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# The function of phraseology in selected crime novels set in the city of Poznań

## Introduction

**A**lthough the authors of contemporary crime novels usually tend to craft their works according to a specific genre framework, they still try to infuse them with enough variety to set them apart from the rest of the market.<sup>1</sup> One of the most successful methods of achieving this necessary measure of distinctiveness is peppering the text with idioms,<sup>2</sup> which enable the authors to invest their characters' lines with a natural, colloquial flow resembling everyday speech patterns, and allow them to better express feelings and emotions. Crime fiction authors whose novels are set in the city of Poznań usually employ idiomatic expressions that the city and the Greater Poland region are known for, which allows them to better reflect the local colour of their particular setting. For the purpose of this essay, I examined four crime novels penned by four different authors: Joanna Jodełka's *Polichromia* (Polychromy) (Jodełka, 2009), Piotr Bojarski's *Arcymistrz* (The Grandmaster) (Bojarski, 2015), Ryszard Ćwirlej's *Upiory spacerują nad Wartą* (Ghosts Walking on the Warta) (Ćwirlej, 2007), and Konrad T. Lewandowski's *Elektryczne perły* (Bone Pearls) (Lewandowski, 2008).

<sup>1</sup> Such treatment is necessary on account of the skyrocketing popularity of Polish crime novels, currently one of the most popular genres of popular literature in Poland, alongside female literature (Burszta & Czubaj, 2017, p. 94).

<sup>2</sup> Herein, I use the term "idiom" as defined by Stanisław Bąba, understood as "an expression with two or more words, with a meaning that is fixed through repeated use and bears little or no relation to its individual parts" (cf. Bąba, 1986, p. 8).

The idioms extracted from the source material can be divided into two categories with respect to their recognizability: nationwide (with widespread recognition) and local (typical of Poznań and the Greater Poland region). Those regional idioms, however, usually appear only in retro crime novels (that is, ones set before 1989), possibly on account of the fact that their recognizability is rather low among the younger generations of Polish speakers (Witaszek-Samborska, 2006, p. 24). The presence of these idiomatic expressions additionally sets the novel in a specific point in time. Rather than focus on quantitative analysis, I wanted instead to interpret the function of selected idiomatic expressions that appear in all of the crime novels mentioned in the preceding paragraph: *pierdoła z Gądek* 'a Gądki doofus', *elegant z Mosiny* 'a Mosina dandy', *juchta z Chwaliszewa* 'a Chwaliszewo hoodlum' and *pener z Chwaliszewa* 'a Chwaliszewo tramp'.

## Characteristics of the crime fiction genre

Crime fiction exhibits a high degree of formal rigour, and the framework organizing that particular genre has been progressively systematized over the years. Thus, the evolution of crime fiction seemed to have progressed in a direction opposite to that taken by most narrative fiction, which sought to relax genre frameworks and subvert pre-existing rules (see Caillois, 1967, pp. 167–168). Said structure underpins nearly every piece of crime fiction, because, regardless of the author and the actual literary content, the mystery has to be resolved and the murderer revealed (Siewierski, 1979, p. 40). Thus, the storyline of a crime fiction novel is usually highly stereotypical and features customary plot elements, such as (1) the murder, generally taking place in the opening portions of the piece, (2) clues, facts that lead to the revelation of the murderer's identity, and (3) resolution of the mystery (Wzorek, 2013, p. 101). Stories based around investigations and hard-boiled action are rarely driven by a variety of facts, but rely instead on "a habitual scheme in which the reader can recognize something he has already seen and of which he has grown fond" (Eco, 2005, p. 119). At the same time, as noted by Umberto Eco,

to say "If a novel gives the reader what he was expecting, it becomes popular," is different from saying "If a novel is popular, this is because it gives the reader what he was expecting of it." The second statement is not always true. It is enough to recall Defoe and Balzac or, more recently, *The Tin Drum* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. (Eco, 2014, p. 566)

A mass-market novel, therefore, does not have to be automatically classified as low culture, as mass literature both meets the needs of readers and often serves as a source of insight into modern society. Consequently, a mass-market novel can be considered anthropological testimony, a reflection of prevalent social tendencies and a highly valuable work of literature.

