CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF POLISH STUDIES REGARDING POPULISM – A POLITICAL-LINGUISTIC APPROACH*

WYZWANIA I PERSPEKTYWY POLSKICH BADAŃ NAD POPULIZMEM – UJĘCIE POLITOLINGWISTYCZNE

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— **ABSTRACT** —

Populism is a multi-disciplinary research issue, especially as politics is concerned, present both in the social sciences and linguistics. Examined from different angles, it exhibits its semantic ambiguity and lack of a single definition. It is essential for cross-disciplinary studies to determine the definition of populism, which will also make it possible to determine the scope of the phenomenon under research. Such a possibility is ensured by the syndromized understanding of populism and by taking into account its manifestations on different levels of political discourse, including linguistic exponents, sender-recipient relations and a specific image of the world created within the framework of this discourse. The application of cognitive methodology in studies offers one of many research perspectives

— **ABSTRAKT** —

Populizm, zwłaszcza w sferze polityki stanowi polidyscyplinarny problem badawczy, występuje bowiem nie tylko w naukach społecznych, lecz również językoznawstwie. Jego wieloaspektowy ogląd wpływa na niejednoznaczność semantyczną, brak jednej definicji. Jej ustalenie staje się kluczowe dla badań interdyscyplinarnych, gdyż pozwoli określić zakres badanego zjawiska. Taką możliwość daje syndromatyczne rozumienie populizmu oraz zwrócenie uwagi na jego przejawianie się na różnych poziomach dyskursu politycznego, obejmującym zarówno wykładniki językowe, jak i relacje nadawczo-odbiorcze czy kreowaną w obrębie tego dyskursu specyficzną wizją świata. Przyjęcie zatem w badaniach metodologii kognitywnej stanowi jedną z perspektyw badawczych pozwalających na charakterystykę

allowing populist discourse to be characterized from an interdisciplinary perspective, including a political-linguistic approach.

Keywords: populism, populist discourse, linguistic image of the world, political linguistics, methodology of populism studies

dyskursu populistycznego, dającą możliwość spojrzenia interdyscyplinarnego, w tym polito-lingwistycznego.

Słowa kluczowe: populizm, dyskurs populistyczny, językowy obraz świata, politolingwistyka, metodologia badań nad populizmem

INTRODUCTION

Describing the difficulties encountered when defining populism, Berlin used the metaphor of "searching for Cinderella": the researcher is like the prince carrying the slipper, in this case it is the term populism, and seeking the foot it fits best. In his quest, he comes across a number of princesses whose little feet almost fit the slipper, but he carries on in his efforts to find an ideal case. He assumes that only then will he be able to discover the very core of populism (Canovan, 2000; Berlin, Hofstadter, MacRae, 1968). To continue Berlin's metaphor, the authors of this paper suggest that, before setting off in the search of the princess, the slipper and how it was actually made should be examined first.

"Populism" is an exceptionally ambiguous term, which on the one hand results from the semantic fuzziness and negative connotation of this term in modern colloquial language, and on the other – from its non-academic origin, indicating that it operates as an element of self-identification (followed by external identification) by a variety of political movements (Canovan, 1981). Consequently, contemporary populism studies are burdened by a number of ontological, epistemological and methodological problems.

ONTOLOGICAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN POPULISM STUDIES

A specific group of problems is related to the ontological status of populism. Regardless of the details of how individual researchers conceptualize populism it has the nature of a dependent entity. Being a "product" of human activity, populism is existentially secondary, it is ontologically dependent because it is "rooted" in the subject, whose consciousness generates a certain linguistic image

of the world (Krajewski, 2002; Gumański, 2003). Such ontological dependence is not a unique property of populism, though, as most research objects in the social sciences are dependent. Simultaneously, the ontological nature of populism is complex, since it refers to the numerous levels of social reality examined. Consciously making a completely arbitrary assumption that populism is in essence (1) a socio-political phenomenon, (2) rooted in the state of consciousness of the subject which (3) creates a specific image of the world by means of language and that (4) this image is reflected in a specifically structured discourse, it can be noted that populism understood in this manner spans over as many as three dimensions of reality: the material level (a "place" where populists encounter their recipients and the "dimension" where the outcomes of the populist discourse are absorbed, for instance in the form of the emergence of a populist party), the level of consciousness which is related to the specific image of the world, and the linguistic level where the populist discourse is manifested.

