Bączkowska / Kukowicz-Żarska / Rumianowska / Grażul-Luft (eds.)

# Identity, Conflict, Interaction

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## Contents

## Acknowledgments

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Editors
*Gdańsk and Płock, June 2025*

# Introduction

The theme of this volume revolves around three distinct yet interconnected analytical categories: identity, conflict, and interaction. The eponymous concepts appear across the majority of the contributions to various degrees, regardless of which Part of the book they were assigned to. As the key notions frequently overlap, intertwine and latch onto one another, consequently, the division of the volume into parts is indicative rather than definitive, based primarily on the dominant focus identified in each contribution, even when multiple core notions are addressed simultaneously. The contributions collected here foreground the challenges, tensions and limitations inherent in identity construction, conflictual online discourse as well as verbal interaction, whether investigated independently or as an interplay across these domains, thereby emphasising the complexity of the phenomena explored in this volume. Theoretically, the contributions are ingrained in various scholarly traditions which comprise educational studies, educational philosophy and psycho- and sociolinguistics, including the sociopragmatic aspects of digital discourse.

The first key concept, identity, discussed in **Part I**, is examined from the perspective of individuals experiencing illness and/or suffering—those with Turner's syndrome (K. Ciepiela), congenital intellectual or physical disabilities (R. Biernat, K. Szeler), or young adults undergoing psychological distress (A. Rumianowska). The methodologies applied here include psycholinguistic analysis (K. Ciepiela), sociopragmatic approach (A. Rumianowska), both grounded in explorations of identity emerging from autobiographical narratives, as well as pedagogical (R. Biernat, K. Szeler) and philosophical approaches (M. Wolińska) based on theoretical speculations. The empirical studies are informed by discourse-analytic and social interactional traditions, which see identity as a process of co-construction, inherently relational, dependent on the milieu, and contextually situated; they are, thus, anti-essentialist. The currently dominant approach, which underpins identity studies known as the 'narrative turn' (Georgalou, 2017, p. 2), views identity as a construct of reality, whether individual or minority-based, and it is present in the chapters by K. Ciepiela, A. Rumianowska, and M. Wolińska.

In her analysis of women diagnosed with Turner's syndrome, K. **Ciepiela** seeks to characterise the process underlying the construction of their identities. The primary characteristic of this disability is short stature, which stigmatises, oppresses, discriminates and excludes TS women from social life. This, in turn, affects how TS women conceptualise their illness and construct their identity. The Author resorts to semi-structured interviews, thus obtaining narratives of three TS Polish women. The findings suggest that identity formation is deeply shaped by both personal bodily experiences and social interactions.

A. **Rumianowska** focuses on the linguistic construction of narrative identity among young adults experiencing psychological and emotional distress. Drawing on Fritz Schütze's biographical narrative interview method and situated within an interpretative-sociolinguistic framework, her study investigates how language shapes and reflects the process of self-construction. Through in-depth analysis of autobiographical interviews, Rumianowska identifies key linguistic markers, particularly the use of verb forms, modality, and metaphor, that signal biographical structures such as action schemes, trajectories of suffering, and biographical transformations. Her chapter shows how narrators negotiate identity in response to internal and external conflicts, reinterpreting their life stories to regain agency and coherence. The interplay between narrative form and self-representation reveals the dynamic nature of identity, especially as it arises through adversity.

In M. **Wolińska**'s discussion, narrative is presented as a strategy employed by marginalised social groups, where storytelling becomes a tool for regaining and/or reaffirming group identity. In this context, narrative is considered a form of social practice. The author addresses both identity and conflict, examining how narrative is used in contentious contexts, such as the silenced voices of minority groups, to maintain or reclaim social identity and minority membership.

K. **Szeler** investigates self-awareness and identity formation in individuals with intellectual disabilities. She presents identity as a dynamic process that involves physical and psychological dimensions—intellectual, emotional, and social. A key concept in her chapter is self-image, which enables individuals to compare themselves with others and confront social norms. Peer opinions play a crucial role in shaping self-image, influencing self-esteem, self-worth, and the sense of agency in individuals with cognitive deficits.

R. **Biernat** explores the sense of identity among adults with mild intellectual disabilities, focusing on how they perceive and articulate their self-concept. Using qualitative methodology within an interpretive paradigm, the study employs nondirective interviews and the Three Wishes Test to elicit personal narratives. The analysis demonstrates that most participants do not perceive their disability as a defining characteristic. Rather, they describe themselves through relationships, values, life goals, and daily roles, similar to their non-disabled

peers. At the same time, the study reveals fragility in identity, marked by low self-esteem, difficulties with self-definition, and internalised stigma. Biernat emphasises that emotional experiences, social roles, and personal aspirations significantly influence identity formation in this group. Her chapter illustrates how individuals with mild intellectual disabilities negotiate self-understanding amid social barriers and life stressors, while also demonstrating resilience and capacity for mature self-reflection.

**Part II,** entitled Conflict, addresses the issue of conflict and peace, presented from an educational perspective. It includes definitions of peace by young adults (A. Głowala) and conflict-inducing, offensive (A. Bączkowska) or critical and degrading (K. Kukowicz-Żarska) discourse found on social media. The studies indicate an existing sense of threat and aggression, particularly in online communication.

The objective of the study presented by A. **Bączkowska** is offensive language found on social media. She examines several Twitter/X accounts of popular celebrities (journalists, singers, actors) in terms of using offensive language in vocatives, both by social media users addressing them and the celebrities themselves, mostly when replying to offensive language. She notices that the use of offensive language (often vulgar and aggressive) in vocatives has often an offensive perlocutionary function, yet they may also serve other functions, such as the demonstration of bonding and solidary, group membership, joking or even complimenting the receiver. Another observation she makes is that while both male-related and female-related vulgar vocatives are employed by men to describe men, women resort only to vulgarisms describing female sexual organs or behaviour. On a more general note, the study presents social media as a source of aggressive rhetoric and challenges in communicating affect.

K. **Kukowicz-Żarska** aims to reveal how German social media users perceive immigrants to Germany. She is particularly interested in the opinions expressed by females on parental forums, where political opinions are often disclosed as marginal topics emerging under the cover of the official forum theme, unrelated to the political issue being discussed on the margins. This form of 'hidden expression' is known as the so-called 'third space' in online communication. It allows political engagement of civil participants in online communication on platforms that are not explicitly political. Thus, females can express their opinion freely without running the risk of being criticised by male discussants. Drawing on a selection of linguistic and discursive strategies, the Author characterises the emerging negative conceptualisation of immigrants by German mothers in the third space. Critical comments are expressed in a personalised manner, where mainly concerns are presented rather than overtly polarised narratives related to political or ideological issues. They are often mitigated, hence the use of hedging, disclaimers, narrative embedding and other linguistic tactics. Van Leeuwen's

social actors theory allowed the Author to notice that passivation is often used to describe immigrants. The migration background is one of the problematic aspects in identity formation.

A. **Głowala** analyses how female students of early childhood and preschool education conceptualise the notion of peace and understand their future role in peace education. Drawing on Katarzyna Olbrycht's concept of axiological education and grounded in pedagogical discourse analysis, her chapter explores the values, attitudes, and images associated with peace. The study reveals that students define peace primarily through personal and emotional categories—such as kindness, empathy, dialogue, and respect—yet often lack a deeper, pedagogically grounded understanding of peace education. Moreover, recurring ideas expressed by the respondents characterise peace as a lack-of-war or a lack-of-conflict situation, i. e., peace is defined through the prism of conflict, war and violence, revealing thus deficits in the positive conceptualisation of peace and possible sense of insecurity in respondents. Głowala highlights the importance of fostering axiological awareness among future educators, and points to the role of teacher reflection and language in building a culture of peace and shaping civic identity.

**Part III** revolves around various forms of interaction in the following contexts: business and brand communication (A. Grażul-Luft), verbal vs. pictorial communication and developmental psycholinguistic aspects (W. Tłokiński and H. Olszewski), verbal communication in instructional settings (A. Kulińska), and communication across generations (I. Szczęsna). The studies demonstrate various forms of deficits, either in comprehensibility (A. Grażul-Luft, A. Szczęsna) or expression through language (W. Tłokiński and H. Olszewski, A. Kulińska).

A. **Grażul-Luft** proposes several parameters that can describe the level of text comprehensibility (readability), in line with the rules of the Plain Language Standards, and the sender-receiver relation parameters. Her study focuses on select family businesses and the information provided on the websites about the profile of these companies. The Author examines the epistemic distance created between the author and the reader (text relationality), which is believed to be crucial in catering for effective communication with the potential clients. Some linguistic parameters also contribute to the increase in positive reception of the author (companies and brands), agency and persuasive power of texts, as well as their universality of experience and a sense of community, inter alia, first-person plural or singular verbs, personal and possessive pronouns, the imperative. The Author concludes that corporate identity in relation to its status as a family business built by the linguistic choices used in the online descriptions of a company affects the perception of the company, yet the companies under scrutiny rarely resort to these linguistic resources, and thus they lack the features of 'familines'.

W. **Tłokiński** and H. **Olszewski** discuss the importance of developing and cultivating reading skills, which may help mitigate emotional and psychological difficulties. The Authors argue that there is an observable shift in contemporary society, wherein reading practices are increasingly being supplanted by image-based communication. The shift from reading to communicating through images is influenced by the rapid development and widespread use of digital technology, which has become an integral part of daily routines. This turn, according to the Authors, leads to unfavourable, long-lasting, and far-reaching consequences for human development, causing deterioration in the spheres of social interaction, communicative efficiency, and interpersonal competencies. Reading is believed to play a vital role in supporting both cognitive and affective aspects of human well-being.

A. **Kulińska** reports on three case studies that present students with deficits in communication skills, caused by both internal (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD, aphasia) and external (learning environment and teaching process) factors. Despite the initial deficiencies, the students have eventually managed to overcome them. The Author claims that the achievements resulted from the collaborative efforts of the learners and the teacher. The ingredients of this success comprised learners' sustained effort, teachers' encouragement, as well as aligning teaching materials and methods with the individual needs of students on the one hand, and examination requirements on the other.

The last contribution by I. **Szczęsna** highlights the problematic aspects of communication and miscommunication between the older and younger generations, encompassing listening, interaction, and understanding. The Author identifies three types of intergenerational miscommunication, or even a lack thereof. The younger generation often denies listening to the stories recounted by the older generation, either due to physical deficiencies of the latter (such as slowing of speech and hearing problems) or excessive focus on their own past experiences. The young also refuse to engage in a conversation with the old due to the topics of conversation (mainly health issues and problems not grounded in the contemporary world) and distinct life priorities. The Author notices that the formation of individual identities among seniors occurred under historical, social, and cultural conditions that are vastly different from those of the modern world, which often leads to miscommunication and a lack of understanding.

While this volume explores three distinct yet interrelated concepts, the chapters encompass a broad spectrum of themes, methodologies, and theoretical approaches, drawing from diverse traditions embedded in educational, philosophical, and (psycho- and socio-)linguistic frameworks. Some of the studies rest on various forms of communication or problems in interaction, particularly the contributions in Part II and Part III, yet their research questions aim at more specific objectives, namely either at conflict-related conceptualisations and

discursive practices (Part II) or, to problems and barriers in communication in first or second language learning as well as in generation gap situations (Part III). The notion of (self-)identity, in turn, elaborated in Part I, relies primarily on the construction of the sense of self belonging to a particular social group, yet, at the same time, it oftentimes entails conflicts, whether person-internal or with or due to external circumstances, such as societal attitudes to minorities. These, in turn, hamper the respondents' interaction with others within their milieu. The conflicts are communicated through narratives, i. e., a specific way of communication while interacting with others. Identity, conflict and interaction are thus not to be seen as discrete notions creating separate modules here, but rather as themes which intertwine and support the leitmotif of deficiencies and challenges.

