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Impoliteness in the language of *Włatcy Móch*, a Polish animated series

Niegrzeczność językowa w polskim serialu animowanym *Włatcy Móch*

The central concern of this paper is the linguistic realisation of impoliteness in Polish. To that end, the language of a controversial Polish animated series has been analysed. *Włatcy móch* (misspelled *Lords of the flies*) revolves around the everyday lives and adventures of four preadolescent boys. The controversy that arose around the series stems mainly from the fact that the boys communicate mainly by means of taboo language. The creator of the series, Bartek Kędzierski, defends his cartoon as “telling it like it is”; according to him, the series reflects fairly and accurately the childhood spent mainly on the playground, without much adult supervision. It is interesting to see what impoliteness strategies can be found in the seeming stream of abuse that constitutes the dialogues between the characters of the series.

Within the politeness tradition so far it has been sufficiently argued that the politeness frameworks (Leech 1983, Brown and Levinson 1987) fail to account for the situations where conflict talk is the norm (Culpeper 1996, 2003). Even a brief viewing of the above mentioned series reveals that conflict talk seems to be the norm for the communication between the characters.

Słowa kluczowe: językoznawstwo, grzeczność językowa, niegrzeczność językowa

Key words: linguistics, politeness, impoliteness

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to present the use of impoliteness in the Polish animated series *Włatcy Móch*, notorious for its use of taboo language. *Włatcy Móch* (deliberately misspelled ‘Lords of the flies’) is a first Polish animated series for mature audience that has attracted younger audiences as well, much to the dismay of that part of the viewing public not impressed with the content or the language presented in the series. The controversy centers around the fact that the characters – four eight-year-old boys – mainly communicate by means of

taboo language, which means that the dialogue is in fact a never-ending string of abuse. For this reason *Włatcy Móch* appear to be a promising source of material for studying impoliteness in Polish.

While there existed a large literature on politeness phenomena in communication (Grice 1975; Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Leech 1983, to name only the seminal works), for a long time the other pole of the politeness spectrum attracted the attention of few scholars (Lachenicht 1980). The launch of the field can be attributed to the publication of Jonathan Culpepper's article 'Towards an anatomy of impoliteness' in 1996, in which Culpepper pointed out the fact that conflictive or impolite talk is not as marginal a part of human communicative experience as the existing frameworks for studying politeness would suggest (Culpepper 1996: 349–350). Since then, the field has been gathering momentum (for an overview see e.g., Bousfield and Locher 2008, Bousfield 2008,), becoming the multidisciplinary field it is today (Culpepper 2011: 3). This paper is an inquiry into the linguistic aspect of the issue, or the linguistic realization of impoliteness in the language of a Polish animated series.

2. Impoliteness

For the purpose of the present analysis impoliteness is defined as a deliberate attack on the face of the interlocutor. Bousfield and Locher 2008 provide an overview of definitions of impoliteness offered in the literature on the subject, note the lack of agreement as to the definition, and propose the following as the 'lowest common denominator': "Impoliteness is behaviour that is face-aggravating in the particular context" (2008: 3).

3. The material

The series revolves around everyday lives and adventures of four preadolescent boys: Anusiak, Konieczko, Maślana and Czesio. The setting is usually their primary school or the playground. Other children characters are also featured, such as Zajkowski, a prototypical 'not-one-of-us' or Angelika, the token girl, also not a part of the gang but rather a member of the outside world. The boys' parents are hardly ever featured, and when they do appear, they only seem to possess the lower half of the body. The most prominent adults in the lives of the boys are their teacher, Pani Frau ('Ms. Frau'), who is their nemesis, always spoiling their fun, and school nurse, who seems to be the only sympathetic adult in the boys' world (Filmweb: *Włatcy Móch*).

The controversy that arose around the series stems mainly from the fact that the boys communicate mainly by means of taboo language. The creator of the series, Bartek Kędzierski, defends his cartoon as “telling it like it is”; according to him, the series reflects fairly and accurately the childhood spent mainly on the playground, without much adult supervision (film.onet.pl 2008).

For the present analysis only one season of the series, season 3, was used, and only the exchanges between children were taken into account. A record has been made of all the impoliteness strategies used by the characters in communication with each other. All the examples quoted below are taken from one episode, entitled “Móndial” (‘World football championship’), in order to save space on contextual introduction of the examples.