Making an ontological assumption that populism is a complex socio-political phenomenon reflected in a specific discourse construction results in the requirement that researchers who analyze populism take into consideration the properties of social phenomena. The entire set of features that constitute a social phenomenon *per se* is significant in as much as it determines the nature of academic theorems on those social phenomena. These theorems cannot occur as nomologically universal assertions (laws; Włodarczyk, 2009; Topolski, 1968), but rather as historical generalizations (Such, 1973) that are applicable only to a specified area, limited period or a set of conditions. It is clearly easier to identify the nature of such assertions when they contain explicit proper names, descriptions and other temporal and spatial determinants, as well as occasional indicators which unanimously imply their limited range of validity. Such indicators are not directly determined in all assertions (sets of assertions), however, raising a range of doubts about their applicability. Assertions which are frequently encountered in populism studies are showcased i.e. in the works by Weyland (1999), Knight (1998), Walicki (1969) and in publications taking account of the Polish context by Przyłęcki (2012) and Ożóg (2005, 2006, 2013).

Polish studies on populism present in the political realm include analyses of the activities of the *Samoobrona* (Self-defense) and *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (League of Polish Families) political parties (Ożóg, 2006; Burda, n.d.), but none of them pertain to the current political situation. These analyses feature descriptions of the distinctive linguistic features of populism. Researchers themselves point to their non-comprehensive nature, focusing solely on the selected aspects typical of

the phenomena concerned (Bralczyk, 1999; Ożóg, 2006). It should be noted that the studies presented so far have not provided an analysis of a complete corpus of material collected in order to examine populism in Polish politics[1]. They do not differentiate the research material with respect to political entities, the time when the texts were created or the medium employed to reach the audience. It seems justified to take these variables into account, as they have a direct impact on the shape of populism in Poland, and to seek its permanent, canonical properties, as well as for the variables that depend on the political circumstances, personalities of speakers and the nature of the audience. Yet describing linguistic populism as a set of tools employed in political communication seems insufficient. It is worth stressing that one of the characteristics allowing a text to be classified as populist involves the specific way of shaping reality.

The parallel coexistence of different historical generalizations of populism results in the fundamental problem of their different explanatory and anticipatory potential. According to Such, the type of historical generalization which generalizes from factual accounts does not have any anticipator (Ossowski, 1964) potential, being ontologically and epistemologically closed (it concerns a finite class of past events); the remaining cases are assertions that are ontologically closed but epistemologically open, and therefore they may provide reasonable grounds for inferences pertaining to the future (Such, 1972).

Researchers into such a complex phenomenon as populism always face a huge challenge in designing their studies so as to reflect the above-mentioned ontological (*ergo*: epistemological) complexity. At the same time, a threat emerges of falling into the trap of methodological substantialism, which follows from the "thinking in terms of disciplines syndrome" (Woleński, 1981). Methodological substantialism is represented by assuming that "only some determined and appropriately characterized element, or elements […] are specific for a given discipline, […] that the determined arrangements of the category of individual objects […], the properties, relations and sets can be examined only in a defined manner" (Węsierski, 2011). Methodological substantialism would manifest itself in populism studies, for instance, by historians reducing populism to nothing more than how political movements (defining themselves or being defined

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[1] The results presented are not approached as a comprehensive study of populism in Polish politics. They are frequently based on the studies of the language of politics conducted by the above-mentioned scholars. Cf. Ożóg (2004; 2006b; 2008), Bralczyk (2007).

as related to the people) operate, by political scientists approaching it only as a defined type of ideology, and by linguists – as a linguistic style.

Addressing the issue of populism, Bralczyk notes in one of his articles that the categorization of this term is related to such terms as "political tactics, socio-technical method, political movement, ideological trend, relative of demagogy, the doctrine of impatient people, a collection of popular slogans, manipulation, tendency, primitive socialism, political mysticism, idea, social demagogy" (1999). He chooses the term *linguistic populism* (Pl.: *populizm językowy*)[2], and endeavors to present linguistic indicators leading recipients to recognize a given utterance as populist[3]. The same approach is taken also by Ożóg, who proposes the term *populist language* (Pl.: *język populizmu*) in his studies (2006). In the studies quoted here[4], populism defined as political populism, or narrowly understood as a political phenomenon, is defined as an ideology which manifests itself in language at the level of rhetorical tools that make it possible to construct a populist vision of the world by means of a peculiar *populist rhetoric* (Ożóg, 2013, 2006).

That populism has been narrowed down to rhetorical categories is exemplified also by the studies on the language of modern politics, where populism functions as one of the eristic tools – *argumentum ad populum*. Polkowska (2015) describes how this eristic instrument operates, rightfully observing that the term

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[2]   A similar stance is taken by Jadwiga Burda in her doctoral dissertation *Populizm w języku polskiej polityki po roku 1989* [Populism in the language of Polish politics after 1989], defended at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Rzeszów in 2012. The material analyzed in this dissertation comes from the period of the III Republic of Poland.

[3]   Jerzy Bralczyk also stresses that the linguistic instruments he is discussing, in particular using typical evaluative measures, are not typical only of populism (1999:).