To summarise, the chapters thus make a contribution to an emerging amalgamate of notions embedded in the conceptualisation of identity and/or communication practices which highlight various types of deficits, as well as limitations and challenges thereof, and this deficiency bias, the shortcomings and challenges predominating the studies reported here, are the main elements which make this volume different from other publications devoted to any of the three key notions mentioned in the title. The chapters thus stress physical or intellectual deficiencies as well as unfavourable life conditions as causes of negative identity construction and a low level of self-confidence that oftentimes entail interaction and integration problems. The generation gap is also seen as a source of poor interaction and miscommunication. Internal deficiencies (ADHD, dyslexia, aphasia, psychological or emotional distress, declining well-being, and health problems) and external factors (learning environment, teacher, unfavourable circumstances, past experiences, and digital technology) hinder the development of oral communication skills and/or a positive construction of self-identity, as revealed by linguistic practices. On the other hand, communication challenges may stem from the poor readability level of texts, the observable decline in reading skills, or the predominance of critical, depreciating, demeaning, and/or offensive and vulgar discourse in social media communication.

The various theoretical and methodological backgrounds represented in the contributions allowed us to present the eponymous notions seen from an interesting and interdisciplinary perspective. We hope to have highlighted these notions in a way that will appeal to scholars from diverse backgrounds.

## Reference

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# Part I – Identity

Kamila Ciepiela

# Body-(dis)abled Identities of Women with Turner Syndrome

**Abstract**
This chapter examines the impact of short stature, a primary characteristic of Turner syndrome (TS), on the formation of (dis)abled identities among women with TS. While hormone therapy is often presented as a means for women with TS to lead fulfilling lives, this outcome is not universally attained. The study explores how embodiment and societal discourses surrounding short stature shape the identity construction of women with TS. Recognizing the importance of subjective bodily experiences and intersubjective societal interactions in identity formation, this research employs narrative analysis of semi-structured interviews with women with TS in Poland. The findings suggest that the identities of women with TS are constructed and interpreted through dominant societal discourses that privilege normativity, ability, and idealized body forms.

**Keywords:** disability, identity, identity dilemma, short stature, Turner syndrome

## 1. Introduction

Identity of a person is commonly understood as the collection of traits and characteristics that define who we are and what we prefer, as well as the attributes others use to form their perceptions of us and determine our true nature. For people with disabilities, disability is an integral part of their identity. Therefore, the construct of a person's identity is complemented with conceptualizations of illnesses or disabilities encompassing knowledge, beliefs, personal judgments, and opinions about diseases and impairments. These constructs are influenced by varying medical and social models, which differ across cultures and affect how people experience and describe their physical and emotional conditions, including fundamental sensations like pain (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Kirmayer, 2008). Such models shape daily routines, lifestyle adaptations, and the regulation

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of behavior in response to bodily conditions, influencing the processing of information and subsequent actions.

There are two main models, viz. the medical and the social that underlie viewing disabilities, including Turner syndrome (TS). The medical model defines TS as a genetic aberration, with key physical manifestations such as short stature and ovarian dysgenesis. Women with TS often resist a corporeal identity labeled as abnormal (Kucharska, 2019) or even 'monstrous' (Walkowska-Radkowicz, 2019), highlighting the perceived opportunity and necessity for correction through treatments like Growth Hormone Therapy (GHT) and hormone supplementation. These treatments aim to improve health-related quality of life, allowing individuals with TS to potentially reach their full capabilities (Rieser & Davenport, 2019; Shankar & Backeljauw, 2018).

Contrastingly, the social model of disability posits that disability arises from the interaction between individuals with impairments and an environment laden with physical, attitudinal, communication, and social barriers. Within this framework, individuals with differences in body size, shape, or function, such as women with TS, are situated "within a hierarchy of bodily traits that determines the distribution of privilege, status, and power" (Garland Thomson, 1997, p. 6).

In both models, an individual's identity is socially constructed through positioning imposed by others, a process described as having a "world-to-agent direction of fit" (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004, p. 474). The societal perception of women with TS as deviating from normative corporeal standards contributes to the construction of a stigmatized identity, leading to experiences of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion (Scambler, 2009). Such discriminatory experiences, termed 'enacted stigma' (Goffman, 1963), can significantly impact the thoughts, emotions, and actions of women with TS. Consequently, these women may develop 'felt stigma', which encompasses anticipated or perceived societal reactions, potentially influencing behavior even without direct social interaction (Ocran, 2023).

The stigma associated with TS not only exacerbates perceptions of deviation from cultural norms, potentially causing psychological distress (Cragg & Lafrenier, 2010), but also impacts perceptions of the abilities of women with TS. Campbell (2001, p. 44) describes ableism as "a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human." This standard creates a benchmark for normalcy, deviation from which results in the perception of disability (Campbell, 2009).

Despite the stigma and its consequences, women with TS retain the ability to think and act independently, actively positioning themselves using "discursive resources or repertoires [that] are not always and already given but rather are accomplished" (Korobov & Bamberg, 2004, p. 475). The use of language—

through specific references, descriptions, and evaluations—plays a crucial role in constructing a sense of self, identity, and world, with 'world- and person-making' occurring simultaneously (Bamberg, 2000, p. 763).

This paper aims to explore the discursive construction of body-(dis)abled identities among women with Turner syndrome. It examines how ableism is imposed, incorporated, negotiated, and/or resisted, and how embodiment influences identity within an ableist society. By analyzing narratives from semi-structured interviews, this study sheds light on the intersection of corporeality and identity in the experiences of women with TS.

## 2. Positioning in ableist discourses and the stigma of TS

The concept of 'positioning' is crucial for understanding how identity and subjectivity are constructed. Positioning refers to the ways individuals situate themselves and others within the discourses prevalent in their cultural and social contexts. These discourses provide the framework of meanings and values that influence how subjects are perceived and how they perceive themselves (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Hollway, 1984). For women with TS, positioning involves navigating societal discourses about normalcy and disability, where the predominant cultural discourse often views short stature and other physical traits associated with TS as abnormal or deficient. This positioning process is not passive; individuals with TS actively engage with and choose from these competing discourses, exercising agency in how they define and present their identities.

A more nuanced view of positioning involves the dual concepts of 'being positioned' and 'positioning oneself', which highlight different interactions between the individual and the external world. 'Being positioned' refers to a world-to-agent direction of fit, where dominant societal discourses and stereotypes impose an identity on individuals, often marginalizing or stigmatizing them. For women with TS, this can manifest as societal views that frame short stature as a limitation, thereby impacting self-esteem and societal perceptions. On the other hand, 'positioning oneself' represents an agent-to-world direction of fit, where women with TS actively engage with these discourses, challenging and negotiating them to construct a more empowered and positive self-identity. This active engagement allows them to resist and reframe the negative connotations associated with their physical characteristics, which demonstrates that identity formation is a dynamic interplay between internal agency and external societal forces (Bamberg, 2000; 2004).

Since in ableist discourse, disability is cast as "a diminished state of being human" (Campbell, 2008, p. 44), the short stature of women with TS, when

viewed through an ableist lens, is perceived as a deviation from the normative body, reinforcing notions of inferiority and deficiency. This perception impacts both self-positioning and the way these women are positioned by others. They may internalize societal attitudes in the form of either the enacted or felt stigma, and thus experience reduced self-worth and a constrained sense of identity, or they may resist these stereotypes, asserting their own narratives and rejecting the diminishment of their personhood. Thus, ableism not only affects external perceptions but also deeply influences the self-conception and identity construction of women with TS within an ableist society.

## 3. Method

This study was conducted using the discourse analysis design, narrative analysis in particular. It is part of a larger qualitative research that examined the lived experiences of TS among women with TS in Poland (Ciepiela, 2020a; 2020b; 2022). The design allowed for the interrogation of how the participants conceptualized their condition and how they managed their identities in light of their relational experiences.

Data for the study were collected in semi-structured interviews with nine Polish adult women with Turner syndrome. The interviews (audio recorded) were conducted in Polish, and transcribed first with Turboscribe.ai to obtain a preliminary rough transcript that became the basis for manual corrective complementing transcription done by the author of this paper. Subsequently, with the view of presenting the data to non-English speaking audience, the author translated the transcripts to English to render the meanings conveyed in Polish.

### 3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were nine women with Turner syndrome. TS involves a range of phenotypic traits caused by the absence of a second sex chromosome. Common symptoms include short stature and early ovarian failure, leading to infertility and often preventing puberty. The primary treatments are Growth Hormone Therapy (GHT) to increase height and estrogen plus progesterone replacement therapy (HRT) to address premature ovarian failure (Huang, Olson & Maslen, 2021). While GHT is generally effective, factors like dosage and late initiation can reduce its success. In Poland, reimbursement for GHT began in 2000 (Świątkiewicz-Mośny, 2010), meaning that women who reached puberty before this date did not receive treatment, resulting in an average height deficit of 20 centimeters, with most not exceeding 140 centimeters. The demographic

details of the participants are given in Table 1. All of the participants provided oral consent to participate in the study. They participated in the study voluntarily.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

| Nick | Age | Height cm | GHT | Education | Employment | Children | Marital status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Carol | 19 | 155 | no | BA | No | No | Single |
| Eva | 53 | 135 | no | MA | Fixed-term | No | Single |
| Lena | 26 | 160 | yes | MA | Yes | No | Engaged |
| Lucy | 27 | 155 | yes | PhD | Yes | No | Single |
| Maria | 52 | 132 | no | Vocational | Pension | No | Divorced |
| Mona | 43 | 130 | no | Vocational | No | No | Single |
| Nessy | 44 | 155 | no | PhD | Yes | Yes | Married |
| Rozalia | 27 | 160 | yes | MA | Yes | No | Single |
| Sofia | 33 | 150 | | College | Yes | No | Single |

## 3.2. Analytic design

The positioning of the participants of the interviews is analyzed on three levels to understand how women with TS construct identities and subjectivities through narrative practices. At the first level, analysis focuses on how characters are positioned relative to one another in texts. This involves examining linguistic and paralinguistic elements that navigate characters through identity dilemmas (realms) like continuity/change, sameness/difference and agency/passivity (Bamberg, 2011; 2012).

The second level, whose analysis in this study is very constrained by the genre features of semi-structured interviews, looks at how speakers position themselves relative to their interlocutors, scrutinizing linguistic and non-verbal cues to understand the discourse mode being constructed. This level investigates whether speakers instruct, apologize, or assign blame, providing insight into the relational dynamics at play. In everyday conversations this level is foundational for understanding the themes and content that emerge at the first level whereas in interviews the range of possible interactional moves is highly controlled by the features of the genre.

The third level addresses how speakers position a sense of their subjectivity vis-à-vis dominant discourses. This involves analyzing linguistic and bodily maneuvers to explore claims or stances that go beyond the immediate conversation. This level considers how individuals align with or resist dominant dis-

courses, constructing local answers to the question, "Who am I?" (Bamberg, 2011; 2012). These practices, repeated over time, contribute to a lasting sense of identity and subjectivity.

