

**Project Jasnopis [Clearwriting] and other recent endeavours
for improvement of communication between public institutions and citizens in Poland**

Improvement of communication between authorities and the people - or rather improvement of public communication in general - needs identification and removal of barriers on the roads towards two-sided understanding. So far as language is concerned, we can distinguish three broad categories of these barriers:

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

I am going to discuss briefly endeavours of Polish state authorities and their institutions to remove each of them. Lets begin from the ethnic barriers or from a situation when authorities speak Polish and some of the citizens don't understand this language, for their mother language is German, Belarussian, Lithuanian etc.

Poland was for centuries a multicultural, multilingual, and multireligious country. However after the World War II, Poland under the Soviet model of states in Central Europe became a unitary state, both nationally and linguistically. Shortly after the world war II, a plan of specific ethnic segregation began to be implemented in the eastern and western provinces of Poland within its new borders. Adequately, the former pre-war law of 1924 on the state language¹ was replaced on 30 November 1945 by the Decree on the state language, clearly stating that the state language in Poland is the Polish language, which is the only language of administration.

Plans of the ethnic segregation in Central Europe have not been fully executed: individuals and families who declared in 1945-1946 Polish nationality and remained within the Polish state began to declare the Ukrainian or Belarussian nationalities, when it ceased to cause danger of deportation from Poland. And so surprisingly, it appeared that the

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

population of the Polish state is not as ethnically homogeneous, that it has its own minorities.

However, the latest National Census of the year 2011 has registered 38 522 thousand Polish residents. Of this number, 36 522 declared that at home they speak only Polish and 596 thousand persons (ie. less than 1.5% of the total population) declared that at home they did not speak Polish. If we take into account that half of those who declare not speaking Polish at home are the people who use at home only "Silesian language", considered to be a dialect of Polish, one can venture the opinion that - at least statistically - ignorance of the Polish language is now not the most important obstacle in public communication between people and the administrative authorities in Poland. The interests of the linguistic minorities are protected first of all by the law of 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities and regional language. According to this law, a minority language or a regional language is used in 33 municipalities in Poland², in addition to the Polish language, in relations between citizens and the authorities.

Against stylistic barriers

Complaints about the incomprehensibility of the official messages in Poland date back to at least 1918, i.e. to the beginning of the Second Republic. Criticism about the difficulty of language of the official documents and many messages in the press and radio was heard in the '50-s., '60-s., '70-s. and so on. From the sixties descend psychological and linguistic studies and research on intelligibility/difficulty of the Polish texts in public communication. Most of these studies and research were inspired by the American publications on readability formulas, by the theories on the elaborated and restricted codes of B. Bernstein or by critical opposition of *bürgerliche vs proletarische Öffentlichkeit* of O. Negt and A. Kluge.

Reminder of these experiences could be interesting, but as in the title of my contribution the word *recent* is used, I confine myself to discuss key actions for the intelligibility of language in public communication in Poland in the last 5 years, i.e. since 2010. That year, the Council for the Polish Language assessed, on its own initiative, the intelligibility of websites of seven Polish ministries. The report, announced after examination, ended with the conclusions that the texts on these sites are "written in the

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

typical clerical style", "the authors show no consideration for the users", "they abuse fashionable foreign words", "they don't follow the rules of Polish spelling", etc.

At that time, the question of the intelligibility of messages in public communication has become a subject of interest of the Parliament, the President's Chancellery and the 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 "The official language friendly to the citizens". Within its framework, a web campaign *Petition - your right* is also comprised; it promotes submitting by the citizens demands to the authorities at various levels; the main tool of the campaign became the website *www.petycje.edu.pl*.

For the sake of better communication with citizens the Prime Minister's Office began training of 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 clerical splutter".

At that time the University of Warsaw launched a postgraduate course on the Internet: "Polish language in government and business."

On 30-31 October 2012, Congress on Official Language took place in Warsaw, involving linguists, lawyers, representatives of central and local government, of the media and translators of EU documents. Its co-organizers were the office of the Ombudsman, Senate, Governor of Mazovia Province, Head of Civil Service, the Council for the Polish Language and the National Cultural Centre under patronage of the President of Poland, Bronislaw Komorowski. The Congress ended with the adoption of the Declaration, which recommended: organization of the psycholinguistic training for the officials in the field of intelligible public communication in speech and writing, elaborating appropriate advisory publications, and - what is most essential - instilling in the officials a sense of responsibility for successful communication.

For a modern model of communication in the office and with the office, it is essential to follow the "European Code of Good Administrative Behaviour" (ECGAB), which promotes the transformation of the role of government from imperious to ancillary. 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.