[4]   Ożóg lists three realms of social life where he finds populism to be present: "firstly, the great category of the behavior and awareness of social groups, studied by social psychology. Populism always is a property of a somehow disappointed and socially harmed and marginalized group. Secondly, populism is a linguistic category, since it is manifested primarily in linguistic behavior, in the field of manifestos, slogans, propaganda and texts generated for the purpose of election meetings and political conventions. **Once populists come to power their populism ends, the language of populism cannot withstand the pressure of reality** [highlighted by the authors of this paper]. The official populism of the authorities frequently transforms into a bloody regime, as was the case of the totalitarian regimes on the 20th century. This, however, is the domain of historical research. Interesting properties of linguistic populism are studied by linguists who are curious about how language operates in great social groups. Thirdly, populism is an element of political activity, serving the purpose of winning power or influence and as such it is the object of political science studies" (2006). The author of this quote addresses the different realms where he finds populism, on the one hand, and his perception of the borders delimiting its use, which no longer seem valid, however.

is vague, and its formal as well semantic indicators are not indisputably defined. Additionally, Polkowska, who studies the language of the right wing in Poland, follows Bralczyk, for whom this rhetorical tool is distinguished by "presenting an extremely simplified image of reality", the simplification of both the form and content, accompanied by a dichotomous structure of the world it presents, and such a self-image of the sender of the message that allows him or her to identify with an audience that is categorized in terms of the nation (Polkowska, 2015). Yet it transpires that such a broadly pictured eristic instrument calls for a categorization that transcends rhetoric.

COGNITIVISM IN POLISH STUDIES ON POPULISM

The observations made so far define populism as a social phenomenon reflected in a specific manner in language. Therefore, researchers face the fundamental task of determining the theoretical and methodological frameworks which will be appropriate for such a complex object of study. Interesting explanatory results are produced in the Polish context by the concept (Kołodziejczak, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, 2017a, 2017b) of focusing on populist discourse as understood by Ożóg (2006). The concept of discourse encompasses the text and the attitude of its author (sender of the message) contained in that text, as well as the characteristic sender-recipient relations inscribed in it. Such a discursive approach to populism makes it possible to stress the relation between the attitude of populist senders of messages and the linguistic strategies they use in order to build a specific sender-recipient relation of a populist nature. The following four elements can be deemed constitutive for populist discourse: (1) the central position of the "mythical" people in the image of the world created in this discourse; (2) setting the people always in opposition to "non-people" (for instance elites, or aliens); (3) a simplified linguistic image of the social world combined with a highly understandable message directed at the greatest possible number of recipients; and, finally (4) the presence of the leader playing the role of the (actual or self-appointed) *vox populi*.

In order to overcome the above-mentioned problems in studies on populism and its linguistic manifestations, attempts have been made to apply the instruments of cognitive methodology, which are well-known in Poland, and in particular the *linguistic image of the world* (hereinafter LIW; Pl.: *językowy obraz świata*), defined by Bartmiński, the founder of the Polish school of ethnolin-

guistics, as "different verbalizations of the interpretation of reality, contained in language, that can be expressed in the form of assessments of the world" (2007)[5].

This structure needs to be sought in colloquial language, which is recognized as the central style of Polish (Bartmiński, 2003). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the language used to create populist messages addressed at a broad range of recipients is described as colloquial, or colloquial style is indicated as one of its characteristic features (Bralczyk, 1999; Ożóg, 2006).

An image of the socio-political reality constructed by populist senders of messages is a proposal sharing certain features of populist discourse. One of them involves a simplified image of the world presented in terms of a dichotomous division, which applies first and foremost to a simplified (black and white) system of values. Another property, which is important from the point of view of political populism, is employing antinomy to describe the world, in particular the *us – them* antinomy. It is a significant element of such an image of the world that the senders of messages place themselves on the side of the recipients (the people, nation). Thereby, it is possible to use the category of *them* to conceptualize the enemy, whether it is the authorities, institutions or any individual or group of people perceived to be aliens, members of the category of *them*, strangers and foes. Senders convince recipients of the image of the reality they present by means of specific persuasive tools, both rational and emotional.

The category of "the people", which is deemed primary and canonical in many political science studies, turns out to be an element which is not decisive for a statement to be populist without the simplified vision of the world and the above-determined sender-recipient relation (Bralczyk, 1999). Dwelling on the issue of the sender-recipient relation, it should be noted that populist discourse is distinguished by a significant element of a specific relation between populist leaders and their recipients included in the *us* category[6]. On account of the narrow perspective of linguistic studies, this issue has not been discussed in literature so far. Linguists are concerned with identifying the category of the

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[5] Grzegorczykowa notes that the LIW is a "conceptual structure established (fixed) in the system of a given language, that is in the grammatical and lexical properties of this language (the meanings and collocations of words) manifesting itself in the form of texts (statements) as everything else in language" (1990).

