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The Scientific Discourse of Contemporary Humanities. Towards Postmodern De/Normalization (?)

In this article, I would like to take up the issue of the recent (meaning today's) stage of the transformation of Polish scientific discourse, the origins of which, in relation to Polish culture, date back to the 16th century [cf. e.g.: Biniewicz 1996, 2002; Ostaszewska 1994; Rejter 2018a, 2018b, 2018c]. First, let us clarify some nomenclature. By 'contemporaneity' I mean the period between 1989, as the symbolic date of a significant political, social and cultural breakthrough in the history of Poland, and the present. The understanding of the term 'discourse', on the other hand, as we know, varies; for the purposes of this discussion I adopt the position of Bożena Witosz, who states:

I would suggest treating discourse as a model, in addition to a genre pattern, of speech/text formation. [...] By choosing a discursive perspective, one can profile both specific statements/texts, their categorial form (genre), and collections of texts and their theoretical models (genre families), respectively. Thus, we can also speak of discourse as a certain method, a procedure for describing the communicative behavior of people, exposing the cognitive and interactional aspect of the participants in the exchange. In this sense it would be a discursive analysis of the text. [Witosz 2009: 70–71]

I am inclined towards a dynamic conception of discourse, as the subject of discourse linguistics [see Czachur 2020], free from assumptions about its development subjected to the process of self-refinement, and this is the thought established by historical-linguistic research influenced by structuralist methods [cf. e.g. Bajerowa 1964, 1986, 1992, 2000].¹ A similarly conceived teleology will

1 Bajerowa sees some organizing tendencies in the history of Polish. In the case of 18th-century language, for example, these are demorphologization and semantization, and normativization in the 19th century. A clear tendency to organize language had already been observed

not work in the era of postmodern nebulous communication, as I shall try to elaborate further in the article.

The lexeme *denormalization* is not recorded by dictionaries, nor does it appear in the National Corpus of Polish Language (NKJP).² I use it in the sense of ‘counter-normalization process’, simple for deciphering due to its clear morphological structure. The use of the slash (/) emphasizes the semantic and pragmatic fluidity of the unit and its uncertain and ambiguous status in the course of my argument.

Stanislaw Gajda writes convincingly and emphatically about the scientific intellectual aura of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries:

The intellectual aura of our modernity is most succinctly and accurately characterized by its key terms: postmodernity, crisis, chaos, turnaround. They indicate changes in the forms of the world, express a considerable degree of reflexivity in their perception, and reveal the cacophony of ideas in the outlooks of individuals and social groups. The term postmodernity pretends to be a general name for our era [...] and encompasses many processes and phenomena that justify assigning the qualities of fluidity, variability and the affirmation of difference to the era. It is worth pointing out those that affect the intellectual aura of (general) science, or their sources can also be traced to science:

- globalization vs localization (centralization, unification and universalization, such as cultural and economic, are accompanied by processes of particularization, see the phenomena of xenophobia and nationalism);
- the reconstruction of the traditional hierarchical model of culture (the loss of the dominant position of high culture, the elevation of popular culture, the emergence of cyberculture with the advent of the Internet as more than just a new communication technology);
- changes in social structure (disappearance of large traditional classes, massification, individualization, neo-tribal communities, network communities);
- pluralization of value systems (cognitive, moral and aesthetic relativism, fundamentalism and conservatism). [Gajda 2013: 61–62]

earlier, e.g. in the 17th century [cf. Ostaszewska, red. 2002]. These theses work especially well with regard to the linguistic system (understood as de Saussure’s *langue*), although the phenomena occurring in contemporary Polish (from the second half of the 20th century onward) called some of the observations into question [cf. e.g. Jadacka 2001; Dunin-Dudkowska, Małycka, eds. 2013; as well as Bajerowa 2003].

- 2 The online resource contains only the specialized meaning of the unit referring to the field of computer science, where the expression *denormalization of the database (data)* occurs, meaning “the introduction of controlled excessiveness into the database in order to speed up the execution of operations on it (e.g., query handling); by denormalizing the database, costly join operations are avoided” [Wikipedia: *Denormalizacja bazy danych*].

The determinants indicated by Gajda [2013] correspond to a certain trend in scientific research, mainly in the humanities and social sciences, clearly inspired by postmodern thought and the resulting vision of the world. One of the most prominent representatives of postmodern philosophy, Jean-François Lyotard, strongly emphasized, among other things, the crisis of 'grand narratives' in science and highlighted its perception based on Wittgenstein's theory of language-games [see also: Lyotard 1998].