The value of a whodunit is not driven solely by the plot, but also by a bevy of other elements, including the novel's particular language, itself a rich pool of evidence for linguists to examine. The writing in Polish crime fiction is often stylized to resemble colloquial speech – a storytelling device that has already been the subject of much study (see Forma, 2015, pp. 165–181; Jaros, 2014, pp. 49–72; Kaptur, 2010, pp. 89–97) – and one of the most popular ways to do so is by peppering the lines uttered by characters with idioms. Idiomatic expressions breathe a natural flow into the dialogue and serve a number of additional functions: expressive,<sup>3</sup> communicative, aesthetic and national-cultural. Colloquial phraseology is customarily deployed to express emotion and characterized by explicitness and expressiveness (Butler, 1978, p. 7).

## Idiomatic expressions as determinants of expressiveness

Expressivization is also furthered by incorrect idiom use, one example being the following line from one of the characters of Joanna Jodełka's *Polychromy*:

(...) even mindless, automatic labour needs some encouragement and what awaits us feels more like **looking for peas in a fucking pod or some other haystack** [emphasis mine, M. N.], and I don't exactly feel up to the task. (Jodełka, 2009, p. 146)

In this particular instance, the character conflated two Polish idiomatic expressions: *dobrać się jak jak w korcu maku* 'to find a match in a bushel of poppy seeds', i.e. 'to find a perfect partner, fitting like two peas in a pod' and *szukać igły w stogu siana* 'to look for a needle in a haystack', ending up with *dłubanina jak w pieprzonym korcu maku, czy coś tam w stogu jakimś*, literally 'sifting like through a fucking bushel of poppy seeds, or something in some sort of haystack'. This particular phraseological contamination might be said to describe the character, stand as testament to his general knowledge of the world, a lack of

<sup>3</sup> Here, the expressive function is understood as the capability to express emotion and emotional states of the characters through the use of an idiomatic expression (sometimes in a distorted or corrupt form).

interest in matters of language or culture. That interpretation actually happens to be true, as the policemen in the novel exhibit a poor grasp of language, culture and art, which in turn forces Magda, an outside consultant and art historian, to come to their rescue whenever their investigation grinds to a halt due to some issue related to one of those three fields. Additionally, the incorrect usage attests to the character's emotional state and allows the author to add a little colour to the expression with which one policeman argues to his fellow officer that the task that awaits them will be neither easy nor enjoyable. Thus, the idiom becomes an integral part of the message itself and communicates, albeit indirectly, the character's attitude toward the task he was entrusted with. The effect is further amplified by the introduction of an expletive, which additionally augments the expressive function of the statement.

Idiomatic expressions interpreted at the textual level are thus tasked, first and foremost, with communicating emotion and serving the expressive function, whereas the author uses them here in the communicative function, to stylize dialogues to imitate natural, conversational speech patterns. Idioms can also be used to describe relationships between two characters and their attitudes toward each other:

Kaczmarek turned away from the phone in a huff. He knew perfectly well that he should have personally interrogated not just Sergey Bezrukiy himself, but also the dozen or so leaders of the White Russians. Alas, he ran out of time. What he had now were half-measures. Lucky for him, he could **rely on Lavrenteyev like on Zawisza himself** [emphasis mine, M. N.]. Wacek never failed him. (Bojarski, 2015, p. 101)

Apart from performing the expressive function, in this particular instance the idiom "rely on someone like on Zawisza himself" (*polegać na kimś jak na Zawiszy*)<sup>4</sup> also serves to imply that the two characters are close and can rely on one another, regardless of the situation. When deployed in a substantial function,<sup>5</sup> idioms allow authors to flesh out the relationships between specific characters without having to resort to sweeping descriptions, all the while lending additional dynamism to the plot. The function of regional idioms, on the other hand, is primarily national-cultural, because apart from

<sup>4</sup> "To rely on someone like on Zawisza himself" means to have complete trust in someone, to be able to count on someone regardless of the situation (Sobol, 2008, p. 228). Translator's note: Zawisza Czarny (Zawisza the Black) is a historical figure; he was a famous fifteenth-century knight, a symbol of dignity and chivalric virtues.

<sup>5</sup> Here, substantial function is understood as describing specific characters or settings in accordance with the meaning of the idiomatic expression.

communicating meaning and augmenting the expressivity of a given literary work, they also help the readers identify themselves with a given region, a given local micro-community.

