. The technology of communication and its constant development, especially in the western civilization, is for Goody, McLuhan or Ong what could be described as an ultimate cause of social and civilization changes and the basic mechanism of development.

Ong views literacy and orality narrowly as a way of coding but he also broadens the meaning of this opposition to the extent that it becomes the principle of existence or a kind of model of two distinct cultures: oral and written. Orality and literacy are then two different ways of perceiving and understanding the world[2]. Literacy becomes a trait of mind. This theory has inspired research mainly among anthropologists, sociologists or media experts, but generally, it did not become a subject of linguististic observation and discussion[3]. Yet, if we should adopt its assumptions, cognitive and intellectual styles probably play a pivotal role for the revealed concretization, that is, the shape and structure of utterances. Sociologists, psychologists and educational-

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[2] It is characteristic, for example, that he includes jazz music in the sphere of oral culture as a form of musical expression which clearly demonstrates the principle of orality.

[3] The phenomenon of functional illiteracy was described by Aldona Skudrzyk (1994) who signalized one of the aspects which may underlie linguistic analyses of the written culture. A broader linguistic research in which this perspective was adopted was carried out by the author in 2004–2005; the results were published in Skudrzyk (2005).

ists have examined mainly the problem of understanding of variously structured texts. The strikingly low competence in understanding the texts observed among the Polish youth has become a reason for undertaking a linguistic research from the sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspective (Skudrzyk 2005). The author works on the assumption that the level of understanding of the texts, at least as regards certain tasks[4] presented in the OECD research, is the evidence of the level of **interiorization of the rules of literate thinking** (a fairly low level, to be exact). Skudrzyk has also subjected to linguistic examination the level of ability to **produce written texts**. Thus the research field included not only a diagnosis of the causes of misunderstanding texts, but most importantly the shape of contemporary written texts, which appear to be exposed to the dominant cultural tendencies and constitute their linguistically and structurally concretized effect.

Entering the culture of literacy is, by nature, a process and as such is gradable. It is not possible to measure its pace or to predict its quality. It is a phenomenon of an undoubtedly emergent nature. However, clear manifestations of the process of entering as well as abandoning literacy can be definitely pointed out, and their causes diagnosed.

The culture of literacy may be endangered/modified/modernized by two contemporary cultural tendencies: the expansion of orality on one side, the expansion of visuality on the other, which results in a change in the semiosphere – the world of communication and signs. Therefore, the youngest generation of Poles is not only under influence of the tendency to remain within the limits of the culture of orality; similar consequences for mentality can be caused by the technological novelties in communication. Not without reason, the young Poles have recently been dubbed „the SMS generation"[5]. Writing in-

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[4] Tasks whose essence is to draw a logical conclusion from a certain number of premises, or those whose solution resulted from combining several pieces of information into one piece of synthesizing information etc.

[5] The notion of „SMS generation" has been popularized by Tomasz Goban-Klas, a sociologist specializing in communization. According to him, the mobile phone has gained a new meaning for the young people: it is used not to transfer particular information, but rather to maintain contact. The „SMS generation" is capable of capturing the essence of communication in 160 signs. Goban-Klas states that the history of communication shows that people have become more and more reluctant to receive lengthy information: *Homer wrote the „Illiad" which many knew by heart. Even in the generation of my parents, it was common to know large fragments of „Pan Tadeusz". Today we prefer the shortest possible*

deed serves them as a means of communication, but it is not litera-
cy understood as the style of thinking and the way of creating a text.
The ways of thinking and the approach to the linearity of reception
are influenced in a very similar way by the phenomenon of hypertext:
„sailing" in place of reading, „jumping" in place of fluency.

These tendencies within the phenomenon defined in the first lin-
guistic study by Skudrzyk as **new literacy** (Skudrzyk 2005) became
the subject of another work, *Kultura piśmienności młodzieży szkolnej*
(*The written culture of students*) (Warchala, Skudrzyk 2010), based on
a research conducted among schoolchildren and younger students.
What follows from the study is that the young generation of Poles has
more and more trouble with written texts, and problems with correct
phrasing are faced even by those, whose job soon will be to teach such
skills – students of Polish philology. Even among them there emerge
individuals who display symptoms of **functional illiteracy** of various
intensity; it manifests itself in the lack of logic on the sentence level,
of the linearity of topic development and in the violations of cohe-
sion and coherence. The logic of reasoning is shaken on the textual
level, because the thought gains consistency only when one's shared
knowledge as well as the knowledge of particular circumstances which
the text concerns or in which it was created is involved. The entire
cause-and-effect chain is therefore omitted and the text remains in
accordance with **non-literary coherence,** which results from the sit-
uation itself. This increasing role of the situational factor in the cre-
ation of coherent texts may be described as a dangerous symptom of
departure from the autonomous written text in favour of the non-au-
tonomous, spoken colloquial text, incomprehensible on its own. It is
worth referring here to the findings of McLuhan concerning the in-
fluence of cold and hot mass media on the quality of receiving stance
(McLuhan 2001: 229). Today, the „cooling of the media" can be ob-
served in various kinds of literacy, when written texts „enforce partic-
ipation and complementation". The cooling of the media is to a large
extent a sign of the departure from literacy.