4. The analysis

I would like to propose that the impoliteness in the sample is genuine rather than ‘mock’ (cf. Leech 1983: 144), and certainly not conventionalised or creative enough to be considered ‘ritual’ (cf. Labov 1972). As it turns out, the use of impoliteness in the sample is not a feature of conflict talk, in that conflict talk requires a ‘triggering event’ (Bousfield 2008: 185) which for the most part seems to be absent in the sample. Rather, the boys can be seen as involved in constant, ongoing and easily triggered conflict talk, with the triggering event being the mere fact of actually interacting. I would like to propose that the impoliteness in the sample serves the purpose of routine negotiation of the position in the group (see Bousfield and Locher 2008: 5, Locher and Watts 2008: 96). The series was advertised by the following tagline: “The first animated series for mature audience that will tell the truth about childhood and the struggle for world domination.” This ‘struggle for world domination’ is present throughout the series both in the macro scale of the boys’ world – school and teachers, playground and parents, as well as in the micro scale of individual interactions. Such interpretation of the role of impoliteness in the series is also supported by research into the communicative patterns of little boys playing in same-sex groups, where the hierarchy is clear, although constantly challenged (Maltz and Borker 1982).

The following strategies have been observed in the sample (Culpeper 1996: 358, cf. Bousfield 2008: 101–134):

- Explicitly associate the other with negative aspect
- Condescend, scorn, ridicule
- Use taboo words
- Call the other names
- Ignore, snub the other

- Exclude the other from an activity
- Use obscure language

One more strategy might be added to the list above, namely ‘use inappropriate identity markers’ (Culpeper 1996: 358, cf. Bousfield 2008: 101-134), since the boys address each other with surnames – Anusiak, Konieczko – and a nickname that is an augmentative form of a common noun *Maślana* (augmentative ‘Buttermilk’). Both the use of surnames and augmentative form have dissociating value in Polish. Only Czesio, the superficially strangest yet in fact nicest character in the group, is addressed with a diminutive form of the name *Czesław*, a form unmarked and expected in communication with and between children. However, it has to be noted that the characters are only known to the audience by means of these forms, so the audience does not know Anusiak’s, Konieczko’s or *Maślana*’s first names, and it is not clear whether the characters do either.

Another matter that needs to be addressed before the examples are discussed in detail is that in the majority of cases more than one impoliteness strategy is used at a time, i.e., the strategies are routinely used in combination. Thus, Example 1, below, is provided as an illustration of ‘explicitly associate the other with a negative aspect’ impoliteness strategy, yet it also contains some taboo language, and inappropriate identity markers.

In the following example the boys are trying to place a bet at the bookie’s for an upcoming football match. The bookie tries to convince *Maślana* to bet on a foreign team, the rest of the boys join in, yet he insists that he only bets when the Polish team is playing.

Example 1. Explicitly associate the other with negative aspect

M: *nie stawiam tylko jak grają nasi.*
no; bet-1st sg only when play ours

A: *Maślana, no co ty.*
Maślana; DM what you

M: *stawiam tylko jak grają nasi. W tobie już nie zostało nic z patrioty, Anusiak.*
bet-1st sg only when play ours; in you-LOC already not left-3rd sg nothing of patriot; Anusiak

K: *Maślana, przecież ty nigdy nie stawiasz na naszych.*
Maślana, but you never not bet on ours

M: *jestem patriotą a nie debilem, Konieczko.*
am patriot-LOC and not imbecil; Konieczko

M: no. I only bet when our team is playing.

A: *Maślana*, come on.

- M: I only bet when our team is playing. there is not an ounce of patriotism left in you, Anusiak.
 K: Maślana, but you never bet on our team.
 M: I'm a patriot, not an idiot, Konieczko.

In the above example, the comment ‘there is not an ounce of patriotism in you, Anusiak’ is an example of ‘explicit association of the other with negative aspect’, an association bordering on accusation of being unpatriotic. So much so, that it warrants a defence – ‘you never bet on our team’, which would imply that the truly patriotic thing would be to bet on the Polish team to win, which reportedly Maślana never does. This is met with another instance of ‘associating the other with negative aspect,’ namely, implying that betting on the Polish team to win would be an idiotic thing to do.

In Example 2. the boys are watching the match at one of their homes. Czesio, the most straightforward character of the gang, is happy that there was a goal. However, it is not the Polish team that scored, so Czesio is scorned for his inappropriate enthusiasm.