Linguists and idiom scholars Stanisław Bąba and Anna Piotrowicz argue that “regional idioms are expressions, statements and phrases (including proverbs) from outside the mainstream, national dialect, which are nevertheless widely known in a given region, also among intellectuals, and which may penetrate beyond that one specific region” (Bąba & Piotrowicz, 1994, p. 112). Idioms typical for the region that the plot is set in serve the same functions as general idioms with nationwide recognizability, but lend the text additional local colour.

The repertoire of regional idioms extracted from retro crime novels for analysis in this study is limited, as the authors used only a handful of distinctive regional idioms, of which two – *pierdoła z Gądek* ‘a Gądko doofus’ and *elegant z Mosiny* ‘a Mosina dandy’ – were initially nicknames of specific persons and have since migrated into mass consciousness, where they function as stereotypes and emotional tropes (Sarnowska-Giefling, 1999, p. 86), while *juchta z Chwaliszewa* ‘Chwaliszewo hoodlum’ and *pener z Chwaliszewa* ‘Chwaliszewo tramp’ were intended to emphasize the distinct character of the Chwaliszewo neighbourhood. “With a history reaching all the way back to 1444, Chwaliszewo was a separate town up until 1800 (...). After it found itself under German rule following the partitions in 1793, it soon lost its distinct character and was incorporated into Poznań in 1800. Chwaliszewo was traditionally seen as a bad neighbourhood and was known for its hooligans, ‘Chwaliszewo hoodlums’, who tended to settle their quarrels using knives and fists” (Czekała, 2017, pp. 86–89).

The term *pierdoła z Gądek* ‘Gądko doofus’ was used by Ryszard Ćwirlej in his novel *Ghosts Walking on the Warta* to describe people spreading unverified gossip:

“People have been talking over beers that it was some kind of wacko that came across your problem. That may well be true, but some people just say that because they don’t think.”

“**Goddamn Gądko doofuses** [emphasis mine, M. N.] And what do those who can think say?” the lieutenant inquired.

“That wackos are locked away in Gniezno,<sup>6</sup> while the socialist society is practical.” (Ćwirlej, 2013, p. 65)

<sup>6</sup> The infamous “Dziekanka” Hospital for the Mentally Ill is located at 15 Poznańska Street in Gniezno.

In his studies of schools slang in Greater Poland, Poznań linguist Henryk Ułaszyn mentions the verb *pierdolić* 'to prattle foolishly' and the idioms *pierdoła z Gądek* 'a Gądko doofus' and *pierdoła z Ryczywoła* 'a Ryczywół doofus', which he explains as meaning "someone prattling without making much sense" (Ułaszyn, 2009, p. 69). The term "pierdolić"<sup>7</sup> also appears in *Słownik gwary miejskiej Poznania* (The Poznań Slang Dictionary), where it is defined as: "to talk a lot and foolishly", whereas "pierdoła z Gądek" is described in the dictionary as "a prattle and a gossip" (Gruchmanowa & Walczak, 1999, pp. 324–325).

*Elegant z Mosiny* 'a Mosina dandy', on the other hand, is a term that the protagonist of Konrad T. Lewandowski's *Bone Pearls* uses to describe his future father-in-law. Himself a denizen of Poznań, he uses the derogatory remark to ironically comment on the man's small-town provenance, even though he did not actually come from Mosina. Thus, it should be noted that the idiom "Mosina dandy" has apparently detached itself from its original meaning, inextricably linked with the specific town, and became much more universal, although still used primarily in Greater Poland:

"That is my future father-in-law," Michał turned and the nun stuck a glass with a straw sticking out in his hand. "Typical **Mosina dandy**..." [emphasis mine, M. N.], he said sneeringly.

They were approached by a mustachioed, jovial man wearing a light grey frock-coat and riding boots. In his hands, he twirled a straw hat with a broad brim. (Lewandowski, 2008, p. 195)

"A Mosina dandy" is a slang term for someone ineptly trying to wear very fashionable outfits without the fashion sense to pull it off properly, eliciting ridicule and pity in the process. The term is also applied to people overdressed for a given situation. Thus, "a Mosina dandy" can be seen as a regional counterpart of the more widely known Polish idiom "to dress like a caretaker on Corpus Christi" (*wystroić się jak stróż w Boże Ciało*).<sup>8</sup>

The divergence in the suggested meanings results from two separate urban stories that the idiom allegedly stems from. One is a story of the Mosina mayor who travelled to Poznań, where he was received with full honours by the German official sent from the West to manage and oversee the city. The foreigner had little grasp of local customs and decided that the guest from Mosina had to be someone important. After a splendid dinner, the mayor

<sup>7</sup> This meaning of the lexeme does function outside of Greater Poland, but the idiom functions solely in the region.

