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## On the fairness of understanding a communicated message

The following conversation of friends inspired me to formulate the title issue:<sup>1</sup>

(Example 1)

Adam: *Podobała mi się homilia Głódźa na pogrzebie Adamowicza.*  
[I appreciated Głódź's homily at Adamowicz's funeral.]

Jerzy: *A ja uważam, że niepotrzebnie mówił o zamachu w Smoleńsku.*  
[Well I think it was unnecessary that he talked about the attack in Smoleńsk.]

Adam: *Nie mówił o zamachu.*  
[He didn't talk about the attack.]

Jerzy: *No nie wprost. Porównywał jednak zamach na Adamowicza z katastrofą smoleńską. Czyli tam i tu był – jego zdaniem – zamach.*  
[Well, not overtly. He did, though, compare the attack on Adamowicz with the Smoleńsk plane crash. So, according to him, there were attacks in both cases.]

Adam: *Niekoniecznie. Podstawą porównania mogło być co innego: tam i tu śmierć, tam i tu tragedia.*  
[Not necessarily. The basis for the comparison might have been different: in both cases there was death, in both cases there was a tragedy.]

Jerzy: *No nie wiem. Ja uważam, że jego zdaniem w Smoleńsku był zamach.*  
[I'm not so sure. I think that he believes that there was an attack in Smoleńsk.]

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<sup>1</sup> Examples 1, 3, 4 and 5 are conversations of colleagues I reconstructed from memory.

I became curious whether Jerzy was fair in his understanding of the fragment of the homily they discussed. Whether the thesis he stated in his final reply could be justified by the homily's text. Before I answer that question and look closer at the essence of the fairness of understanding, allow me to quote the fragment of the homily:

*Wielu z tych, którzy tamtego dnia lecieli do Katynia, aby na grobach zamordowanych polskich oficerów złożyć wieniec pamięci Ojczyzny było ludźmi, do których nagła śmierć przysłała in media vita – w połowie życia.*

[For many of those who on that day flew to Katyn to place wreaths of remembrance of the Motherland on the graves of massacred Polish officers, sudden death came in media vita, midway through their lives.]

*Przysłała w połowie życia także do śp. Pawła Adamowicza. Ofiary zbrodniczego, okrutnego, niepojętego w swej scenerii zamachu.*

[It also came midway through the late Paweł Adamowicz's life. A victim of a sinister cruel attack inconceivable in its setting.]<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the statement on the death of the president of Gdańsk, there appeared a reminder of the Smolensk plane crash. The basis of the comparison was specified: in both cases death came midway through the victim's life. I shall return to the issue of the fairness of the understanding of communication in the conversation in example 1.

But now, allow me to present a different dialogue:

(Example 2)

Journalist: *Pani poseł zbulwersowała wiele osób swoimi słowami. Posłuchajmy:*

*[You outraged many people with what you had said. Let us listen:]*

[a recording from a pride parade in Warsaw is played]

Sejm Deputy: *Kochani, ta parada ma szansę odmienić oblicze ziemi, tej ziemi.*

[Dear friends, this parade has a chance to change the face of the earth, this earth.]

Journalist: *Panie senatorze, co pan powie o słowach pani posłanki?*

[Senator, what can you say about the Deputy's words?]

Senator: *To obrzydliwe, skandaliczne. Używanie słów papieża. Wykorzystywanie tradycji chrześcijańskiej do promocji homoseksualizmu jest czymś wyjątkowo wstrętnym. Nie ma żadnego prawa pani poseł używać tych*

<sup>2</sup> <https://gdansk.gosc.pl/doc/5294879.Homilia-abp-Slawoja-Leszka-Glodzia/2> [accessed on: 21.01.2019].

*słów, dlatego że ewangelia chrześcijańska jest wyjątkowo obca ekscesom promocji homoseksualizmu i samego homoseksualizmu. Pomijam już czy to jest choroba, nad tym można dyskutować. Jest grzechem. Proszę nie przerywać. To, że pani ośmieliła się użyć tego określenia wystawia jak najgorsze świadectwo.*

[It's disgusting, outrageous. To use the Pope's words. To use the Christian tradition to promote homosexuality is an extremely disgusting thing. There is no right for the Deputy to use those words because the Christian doctrine is extremely foreign to the excesses of the promotion of homosexuality and of homosexuality itself. It is a sin. Do not interrupt me. The fact that the Deputy dared to use the term is the worst of testimonies.]<sup>3</sup>

When I was analysing the exchange, I considered two issues:

1. Did the Deputy fairly understand Pope John Paul II's message?<sup>4</sup>
2. Did the Senator fairly understand the Deputy's message?