The language-game means that no concept or theory can adequately capture all aspects of language, if only because the very attempt to do so establishes a new language-game. So grand narratives are no longer credible because they are part of a certain language-game, which is in turn part of a diverse spectrum of language-games. Lyotard wrote about speculative discourse as a language-game – a game with specific rules that can be analyzed in terms of the interrelationships that would occur between sentences. [Lechte 1999: 424–425]

He also points out the rules governing the science which he considers a language game. They are as follows:

1. Only denotative (descriptive) sentences are sentences of science.
2. The sentences of science are quite different from the sentences (regarding the beginning) that form a social bond.
3. The requirement of competence applies only to the sender of the scientific message, not to its recipient.
4. A sentence of science exists only in the context of a sequence of sentences that are justified by an argument or proof.
5. Based on the rules (4), a scientific language-game requires knowledge of the current state of scientific knowledge. Science no longer requires a narrative for its legitimacy, since the rules of science are immanent to its language-game. [Lechte 1999: 425]

These principles are being challenged in the face of a new postmodern paradigm, whose realm is marked by such features as uncertainty, unpredictability, catastrophe, chaos and paralogy. The panacea may turn out to be a shift from a global treatment to local takes on politics, language, art or history, those domains that co-create the humanities in the broadest sense. Lechte [1999] calls for the concept of game to be included in the reflections, but he also refers to terms he calls "phrase-governing rules" and "genres of discourse".

Like language-games, phrase-governing rules have their own formation patterns, and each phrase represents the universe. Thus, there is no one universe, but a multitude of universes. A phrase-governing rule represents the universe of sentences, or the type of phrase: prescriptive, ostensive, performative, exclamatory, questioning, imperative, evaluative, nominative, etc. A genre of discourse, on the other hand, attempts to impose unity on a certain set of sentences. The genre of discourse must be referred to when identifying the phrase-governing rules, since phrases can be cited and imitated. A cognitive (factual) phrase found in a literary work is not the same as a historian's cognitive phrase. [Lechte 1999: 428]

Similar assumptions allow a concrete perspective on contemporary scientific discourse. The crisis of classically (neopositivist, modernist) understood science noted in the meta-scientific discussion is a reflection of the philosophical contemplation of the condition of the world and culture, whose impasse or even collapse has long been prophesied by thinkers. This is where (above all) the evaluation of the condition of humanism, seen by some as insufficiently encompassing the care of the individual in favor of abstract humanity,³ comes to mind. One may therefore conclude that a similar intellectual aura has influenced certain features of scientific discourse, which have been recognized by researchers of communication for some time.

Irena Bajerowa, when characterizing the transformation of scientific style in the twentieth century, states:

But lately, completely new trends are emerging; the postmodern retreat from neo-positivism is searching for a different language and this one – surprisingly! – is influenced by a variety that is not at all scientific: artistic language. [Bajerowa 2003: 112]⁴

As evidence of similar transformations, Bajerowa cites such features of the language of modern science as references to the imagination, emotionality, rhetoric, aestheticization or metaphoricity [Bajerowa 2003: 113]. Romualda Piętkowa further notes reevaluations on the upper levels of communication:

Scientific texts [...] change their face, there is a transfer of textual conventions between genres belonging to different discourses, we can talk not so much

3 This is the way Emmanuel Lévinas and Michel Henry among others, see this problem [Gielarowski 2016].

4 The departure of the language of postmodern science from the canons of scientism is also noted by Piętkowa in numerous works [e.g., 2001, 2004, 2005, 2007].

about intertextuality, but about interdiscursivity. An illustration of these processes is the shifting boundary between objectified and subjective discourse, as well as between scientific and advertising discourse [...]. [Piętkowa 2004: 131]

