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Language in Internet discourses and linguistic-communicative norms, rules, principles...

Summary. The article is a review, it concerns linguistic reflection on language on the Internet in the context of norms, principles and rules regulating its use. The Internet is a communication environment in which the role of language remains important. It is composed of texts *sensu stricto*, linguistic and *sensu largo*, different modal. And texts, embedded in contexts, create discourses. Linguists repeatedly ask research questions about the quality of the language of discourses on the Internet, about compliance with the standards of linguistic correctness. An interesting question is the legitimacy of introducing the concept of an Internet linguistic norm. The author lists concepts regarding the rules of language in use that are broader than the norms of linguistic or only grammatical correctness. It is justified to treat them as tools for research on the normative and qualitative aspects of linguistic communication on the Internet. In some cases, however, such norms, principles and rules should be modified and updated so that they become operational with regard to Internet discourses.

Keywords: failure to apply linguistic and communicative standards, Internet discourses, language and communication norms

*Język w dyskursach internetowych i językowo-
-komunikacyjne normy, zasady, reguły...*

Streszczenie. Artykuł ma charakter przeglądowy, dotyczy językoznawczej refleksji nad językiem w internecie w kontekście norm, zasad, reguł mających regulować jego używanie. Internet to środowisko komunikacyjne, w którym rola języka pozostaje ważna. Jest zbudowany z tekstów *sensu stricto*, językowych, i *sensu largo*, innomodalnych i różnomodalnych. Teksty zaś, osadzone w kontekstach, tworzą dyskursy. Językoznawcy wielokrotnie stawiają badawcze pytania o jakość języka dyskursów w internecie, o zgodność z normami poprawności językowej. Interesujące staje się pytanie

o zasadność wprowadzenia pojęcia językowej normy internetowej. Autorka wymienia koncepcje dotyczące zasad języka w użyciu, które są szersze niż normy poprawności językowej lub tylko gramatycznej. Zasadne jest potraktowanie ich jako narzędzi do badań nad normatywnymi i jakościowymi aspektami językowej komunikacji w internecie. W niektórych przypadkach należy jednak dokonać modyfikacji i aktualizacji takich norm, zasad, reguł, by stały się operacyjne wobec dyskursów internetowych.

Słowa kluczowe: odstępstwa od norm, dyskursy internetowe, normy językowe i komunikacyjne

In the 21st century, almost half a century after its invention (see Pacelt 2021), the internet has become an indispensable element of human life. The reason for that is the fact that

the internet has awakened in its users the need of participation and activity and, moreover, it has given them the opportunity to independently shape the media reality, allowing for a direct participation in the process of creating its contents¹. It has made available not only a global platform of thought exchange, but also tools thanks to which it can be done without much effort or cost (Jabłońska 2020: 128).

In a popular online meme, the internet is part of the pyramid of human needs as once developed (in 1954) by Abraham Harold Maslow (Maslow 1990): in that ironic 21st century hierarchy, access to Wi-Fi is a more basic need than physiological ones. And in June 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution according to which the internet is one of the basic human rights, just like the right to life, personal safety, freedom, equality under the law, or privacy. And although the resolution has a non-binding status, it is yet another step towards adaptation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in a virtual world.

At present, the Net is shaping a “new reality”, with all its consequences. Its reach justifies calling it a “galaxy” (Castells 2003), and its significance – the “tissue of human life” (Castells 2003: 11), which immanently ties human life to technology.

The article constitutes a review and offers a linguistic reflection on language on the internet in the context of norms, standards, and rules which are supposed to regulate its use.

The linguistic aspect of the internet

The internet is made up of texts, those *sensu stricto* linguistic and those *sensu largo* unimodal and multimodal. Texts, embedded in contexts, form discourses. Just like the internet, they are also referred to using the cosmic metaphor, and compared to nebulae (Kalaga 2001).

¹ On the culture of participation see Jenkins 2007: 9.

The internet is a medium but also a communication environment, in which the language continues to play an important role. Speaking radically: "The internet is a construct built entirely of words and in that sense, it is a paradise for semioticians" (Lisiecki 2001: 116). Communication through a computer has provoked linguists to reflect once again on the notion of a text. Its traditional understanding has proven insufficient to cover that form of textuality which has emerged with the development of the Net. Thus, the proposal to consider a text and its functioning in a virtual space as a hypertext.