## 4. Analysis

(1) Lucy

I: erm would you say that you would be a different person without TS?
L: I mean I think it's part of my personality and sometimes when I look at myself, I don't know what I have after my mom who is very expressive, erm who is a choleric, and I wonder how much of that is a question of personality, because I notice the features of my mother [crying, wiping her tears with her index finger], because when I feel frustrated or I don't like something, I rush to my mum, but on the other hand I see that my behavior [crying ceased], it is related to the therapy, for example my sisters noticed [crying again], because I'm on patches, that I forgot to put [the patch]
I: [mhm]
L: I don't know, and I can cry all Sunday, everything irritates me, and then it turns out, you definitely didn't stick that patch or something and it's strange, but I have an impression it is all connected somehow
I: mhm
L: I have a bit of an approach from special education, I went to a conference in WXXX for people with disabilities and gave a paper on TS, I feel good about it, it's a bit like my world, when I see all these disabilities, it's so normal for me, I feel good I feel part of
I: so not only TS, but also other disabilities, you empathize with these people
L: yeah

As the interview draws to a close, a key question is posed to Lucy, shedding light on how she perceives TS and its relation to her identity. Lucy responds with two small stories. The first, titled *Estrogen Patch*, features Lucy, her younger twin sisters, and the patch as the central characters. Lucy forgets to apply the patch, leading to a tearful Sunday. Her sisters, acting as a single character, notice the missing patch and remind her to apply it. Their proactive role is evident as they identify the cause of her distress and offer a solution. Lucy, in turn, reacts to their suggestion, highlighting her reflective nature. While Lucy frequently evaluates actions, her assessments are less definitive than her sisters', who offer conclusive judgments like, "You definitely didn't stick that patch." This difference is evident in the language used–Lucy's evaluations involve tentative verbs (think, wonder, have an impression), whereas her sisters' are assertive and irrefutable.

Although the patch seems to be an inanimate object controlled by Lucy, it actually governs her well-being. When the patch is not applied, her mood dete-

riorates, leading to socially inappropriate behavior. Once applied, her behavior conforms to societal norms, making her 'invisible' and blending in with non-impaired individuals. The patch, therefore, emerges as a significant biosocial agent, influencing Lucy's emotions, social interactions, and overall happiness (Radkowska-Walkowicz, 2019a, 2019b). The *Estrogen Patch* story also touches on Lucy's identity, suggesting a transformation in her sense of self when the patch is applied. She questions whether her true personality is inherited or shaped by TS, raising the issue of identity as either stable or subject to change based on environmental factors.

The second story, which Lucy shares in response to the interviewer's question, addresses the sameness-difference dilemma. She recounts attending a conference where she gave a speech on TS. Unlike the first story, Lucy is the sole protagonist, though the presence of other characters is implied through the familiar setting of a conference. The other participants share a common characteristic–having a disability. Lucy explicitly identifies with this community, feeling a part of it. In contrast to the *Estrogen Patch* story, here Lucy is portrayed as an active agent who deliberately engages in the conference. She is both an agent (attending the conference, giving a paper) and an experiencer (observing other disabilities, reflecting on her feelings). Her positive evaluation of the event and its participants (*I feel good*; *I feel part of*) reinforces the idea that TS is an integral part of her identity, distinguishing her from 'typical' women and aligning her with those who are socially marked as disabled.

Lucy's non-verbal behavior during the interview further underscores her self-perception related to TS. As she recounts the *Estrogen Patch* story, her eyes well up, and she eventually sheds tears, subtly wiping them with her finger as if trying to conceal them. This behavior suggests that Lucy views public weeping as socially marked, reinforcing the notion that tearfulness, a trait she attributes to TS, sets her apart from others. Bamberg and Wipff (2020), drawing on Searle's (2010) concept of 'background', suggest that cultural background assumptions emerge through embodied engagement in specific contexts, shaping meaning. Lucy's non-verbal cues thus reveal that what she considers a mark of TS contrasts with her understanding of societal norms.

(2) Maria

I: How would you say in your own words what Turner Syndrome is?

M: Oh, well, not an easy disease and difficult to diagnose and difficult to live and survive. Well, sometimes it's difficult to live with it, and sometimes not, sometimes you like it, and sometimes it's fun, sometimes there're funny situations. Well, I found myself in such a funny situation when I got married. We're travelling by train, and therefore I didn't wear a wedding ring after that, because when we're

going out or when I was going somewhere on my own, and once at the butcher's, a lady says, oh, a child's wearing a wedding ring. Good, I came home pissed off, I took off the wedding ring, thinking: I won't wear a wedding ring if they say that the child's wearing a wedding ring. Back then, when I was traveling with him [ex-husband] I wore the ring, but the clippie did not see it. We didn't manage to buy tickets at the ticket office, or it was closed, I don't remember, and he says to the clippie two tickets please, and the clippie looked at me and said one ticket, and buy an ice cream for the child instead. [laughs] And we left the train and I said to him, now you have to buy an ice cream for the child, [laughs] no excuses!

I: But you rather took that as laughable

M: Yeah, as funny

I: You didn't feel offended by that, did you?

M: No, as ordinary, as I say, until I was thirty, I really looked like a child. Once, when I was younger, I entered an office, for example, there were such situations that I was told I have to come with someone older because they told me I would not arrange anything, because the child came. And also such a situation when I lived with him in the country, a chimney sweep came, we got married in October, and in December before Christmas, the chimney sweep came. I opened the door, and the chimney sweep said, is there an adult at home, because the child can't sign documents, but I could sign, [laughs] because I knew what's going on, I mean I could sign [laughs], because I was the adult at home

M: Only from the age of thirty, I looked mature, you know, the wrinkles appeared, every adult looks like that

I: And now?

M: Now there happen situations that, for example, a child tells her mom, oh, look what a little lady is walking. And how can she say it otherwise? Sometimes a mom scolds her child: don't say so. But how can she say it otherwise? She's telling the truth. Well, a little lady is walking, how should she say it otherwise.

M: Oh, I also remember such a funny story in my family, I mean in my friend's family, their three or four-year-old son was there, I think he was three, then. I went to them for a coffee for the first and last time and he was there and we're drinking coffee, and he came up to me with a toy car and asked, will the big kid play with me? Well, we squealed with laughter and even now I remember that.

I: That is, body height is such an experience

M: not really

I: It's just that your approach is like this?

M: Well no need to get angry. Well, these are funny stories. Well, when, I say, when someone tells a child, don't say that, and how is the child supposed to say that? It could be worse, but a little lady is ok. Well, how else to say that?

This interview excerpt features several stories illustrating Maria's attitude towards her bodily appearance due to TS and others' perceptions of it. Maria notes a significant change at age thirty when her first wrinkles appeared, claiming that while her appearance altered others' attitudes, her own remained as easygoing as before.

The stories titled *On the Train*, *At the Butcher's*, and *Chimney Sweep* depict events in Maria's life after marriage, featuring human characters (Maria and representatives of Polish society, such as the butcher, the train conductor, and the chimney sweep) and inanimate characters (her body height and a wedding ring). In the narrative abstract (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), Maria states that she "found herself in such situations." The use of verb *find* places her at the receiving end of the agency-recipiency continuum (Bamberg, 2011; 2012), a position she maintains throughout the other stories she delivered in the interview.

In *On the Train*, the conductor talks to Maria's husband, suggesting he buy ice cream for his 'child', mistakenly referring to Maria. This label and action classify Maria as a child (cf. MCD Sacks, 1972). When they disembark, Maria requests ice cream, further aligning herself with the child categorization. This instance demonstrates how Maria's short stature constructs an asymmetrical relationship, casting her and her husband in a father-daughter dynamic. In other situations, this asymmetry manifests as an adult-child relationship, positioning Maria under the constant supervision and control of others where even the social power of such markers of adult status as a wedding ring is weaker than the categorizing power of her short stature.

In *At the Butcher's*, Maria attempts to use her wedding ring to align with a group of women, but her short stature's social categorization proves stronger. Maria claims membership in the children's category by removing her ring, surrendering to this social identification as different from other women.

A change in category membership occurs when wrinkles, another inanimate and biological actor, are introduced. Wrinkles, as markers of old age, shift Maria's identity towards that of a mature woman. According to Maria, the appearance of wrinkles alters how others perceive her and defines her social interactions, in line with the idea that age crucially determines social judgments and interactions (Twigg, 2009, p. 97). Wrinkles can be seen as a sign of wisdom or as a symbol of physical decline, depending on one's perspective. Contrary to the master narratives of old age, where signs of aging are typically masked, Maria embraces her wrinkles as a testament to her maturity and femininity, making no effort to hide them.

Unlike the wedding ring, wrinkles, as part of the 'deep biological background' (Searle, 1994), are a powerful agent in social contexts, communicating unambiguous messages about a person's age and social position. Wrinkles thus become a protagonist, overriding the social power of TS that Maria has never fully acknowledged. Regardless of where the social power resides, Maria consistently positions herself at the recipiency end of the continuum. Previously, her short stature dictated her inferior social positioning; now, wrinkles assume that role, placing Maria on an equal social footing with others.

The appearance of wrinkles marks a pivotal moment in how Maria claims group membership, leading her to label herself as a woman, with others addressing her as 'madame'. However, this membership is often qualified with descriptors like 'little' or 'short', emphasizing her TS-related short stature. The ambiguity of her identity category is further illustrated in a story where a son of Maria's friend refers to her as a 'big kid', an example of misidentification based on height, with the mention of wrinkles suggesting a recognition of her age.

Maria evaluates these events as 'funny situations', describing her reaction as light-hearted but not indifferent. She acknowledges these instances as reflections of her true physical condition, legitimizing the categorizations imposed by others and attributing them to biology. Maria's stories demonstrate the influential role of TS in identity construction and social categorization. Through specific attributions and event selections, Maria aligns with certain identity categories, subtly positioning her sense of self and others within the contexts of marriage, family, and friendship.

(3) Rozalia

I: Do you think it's better that other people do not know that you have TS?
R: Yes, I think so. In elementary school, kids teased me just because I wore glasses, so I think if they knew that I had a genetic disease, it would be worse, they would stigmatize me even more.
I: Do you remember any situations where you were stigmatized?
R: Well, in high school I was not called names, but I was pushed to the margins of the class. For example, once my classmate and her boyfriend invited me to their eighteenth birthday party, and other classmates asked why they did that. They thought I would not come anyway. But I showed up there, and their excuses for not inviting me to parties failed.
I: Did they invite you to other parties?
R: No, never.
[Some lines skipped]
I: And what does it look like at work? Do people know you have TS?
R: They know that I am disabled because I work seven hours, which is one hour less, as people who have a moderate or severe degree of disability are entitled to a seven-hour working day, and so I was employed, so these people know that I am sick, I work shorter hours. But they know that I have Addison's disease, because I told them so that they would know that when I for example faint, they need to call the ambulance so that I get hydrocortisone right away. They do not know that I have TS, though.
I: And have you ever revealed to either strangers or friends that you have TS?
R: Well, yes, once.
I: Can you tell me about that situation?
R: It happened during the preparations for the World Youth Days with Pope Francis.