At this point, the question of the fairness of understanding arises. Among the principles of the ethics of the word, Jadwiga Puzyńska and Anna Pajdzińska list the following: "hear others out with goodwill but do not be naïve, try to understand their reasoning," "do not break off from dialogue, do not be closed to the words of others, do not perceive them with preconceived prejudice."<sup>5</sup>

Considering the indicated principles, one might assume that a fair understanding is based on the reception of communication which is connected to the content, intentions and mode<sup>6</sup> assigned to the communication by its sender. Then again, communications are peculiar in that they do not include everything. Recipients complement them with elements based on their knowledge of the world. Its extent may vary. Additionally, the reception of a text is influenced by the axiological

<sup>3</sup> Fragment of the *Prosto w oczy* show in TVP1, June 2006. The show was hosted by Monika Olejnik, the guests were Deputy Joanna Senyszyn and Senator Stefan Niesiołowski.

<sup>4</sup> The reference was to the homily delivered in June 1979 in Warsaw. The Pope quoted the words of Psalm 104: Thou sendest forth thy spirit and thou renewest the face of the earth," and added: "this earth."

<sup>5</sup> J. Puzyńska, A. Pajdzińska, "Etyka słowa", [in:] *O zagrożeniach i bogactwie polszczyzny*, ed. J. Miodek, Warsaw 1996, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 35–45 [unless indicated otherwise, quotations in English were translated from Polish].

<sup>6</sup> I am using one of the basic assumptions of communicational grammar: a communication includes a reference to the reality (the ideational level), it expresses the knowledge, convictions, emotions and/or will of the sender, it fulfils a goal in relation to a recipient (the interactive level), and it is formulated in a way (the meta-discursive level). Vide: A. Awdziejew, "Komunikatywizm – nowe horyzonty badań nad językiem", [in:] *Język trzeciego tysiąclecia*. Kraków, 2–4 marca 2000, ed. G. Szpila, Krakow 2000, Wydawnictwo Tertium, pp. 15–23.

attitude of a recipient and the related view of reality, i.e. the mode of seeing the world which is based not only on knowledge but also on convictions.

Now, allow me to return to example 1. Further in Adam and Jerzy's conversation, they were not able to recall whether the priest whose text they discussed had ever spoken of his views on the causes of the Smolensk plane crash. Nonetheless, they were able to establish that in many of his statements, Archbishop Głódź expressed views similar to those of the politicians of the so-called right, some of whom have adopted the thesis of an attack. Therefore, Jerzy concluded that the comparison between the attack on the president of Gdańsk and the Smolensk plane crash offers basis for a conclusion that the Gdańsk metropolitan bishop had adopted the thesis of an attack, while Adam did not draw such a conclusion, and his attitude was motivated by the fact of the lack of knowledge on the archbishop's views and the possibility of using a different basis for comparing both events (*in both cases there was a tragedy*). A question arises: which understanding was fair? Adam's or Jerzy's? Adam applied the principle of "hear others in good will [...] trying to understand their reasons." I consider his understanding of the archbishop's communication as fair. At the same time, though, I do not deny the fairness in Jerzy's understanding as in his reception, he considered the broad context, and the knowledge of it does not necessarily entail prejudice. In other words: his understanding fits the framework of fairness. Then another question arises: is it possible to assume that there are various degrees of fairness? If so, I consider Adam's understanding fairer than Jerzy's understanding.

Allow me to consider now example 2 and answer the question whether Deputy Senyszyn understood John Paul II's words fairly. The reaction of Senator Niesiołowski indicates that he considered the paraphrase of the Pope's words as an interpretative abuse. It would be difficult not to see reason in that. The applied paraphrase suggested that between the axiological attitude of the originator of the quote and the attitudes of the participants of the pride parade there was an ideological equivalence, which was unfounded as such equivalence did not exist.<sup>7</sup> Deputy Senyszyn indicated that, though not in a very weighted manner, maybe even aggressive. Yet it is not completely clear whether Senator Niesiołowski accused Deputy Senyszyn of an unfair understanding of the text or of manipulating it. At this point, another question arises: how to differentiate an unfair understanding of a communication from a situation when it is intentionally used for manipulation? Does a communication scholar possess the tools to settle that? I believe that, for the time being, no, and that all one can do is state that their thesis is either more or less probable. However, for the purposes of this discussion, I shall assume that the Deputy displayed an unfair understanding of the Pope's words.