<sup>8</sup> *Wystroić się jak stróż w Boże Ciało* 'to dress like a caretaker on Corpus Christi' means to dress inappropriately for a given situation (Sobol, 2008, p. 347)

was sent to an inn for the night, but it soon turned out that the place had no nail to hang up his foot wraps, a fact that saddened him dearly. Asked about his accommodation, the mayor mentioned the nail, and the German official, deeply concerned with the complaint, vowed to implement the necessary changes, but was quickly overruled by the city council. In the meantime, the story reached the common folk, leading to the emergence of the ironic moniker “Mosina dandy”.<sup>9</sup> The other possible origin story for the term was featured in the memoirs of Jan Chryzostom Pasek, in which Mosina appears as the winter staging area for Hetman Stefan Czarniecki’s forces in the winter of 1659–1660 and is described as a swiftly developing town. During that winter, the Hetman’s forces received new uniforms, cut in the Swedish fashion, which made them stand out so prominently at the assembly of the royal forces later that spring that some came to call them “Mosina dandies”:

The year of our Lord 1660, please God, we began in Mosina (...). The soldiers called on the king, handsomely outfitted *in veste peregrina*:<sup>10</sup> a *żupan*<sup>11</sup> of drilling, *kontusz*<sup>12</sup> also of drilling, a jerkin made of cavalryman’s vesting, German-style boots with high tops reaching nearly to the waist, the *kontusz* to the knee. From whence that short coat, wrongly called a Circassian coat, with the high boots and garters did come into being, for it was we who were forced *ex necessitate*<sup>13</sup> to create this outfit, having worn our coats short in those countries on account of the boot-tops, so long are they, and wide. It would have looked a fright if a long coat were to bounce upon those broad boots, both front and rear. (...) The style that we brought back then *ex necessitate* from Denmark went into vogue with everyone then. When our soldiers came dressed in that fashion, Queen Ludwika [Mary Louise Gonzaga] in Warsaw and her ladies-in-waiting wondered in amazement and had them turn round and round, while they looked the lads over, enjoying themselves. So that even should a person have fine cloth, he would attire himself in the motley drilling if he wanted to tease some favor out of the king. (Pasek, 1976, pp. 51–52)

The second explanation is much more positive in character and is oft repeated by the Mosina locals themselves, who even built a statue to the “Mosina dandy” in the town (see “Elegant z Mosiny”, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> The story can be found at <<http://poznanznanyinieznany.tumblr.com/post/38463023139/elegant-z-mosiny>> (“Elegant z Mosiny”, 2012). An attempt to locate the source provided by the author of the Web site failed, while dictionaries provide only the meaning of the idiom, without offering any semblance of an origin story.

<sup>10</sup> *In veste peregrina* is Latin for “in foreign clothes”.

<sup>11</sup> Translator’s note: the *żupan* is an ankle-length cassock-type gown worn under the *kontusz*, see note 12.

<sup>12</sup> Translator’s note: the *kontusz* is an ankle-length overcoat, fitted at the waist, with long, split sleeves.

<sup>13</sup> *Ex necessitate* is Latin for “out of necessity”.

The idioms *juchta z Chwaliszewa* ‘Chwaliszewo hoodlum’<sup>14</sup> and *pener z Chwaliszewa* ‘Chwaliszewo tramp’<sup>15</sup> are used in Piotr Bojarski’s novel *The Grandmaster* – both are derogatory terms for people living in Chwaliszewo and both are very emotionally charged:

Wielicki fell silent for a moment. The guy he saw just moments before on his way to the ballroom didn’t exactly look like a chess player. But can you really know what a chess player looks like? Maybe some look exactly like **Chwaliszewo hoodlums** [emphasis mine, M. N.]. (Bojarski, 2015, p. 163)

Kaczmarek winced at the answer and pulled his hand across his unshaven face.