We, me and my sister, went to a meeting, one in a series, where the commandments were discussed. On that day the commandment do not kill was reflected upon, and then a priest spoke about abortion and after that, after the sermon, although it was not a sermon, because it was not during the mass, but after preaching, anybody could make a comment and I spoke and said that I have something like this and that I do not understand why disabled or ill people are killed, because they can function very well in society (…) and they are productive

I: And how did that group react to that coming-out back then? Were they people you knew or strangers?

R: My sister was with me, but most people were strangers. Some people came up to me and hugged me.

I: Was it pleasant for you? Or did you rather think it was so out of pity?

R: Nice. It surprised my sister because earlier I told her that I was going to reveal that and she was so afraid of how people would react, but when these people approached me and hugged me, she was so pleasantly surprised.

I: Was it just that they hugged you in such a gesture of solidarity or did they say it was great came out?

R: They said it was great that I did something like that.

The interview with Rozalia features a series of interconnected stories about her relationship with her peers, collectively titled *My Secret Life with TS*. This overarching narrative encapsulates various events across different periods of Rozalia's life–primary school, high school, and the workplace–offering insights into her perspective on her genetic condition and the social relationships she developed with her peers.

In each story, Rozalia is the sole protagonist, portrayed against a group antagonist–her peers. During her school years, Rozalia is positioned by her peers as different and excluded ("I was pushed to the margins of the class"). She often speaks about herself using passive constructions, while her peers are depicted as active agents ("kids teased me; they would stigmatize; they invited me"). Each story centers on an event where Rozalia experienced social harassment. However, the reason for her harassment is neither clearly explained nor overtly linked to her TS condition, which she did not disclose to her peers. For instance, Rozalia attributes the harassment she experienced in primary school to wearing glasses.

While vision defects can be disabling, wearing glasses is fairly common among schoolchildren. The interviewer's field notes clarify that Rozalia did not suffer from a severe vision defect and wore ordinary corrective glasses, making her attribution of harassment to this seem odd. However, this is significant in analyzing the positions she constructed for herself and her peers, as it suggests that Rozalia's bodily appearance did not deviate from the norm as TS bodies often do (e. g., short stature, puffy hands and feet). It also indicates that her peers likely did not notice any symptoms of TS. This assumption is supported by the fact that Rozalia received growth hormone (GH) supplementation, resulting in a height

that does not differ from the population average. Additional confirmation comes from the researcher's field notes, which do not mention any visible TS symptoms or other abnormalities.

Given that TS was not visibly apparent in Rozalia, it can be argued that she felt different and consciously chose not to reveal her condition to protect her status as a 'normal' schoolgirl. Lucas and Phelan (2012) note that being labeled with an illness reduces an individual's interpersonal power and lowers their status within a group. By concealing TS, Rozalia aimed to protect her self-worth, but this led to self-stigmatization and internalization of negative social perceptions of TS, which she then projected onto her peers' behavior. As Pachankis (2007, cited in Hatzenbuehler, et al., 2013, p. 815) observes, "fears of rejection and negative evaluation lead individuals with concealable stigmas to avoid entering close relationships for fear of others discovering their stigmatized status," which seems to be Rozalia's case. In one story, she expresses distress about not being invited to parties, yet quotes her classmates saying it was pointless to invite her because she never attended. This suggests her peers had prior experience with Rozalia declining their invitations. However, Rozalia interprets not being invited as a sign of social marginalization and dismisses their explanation as an excuse to isolate her. Her subsequent decision to attend a party can be seen as an attempt to challenge her social positioning, though it ultimately reinforces her status as 'different' within the class.

From the analysis of Rozalia's school stories, it is evident that her awareness of having TS led to self-stigmatization and self-exclusion from peer groups. Thus, TS emerges as an actor with real agentive power, with Rozalia's agency manifesting in her efforts to keep TS a secret.

This pattern continues in Rozalia's behavior at work. She partially shares her health information with coworkers, disclosing only her Addison's disease while withholding her TS diagnosis ("people know that I am sick; they know that I have Addison's disease"). The reasons for this partial disclosure can be speculated upon. First, Addison's disease, unlike TS, can be life-threatening if cortisol levels drop suddenly, so Rozalia might have disclosed this condition in anticipation of potential emergencies. More importantly, she might have concealed TS because its main symptom–degenerated ovaries–is hidden and only potentially seen or imagined by Rozalia as shameful. This concealment indicates that Rozalia perceives TS as the condition that makes her different from society. Therefore, TS, though hidden, is a powerful agent in Rozalia's stories about her relationships with schoolmates, holding power over her by stigmatizing and isolating her.

A shift towards agency occurs when Rozalia decides to reveal her genetic condition publicly at a religious meeting. Her independent decision is implied when she mentions informing her sister beforehand ("I told her that I was going to reveal that"). Her sister's fear of stigmatization ("she was so afraid of how

people would react") reflects the negative views both sisters held about society's perception of TS. However, Rozalia's determination to disclose her condition despite anticipated social rejection underscores the heavy burden of TS's stigma.

This disclosure marks a turning point in Rozalia's identity construction. She feels integrated into the group, as others approach and embrace her ("they approach and hug her"). No longer confined to roles of recipiency and difference, Rozalia now navigates her social positioning with greater agency. Yet, it cannot be said that Rozalia fully self-positions at the agency end of the continuum. Instead, her positioning is a dialectic outcome of personal agency and the world-to-person fit (Bamberg, 2011; 2012). While she independently decides to disclose her condition and critiques dominant discourses on disabilities, including Turner Syndrome, her social integration is also dependent on others' acceptance of her positioning.

## 5. Discussion

Women with TS experience a complex interplay between sameness and difference, referred to as the sameness-difference identity dilemma (Bamberg, 2011; 2012). This dilemma, which involves the negotiation of identity through the tension between fitting in with societal norms (sameness) and standing out due to distinct characteristics (difference), is a critical theme in the narratives of women with TS. Their experience is shaped by both internal self-perception and external societal attitudes toward their physical and social identities. The exploration of this dilemma reveals that the identity formation of women with TS is deeply rooted in their embodied experiences and the stigmatization associated with their condition.

Short stature, one of the most visible symptoms of TS, is a primary marker of difference for women with the condition. From early childhood, women with TS are positioned by society as different due to their height, which deviates from the norm. They are often misidentified based on this single characteristic, leading to encounters that underscore their perceived divergence from societal standards of normality. For example, the women in this study recount being referred to as 'little' or 'short', which both highlights their physical difference and reinforces their positioning outside normative adult femininity.

This externally imposed sense of difference is mirrored in the women's self-perception. The women self-position as different when they compare their characteristics—both visible (e.g., short stature) and invisible (e.g., infertility)—to those of their peers. The internalization of these differences contributes to what Goffman (1963) describes as 'felt stigma', where individuals recognize the potential for others to devalue them and their abilities based on a particular trait.

This stigma is not purely a social construction but is deeply tied to the embodied experiences of women with TS, as they navigate how their bodies deviate from both biological and cultural expectations of womanhood (Connell, 2014).

Growth hormone therapy (GHT) plays a significant role in shifting women's self-perception and societal positioning toward the sameness end of the spectrum. As these women grow taller with treatment, they increasingly conform to societal standards of height, which can reduce the overt markers of difference (Ballard & Elston, 2005). This shift highlights the power of medical interventions in aligning women with TS more closely with normative physical ideals. However, this sense of sameness is not absolute. For women like Maria, who did not receive GHT, the physical marker of short stature remains, reinforcing her self-perception and societal positioning as different and disabled.

HRT also plays a significant role in the identity construction of women with TS. Beyond its medical function in managing the health consequences of TS, HRT is seen as a means of addressing social issues by 'normalizing' physical appearance and behavior. For example, the women describe how HRT helps regulate their emotional responses, such as reducing their propensity to cry, which they perceive as a departure from social expectations of emotional control (Rajtar, 2019). In this sense, HRT contributes to a form of bodily and behavioral conformity that shifts their identity closer to the norm, while also addressing the social challenges they face.

Despite medical interventions, women with TS continue to experience both felt and enacted stigma. The latter is evident in the ways they are often infantilized or misidentified as 'big kids', especially when their short stature is interpreted as a sign of youth rather than a genetic condition. This misidentification further reinforces their marginalization and contributes to the development of a stigmatized identity (Scambler, 2009). While some women with TS lightheartedly acknowledge this situation, it remains a form of enacted stigma that they cannot fully escape.

Gender identity is another area where the sameness-difference dilemma plays out. While women with TS are often positioned as women in social contexts, their identity is frequently qualified by descriptors such as 'little' or 'short', emphasizing the way their physical difference marks them as other. The asymmetrical nature of male-female relationships further complicates their gender identity, as some women with TS avoid intimate relationships due to fear of rejection or discovery of their infertility. This avoidance is not just about protecting themselves from potential stigma, but also about managing the complex intersection of gender, disability, and societal expectations of femininity.

Language is another tool through which women with TS navigate the sameness-difference dilemma. The narratives of women like Lucy and Maria reveal significant differences in speech patterns when compared to their peers or sib-

lings. Lucy's use of tentative language, filled with verbs like *think* and *wonder*, contrasts with the assertive and definitive speech of her sisters, highlighting her more cautious approach to self-expression. Maria's imperative speech patterns, reminiscent of a child's requests, further illustrate how societal perceptions of their identities as 'different' influence the way they communicate and are communicated about.

These linguistic patterns reflect deeper societal attitudes toward women with TS, where they are often viewed as passive or less agentic compared to their 'normative' counterparts. This passivity is reinforced by social interactions where women with TS are spoken of as objects to be acted upon rather than as active participants in their own lives.

For women with TS, the 'agency-recipiency identity dilemma' is deeply embedded in their lived experiences, particularly in relation to medicalization and social interactions. Their negotiation of this dilemma evolves throughout their lives, as they shift from passive recipients of medical treatments as minors to agents navigating societal expectations in adulthood. However, even in adulthood, the extent of their agency is often circumscribed by societal norms, medical discourses, and stigma.

As women with TS transition into adulthood, they gain legal autonomy and can make independent decisions regarding their health. In most cases, this involves the decision to continue HRT and other treatments that help them align their appearance more closely with societal norms of femininity (Diasio, 2023; Radkowska-Walkowicz, 2019ab; Rajtar, 2019). However, this decision is often not entirely independent, as these women are influenced by societal pressures to conform to normative standards of beauty, physicality and ability. The choice to continue HRT is often motivated by a desire to fit in and avoid the stigmatization that accompanies physical differences (Scambler, 2009). As a result, their agency in these decisions is complicated by the interplay of personal desire and external expectations.

This quasi-independent agency reflects the tension between conformity and resistance in the identity formation of women with TS. On the one hand, they exhibit agency by choosing to engage in medical treatments that help them blend into societal norms, effectively making themselves 'socially invisible' by minimizing the physical markers of TS. On the other hand, this choice is constrained by the social stigmatization of non-normative bodies, which pressures them into adopting treatments they may not otherwise choose. In this way, their agency is shaped and limited by the societal structures in which they exist.

Another example of an agency-recipiency dilemma faced by women with TS is whether to disclose their condition or conceal it. This decision represents an important form of agency. When their physical symptoms, such as short stature, are less pronounced—due to GHT or societal factors such as aging—the stigma

associated with TS becomes more concealable. At this point, women can actively choose whether to disclose their condition, weighing the risks of stigmatization against the benefits of being open about their identity.