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<sup>7</sup> Professor Grażyna Habrajska pointed out to me in a conversation another way of understanding the Deputy's statement: as an ironic criticism of how politicians use the Pope's words.

And, finally: did the Senator fairly understand the Deputy's message? She expressed her conviction of the breakthrough role of the pride parade in Warsaw. The Senator did not argue with that. Actually, he did not refer to it at all. He only negatively evaluated the manner in which the Deputy used the authority of the Pope to justify her argument. And despite I do not accept the aggressive language used by the Senator, I cannot deny him the fairness of his understanding of the Deputy's communication.

As I have already mentioned, the mode of reception is influenced by a recipient's convictions. Consider the following examples.

(Example 3)

Alicja: *Ładnie powiedział Kaczyński, że PiS nie wystawi swojego kandydata na prezydenta Gdańska.*

[Kaczyński said it nicely that PiS will not run their candidate for president of Gdańsk.]

Bogumił: *Ładnie? Powiedziałbym – świetnie wyreżyserowane. Nie wierzę w cudowne nawrócenie PiS-u.*

[Nicely? I would say "well directed". I do not believe in PiS' reformation.]

(Example 4)

Celina: *Podobało mi się to, że Michnik podpisał listę poparcia dla kandydatury Kaczyńskiego.*

[I liked it that Michnik signed the letter of support for Kaczyński's candidacy.]

Damian: *Daj spokój. To tylko świetny chwyt pod publiczność.*

[Oh please. That's just a pretence.]

(Example 3 – after the assassination of the president of Gdańsk in January 2019, Example 4 – during the presidential campaign after the death of Lech Kaczyński).

Bogumił (in Example 3) based his understanding on his political views, similarly to Damian (in Example 4). The convictions of each sender of the opinions differed, yet the model of understanding was similar. Both Bogumił and Damian perceived the statements by both politicians according to the following model: "I behave in a way which is supposed to evoke your (the recipient's) acceptance."

In other words: the interlocutors assigned politicians unexpressed intentions. Does such an assignment remain within the extent of the fairness of understanding of a communication? (In example 3, the message was the announcement of not running a candidate in presidential elections; in example 4, the signing of a letter of

support for a political opponent). The understandings brought forward by Damian and Bogumił were based on the assumption that politicians seek social support. In it, in my opinion, there is nothing unfair, as it is based on one's observations of public life and the familiarity with human nature. Since, however, the discussed seeking of support is evaluated negatively by the interlocutors in the conversations, one should verify the above-indicated intention: "I behave in a way which is supposed to evoke your (the recipient's) acceptance and that is the only motivation for developing my communication, other values are of no interest to me."

Such a motivation is evaluated negatively in common perceptions. If, however, this article focusses on fair or unfair understandings of communication, please consider whether the assignment of the intention to the communications' senders is based on something. Both recipients (Damian and Bogumił) would probably search for such bases in previous communications by the politicians they criticised. Do the previous communications offer sufficient premises for assigning that intention, and, in turn, for the understanding of the communications proposed by the interlocutors? Or is it understanding based on prejudice? That is yet another question which I wish to pose in my discussion.

And another issue: the mode of listening of interlocutors. Consider the example.

(Example 5)

Filip: *Nie róbcie z Adamowicza świętego. Miał kilkanaście mieszkań w Gdańsku, był zamieszany w Amber Gold i inne afery.*

[Don't make Adamowicz a saint. He had a dozen or so flats in Gdańsk, he was implicated in Amber Gold and other shady affairs.]

Marta: *Nic na ten temat nie wiemy. Na razie nie udowodniono żadnego przekrętu. Więc może nie ferujemy wyroków.*

[We don't know anything about that. No scam has been proven. So let's maybe not pass false judgements.]

Filip: *Mówię raz jeszcze: nie róbcie z niego świętego.*

[I'll say once more: don't make Adamowicz a saint.]