[6] We have analyzed the language of Paweł Kukiz and found that the self-image he presents includes dominating roles that are different with respect to the politician-recipient relation, embraced by the "us" category, and different with respect to the relation of politician-other politicians – enemies of Poles, who form an opposition category "them" (Kołodziejczak, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, 2017b).

enemy, which is significant in terms of persuasion, and is pejoratively assessed in political texts. Hostile political parties and the broadly understood authorities are attributed with negative properties, and their views are additionally described as irrational (Bralczyk, 1999).

The simplification of the image of reality as presented in populist texts primarily concerns seeing the world, values and solutions proposed as black-and-white. The authors of publications emphasize such values as dignity, as well as truth and lies (Burda, 2012, 2013). The matter of truth addressed by populists frequently translates into employing such linguistic instruments that increase the probability of the assessments and solutions proposed. They encompass quasi-evidence, quantifiers and arguments that frequently refer to various statistics (Bralczyk, 1999; Ożóg, 2006).

The simplification of the world created by populist senders of messages is also related to the easily understandable language populists use to communicate with their recipients. The messages should be communicative, in order to reach the broadest range of recipients possible. The simplicity of language which is frequently attributed to populists makes the understandability[7] of messages one of the constitutive properties of populism.

One of the tools which can be used in order to examine the degree of understandability (or readability) of a text and comparing it with its efficiency could be provided by the Gunning fog index (Broda, Maziarz, Piekot, Radziszewski, 2010). The index employs an algorithm to estimate the years of formal education a person needs to understand the text. The level of difficulty of a text is the outcome of such factors as the number of words and sentences in it, as well as the proportion of difficult (multi-syllable) words. Studies on text readability conducted by the Plain Polish Language Laboratory (*Pracownia Prostej Polszczyzny*) in collaboration with engineers of linguistics from Wrocław University of Science and Technology have made it possible to adapt the fog index to test the readability of texts in Polish. As a result, a Polish equivalent of the linguistic standard defined in studies abroad as "plain language" has been developed. The researchers from Wrocław have come up with the name "plain Polish" (Pl.: *prosta polszczyzna*) for their model, which specifies the principles required for texts to be communicative (Piekot, Maziarz 2014; Piekot, Zarzeczny, Moroń, 2015).

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[7]　Readability is understood as a property recipients attribute to texts on the basis of their subjective assessment, which is strictly related to their receptive competence.

It is not by accident that the FOG-PL tool is mentioned here. We believe that it may be successfully applied to examine political statements in order to assess their understandability and communicativeness. What is more, it appears that such an analysis could be carried out not only with respect to written (which were the only text type examined in the Plain Polish Language Laboratory) but also spoken texts[8].

CONCLUSIONS

The history of the difficult scholarly struggle with the issue of populism leads to the following conclusions. First, populism as a social phenomenon is a focal point of all the properties of social phenomena as such, namely complexity (including ontological complexity), its syndromized nature, various manifestations (multivalency) and development dynamic. Second, these features are complemented by specific properties of populism, exemplified by the specific form of linguistic expression and its inherent property of the dominating sender-recipient structure which make the "transformation" of such a complicated object of study into an adequate object of cognition an extremely difficult task. Third, this challenge is handled in different ways by researchers: they narrow their studies down to idiographic research (for instance case studies) whose results (taking the form of historical generalization in the best case) are limited in terms of applicability and explanatory use; or they "flatten" (simplify) the object of cognition so that it conforms to the methods that are deemed standard in a given field of academia. This methodological substantialism affects both the quality of the results obtained by researchers and the degree of their further applicability, and results in the largely non-cumulative nature of knowledge on populism (which is understood as a "global resource"). Fourth, it appears that the above-mentioned problems faced in studies on populism may be overcome if attention is focused on its discursive manifestations, analyzed with instruments rooted in cognitive methodology (in particular the LIW methodology) which expand the range of rhetorical tools used by populists. Such an approach, developed from the point of view of problem-oriented transdisciplinarity (Meyer, 2007), offers the possibility to present the ontological complexity of populism and

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[8]   Parliamentary statements by Paweł Kukiz, the leader of the Kukiz'15 movement, and his posts on Facebook were subjected to such an analysis (Kołodziejczak, Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, 2017a).

grasp the essence of populism via its linguistic form. Yet, on the other hand, the conclusions developed by means of this analytical tool do not (and will not) have the character of general scientific laws but rather that of historical generalizations – as was the case of earlier analyses. Still, the explanatory potential of such conclusions seems significant and the range of their applicability relatively broad. The ultimate decision whether to use these tools is made by the researcher.

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