This decision-making process illustrates a form of felt stigma, in which women anticipate negative reactions from others based on their condition and modify their behavior to avoid those reactions (Scambler, 2009). In this case, agency is exercised through strategic social interactions, where women decide how much of their identity to reveal and under what circumstances. However, this form of agency is again constrained by societal norms and the fear of rejection or misidentification, particularly in intimate relationships, where disclosure of infertility or other symptoms of TS may carry significant emotional risks.

Interestingly, the objects and treatments associated with TS, such as HRT, estrogen patches, wedding rings, and even physical markers like wrinkles, can become social actors that exert agency in the identity formation process. These inanimate objects often influence how women with TS are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves. For example, wrinkles, typically associated with aging, can paradoxically serve as a sign of maturity rather than bodily deterioration in women with TS, helping them resist infantilization. In this sense, these physical markers of aging act as agents in the women's social positioning, as they contribute to their perceived alignment with adult norms of appearance (Diasio, 2023).

Similarly, medical interventions such as estrogen patches can both empower and constrain women with TS. By choosing to use these treatments, women exercise agency in modifying their bodies to meet societal standards (Ballard & Elston, 2005); Diasio, 2023; Radkowska-Walkowicz, 2019b; Rajtar, 2019). Yet, the treatments themselves also act as external forces that influence their self-perception and identity. The patch becomes a visible reminder of their condition and their reliance on medicalization, highlighting the complexity of their agency as both self-determined and externally directed.

Further examples of the ambivalent positioning between agency and recipiency can be found in language structures. When speaking about themselves, women with TS frequently use passive constructions, positioning themselves as recipients of actions performed by others—whether medical professionals, parents, or societal forces. For instance, they may describe how they were 'given' treatments or how their bodies were 'corrected' through medical interventions. In contrast, when describing others, they often use active language, depicting others as agents who make decisions and take actions. This linguistic pattern reflects the internalization of their passive positioning in medical and social contexts (Bamberg, 2011; 2012).

However, within these narratives, moments of resistance and agency also emerge. Women with TS sometimes speak of resisting societal expectations or

challenging the labels imposed on them. In these moments, they assert their agency, actively deciding how they want to be perceived and how they navigate the stigmatization associated with their condition.

The 'continuity-change identity dilemma', as described by Bamberg (2011; 2012), addresses the tension between preserving a consistent sense of self over time and adapting to life changes, particularly as one's body and social experiences evolve. For women with TS, this dilemma is particularly pronounced due to the profound changes brought about by medical interventions such as GHT and HRT. While these treatments often facilitate physical changes that align their bodies more closely with societal norms, many aspects of their identity and internal experiences remain continuous, shaped by earlier encounters with stigma and marginalization.

One of the most significant turning points in the lives of women with TS is the completion of GH therapy. Upon reaching an average or near-average height, these women experience a physical transformation that reduces the most visible marker of their condition: short stature. This change allows them to blend more easily into society and claim a fuller membership in the gender group to which they have always belonged but often felt peripheral due to their physical differences.

From a narrative perspective, the conclusion of GHT is often framed as a pivotal moment in their life story, a point at which their bodies become less deviant from the societal norm. Achieving physical 'normativity' through GHT often grants women with TS a form of social recognition that was previously denied to them (Ballard & Elston, 2005). They are no longer as visibly marked as *different*, allowing for greater ease in social interactions and a diminished sense of being 'othered' based on their appearance.

However, while GHT may resolve the physical aspect of the continuity-change dilemma, it does not necessarily alleviate the emotional and psychological dimensions of this conflict. Many women with TS continue to experience the felt stigma, a lingering internalization of the negative attitudes and social harassment they encountered earlier in life when their short stature marked them as different. This internalized stigma often persists despite the physical changes brought about by medical interventions (Ballard & Elston, 2005; Scambler, 2009). For example, even though they may now meet societal standards of height, many women with TS continue to perceive themselves as outsiders, shaped by earlier experiences of being teased, excluded, or treated as inferior. This sense of difference can persist in social interactions, where subtle cues or comments from others remind them of their past marginalization. As Bamberg (2011; 2012) suggests, the identity dilemma lies in the tension between the continuity of internalized experiences and the external changes in their bodies.

In addition to the persistence of felt stigma, the language and behavior of women with TS often remain continuous, even after their physical appearance has changed. This study has found that many continue to use passive constructions when describing themselves, positioning themselves as recipients of actions performed by others rather than active agents in their own lives. This linguistic pattern reflects the continuity of their self-perception as shaped by earlier experiences of medicalization and societal marginalization.

Furthermore, women with TS may continue to exhibit behaviors that were shaped by their earlier experiences of being treated as different. For example, they may avoid certain social situations or relationships due to lingering fears of rejection or misidentification (Diasio, 2023). This behavioral continuity illustrates the difficulty of fully transitioning into a new identity, even when their physical bodies have changed.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the narratives of three women with TS as they shared their experiences of living with the condition. The aim has been to illustrate how, through their stories delivered in semi-structured interviews, these women integrate the experience of TS into their broader life narratives, making the everyday realities of coping with the syndrome a fundamental part of their self-identity. The analysis has focused on how these women navigate three central identity dilemmas–agency versus recipiency, sameness versus difference, and continuity versus change (Bamberg, 2011; 2012)–in shaping their sense of self and negotiating their place in society.

One key theme that has emerged throughout these narratives is the persistence of the 'felt stigma', a form of internalized stigmatization developed from earlier social encounters where these women were treated as different or inferior due to their physical and social characteristics. Although medical interventions such as GHT and HRT help these women conform to some societal norms, the 'enacted stigma'–the external expressions of stigma experienced from others–remains a significant challenge. For example, comments about their short stature or assumptions about their abilities continue to serve as reminders of their marginalization, further perpetuating their sense of difference despite medical normalization. The persistence of both felt and enacted stigma underscores the incomplete resolution of these identity dilemmas, particularly the sameness versus difference dilemma, which remains a central struggle for these women.

While this paper sheds light on the complexities of disabled identities in women with TS, it has several important limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the study's sample size is small, focusing on the narratives of only three

participants. This limited scope restricts the generalizability of the findings, as the experiences of these women may not fully represent the diversity of experiences among all women with TS. Second, the study is situated within the specific social context of Poland, a country with distinct cultural norms and healthcare systems that influence the experiences of disabled individuals. The ways in which women with TS navigate stigma and identity dilemmas may differ significantly in other cultural or national contexts where disability and medical care are understood differently. Third, the analysis relies heavily on narrative self-reports, which, while rich in detail, can be subject to selective memory and self-presentation biases.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable insights into how women with TS construct their identities in relation to their condition and the social world around them. The narratives reveal how the intersections of medicalization, disability, and gender shape these women's lived experiences, providing a nuanced understanding of how they negotiate their identities in the face of societal stigma and medical expectations.

## 7. Implications for future research

Further research is needed to build on these findings and address the limitations of the current study. Expanding the sample size to include a broader range of participants–both in Poland and internationally–would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences of women with TS. Additionally, future studies could explore how the social and cultural context influences the navigation of identity dilemmas, comparing the experiences of women with TS across different countries and healthcare systems.

Another area for future exploration involves longitudinal research that tracks how women with TS experience these identity dilemmas across different stages of life. Such studies could provide valuable insights into how felt and enacted stigma evolve over time and how these women adapt to ongoing changes in their physical appearance, social roles, and medical needs.

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Agnieszka Rumianowska

# Exploring Narrative Identity from a Sociolinguistic Perspective

**Abstract**
This chapter examines the concept of narrative identity as expressed through autobiography. The primary objective was to identify and analyse the linguistic practices reflecting the process of constructing narrative identity among individuals in early adulthood. Empirical data were collected through narrative interviews conducted with two female participants, aged 21 and 23. The material was analysed using Fritz Schütze's method of narrative interview analysis. Particular emphasis was placed on the interpretative-sociolinguistic aspects of the process structures shaping the participants' life trajectories.

**Keywords:** language, identity, autobiography, narrative, analysis

## 1. Narrative identity

Narrative identity is a construct expressed through the act of presenting oneself as the central figure of life events (de Fina, 2003; Cierpka, 2013; Mikkonen, 2019). By recounting personal life stories, individuals simultaneously disclose and shape their identities, becoming authors of their own selves. As Ricoeur (1985) observes:

> Our own existence cannot be separated from the account we can give of ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity. We recognise ourselves in the stories that we tell about ourselves. It makes very little difference whether these stories are true or false; fiction as well as verifiable history provides us with an identity (p. 214).

This narrative process is dynamic, open to reinterpretation of memories and reordering of experiences. The (auto)narrative is not a factual record but rather the result of an individual interpretation that can be reinforced or modified over time (McAdams, 2008; Ostaszewska, 2018). Such transformations are made

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possible through a reflexive engagement with memory and a conscious reference to past experiences in the context of present realities and future life goals (Rokuszewska-Pawełek, 2006). The (auto)narrative thus manifests itself as a reflection on past events and an expression of the retrospective construction of meaning, offering a unique articulation of lived experience (Karkowska, 2018; Lalak, 2010).

The process of constructing (auto)narrative reflects the natural human capacity to retrieve and reinterpret forgotten memories. Individuals reconstruct their life stories by selecting themes and images of personal significance and by reordering facts and events. They set actions within a specific timeframe and integrate them into meaningful wholes. Under the influence of new external circumstances, they reinterpret the meaning of their experiences and create new visions of the future. What they stress in their life stories and what they omit depends on their emotions, needs, personal values, motivations, and beliefs. The process of constructing (auto)narrative is therefore highly complex. In the face of this complexity the most important task for an individual is to maintain a coherent narrative about themselves despite the difficulties encountered. The challenge is to be able to adapt to change and incorporate new experiences into an evolving life story (Giddens, 2002; Ricoeur, 1996). From this perspective, narrative approaches to identity show, above all, how individuals attempt to maintain autobiographical coherence in the face of life's changes as well as how they react to crises that undermine their values and beliefs.

The ontological foundations of narrative identity can be found in philosophical concepts of subjectivity proposed by Heidegger, Ricoeur, and MacIntyre. Heidegger (1927) rejects the traditional notion of a substance and instead proposes a concept that emphasizes the temporality of human existence. He argues that understanding oneself in three temporal perspectives (past, present, and future) is both a precondition and a mode of being, forming the basis for self-design and identity construction. In his view, existence and narrative cannot be separated.

Ricoeur (1996) highlights the internal dynamics of temporality, relating it to the process of composing a story in which being oneself remains the same despite different life experiences. In his opinion, narrative identity bridges the psychological consistency of character and the ethical consistency in the sense of remaining true to oneself and others, despite changing circumstances.

MacIntyre (1985) develops the concept of narrative unity. He suggests that life can be compared to a journey that requires a search for meaning. Individuals find themselves at a specific point in their journey that they did not plan or initiate. Additionally, they belong to different communities and must take into consideration the actions of others. Therefore, people have to become aware of which story or stories they are a part of. This is crucial for both discovering what ought

to be done and determining which values or criteria are meaningful in the context of assessing one's own life. MacIntyre argues that the quest for narrative unity does not occur in isolation but within a tradition and a specific social context.