In the context of audiovisuality of digital texts, one can express intellectual optimism, emphasizing co-existence of semiotic codes, without considering them in the category of dominance. I share the opinion of Maryla Hopfinger that "an image enriches and balances the communication scene, and does not force out the word" (Hopfinger 2013: 12); that dystopian vision can sometimes be heard also in statements by critics of the audiovisual culture, culture of the image, of the picture. A word (metonymy of a language within the meaning of Saussure's system) remains an element of a media message (a media-text, see Skowronek 2013), however, one must consider the fact that the language is currently functioning within an audiovisual culture, which has some influence on it. "Poddane technologii" [Subjected to Technology] (Ong 1992), belonging to the space of electracy – it remains a human property. *Homo virtualis* is still *homo loquens* and *homo communicans*², whereas "media [...] must be considered a prerequisite for existence and agency of the discourse, manifesting itself also in the specifics of functions and meanings of communication practices" (Czachur 2020: 159).

Fragmentizing in research, in various way and for various reasons, the "galactic" space of the internet – the discourse "nebula"³, it is worth considering the following constation, justifying the multitude of typologies: "There is no universal way of ordering the logosphere" (Wojtak 2014: 97). The knowledge of communication on the internet, of internet discourses, discursive communication forms is of a fragmented and open nature. This is due partially to perception mechanisms characteristic for men (see, for example, Tokarczuk 2019: 16). The process of fragmentation is an inherent part of mass media themselves, resulting not only from the chronological order of individual mass media but also from their immanent properties (Szpunar 2012: 167-168).

The nebula-nature⁴ of the language matter of discourses in the internet galaxy raises questions about their quality, and the quality of the language as well: *Czy normy językowe obowiązują w Internecie?* [Do linguistic norms apply

² See also *Homo legens* (Jawór 2008).

³ In the article, an original concept and definition of a discourse is adopted, as offered in Czachur 2020.

⁴ See one of the meaning of the word: 'something unclear, undefined or without a distinct shape' (SJP PWN).

on the internet?]) (Gruszczyński 2001), *Czy internet to świat bez zasad?* [Is the internet a world without rules?] (Knol 2012), what is there on the internet which provokes behaviors violating (various) norms? One can answer simply: the (illusory) feeling of anonymity, the culture of individualism, with one of its forms being the network individualism. One can also refer to the persuasive power of the winged phrase “Differentiate or die”, based on the title of a guidebook by Jack Trout (Trout, Rivkin 2000). One should also take into account the level of cultural capital of an internet user, determined to some extent by the education level of the young generation and also related to the indifference of a part of the youth towards its mother tongue.

Internet versus linguistic norms, standards, rules

Theoretical cultural and linguistic thinking has led to a concept of a two-stage linguistic norm, introducing the terms: model norm and common norm – to regulate and describe contemporary language behaviors (SPP). The first one should be respected in public statements, “in particular those which are norm- and culture-formative” (SPP 2005: 32). Therefore, according to findings of theoreticians as well as based on the language policy, media create a social space, in which rules covered by the model norm, the high norm are/should be observed: “[...] that norm should be followed in the language of journalists and publicists, people of science and other intellectuals. This means that the language of television, radio, press [...] should be evaluated in terms of observance of the model norm” (SPP 2005: 32). Numerous studies, analyses and data allow the conclusion that the media fulfill their obligation to promote the model norm, although individual media do it to a different extent. Researchers focus on – more distinctive, particularly notable – phenomena of lack of respect for the language norm. Mistakes are made on all language levels. There are also violations related to the manner of communication: failure to observe language etiquette, rules of conversation, ignoring of pragmatic aspects of a communication act, suspension of the ethical aspect of communication (language of domination, violence, aggression, discrimination, manipulation, lies)⁵.

The virtual social and linguistic reality makes us re-define those normative terms and ask questions about the justifiability of introduction of the term of an “internet norm”, which does not have to be identical to linguistic norms developed so far (Żydek-Bednarczuk 2007). This is a new “generation”

⁵ Norm infringements, performance mistakes and competence errors can be unconscious, spontaneous, caused by various internal or external factors. But one can also distinguish intentional, deliberate norm transgressions, due to various motivations: rebellion, nonconformism, provocation, playing with the recipient. Both those possibilities coexist in media.

of normative linguistic reflection, this time focused on virtual communication; that communication space is, after all, different from everything known so far, even if not radically new, then modified, differently organized than the traditional society, showing a different approach to language (cf. for example Żydek-Bednarczuk 2013).

In the course of the twentieth century, mass media took over the role of the main channel of propagating (spreading) general (nationwide) language norms (Bajerowa 2003: 34), moving to the background institutions which previously fulfilled that function, i.e., literature, family, school, church. Due to social, cultural and technological changes, the language of the press, radio and television started to be considered a model one – although “not quite rightly so” (Bajerowa 2003: 35). Media, particularly the “traditional” ones, ennoble the language present in them: “That language, simply by the fact of being published by state broadcasters, gains an official status, that is representativeness and – through subconscious assumption – perfection” (Bajerowa 2003: 35).