A few months after the Congress on Official Language (25 February 2013), the presidential palace in Warsaw hosted a public debate aimed to answer the question "Can the official language be friendly to citizens?" [Record of this debate is available on the Internet at <http://www.prezydent.pl.dialog>] The participants of the debate, invited by the President, answered "yes" to it and pointed to the causes and sources of "unfriendliness" of official language, manifested in its "incomprehensibility"³.

At these conferences and congresses or after them, one can meet with the jocular maxim: "According to the Polish Constitution, the official language in the Republic of Poland is Polish, but it does not mean that the Polish language is the official language".

Perhaps the most recent government action to help "in a 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 2015⁴. Prime minister Ewa Kopacz herself announced that the launch of this service fulfils her promise, given in her exposé 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 will be (or have been) sent to all directors general and will be promoted among officials throughout Poland.

Physiological barriers

³ It was pointed out that inter alia one of the factors of incomprehensibility of official texts is clerical sense of power over reality extending to the sense of power over words. So are born **cancellarisms** invented and consciously put into circulation by the officials. Lawyers are yielding to the temptations of organizing reality using specifically defined words; are yielding the lawyers: their contribution to the blocking of communication between administration and citizens are *jurisms*. The academics with their *scientisms* come up to 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 characterizes the official texts, where office, law, science and influence of the EU combine, for example, 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 this way: "Each time you want to do something in the office, we are treating it as our service for you. We want you to arrange your matter quickly and efficiently, that's why we collected our services in one place. We describe in a simple and accessible way, what you have to do, what to prepare, where 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."

According to the Declaration approved unanimously on 11 June 2006 at the conference "ICT for an Inclusive Society" held in Riga, Latvia, "Many Europeans still reap few or no benefits from ICT and there are resilient 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 education used the Internet, against 73% of those with high education; only 32% of unemployed 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."

A specific nature characterizes portals dedicated to overcoming communication barriers arising not so much from the hermeticity (tightness) of messages, as from disability or half-disability of network users. To this group belong two Polish portals: community service <dostepnestrony.pl> [accessiblepages.pl]⁵ and Polish Academy of Accessibility, supported by the government . Both portals and - as I mentioned earlier - the government program "Obywatel" ("Citizen") link to the conference in Riga and its ambitious postulate that the differences in Internet usage between current average use by the EU population and use by older people, people with disabilities, women, lower education groups, unemployed and "less-developed" regions shall be reduced by half, from 2005 to 2010.

The Office of the Ombudsman - since the emergence in Poland of the digital exclusion problem - monitors issues related to the accessibility of websites for people with disabilities and undertakes interventions when it is in its jurisdiction: "In 2010 for the first time Office of the Ombudsman estimated the accessibility of public administration websites for people with sight 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."

The last public report on the availability of websites of public institutions ("The availability of websites of public institutions") has been developed by Piotr Witek and Michał

⁵ Portal <dostepnestrony.pl> [accessiblepages.pl] was created as the result of cooperation of the Friends of Integration Association and the State Fund for Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities. It is co-financed by the European Union.

Dziwisz in 2013 and made available by the Office of the Ombudsman in December 2014. Their report includes double test of approximately 3 000 objects created between 2012 and 2013.

"The report shows the most common irregularities in websites construction and barriers faced by the people with disabilities. The report includes also a summary of the qualitative changes and trends occurring in 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. "

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

"Based on the survey, analyzing the pace of the changes made over six months, assuming unchanged dynamics of the processes 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%** sites owned by the public subjects will be considered accessible, and less than one-third (32.3%) portals having intermittent problems with access to public information. "

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 made available to the digitally excluded.
- Increase of the number of available sites for the six months amounted to 1.5%.
- Increase of the number of services available with sporadically occurring barriers in accessing information over the six months amounted to 2.3%.
- The direction of change is positive, but the pace is clearly insufficient.
- **While maintaining the current growth rate 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. "

For this purpose it is necessary to carry out systematic training and regular checks of the level of accessibility of public websites⁶.

⁶ In this connection it should be remembered on the definition of "communication" in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 13 XII 2006 r. which in 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

Probably, Poland is not an exception 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.

Logios and Jasnopis

The nationwide, pan-European and even global (to remind the American "Plain Writing Act" of 2010) interest in the accessibility of messages in public communication has contributed to a reminder of research on readability from the fifties and sixties of the last century. I am thinking here about the American experiments, formulas and publications by Edgar Dale and Jeanne Chall, Rudolf Flesch, Robert Gunning, George Klare or Wilson L. Taylor. Methods and formulas developed by them to measure the readability of the press have been adapted then (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 readability of the messages in administrative and commercial communication was revived in Poland on the tide of discussions about the official language⁷.