A foundational premise in the study of narrative identity is the performative function of language. Language actively participates in constructing social reality: each utterance not only describes but also shapes reality by establishing meaning (de Fina, 2003; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2016). Through language, what is ambiguous or fluid becomes clarified and defined. In this context, language is understood as a decisional category. A person does not merely speak; they define themselves through various modes of expression. By speaking about themselves – their needs, fears, their possibilities, strengths and weaknesses – they create certain versions of self-identity. From this perspective, language and identity are inseparable. As Edwards (2009) asserts:

> Since language is central to human existence, and in the view of many is the most important feature that distinguishes our humanity, it is obvious that any study of identity must necessarily take it into account. […] Language serves as an important determinant of identity (p. 20)

By adopting language as the analytical starting point for examining (auto)narratives, researchers can investigate how human actions are structured by language, how experiences are expressed in different ways, and how comprehensive visions of human life are constructed.

## 2. Research method and procedure

The research on narrative identity was conducted using *autobiographical narrative interviews*. This method is characterized by minimal researcher intervention and emphasizes the participant's own account of the topic introduced by the researcher. A narrative interview can be broadly defined as a conversation in which the interviewee recounts the story of their life from a perspective relevant to the research focus (de Fina, 2003; Rubacha, 2008, p. 136). Crucially, the respondent's narrative unfolds without external prompts or interventions (Kaźmierska, 2004, p. 74).

A narrative is not merely a collection of answers to specific questions but rather a spontaneous, self-structured account of personal experiences. What distinguishes this method from other forms of qualitative research is its ability to capture the processual nature of life events, to reveal patterns within individual biographical experiences, and to reconstruct sequential stages of a person's biography.

There is a relative correspondence between the order in which individuals recount their life stories and the structure by which they experience life (Kaźmierska & Waniek, 2020, p. 15; Rokuszewska-Pawełek, 2006). In other words, the phases of a biography are typically reproduced in narrative form in a sequence that reflects the actual progression of biographical events. The fundamental principles organizing a life story are known as biographical process structures, which underlie the biographical process itself (Schütze, 2016; Kaźmierska & Waniek, 2020, p. 105). These structures reflect fundamental types of biographical experience and personal attitudes toward one's life. Analyzing them makes it possible to reveal the motivations behind a person's actions, their reactions to social expectations, and the influence of unpredictable events on their lives. Examining them also allows the researcher to identify phases of intentional order and periods of disruption and biographical chaos.

Narrative interviews were conducted with two female participants, aged 21 and 23. A purposive sampling strategy was employed. The study included individuals who had certain characteristics and met particular criteria (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, & Zechmeister, 2002, p. 167). The study focused on individuals in early adulthood who had experienced, or were experiencing, life difficulties that resulted in temporary or long-term disruptions to their overall life balance.

The aim of the study was to explore and describe the linguistic manifestations of the process of constructing narrative identity among individuals in early adulthood.

The time and place of the interviews were arranged by telephone. Each interview lasted between 1.5 and 2.5 hours. The conversation started by presenting the following instructions:

> I have a special task related to your biography. Please tell me your life story. Try to be as detailed and descriptive as possible. Start your life story from the period you remember from your childhood. Feel free to decide what you want to say and how you want to say it. I will not interrupt or ask you questions. Only after you finish will I ask you questions to make sure that I have understood everything, or to ask you more about some of the issues you have mentioned.

After the participants had finished presenting their stories, additional questions were asked in order to clarify and elaborate on certain themes.

## 3. An analysis of autobiography from an interpretative-sociolinguistic perspective

The extraction and characterization of process structures constituted the central phase of the research, illustrating the diverse ways in which the participants interpreted their past experiences. Following Fritz Schütze's (1981, 1992a, 1992b) framework, the analysis focused on four types of process structures: biographical action schemes, institutional sequence patterns of biography, creative metamorphoses of biographical identity, and biographical trajectories of suffering.

In the first case, the narrator presents their life from the perspective of intentional actions undertaken, the execution of plans, and efforts invested in shaping their destiny and constructing their identity (Schütze, 1981; 2016, p. 455). A distinctive feature of this structure is the use of language that expresses intention, a positive emotional tone, and a focus on planning and evaluating one's actions. Typical expressions include:

> "That's when the idea came to me," "Well, then I decided to change my field of study," "I started looking for a job and succeeded," "I always wanted to be an actor," "Then I got curious about it and said to myself," and "I did what I liked and what made me happy."

In the case of institutional sequential patterns, the narrator tells the story of their life, focusing on how they fulfilled action scenarios created by external expectations. They show a sequential and schematic series of events, including the achievement of successive levels in institutional hierarchies, as well as the mechanisms of becoming entangled in social relationships. Language within this structure expresses a sense of obligation, necessity, or difficulty in meeting social expectations, illustrating both conformity to and occasional distancing from institutional norms. Examples include:

> "I had the feeling that I had to be obedient," "I had to finish high school," "My parents also wanted me to succeed, pressured me," "Society requires you to be nice," "Then there were new responsibilities in the form of studies," "The order was there, and you had to go to meetings," and "Everything went on normally."

Within the framework of creative metamorphoses of biographical identity, the narrator presents their life primarily through the lens of transformative change, highlighting unexpected and positive shifts that opened new opportunities for growth and altered previous worldviews (Schütze, 1981; 2016, p. 455). The language of biographical metamorphosis includes expressions of surprise, disorientation, and difficulties in adopting new categories or on relating to events. Examples include:

> "I realised that I was talented," "I realised that I wanted to do something different," "The experience straightened me out," "The arrest also taught me to enjoy the little things,"

"It was such a push for me, it was such a nudge from fate," and "It was really rehabilitating to the bone."

The fourth structure involves presenting life in terms of biographical trajectories —that is, becoming caught in patterns of adverse conditions and constellations, leading to a sense of helplessness and loss of control. The phenomenon of trajectory refers to processes of prolonged suffering, resulting in increasing disorder, estrangement from oneself and others, and a feeling of being overwhelmed by external forces. As Schütze (1992a; 1992b) explains, trajectory potential generally comprises two components: biographical dispositions toward being hurt and key contradictions within the current life situation. Language representing trajectories of suffering reflects overwhelming external impacts, deep and enduring pain, exhaustion, and profound confusion. Typical expressions include:

"I was just totally out of steam," "It didn't help," "I'm afraid it's going to get worse," "And then the worst happened," "It was very hard for me," "I had depression that I couldn't get rid of," "I realised that it wasn't going to get better," "Then I lost all hope," and "I didn't have the strength to fight it anymore."

During the analysis of these structures, particular emphasis was placed on the grammatical dimension, specifically identifying the most frequently used grammatical forms through which participants defined themselves and related to the world (Grażul-Luft, 2025, this volume). Special attention was given to verbs, regarded as the part of speech that most clearly reveals how individuals position themselves in the world.

The analysis focused on several verb categories:

- First-person, task-oriented action verbs (e.g. "I moved out," "I called," "I said," and "I went") expressing intentional, controlled actions rather than instinctive behaviour. These verbs express dynamism and agency and do not have abstract character.
- State verbs expressing personal abilities and possibilities (e.g., "I could," "I can," "I am brave," "I like," "I respect," "I love," and "I am grateful"). Predicates belonging to this category are declarative and may indicate a high degree of self-reflexivity. Special representatives of this group are volitional verbs, such as "I have always wanted," "I want," "I would like to become a manager," "I expect," and "I desire."
- Third-person verbs describing actions of others toward the subject (e.g., "he said," "he did," "she started shouting at me," "they hurt me," and "she has a bad character"), as well as generalized expressions with indefinite subjects ("everyone is against me," "everybody thinks only of themselves," and "nobody likes me").

– State verbs indicating limitations and helplessness, expressing a lack of agency (e. g., "I had no influence," "I was overweight," "I had no friends," "I couldn't change it," and "I couldn't deal with it"). This group also includes verbs denoting self-destructive behaviours ("I worried," "I self-harmed," and "I blamed myself"). Particularly representative are verbs in the negative form ("I am not," "I can't," and "I don't know how to").

Special attention was given to verbs, regarded as the part of speech that most clearly reveals how individuals position themselves in the world.

From the perspective of the collected data analysis, the categories of person, textual modality, and metaphor also proved significant. Statements formulated in an impersonal form were interpreted as attempts to conceal oneself behind the presented world and to depict reality logically and informatively rather than subjectively. Metaphors, in turn, were viewed as expressions of efforts to broaden one's understanding of the self and the world.

### 3.1. Analysis of autobiography (I)

The author of the narrative analysed below is Weronika, a 21-year-old student of English philology in Poland. The story can be divided into two parts. In the first one, the narrator refers to her difficult childhood, bringing back dramatic events from the past. In the second, she describes her current life situation and the conclusions she has drawn from her experiences and reflections. While the first part can be understood in terms of the experience of a suffering trajectory, the second part clearly shows markers of the biographical metamorphosis and action process structures.

The woman reports that her childhood was difficult, sometimes even traumatic. She enumerates a range of problems, disadvantages, and obstacles she experienced in the school and family environment. Weronika feels embarrassment, sadness, anger, as well as helplessness, guilt and fear of the future. As the unpleasant events and troubles accumulate, conditions for the emergence of a trajectory are created. The woman stops managing to overcome everyday obstacles, expressing a deep sense of powerlessness, loss of control over her life and articulating thoughts of suicide:

> So there was a moment when I just left and went to the cathedral, and those thoughts were so strong that I was just walking around and didn't know what to do with myself. I wondered if this was the moment to end it all.

Unresolved problems lead to a serious nervous breakdown and Weronika must spend several weeks in a psychiatric hospital. Her mental health deteriorates to

such an extent that she cannot focus on learning and making progress in her academic performance. The entire situation causes the woman to lose the chance to pursue her dream university program.

Weronika's account of her experiences illustrates a trajectory of suffering. The first part of her narrative is dominated by the language of weakness. A number of negatively charged expressions can be observed here: "it was tough," "it was traumatic," "pressure," "serious problems," "it got really tough," "it was really difficult," "it was a difficult time," and "family conflict came up again."

The woman describes the reality and herself in a deeply pessimistic way, using verbs in the form of negation: "there was no support," "there was no understanding," "my childhood wasn't very good," "I didn't get good grades," "I didn't write my Matura exam very well," and "my dad never took care of me."

After passing the Matura exam, Weronika makes her first attempts to overcome the problematic situation and develop strategies for coping with everyday life. She wants to start a new life chapter; that is why she changes her environment and moves to another city. The moment of making this decision can be seen as a turning point in her life story, which entails a biographical metamorphosis. The biographical transformation is illustrated by the following expressions: "The fact that I came back to Plock after two years shows that everything has been resolved," "I am very grateful to fate for that," "I am really very happy about it," "I can be more independent now, and thanks to that I don't have problems with my parents either," "I am able to really appreciate it at the moment as an educated person," and "I think it has worked out for me."

The two-year stay in another city allows Weronika to come to terms with her painful memories and start working on her own identity. This process is evident in her attempts to reinterpret the past in a more 'positive' way, to find forgotten threads in her memory, and to integrate her experiences and the inconsistencies of the world into a coherent whole. Taking on new personal and professional challenges, and, at the same time, establishing close and supportive relationships with other people, provides her with an opportunity to recognise her own value and regain faith in her strengths and abilities:

> It showed me that I am worth something, that people are able to like me, that even when I am at a point in my life where I don't like myself, it doesn't change the fact that others can like me.

Although the achieved balance remains under pressure from the trajectory potential, the experience of suffering does not deepen. The new living arrangement proves generally stable, primarily due to the development of effective competence to act.