Media have, therefore, become a transmitter of linguistic norm(s). Their role in language development is not limited to just mediatization of the model or at least the standard language. Parallely, in particular at the turn of the 20th and 21st century, in the culture of convergence (Jenkins 2007), they have also become a generator of communication and linguistic norms and patterns. That role has been assigned mainly to the youngest medium, that is the internet, which as a new, universal, egalitarian and, above all, an interactive medium, which has created new genological forms or modified the existing ones, which has developed its own courtesy code (netiquette), new linguistic categories (e.g., nicks), new forms and new norms – after ages of orality and literacy, it has established a new form of culture, named electracy. It has also become a space for linguistic creativity and experiments, with unlimited access “for everyone”. Moreover, although traditional violations of normalized spelling rules are considered a manifestation of lack of knowledge/ignorance (and penalized at school with low grades), the internet has become a space in which spelling norms can be suspended, based on conventions binding in the virtual world (in the society of individuality). Here, spelling nonconformism prevails, verging on anarchy. Thus, the postulate of a liberal approach to internet writing habits: “In essence, however, the internet spelling should be treated rather as an area of significant deviations from spelling rules than the area of ignorance” (Grzenia n.d.). This opinion does not exclude another one: authors of internet texts do not only fight against, struggle, play with spelling conventions (which is true for some of internet writing), but they are also sometimes indifferent to spelling rules, and their writing creations are a-orthographic and dismiss the value of spelling rules as a convention. Simultaneously, some of internet users show lack of ability to write correctly,

not only on the level of orthography and punctuation. This carelessness and disregard on the spelling level, presented in the environment of communication mediated by computers, should draw attention of linguists – due to potential interferences which may occur in situations of moving from communication in an *online* space to a *real life* space. Important in this stream of reflection is the problem of a point of reference for qualification of a statement as a deviational, defiant of the norm or norms, but which ones? In other words, points of reference for correct or even model texts.

Linguistics has also developed a broader view of language rules in use than just the assessment of linguistic or simply grammatical correctness. At this point, I will only list them, without discussing them further:

- Theory of three styles: the high style, the intermediate style and the lower style, present in ancient rhetoric and continued in classical periods until the 18th century. This differentiation had a normative character, it determined the scope and tasks of individual style variants, according to the *decorum* principle.
- Conversation maxims (conversation principles) by Paul H. Grice, being part of the theory of conversation implicatures (1977).
- The principle of courtesy by George Lakoff (1973; see too Grice 1977) and courtesy norms by Małgorzata Marcjanik (2015)⁶.
- The concept of three types of language contacts by Władysław Lubaś (1979)⁷.
- Principles of the culture of language communication, proposed by Marian Bugajski (1999).
- Principles of word ethics by Anna Pajdzińska and Jadwiga Puzynina (1996).
- Genological theory by Maria Wojtak (2004), in particular the concept of genological models.
- Proposal of a classification and description of genres, considering their codification or, broadly speaking: conventionalization, by Aleksander Wilkoń (2002: 201–204).
- Normalization of a scientific article in terms of the text structure: IMRAD structure, named after individual sections (parts) of an article: **I**ntroduction, **M**ethods, **R**esults, **D**iscussion⁸.

⁶ More in Żurek 2008.

⁷ See Skudrzyk, Warchala 2002, 2020.

⁸ This structure (as required by editorial teams) is present in scientific journals in various disciplines.

- Text/textuality characteristics as presented by Jerzy Bartmiński and Stanisława Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska (2010).
- Recommendations for equality discourse (Dymek et al. 2011).
- Principles of language culture on the internet proposed by Alina Naruszewicz-Duchlińska (2019).
- Statutory regulations: Act on the Polish language, Journal of Laws of 2011 no. 43 item 224, wording adopted on 1 October 2011. Behavior on the internet is also regulated, to some extent, by the laws of the given country. In the Polish internet reality, it is prohibited to publish contents contrary to provisions of law.

Some of the aforementioned concepts concern language communication *in toto*, others are explicitly oriented at communication on the internet. There, autochthonic discourses can be found, for which the internet is the primary and only habitat, as well as xenochthonic ones, created as a result of migration of texts between various habitats (Trzynadlowski 1982), not to mention non-internet and pre-internet texts. Some of those concepts were, therefore, developed with internet communication in mind, others require re-thinking, revision, renovation, modification. It is worth to remember them because of their cognitive and descriptive potential. I am convinced that if updated, they can prove useful for the purposes of research and description of normative aspects of the use of language on the internet.

The referenced standards, norms, rules, etc. are created by: linguists (I would risk saying that the proverbial Smith knows the basics of grammar correctness rather through intuition and not detailed studies in the area of language culture and lapse-ology), politicians (the Act on the Polish language seems to be, at least partially, an example of “paper” rules), and also officials. They were developed at different points in history, already in ancient times, they concern various forms of language existence, its different levels. They belong to the group of assertions (and maybe also assertions implicitly combined with directiveness) and directives. As it can be seen, they have different illocutionary force. Also reactions to them and sanctions for a failure to respect them can differ (perlocutionary effects).