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*forms. „Short Message Service', as the name suggests, is an excellent example of the short-
ening attention span.* (an excerpt from the interview published in *Tygodnik Powszechny*
10th February 2002.)

2. Bilingualism – dialectal diglossic environment

Our research was carried out in the regions of Silesia and Zagłębie.
This area of research, i.e., the Silesian Voivodeship, is not only the area
closest to us geographically but also an area where children show spe-
cific processes of shaping of their language competence. First of all,
we are dealing here with the influence of three strong elements of lan-
guage: the dialect as a language of first socialization, used in the Sile-
sian family and often also at school (not only during breaks), highly
varied colloquial language of big cities and the general language dom-
inant in mass media and education. Essentially, what prevails in com-
munication is the culture of orality

Another important communication factor causing the weakening
of written culture is the influence of the dialect model, which is the
model of first socialization in families cultivating dialectal rules of
communication. This means that dialect (or dialects) as well as tradi-
tional family model (which we call after Bernstein a positional mod-
el) which maintains strong ties with the region and its language high-
ly influence the type of language contacts. Dialect is understood here
not only as a means of communication within the family but also as
an element of preserving the regional identity of the young genera-
tion. At the same time it influences the communicative competence
of young Silesians as it remains the language of first socialization, in
which young people form their value system and their perception of
the world as well as name their first relations. It is an important lan-
guage of everyday life which allows one to communicate freely with-
in one's peer group and family, but at the same time brings the risk of
a particular, situational view of the world. This very language, which
plays an important role in primary socialization, may in our opinion
become a serious impediment in the development of one's commu-
nicative competence[6], or even a source of failure in the process of so
called secondary socialization – at school, in college and in public life.
Undoubtedly, we are dealing here with a phenomenon of linguistic
transfer, which Ida Kurcz recognizes as a basic notion in psychology

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[6] Psychologists claim that the authoritarian upbringing which assumes a one-way
communication between child and parents is an impeding factor in the development of
speech.

of learning. She presents the transfer as „applying habits acquired in the process of mastering one material to another material", and adds: „If the transfer proves conducive to learning, it is a positive transfer, if it proves inhibitive – it is a negative one" (Kurcz 2000: 185).

The co-occurrence of two distinct codes, dialectal and general Polish, becomes an important aspect of our research considering their mutual relation in sociolinguistic biographies of our subjects and the impact these codes have on the quality of their idiolects. We have to refer to phenomena occurring at the meeting point of two languages, or more accurately, two regional/functional/social variants of a language and we believe that the communication and language status of the examined region fits into the category of diglossia[7]. More precisely, the standard and dialectal variants are used here in separate sociolinguistic functions. They require of their users an awareness of differences between these functions, and therefore a real mastery of a *code switching* mechanism, i.e., the internalized knowledge of the extent in which both codes are used[8]. Diglossia may be regarded as a useful and adequate tool, helpful in describing and understanding linguistic situation in Silesia – this has been confirmed by Jagoda Cieszyńska's interesting study of the language situation of a child in diglossic environment. As shown in Cieszyńska (2006) a bilingual person functioning in a bilingual and bicultural environment differs from a monolingual person in terms of linguistic data processing. This applies especially to children in the primary socialization phase

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[7] The concept of diglossia was introduced to sociolinguistics by C.A. Ferguson in 1959, in an article entitled *Diglossia*, where he applies it to a variant of language which combines elements of the standard and regional variations. The term was made more precise by J. A. Fisherman who emphasized that one of these variations was a language acquired institutionally, that is through formal education, and therefore the variants in diglossia function complementarily. The standard variation has a clearly determined communicative space – it is primarily a tool of written communication and secondarily a means of oral communication in official situations. The dialectal variation is used in everyday communication. Therefore, the application of the term „diglossia" to a child from Silesian family seems appropriate.