Weronika's description of the last four years of her life largely takes the form of biographical action schemes. This part of the narrative contains future-ori-

ented volitional verbs expressing the need to change her current life situation and reflexive predicates indicating the need to take control of her own life: "I wanted to go to university," "I decided to take the exam," "I got in," "I took part," "I did very well," "I decided to move out," "I found I wanted to work," "I wanted to learn about life," "I want to fix things," "I am now able to," "I decided to go to university," "I finished," "I worked," and "I chose."

The rest of Weronika's narrative also includes a series of verb phrases that demonstrate the positive transformation of the narrator. These expressions illustrate the need to enter into a deeper relationship with the world, as well as a desire to learn more about herself: "I'm very interested in it," "I'm always learning something," "These have been my interests for years," "I like to meet new people," and "I read a lot."

The main driving force behind Weronika's personal development, and her motivation to overcome life's difficulties, is her ongoing search for meaning. The woman consistently seeks new perspectives that could give her a deeper understanding of her actions and experiences. She finds one of them in the realms of science, belief, and astronomy. Convinced that meaning is not immediately given but must be discovered through interpretation, she engages in active reflective work, showing her readiness to search for meaning in various circumstances and life situations.

In accordance with her life philosophy, Weronika adopts an attitude of humility towards fate and stops thinking about the future in rigid, idealistic terms. She rejects a demanding, self-centred attitude towards the world and instead uses the language of gratitude: "I'm very grateful to fate and to people for this," "I'm also very grateful to them for this," "I'm definitely grateful that I got a scholarship," and "I'm grateful for all the things I've been able to do."

Moreover, the woman tries to free herself from rigid or negative thought patterns. She stops fighting against adversity; instead, she shows a willingness to bind contradictions together into a meaningful whole. All of this is possible thanks to a high level of reflexivity, an ability to engage in dialogue with herself, to seek out new meanings, and to accept the painful facts of her biography. Her positive outlook on life and her belief in a favourable turn of events are also worth mentioning:

> Thanks to all that has happened, I am now the person I am. I'm sure that if I hadn't experienced all of this, my view of the world would have been radically different, but I think it has worked out for me, even if it is kind of a complete paradox.

This capacity for reflection enables the narrator to become more self-aware, and to reconstruct her own identity. The tendency towards reflective thinking is reflected in the frequent use of mental verbs: "I'm analysing everything," "I'm

looking for some reasons," "I'm trying to get to that original cause," "I think I played it right," and "I think it had a very positive effect."

Another characteristic feature of how Weronika presents her experiences is the frequent use of oppositional conjunctions and expressions that contain antithetical meanings, reflecting her efforts to view her experiences in a more positive light: "But I made up for it," "But I managed to survive," "However, I managed to fix it," "But with the help of medication, I managed to survive," "I try to understand even though…," and "I had to be really very independent, but now I see the effects of that, even though I survived a lot myself."

Numerous metaphors in Weronika's narrative also reflect her attempts to make sense of a complex reality. Through metaphor, she seeks to grasp what is problematic, absurd, and ambiguous. The discovery of the meaning of existence is compared to reading an already opened book. Additionally, filling one's life with meaning is likened to the act of using a hammer, framing the idea of building one's life as akin to creating a valuable work of art.

To express her beliefs and attitudes toward norms and values, Weronika frequently uses expressions characteristic of deontic and epistemic modality: "You have to reach the bottom to appreciate what you have," "You have to look inside yourself, I think that's important," "You have to set some boundaries," "There's no point in looking for meaning in the cosmos," "You have to be shown what's right and wrong," "You have to come to certain things yourself," "You have to learn all the time," and "You have to learn from all situations."

The successful resolution of Weronika's identity crisis appears to be determined above all by the recognition of her own freedom, which is clearly reflected in the linguistic layer of her narrative. The woman knows that without genuine personal commitment, inner discipline, a strong will, and independent self-work, full development is not possible. Although she does not entirely reject the educational influence of others in shaping her way of being, she emphasises above all the role of her activity, self-discovery, testing her own abilities, and integrating the maze of signs, codes, events, and experiences into meaningful structures.

### 3.2. Analysis of autobiography (II)

In the story under analysis, the dominant process structure is a trajectory of suffering, contrasted with action process structures. Thus, part of the biography develops in a trajectory structure, while the rest has an intentional character.

The narrative of 23-year-old Anna is an example of a process illustrating the accumulation of problems that become the reason for overwhelming suffering. In order to get rid of increasing distress and pain, the woman adopts various sur-

vival strategies. She shows indifference towards others and sometimes even demonstrates hostility and open rebellion.

Anna begins her story by describing and characterising her parents' behaviour, accusing them of a lack of support, understanding and acceptance. She blames her closest ones for denying her the right to self-determination and moral autonomy. The way in which her parents treat her violates her integrity, lowers her self-esteem and undermines her sense of security. The atmosphere in which she grows up is full of threat, distrust, and fear. Anna has the feeling that her needs are neglected and the possibilities for self-development are limited.

As a result, the woman strongly focuses on her own faults and demonstrates a high degree of self-criticism, low self-confidence, and a deep fear of being hurt:

> Sometimes I was afraid of my parents. If someone came up the stairs, I would already get up and be ready before they even opened the door handle because I was afraid. There was once a situation where I really didn't want to go to school because I was very tired and didn't feel well. My mother came into the room and threatened me with my father, saying he would come and do something to me. And indeed he came. He dragged me out of bed by my hair, shattered everything around me, yelled, called me names, and left. I was supposed to go to school like that—and I did. There were situations when I was pulled by the hair or hit in the face.

All attempts to repair her relationship with her parents end in failure. Anna feels fundamentally misunderstood and unrecognized by them. All of this causes her to isolate herself and hesitate to share her worries and dilemmas with anyone. She is no longer able to manage negative emotions successfully. The only way to cope with the overwhelming situation is by crying: "In middle school, when I came home, I would lie on the floor and cry in the corner. I felt so helpless." Her entire childhood is marked by internal conflicts and tensions between her need to realise personal freedom and the necessity to play a strongly defined social role and fulfil the demands imposed by her parents: "I couldn't speak out on various topics because it was forbidden, because I thought wrongly, or I was too young." Anna's aspiration to be herself and to pursue her vocation clearly clashes with her parents' expectations. Her need for self-assertion is perceived by her parents as a disruption to the functioning of the entire family system.

Over time, Anna's difficulties begin to extend beyond her family. She faces serious interpersonal challenges among her peers, mentioning the problems of emotional abuse, mistreatment and humiliation. Incidents of sexual harassment during her school years further exacerbate her sense of injustice and alienation.

A combination of negative external circumstances, including a long-term illness, increases the potential for a trajectory of suffering. The woman reports feeling a growing sense of being overwhelmed by problems, emotionally disoriented, and limited in her ability to freely pursue her own needs. Her

emotional and mental state is well captured in the words: "The world hadn't changed for me, it was just me against the world."

Left to her own devices, unaccepted, and deprived of support and understanding, Anna faces a critical choice: whether to continue identifying with the role of a victim and conform to her parents' decisions or to assert herself in open opposition. She decides to realise her biographical plan by resisting her oppressors and openly protesting against the expectations imposed by her environment. Therefore, Anna adopts an attitude of open rebellion. Most of the action strategies she develops in this context are negative, often involving manipulative practices and the objectification of interpersonal relationships. The struggle against her relatives becomes a key principle in the construction of her own identity.

To emphasise her beliefs and express her protest against the behaviour of her relatives, the narrator introduces deontic expressions into her story. These reflect a postulate attitude and frame selected behaviours as either obligatory or forbidden "A mother should not behave like this," "All attention should then be focused on me, not on them," and "A parent has a duty to support their child as far as they learn."

At the age of 19, the woman moves out of the family home and starts university studies. She takes on new challenges, wanting to change her life according to her own vision. Anna continues to pursue her biographical plan in opposition to her parents, coming into open conflict with them.

Her childhood and early adolescence experiences make it extremely difficult for her to define her own identity. These difficulties are reflected in the process structures revealed within her narrative—specifically, in the interplay between trajectory structures and action process structures. This interplay is also reproduced at the linguistic level of her account. The verb phrases she uses depict an antagonistic vision of herself, revealing both activity and passivity, action and submission, competition and avoidance.

On the one hand, the narrator enters the role of a victim. She feels wronged, rejected, and tormented, expressing a sense of helplessness, powerlessness, sadness, and fear of the future: "I was an object," "They treated me as an object," "I didn't have the courage," "I stayed quiet," "I was so alone," "It was hard," "I cried," and "I had to do everything."

On the other hand there are some parts of the narrative, that demonstrate a desire for autonomy and self-determination. The woman uses a number of phrases that illustrate taking control, a sense of agency and awareness of her own needs: "I wanted to go," "I wanted to leave with my head held high," "I didn't want to see those people anymore," "That's why I didn't go to the middle school in…," "I decided it was OK," "I wanted to re-enrol," "I approached," "I did everything

myself," "I decided," "I started meeting," "I studied well," "I moved," "I searched," and "I quit."

The complexity of lexical and grammatical choices reflects the complexity of the narrator's thoughts and experiences, illustrating the contradictions shaping her identity and her ongoing attempt to find her place in the world.

The identity crisis makes the woman unable to cross the boundaries of her own limitations and transcend her own self. She is characterised by emotional instability, irritability, inconsistency in her actions, a lack of trust, and a tendency to generalise. Anna avoids closeness and closes herself off; at the same time, she suffers from loneliness. On the one hand, she wants to improve her relationship with her parents; on the other hand, she shows emotional coldness and a low level of sensitivity to the problems of her closest relatives. Finally, she expects help and support from others, but is unable to ask for it.

A comparison of Weronika's and Anna's narratives from a linguistic perspective reveals clear differences in the ways they speak about their life experiences, the topics they select, and the grammatical forms they use. The decisions made by the two narrators on how to construct their life stories are reflected in the different images of their identities.

## 4. Conclusion

The research presented above is based on the conception of language as a medium through which people encounter the world, interpret their lives, and relate to reality and themselves. Language is treated as a person's mode of being in the world. Individuals act, think, and live in language and through language. Using it, they do not describe themselves and the world passively – on the contrary – they shape their own concept of reality, create new meanings, and make sense of their experiences. Narrative identity is a crucial expression of this interpretive process.

It is especially important to explore the sociolinguistic practices through which people express their experiences when facing personal crises. In such problematic or even limiting situations, individuals have to reconstruct their identity from fragmented experiences. Reconstructing identity is a very demanding process that has not only a psychological dimension but also a reflective, social, and linguistic one. In order to create a meaningful and consistent narrative of the self, individuals must develop their reflexivity, recognise their freedom, and maintain a sense of coherence and continuity, even when life situations change. The way in which people fulfil this task is reflected in the sociolinguistic dimension of their expressions, in the linguistic patterns, grammatical forms, and structural features used. From this perspective the most

important question the researcher must answer is not only what people say, but also how they say it and how they position themselves in the world.

The sociolinguistic analysis of Weronika's and Anna's narratives makes it possible to discover how both narrators construct their identity. Weronika's account reflects a transition from suffering to agency. Anna's story, however, shows the ongoing struggle between victimisation and resistance, social expectations and personal aspirations. The use of Fritz Schütze's narrative interview method made it possible to reveal the biographical structures underlying both stories. This methodological approach has been shown to be effective in exploring how the linguistic patterns relate to the narrators' reconstructed identities and life trajectories.