At the beginning of the second decade of this century, young linguists from the University of Wroclaw in collaboration with computer scientists from the Technical University of Wroclaw transplanted on Polish soil the ideas of the Movement of Plain Language and offered their services to the state administration in assessing the intelligibility of official documents. In 2012 their activities were institutionalized as the Laboratory of Simple Polish Language of the Institute of Polish Philology at the University of Wroclaw. Its headmaster is Dr. Thomas Piekot. Under his guidance, a model ("formula") for measuring the "vagueness" of the Polish language texts has been elaborated. It is based on the Robert Gunning's readability formula⁸. The original Gunning's formula, designed to measure the readability of English texts, had to be adapted to the Polish language, which differs from the English in, among others, its inflectiveness and the average length of word.

The Wroclaw formula allows its users to categorize the Polish utility texts into 7 categories, depending on their degree of "haze" from the simplest to the most difficult.

communication, including accessible information and communication technology; *Language* includes spoken and signed languages and other forms of not spoken languages".

⁷ Bartosz Broda, Bartłomiej Nitoń, Włodzimierz Gruszczyński, Maciej Ogrodniczuk: Measuring Readability of Ninth International Conference on Language Resources and Evaluation (LREC'14), Reykjavik, Iceland.

Edyta Charzyńska, Łukasz Dębowski: Empirical Verification of the Polish Formula of Text Difficulty. http://www.ipipan.waw.pl/~ldebowsk/docs/artykuly/qualico2014_ecldwg_doc.pdf

⁸ Robert Gunning: *The technique of clear writing*. McGraw-Hill, 1952.

Indicator of haze, or FOG index takes a value from 1 to more than 22 and is associated with education measured by years of schooling. And so the texts, in which the rated vagueness (FOG index) is within 1-6 correspond to those with primary education, while texts whose vagueness index is 22 or more can be fully understood by a person with a doctorate.

Seven categories of Polish utility texts according to their vagueness (acc. to www.logios.pl)

Degree of vagueness	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 vagueness 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 doctoral students.**

In 2015 a similar, though more advanced, computer program to measure the readability of Polish utility 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 that "Jasnopis", mentioned in the title of my contribution. It is the outcome of a project subsidized by the Polish National Centre of Science in 2012-2015. The aim of the project was firstly to identify text peculiarities, that hamper its understanding by the reader, and secondly to create a computer tool to measure the degree of difficulty or readability of the Polish utility texts. Adopting this task - as the authors of Jasnopis explain - was justified by the enormous amount of very difficult texts in the public space, increasing 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, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Administration and Digitization, Ministry of Education, Agency Enterprise Development, the Social Insurance Institution and others. In these institutions, a need was felt to have an empirically verified tool that would be able to evaluate objectively the readability of the text, quickly and 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, the verbal text has nothing beyond the lexical units (words or morphemes) and ways of combining them into larger structures. To simplify this opinion, we can say that since in the text there is nothing but the vocabulary and syntax, i.e. words and sentences, the factors of language difficulties of every verbal expression must be sought in hard ("difficult") words and tough sentences. Underlying all readability formulas is this banal truth. The differences between them in this respect boil down to differences in the criteria for "difficult" words, and assessing the shares of vocabulary and syntax in reducing the readability of the text. Most readability formulas [I know] assume the average (measured by the number of words) length of the sentence of the text to be a statistically true indicator of the difficulties of its syntax.

Indicator of difficulty of vocabulary in most readability formulas is based on the length of words, but 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 program "*Jasnopis*", assessing a text:

- defines a class of its difficulty on the seven degree scale;
- distinguishes its "difficult" words (four or more syllables without words deemed for generally known);
- distinguishes its too long sentences;
- distinguishes its too difficult paragraphs (relative to the difficulty of the whole text and in relation to the selected class of difficulty);
- suggests proposals of possible changes of difficult words (synonyms, hyponyms, hypernyms);
- offers also indexes of clarity, statistics, graphs of lexical similarity, linguistic model of paragraphs, and assesses compliance of the style of the paragraph with the style of entire text or its compatibility with the chosen style.

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

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, situation gets worse with every decade and probably the language used by the political or economic power - and science will never be commonly understandable. But we have to strive for it, because without our efforts about the public communication it will be 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 to the current (plain) language and vice versa.