[8] This sociolinguistic term as well as the modes of its application were introduced into Polish lingustics by Halina Kurek [Kurek, 1987]. According to her approach the switching of the code takes place when the conversational situation is official or semi-official, which results from either the descent or the social status of one of the interlocutors (priest, teacher etc.). Code switching describes mainly switching from dialect to standard variation (or precisely – a mixed variation, since it is often regionally marked).

or those „entering" the secondary socialization phase. Cieszyńska claims that their operating both within dialect and standard language becomes a cause of educational impediments and, more importantly, a factor restraining acquisition of knowledge.

There is still another aspect of the problem. The primary language used by our subjects, i.e., their dialect (but also, as we prove further on, a colloquial variant of the Polish language) – refers only to the everyday world, where references are usually perceptible and evident because of their situational representation. What to do, however, in a world dominated by abstraction and complicated nets of relations, where students coming from dialect environments have to learn new names for concepts, objects and relations before exploring new areas. Considering the importance and permanence of the first social experiences, the use of dialect, its potential and its range of conceptualizing the world become not only the first communicative experience, but also a model of their functioning in general speech, and finally a model of communicative competence in general. Here, dialect as a source of identity and the carrier of cultural tradition may become a regressive factor, especially in a global community, where the sense of social advancement as a basis of success in life is very common; dialect may also prove to be a socially marginalizing factor, the factor of confinement, or even self-confinement in homogeneous groups within cultures which are condemned or condemn themselves to isolation.

There is another interesting – this time psychological – aspect of diglossia, firmly embedded in Polish culture of communication. Recent works in social psychology discuss stigma, that is, the situation when an individual is deprived of full social acceptance, and it seems that more and more new groups are stigmatizatized in this way. In all sorts of stigma, to quote the classical work of Erving Goffman, [...] *the same sociological features are found: an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated.* (Goffman 1963: 15) Our research and, above all, the quoted responses have shown that in the conditions of Polish culture of communication the use of dialect in public leads to negative stigmatization and is perceived as lack of communicative competence

and linguistic lability. Incompetent communicative behaviour is usually treated by Poles as a symptom of primitivism, lack of education and manners, or even low intelligence. This negative valuation of dialect, so specific for the Polish language awareness, allows us to single out this aspect as a determinant of communicative success but also as the impeding factor in entering the culture of literacy.

3. Methodological inspirations

The inspiration for this research comes from two methodological sources. In the first place, from Basil Bernstein's concept of cultural codes, which has allowed us to draw general conclusions from the collected material of students' essays and comments. By saying „cultural codes", we obviously mean two codes understood as two regulative principles ruling the general social communication but also written communication as well as school and educational discourse. It is worth reminding here that a restricted code is the one that is described in terms of particular, local and context-dependent meanings, while an elaborated code is described in terms of general context-independent meanings. In the extended version, we use the notion of code to indicate two epistemologies, separate paradigms conceptualizing the surrounding world, or two principles of comprehending and understanding reality by means of linguistically determined ways of capturing it. We also owe to Bernstein the basic conceptual apparatus applied here, however extended and supplemented with elements of discourse analysis, more specifically, critical discourse analysis and broadly understood pragmatics.

Another source of inspiration were doubtlessly fundamental methodological findings of the sociolinguistic school of Katowice, the group of researchers led by Władysław Lubaś.[9] We owe to those findings a sort of sensitivity to spoken text, the ability to analyze live speech, finally

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[9] We should mention here a number of articles published in „Socjolingwistyka" („Sociolinguistics"), a journal issued by the University of Silesia and edited by W. Lubaś; also the monographs written in Katowice, of which the following are significant for our research: Lubaś W. (1979; 2003); Kita M. (1989); Skudrzyk A. (1994; 2005); Warchala J. (1991; 2004); Żydek-Bednarczuk U. (1994); Wilkoń A. (1987; 2002).

the awareness of the structural differences and independence of the code when it comes to the written and spoken forms of the language.

The basis of the analysis was the research material gathered over the years 2006–2010 within the Silesian Voivodeship (Silesia and Zagłębie)[10]. It consisted of surveys carried out in schools by M.A. students of Polish philology at the University of Silesia, Katowice, as well as of schoolchildren's writing assignments. The corpus was further supplemented with diagnostic material in the form of students' written works. These allowed us to make our research of schoolchildren more objective in a sense: thanks to them we received at least a partial answer to the question of how high school graduates use their skills later on and whether what we observed in students' assignments is merely a phase in the process of acquiring certain skills, a kind of processual passage into the written culture, or rather the observed tendencies are of permanent nature and take root in writing style of the students who should be able to handle complex texts with no difficulty. We chose then as our subjects the students of Polish language and humanities in general since their future career will be based on their linguistic competence.

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[10] Cf. the map of the Silesian Voivodeship and the areas where the research material was collected.