Marta thus commented on Filip's final statement: *on mnie w ogóle nie słuchał* [he was completely not listening to me]. Marta was not evaluating the person they were discussing. She only manifested her distance. Filip did not refer to her appeal for distance. And the premises for his evaluation were weak. I consider Filip's understanding of Marta's statement as unfair. That unfairness could had been a result of Filip's excessive attachment to his opinion which made him overlook the opinion of another person. The fact of not listening was the reason why the understanding was unfair. One other issue impacted that exchange. Marta was

a young woman while Filip was an older man. In another part of the exchange, Filip said to Marta: *młoda jesteś i niewiele jeszcze wiesz, ja mam duże doświadczenie, za parę lat poznasz prawdę* [you're young and you don't know much, I have much experience, you'll know the truth in a few years' time]. An analysis of the exchange offers one more insight: Filip was driven by prejudice which had him convinced that when a young person is faced with an older person, the former cannot be right.

The presented findings offer the basis for a few remarks.

1. I associate the understanding of the meaning of a communication with the understanding of its content and intentions. I treat the mode of formulating a communication as an element which enables understanding. The understanding of a communication by a recipient consists of reproducing the content and the intentions envisaged by a sender. The degree of the compliance between content and the sender's intent and the version reproduced by a recipient can only be studied through an analysis using means of communication, set by conventions, and one cannot omit the broad context which consists of external circumstances, and the sender's and recipients' axiological attitudes and visions of the world. Considering the complex nature of the phenomenon and its limited verifiability, the compliance of the sent and the received communication can only be indicated within a range of probability. However, if communication is intended to achieve understanding, then one should consider whether it would not be advisable to seek in human communication some rules which they use (even if not consciously). Such a description should start with Grice's conversational maxims.<sup>8</sup> Maybe it would be possible to develop a catalogue of principles of fair understanding of communication. It could apply to both the pragmatic and the relation-based aspects of communicational conduct.
2. The search for said principles presumes that a sender of a communication intends to achieve a communication purpose in good will, while remaining respectful of recipients and treating them as partners. Such a basis precludes the intention to use recipients as tools or to depreciate them. However, the reality is that agents in acts of communication carry various attitudes. One can, e.g. refer to someone else's communication while offering its unfair understanding (or while pretending to understand it unfairly) to manipulate recipients. It is difficult to indicate the line between unfair understanding and intentional manipulation. One can attempt to find it. That would require one to consider a very broad context, and even then the search could offer answers within a range of probability. Nonetheless I believe that in studying

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<sup>8</sup> H.P. Grice, "Logika a konwersacja", *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 1980, issue 6 or: [in:] *Język w świetle Nauki*, selection and edition B. Stanosz, Czytelnik, Warsaw 1980, pp. 91–114.

- communication it is worth considering this issue, even if only to defend oneself better against manipulation from others.
3. Another issue is whether one could talk about the degrees of fairness of the understanding of a communication, and if so, how such a degree could be measured. I shall leave it for later study.
  4. The analysis of the examples triggers the question about the reasons for unfairness of understanding. It seems that the reason can be traced to the mental attitude of a recipient, mainly their axiological attitude. That is another matter which could benefit from a closer examination.

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## O rzetelności rozumienia przekazu komunikacyjnego

### *Streszczenie*

Autorka przyjmuje, że rzetelne rozumienie przekazu to taki odbiór, który jest bliższy treści, intencji i sposobowi nadanym przekazowi przez nadawcę. Odbiór ten uwarunkowany jest stopniem wiedzy odbiorcy oraz jego postawą aksjologiczną



i wizją świata. Analizowane przykłady pokazują różne aspekty rzetelności rozumienia oraz skłaniają do pytań o metodę badania opisywanego zjawiska.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sens, rozumienie, rzetelność, etyka komunikacji.

## On the fairness of understanding a communicated message

### *Summary*

The author assumed that a fair understanding of communication is such a reception which is close to the content, intent and mode assigned to it by the sender. That reception depends on the extent of the knowledge of a recipient, and their axiological attitude and view of the world. The analysed examples indicate various aspects of fairness of understanding and trigger questions regarding the method of studying the phenomenon.

**Keywords:** meaning, understanding, fairness, communication ethics.

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