Elsewhere, Piętkowa [2005] draws attention to the heterogeneity of scientific texts, their rhetorization, their approximation to colloquial and artistic discourse, the re-evaluation of the category of the subject of expression, and such features and determinants as blurred genres, intertextuality, hybridity, interdiscursivity, linking scientific and literary communication. Among the reasons she emphasizes the growing role of the pragmatics of communication in general, the prominence of the advertising nature of all texts, which finds manifestation, for example, in the titles of scientific works [Piętkowa 2001]. In the language of the modern humanities, a word often becomes an object of play, a game even, a material subjected to treatment, often bringing out some hidden clues, leading to ever new discoveries of the potential of verbum. Such art for art's sake, albeit seeming, becomes, in some cases, a vehicle for surprising associations uncovering inter-word alliances, which determines the specificity of postmodern science communication [Chojecki 1997]. These and other comments and observations [cf. e.g. Bajerowa 2003; Chojecki 1997; Gajda 2013; Piętkowa 2001, 2004, 2005, 2007; Rejter 2018b] referring to the widely understood postmodern turn in scientific discourse make it possible to talk about the re-evaluation of some areas (primarily the disciplines of humanities) of this sphere of communication. The prototypical (indicated as normative and postulative exponents of discourse [cf. Gajda 1982, 1996, 1999, 2001]) features of the scientific variety of language, distinguished years ago by Gajda [1982], are therefore called into question. I propose to summarize this synthetically in the form of a table:

Table 1. Prototypical and postmodern features of scientific communication

Prototypical features of scientific communication	Features of postmodern scientific communication
objectivity	subjectivism
impersonality	manifestation of the subject of speech, emotionality
logicality	essayistic styles
clarity	metaphorization

Prototypical features of scientific communication	Features of postmodern scientific communication
explicitation	rhetoric
brevity	florid style, aestheticization
abstractness	concreteness, singularity
monologism	dialogicity

Source: own work.

It seems that in addition to the above reasons for this state of affairs' connection with the general thought climate of postmodernism, other reasons for the re-evaluation and re-interpretation of scientific discourse may also be distinguished. These would be, in my opinion:

- a) culture of individualism;
- b) consumerism (cultural pragmatism, commodification of all manifestations of human activity);
- c) detabooization of customs of social communication (selling intimacy, crossing moral and aesthetic boundaries);
- d) a general loosening of the norms of language and communication (e.g., colloquialization, vulgarization, slack language, liberal netiquette);
- e) egalitarization of culture and communication, democratization of discourses (e.g., interactivity of the media, general accessibility to the media, blogs and online forums as areas for scientific activity, rejection of authority figures, scientific celebrityhood);
- f) the crisis of modernity as an ideological formation;
- g) the social aspect of scientific communication (scientific ideological discourses, e.g., feminism, gender studies, environmentalism, posthumanism);
- h) inter- and transdisciplinarity of scientific research (methodological syncretism).

Of course, we may also speak of a feedback relationship in this case. The above elements of modern culture are arguably as much the effect of the general atmosphere of thought as they are its cause, providing a stimulus for philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists to draw conclusions and formulate reflections. The enumerated determinants and contexts of postmodern scientific communication may be contrasted, of course in a simplified form, with analogous ones related to its prototypical form:

Table 2. The determinants and contexts of science communication

Determinants and contexts of prototypical scientific communication	Determinants and contexts postmodern scientific communication
methodological accuracy	methodological syncretism
disciplinarity of science	inter- and transdisciplinarity of science
pursuit of truth as a general value	negation of a single existing truth; post-truth
abstract, general dimension of science	individual and ideological dimensions of science
elitism of science	egalitarianism and the journalistic aspect of science
idealism as a basis for reflection	pragmatism as a feature of reflection
explanation and interpretation	descriptivity, science as narrative
genological categorization of discourse	nebulousness and the essayization of discourse

Source: own work.

There remains the question of the impact of these trends on contemporary humanistic (and social) scientific discourse in general and on its form in dynamic terms (discourse understood as a sequence of stages seen from the perspective of centuries of transformations of this communicative domain). Several observations and conclusions may be made in this context:

- A. Changes in the discourse of modern humanities implied by the aura of thought of postmodernism affect some areas of scientific reflection. Still, even within a single discipline, there remain domains covered by methodological precision, faithful to the prototypical exponents of discourse. In the case of linguistics, for example, these would be works that remain in the orbit of inspiration by structuralist methods.
- B. Science reflects transformations of a cultural and social nature, so scientific discourse absorbs features of the world it has undertaken to describe. The dominant thought formation of the era has always made a mark on various aspects of reality, so the contemporary climate of postmodernism encompasses various manifestations of world perception.
- C. The re-evaluations within the scientific discourse are a signal of its de-normalization, but the process does not concern the entirety of scientific

communication; it is only a sign of some cracks, fissures, shifts appearing in the postulational and normatively understood discourse. So it is better to talk about some variation of standardization, new standardization, de/normalization.