“I forgot about that, I’m going to look like a **Chwaliszewo tramp** [emphasis mine, M. N.] during the *symultana*,” Kaczmarek thought worriedly. (Bojarski, 2015, p. 197)

Choosing Chwaliszewo to symbolize a bad neighbourhood stems primarily from the fact that the local dialect presents Poznań as a generally safe city and lacks specific terms for hooligans or fistfights (Piotrowicz, Walczak & Witaszek-Samborska, 2011, pp. 354–355). The low distinctiveness of Poznań neighbourhoods is reflected in the idiom base, with only a handful indicating areas generally considered dangerous, e.g. *juchta z Chwaliszewa* ‘Chwaliszewo hoodlum’, *wildeckie/jeżyckie/śródeckie wybijokno* ‘Śródka/Wilda/Jeżyce windowbreaker’ (Piotrowicz, Walczak & Witaszek-Samborska, 2011, pp. 354–355).

## Conclusions

Idiomatic expressions appear in lines spoken by characters of selected crime novels, where they mostly serve the expressive function. They are introduced into the narrative only when the narrator brings up the inner thoughts of the characters. Such usage may assist with fleshing out the characters and their relationships, but is primarily used to allow the characters to talk of their feelings and to share their opinions. Idioms also serve aesthetic and nominal functions, as they allow the authors to stylize dialogues to imitate everyday speech patterns.

Thus, the functions of specific idiomatic expressions have to be examined individually from two separate perspectives: intratextual (the purpose for which the characters use a given expression) and extratextual, meaning the purpose intended by the author.

<sup>14</sup> *Juchta* – a hoodlum, hooligan; before the First World War, it was used as a slur describing hooligans and criminals from Chwaliszewo, a small Poznań neighbourhood (Gruchmanowa & Walczak, 1999, p. 235).

<sup>15</sup> *Pener* – a derogatory term for people from the margins (Gruchmanowa & Walczak, 1999, p. 235).



Furthermore, apart from performing the expressive function, regional idioms are used primarily for national-cultural purposes, as they reflect the local colour, as well as the individual character of the city and its specific neighbourhoods, and allow the authors to introduce a broader audience to the local dialect and its idioms.

*Translated by Jan Szelańiewicz*

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## Funkcja frazeologizmów w wybranych poznańskich powieściach kryminalnych

Artykuł prezentuje kilka prawidłowości widocznych w funkcjonowaniu frazeologizmów w wybranych współczesnych powieściach kryminalnych, których akcja rozgrywa się w Poznaniu. Frazeologizmy ogólnopolskie przede wszystkim sprawiają, że wypowiedzi bohaterów przypominają mowę potoczną, są bardziej naturalne i ekspresywne. Bohaterowie w ten sposób przekazują swoje emocje. Frazeologizmy typowe dla Wielkopolski dodatkowo oddają koloryt lokalny i sprawiają, że

powieści są oryginalniejsze, ściśle związane z przestrzenią, w której rozgrywa się akcja. Poza tym użycie frazeologizmów pozwala scharakteryzować bohaterów. Analizie poddano cztery powieści różnych autorów: *Arcymistrza* Piotra Bojarskiego, *Polichromię* Joanny Jodełki, *Upiory spacerują nad Wartą* Ryszarda Ćwirleja oraz *Elektryczne perły* Konrada T. Lewandowskiego.

**Słowa kluczowe:**

frazeologia; kryminał; literatura współczesna; miasto; Poznań; Wielkopolska; język polski

## The function of phraseology in selected crime novels set in the city of Poznań

This article presents several patterns concerning the function of phraseology in contemporary crime novels set in the city of Poznań. Standard Polish phraseologisms make the characters' speech more colloquial, natural and expressive and are used to convey their emotions. The use of phraseological units typical of the region of Greater Poland adds local colour and makes the novels more realistic by closely relating them to the space where they are set. The use of phraseology also serves to characterise the protagonists. The study analyses four novels: *Arcymistrz* (Grandmaster) by Piotr Bojarski, *Polichromia* (Polychromy) by Joanna Jodełka, *Upiory spacerują nad Wartą* (Ghosts Walking on the Warta) by Ryszard Ćwirlej and *Elektryczne perły* (Bone Pearls) by Konrad T. Lewandowski.

**Keywords:**

phraseology; crime fiction; modern literature; city; Poznań; Greater Poland; Polish language

**Note:**

This is a translation of the original article entitled "Funkcja frazeologizmów w wybranych poznańskich powieściach kryminalnych", which was published in *Adeptus*, issue 13, 2019.

**Citation:**

Nowak, M. (2019). The function of phraseology in selected crime novels set in the city of Poznań. *Adeptus*, 2019(13). <https://doi.org/10.11649/a.1655>