Example 2. Condescend, storn, ridicule

- C: *BRAWO:::*
 bravo
 K: *z czego się cieszysz Czesiu?*
 from what (reflexive) rejoice-2nd sg Czesiu
 C: *no bo był gol*
 because was goal
 K: *ale nie dla nas, Bondziolo*
 but not for us, ??
- C: BRAVO::
 K: what are you so happy about, Czesiu?
 C: there was a goal.
 K: but it's not us who scored, dimwit.

First there is a set-up, the question ‘what are you so happy about?’ This particular wording in colloquial Polish (paired with the intonation) is predominantly used to scorn the interlocutor for unwarranted gaiety. Czesio, being the honest character that he is, falls for the set-up and replies, for which he is scorned again, this time with the addition of name calling. Both the offensive name and the intonation of the last remark point to its scolding function.

The context for Example 3. is the school hall, where Maślana is talking to Angelika, who is playing with a sanitary towel. When Maślana wants to inspect

it and find out what it is, she replies with cryptic ‘ladies’ stuff’, thus excluding him from the activity she is engaging in, by means of using obscure language.

Example 3. Exclude the other from an activity, use obscure language, ignore, snub the other

M: *taak? poka. (.) hm, wygląda jak pielucha. (.) do czego to?*
yes; see-IMP, slang; looks like a diaper. for what it?

An: *to są (.) kobiece sprawy Maślana,*
these are; womens’ matters Maślana-nickname

M: *le znowu jakieś łomens rajts, ide*
(dismissive) again some [Polish approximation of the pronunciation of the English phrase *women’s rights*]; go-1st sg

M: *yeah? lemme see. (.) um, it looks like a diaper. what’s it for?*

An: *this is (.) ladies’ stuff Maślana*

M: *meh, again with the women’s rights, I’m outie.*

One way in which Example 3. is different from examples 1. and 2. is that the impoliteness in the latter appears to serve a normative function. It seems to be used to the end of bullying someone into conformity (for this use of impoliteness in military training see Bousfield 2008). Both calling someone unpatriotic or an idiot, as well as ridiculing someone for being happy when happiness is inappropriate, serve a socialising purpose. Being cryptic and intentionally obscure serves only the purpose of excluding the other, making the other feel unwelcome. To this the only appropriate response is to physically remove oneself from the situation, at the same time making light of the damage, which is exactly what Maślana does with his ‘meh, women’s rights, I’m outie’ remark.

5. Conclusions

The most interesting aspect of the impoliteness in the sample is the omnipresent tension of imminent conflict that actually hardly ever materialises¹. Instead, the characters seem to communicate from the state of heightened sensitivity, where any utterance is a potential ‘triggering event’. The main impoliteness strategies used by the characters throughout the series are the use of taboo language and the use of substandard forms. It can be argued that by means of this kind of sub-standard language use speaker engage in positive face

¹ In ‘Móndial’, the episode from which the examples are quoted, the tension unexpectedly culminates during a football match, where a seemingly minor ‘triggering event’ develops into a full-on physical violence.

work: “us versus them”, as sub-standard, low-prestige varieties hold a strong identifying value (Ryan 1979). The prominence of the ‘scorn, ridicule’ strategy point to the socialising function of the impoliteness in the sample. The controversy surrounding the series and the overall impression of the audience suggests that it is actually the audience whose face is the most threatened by the language of the series.

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł jest omówieniem strategii i funkcji niegrzeczności językowej w serialu animowanym *Włatcy móch*. Autorka kreśli tło społeczne towarzyszące serialowi, przedstawia definicję niegrzeczności, omawia przeanalizowany materiał (trzecia seria serialu) oraz przedstawia owe strategie niegrzecznościowe i ich funkcje na kilku przykładach. Analiza wykazała, że głównymi strategiami występującymi w serialu są ‘powiązanie drugiego z negatywną cechą’, ‘besztanie’, ‘ośmieszanie’, ‘użycie słów zakazanych’, ‘przezywanie’, ‘ignorowanie’, ‘ostracyzm’, ‘używanie niezrozumiałego języka’. Autorka sugeruje, że większość wystąpień niegrzeczności w badanym materiale ma funkcję socjalizującą, zaś faktycznym odbiorcą urazy są widzowie serialu.