- D. I would not consider the changes within the scientific discourse in terms of a crisis, but rather as a manifestation of certain qualities and general trends in the culture,⁵ which in the future may bring new and surprising results.⁶
- E. The transformation of scientific discourse is also influenced by the field in which it operates. It is important to remember the specificity of the humanities, situated in a special way in relation to other branches of knowledge.⁷
- F. Despite changes in the scope of scientific discourse, many of its features (such as science as the primary means of gaining knowledge about the world, the social aspect of science, the production and communication of knowledge, and linguistic action as an integral part of science) remain relevant [cf. Gajda 2001: 183].
- G. Scientific discourse should not be viewed through its monolithic nature, but on the contrary, just like the entirety of modern culture, it should be seen as a complex, multidimensional quality that depends on a number of aspects. It is worthwhile speaking, especially in some situations, of multiple scientific discourses differentiated by, among other things, their themes and goals (e.g., ideological discourses: feminist, queer, ecological and others).

5 In contemporary philosophical reflection the view of crisis (of culture, of man, of the world...) is often presented [cf. e.g. Gielarowski 2016].

6 As Gajda observes: "Tendencies of this nature [of the postmodern turn – A.R.], however, are accompanied by processes of defending the identity and integrity of science and its language. The linguistic turn sharpened the linguistic consciousness of researchers, showing the limitations of the old, scientific language of science, but at the same time revealing the dangers of taking the new language to the extreme [...]. The threat of the disintegration of science into 'two cultures' [...] is answered by a 'third culture' [...] calling for the unity of science and the integration of the arts, humanities and natural sciences. However, a significant number of researchers distance themselves from the 'language-related' discussions that go beyond their heads, although this does not mean that they do not influence their linguistic behavior" [Gajda 2013: 66].

7 Among other things, Bytniewski emphasizes that representatives of the humanities primarily explain and interpret cultural reality, and the humanities themselves remain in the position of a "younger sister" of the empirical fields. This provides an important context for understanding science in general, including with regard to particular trends or even outstanding individuals representing science [cf. e.g. Bytniewski 2013: 11–20].

H. The specificity of scientific discourse as one area of communication is better grasped when viewed from a certain distance. The historical perspective of the description of the issue is fortunate for the projected conclusions. For the history of scientific discourse bears witness to various re-evaluations resulting, after all, not only from teleological development, but also from the influence of philosophical thought or the general cultural and social climate of the era.

Further research into the phenomenon of scientific discourse at various stages of its transformation will elicit clarification and will add to the observations made in this paper.

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Artur Rejter

The Scientific Discourse of Contemporary Humanities: Towards Postmodern De/Normalisation (?)

This article addresses the latest stage of transformations in Polish scientific discourse, the origins of which are commonly traced back to the 16th century in relation to Polish culture. The paper provides a synthetic and report-like overview, offering several key insights regarding the examined area of communication: 1. Changes in the discourse in contemporary humanities, influenced by the intellectual aura of postmodernism, pertain to certain areas of scientific reflection. 2. Science reflects the transformations in cultural and social nature, thus scientific discourse absorbs the characteristics of the world it describes. 3. Revaluations within scientific discourse serve as a certain signal of its denormalisation, although this process does not encompass the entirety of scientific communication but rather signifies cracks and shifts that emerge in the proposed and normative understanding of discourse. 4. Transformations within scientific discourse should not be regarded as a crisis, but rather as manifestations of certain qualities and general tendencies in culture that may bring new and surprising effects in the future. 5. The transformations of scientific discourse are also influenced by the field in which it operates. The specific nature of humanities sciences, situated in a particular way in relation to other branches of knowledge, should be taken into account. 6. Despite changes in the scope of scientific discourse, many of its characteristics remain relevant. 7. Scientific discourse should not be regarded as monolithic; on the contrary, it is a complex, multidimensional quality dependent on various aspects. 8. The specificity of scientific discourse as one of the areas of communication becomes more graspable when examined from a certain distance. Therefore, a historical perspective on the issue proves fortunate for the proposed conclusions.

KEYWORDS: Polish scientific discourse; discourse transformations; discourse linguistics; history of the Polish language; humanities.

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