A large part of those normalizing, typologizing rules is supposed to regulate the use of language in general. But our focus is directed at internet discourses. The internet, a medium but also a communication environment, or even an existential one, has its characteristic traits. Being in the “real world” and the world of the internet is not identical, each of those environments has its own norms and customs, which may partially overlap. The code of being on the internet – called *netiquette* – was created already at the dawn of the

internet world⁹. The first version of netiquette, regarded as etiquette in virtual space, by Arlene H. Rinaldi, was developed as early as 1992¹⁰. That document covered basic rules of using electronic mail, discussion groups or telnet. Emphasized was the not homogenous nature of the network – netiquette rules applicable in one space will not necessarily be applied in a different space. Still, it is worth remembering its words, stressing the responsibility of an internet user.

Just like *savoir-vivre*, netiquette is not codified¹¹. They are not identical, but netiquette recommends rules similar to those regulating behavior in the “offline world”. It does not allow behavior which is antisocial and contradictory to good manners.

The set of netiquette rules is determined within a specific internet community, for its purposes, e.g., a discussion forum, a social network. Discussion forums of previous decades, based on polite exchange of opinions, are no longer the only form of exchanging ideas on the internet. Some topic groups or chats and social media are characterized by a rather relaxed atmosphere – coarse language or series of short messages are allowed. Still, 10 rules can be named, applicable regardless of the type of an internet site and the structure of its community:

1. Do not use hate speech – be respectful.
2. Do not violate privacy of other persons.
3. Do not spam and keep to the topic.
4. Write correctly in the language used.
5. Do not post contents owned by others without indicating the source.
6. Read policies and respect rules of the group.
7. Do not provoke arguments (do not troll).
8. Before asking a question, use a search engine.
9. Do not post links to suspicious articles and fake news.
10. Do not overuse irony and sarcasm (*Jak zachować się...*).

⁹ The first known use of the word *netiquette* goes back to 1982. In Polish language, *netykieta* was introduced in 1997 (the word was then recorded in the National Corpus of Polish language).

¹⁰ The first Polish source of internet *savoir-vivre* was a portal created in 1998 by Tomasz Urbański. The site no longer exists, but it has provided a basis for other netiquettes. They were initially applied on discussion forums, in e-mail services and instant messengers.

¹¹ For the terms normalization and codification, see, e.g., Siuciak 2020.

The basic rule of being on the internet is respect for others, which corresponds to the principle regulating interpersonal relations in the “real world”. “On the internet, be yourself, unless you are an asshole – then be someone else”, as Janusz Chabior said in a campaign against coarse language on the internet.

Netiquette proves to be a “highway code” of the internet, a very universal but also a specialized one – in form of detailed netiquettes. Namely: “politeness is for everyone, but for everyone it is different”.

Conclusion

The internet is a space of balancing between freedom, creativity, originality, individualism, nonconformism and compulsion, standards, norms. An internet user should be aware that they can make mistakes, are entitled to incorrectness, inconsistency with norms, being different, original, exceptional, without being sanctioned – criticised, condemned, ridiculed, excluded. The freedom of a creator is limited by respect for the recipient and for themselves, having regard to the other person. An ideal would be, perhaps, one of the key ethical principles in medicine, *Primum non nocere*, attributed to Hippocrates.

The linguistic quality of internet discourses is the result of operation of at least two areas: education in terms of verbal communication (here I include – as a foundation – scientific achievements of scholars in various disciplines, oriented at studying interpersonal communication and its rules) and media communication which offers a foundation for getting around in the e-world.

For years, a debate has been held on media, digital and internet education, which would teach about media, for media, towards media. Those formulas are a shortcut referring to acquisition of competences, skills in using media with a variety of communication roles, (critical) attitudes towards media, contents and forms of messages. Naturally, they cover all media present in the reality of the 21st century, including the internet, which in the course of its development has become a social meta-medium (Filiciak 2010).

Normalization of verbal communication has taken place since the dawn of the internet and the internet community. The regulatory mechanism remains the object of interest and care of both internet users themselves and numerous specialists in verbal interpersonal relations, the latest example of which can be the instant reaction to the unexpected acceleration, forced by biology (COVID-19 pandemic), of shifting to online life, which takes the form of guidelines on netiquette developed for the purposes of the newest communication forms (cf. Jarczyński 2021).

List of abbreviations

SJP PWN – *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl> (access: 10.10.2021).

SPP – Markowski A. (ed.), 2005, *Słownik poprawnej polszczyzny*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

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