To conclude, the study shows that narrative identity is not fixed; on the contrary – it is a dynamic and ongoing process. People create different stories about their lives and speak in various ways about their experiences, personal challenges and changing social conditions. Understanding this phenomenon is not possible without exploring it from the perspective of the content, structure and sociolinguistic features of (auto)narratives.

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# The Role of Narration in Shaping Identity and Resolving Conflicts: Michel de Certeau's Perspective

**Abstract**
This chapter analyses narrative identity and its potential for conflict resolution from the perspective of Michel de Certeau's theory of everyday practices. Narratives function as key strategies enabling individuals and groups to construct meaning, verbalise experiences, and affirm their presence and agency in the context of power structures. They play an important role in the process of shaping individual and collective identity, allowing the symbolic integration of different events into a coherent narrative that provides a sense of continuity and purpose. At the level of interpersonal and intergroup relations, sharing narratives creates space for mutual recognition, the mitigation of differences, and the co-creation of new histories that transcend conflicting visions of reality. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's concept, the author analyses how narrative can act as a tactic used by marginalised groups who, through the symbolic reclaiming of lived spaces, resist dominant narratives that limit their presence. As a result, the author points to the need to develop 'narrative hospitality' as an ethical imperative and strategic intervention promoting dialogue and mutual understanding in the social sphere.

**Keywords:** narration, narrative identity, narrative hospitality, conflict resolution, Michel de Certeau

## 1. Introduction

Narrative is one of the most deeply rooted ways in which humans try to understand themselves and the world around them. Since the dawn of time, people have told stories to make sense of their experiences, tame the unknown and find order in everyday life. Each era and each community has created its own narrative frameworks, its own stories, allowing it to interpret reality and share what is common and what is most personal (see Salmon, 2010; Lyotard, 1984). From ancient myths and legends (Lévi-Strauss, 1958; Eliade, 1957) to the complex,

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often fragmentary stories of postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984; Jameson, 1991), narrative accompanies human experience as a tool for cognition and culture formation. Even if contemporary thinkers express scepticism towards the so-called 'grand narratives', they also point out that every gesture of storytelling or interpreting the world is an act of creating meaning – a form of narrative that shapes the way we understand each other, but also ourselves.

Paul Ricoeur (1992, p. 147) presented the concept of narrative identity as a dynamic process in which a person integrates changing experiences into a coherent story about their own life: "The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character". It is the narrative structure that allows people to maintain a sense of continuity of identity – even when the reality around them changes and life presents them with new challenges. Jerome Bruner (1990, p. 111) expresses a similar view, emphasising that narrative identity acts as an internal order that allows people to find meaning and coherence in a changing world: "The 'Self' is a perpetually rewritten story. In this sense, it is a situated but constantly changing narrative construction". It is through stories about ourselves – constantly being added to and transformed – that we build an understanding of who we are. Bruner (2002, p. 64) places particular emphasis on the meaning-making role of narrative: "We seem to have no other way of describing 'lived time' save in the form of a narrative. And so we come to conceive of ourselves in the form of a story, with its sense of coherence and purpose over time". According to him, narrative becomes the foundation for understanding ourselves and our place in time – creating a story out of human experiences that gives them direction, purpose and meaning, even if the world around us is constantly changing.

Like Bruner and Ricoeur, Anthony Paul Kerby (1991, p. 40) sees narrative as a key mechanism that allows people to integrate experiences, give them meaning and shape their sense of identity. As he writes: "Narrative is the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite. In this way, we create for ourselves a place of meaning and identity". Kerby (1991) emphasises the introspective aspect of narrative, contending that it is in personal reflection that people find meaning in their experiences, regardless of external circumstances. According to him, narrative identity emerges from internal reflection and the autonomy of the individual in relation to their own experiences. Against this background, Michel de Certeau's analyses offer a different, socially embedded perspective. While Bruner and Kerby focus primarily on the internal processes of identity construction, de Certeau (1984) sees narrative as a tactic of resistance – a way in which individuals and groups, especially marginalised ones, can symbolically reclaim spaces appropriated by dominant narratives. Narrative becomes a form of action in which

it is possible to tell one's own stories – alternative to official narratives – and create new ways of being in the world.

For de Certeau, narrative is not merely a tool for describing reality, but a means of transforming it. It opens up a space for creative action, allowing individuals to regain agency, voice and a sense of being a subject. As he writes: "The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices. Every day, the 'ordinary' man is forced to wily practices, to use, to hunt, to rummage. […] He poaches in countless ways on the property of others" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xii). Narrative can therefore be a silent but significant form of resistance – deeply rooted in everyday experience and the human need to make sense of things.

## 2. Research aims and objectives

Analysing Michel de Certeau's perspective, the chapter highlights the role of narrative in conflict resolution. Narrative identity and narrative hospitality, understood as the ability to accept different perspectives and versions of reality, emerge as key tools for peacebuilding (Ricoeur, 1992; Bruner, 1990; de Certeau, 1984). The work is based on a literature review and a hermeneutic approach (Gadamer, 1989), which allows for the exploration of how narrative can serve as a means of resistance, integration, and transformation in diverse social contexts. To analyse Michel de Certeau's perspective, a descriptive-interpretative approach was used (see Denzin, 2000), enabling not only the description of concepts but also an understanding of their implications for intercultural and intergroup dialogue. A qualitative methodology was used, focusing on the analysis of theoretical texts to discover how narratives build bridges between conflicting visions of reality and create a common space for dialogue. With regard to the narrative theory of hospitality, the study draws on philosophical and pedagogical concepts related to the ethics of dialogue (Levinas, 1969), illustrating how the acceptance of diverse narratives can become an ethical practice that supports peacebuilding.

## 3. Michel de Certeau: Narration as a tactic of the marginalised

In his groundbreaking book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau looks at everyday life from the perspective of those who have no influence over the rules governing the world. He introduces a distinction between strategies and tactics – two different logics of action in the social sphere. Strategies belong to the powerful: institutions, states, organisations. They establish order, plan actions, and set the limits of what is permissible. Strategy

assumes that the world is predictable and manageable – all you need is power and the right tools.

And yet, most people do not live according to strategy. They live by improvising – in a daily struggle with rules they did not create. Tactics, according to de Certeau, are precisely this quiet, often invisible way of being – flexible, creative, fleeting. It is a form of action available to those who lack power but are able to cleverly take advantage of opportunities. Tactics are the ability to 'move around on someone else's turf', to exploit gaps and moments when the gaze of authority is temporarily averted. In these small, everyday gestures – in movement, in ways of speaking, in the use of language and space – de Certeau sees a subtle form of resistance, of regaining agency and subjectivity where it seems to be absent.

For Michel de Certeau, narrative is a distinctive form of action through which individuals and groups deemed 'socially superfluous' – those pushed to the margins – can reclaim their stories and rebuild a sense of identity. Through storytelling, they are able to express their experiences on their own terms, even in situations where their voices are silenced by dominant narratives. Narrative offers them the possibility of creating microscopic spaces of meaning in which their identity and experiences are symbolically recognised and affirmed:

> Tactics are procedures that gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time, to the circumstances which the precise instant of an intervention transforms into a favourable situation. The play of possibilities on the basis of the situation creates surprises. It does not, properly speaking, create a space; it achieves its effects in, or against, an order of places. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 29)

De Certeau emphasises that stories told from the margins are a form of resistance – discreet yet effective. In contrast to strategy, which operates within an orderly and predictable space, narrative tactics are flexible – they adapt to the situation and subtly transform reality:

> A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. […] It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 37)

An example of the 'tactical' use of narrative – as emphasised by Michel de Certeau – is the creation of stories by minority groups who reinterpret history and culture from perspectives that challenge official, dominant narratives. These stories encode not only a voice of resistance to exclusionary and invalidating structures, but also a longing to reclaim a place in the world.

Through narrative, marginalised individuals gain not only a means of self-expression but also a symbolic space of resistance. In telling their stories, they bring into public discourse voices that have long gone unheard. De Certeau thus sees narrative as more than an act of communication: it is a mode of reclaiming

agency, constructing identity, and questioning structures of domination. For those who have experienced exclusion, narrative becomes a form of presence – a way of smuggling in their own meanings and perspectives. In this sense, narrative does not merely reflect reality; it also becomes a practice of transformation, in which the stories of those long excluded begin to emerge between the lines of dominant discourses.

The problem of marginalisation is therefore not only a matter of social exclusion. Additionally, it is a fight for the right to be remembered in the collective culture (Wolińska & Michalski, 2022). A person may lose their identity and be excluded from public discourse if they are unable to share their own story. According to Michel de Certeau, historical narratives frequently favor the dominant viewpoint over the voices of marginalized groups. Storytelling becomes a subtle yet effective strategy in these situations, allowing marginalized people to regain their voice and share their experiences in a way that suits them. They are able to 'regain their voice' and end the silence enforced by hegemonic structures by crafting such narratives. As de Certeau notes: "Historical discourse makes a social identity explicit, not so much in the way it is 'given' or held as stable, as in the ways it is differentiated from a former period or another society" (de Certeau 1988, p. 46). Thus, historiography allows people to take a retrospective view, thanks to which the past becomes a point of reference for understanding the present. De Certeau adds that historical narratives combine 'a new intelligibility' of the present with 'the remnants of various pasts' that are present not only in documents but also in the historical work itself as a form of archive. In this way, historiography becomes a form of narrative that not only describes events but also gives them meaning in a cultural and social context. Historical narrative thus becomes a tactic for regaining identity, which, in the face of exclusion, allows individuals and groups to integrate their own symbolic and cultural spaces with the dominant ones.

A deeper understanding of Michel de Certeau's perspective on historical narrative can be gained through a discussion of the right of marginalised social groups to narrative and to construct their cultural identity. According to de Certeau, narrative is a continuous process of transforming what was into what is, rather than merely documenting the past. De Certeau uses the word *réel*, borrowed from Lacan's psychoanalysis, to describe a world of ambiguous space and time that cannot be adequately expressed in words. He compares what he calls *réel* to the unconscious dimension of history, which is a universe still inaccessible to language and signs. De Certeau argues that our senses acquire context and meaning through the interpretation of what we touch, see, hear and read – all of which is filtered through cultural systems and philosophical ideas that are constantly evolving.

This concept is expanded upon by de Certeau, who emphasises that historiography cannot escape "the return of the repressed" (*le retour du refoulé*), or the influence of the past that resurfaces in the present. According to him, writing history is about more than just recording facts; it's also about unearthing and resurrecting the unknown in order to capture the ephemeral present. In order to maintain the obvious proof of truth, the past always infiltrates the present as a form of absence. Historiography is thus changed into a type of 'scriptural' narrative, whose purpose is to evoke 'bodies' and presences from the past in addition to documenting them. This revisiting of the past turns into more than just a documentation; it's a type of visual and symbolic presence, returning through memories and visions of other worlds.

According to Michel de Certeau's ideas of *réel* and the *return of the repressed*, narrative functions as a tool for social and cultural identity expression in situations that restrict complete access to the prevailing reality, in addition to reconstructing the past. In *Culture in the Plural* (1997), de Certeau expands on this concept by examining cultural diversity and exploring how marginalised groups can express their identities and defy imposed norms through everyday culture.

Everyday practices, such as language, symbolism, and local customs, enable marginalised individuals and groups to find their own place within a reality controlled by official structures. As de Certeau writes, these narratives are often tactical – they are created in moments that allow for their expression, yet they remain flexible and adapt to changing conditions. The narratives of the marginalised are thus 'smuggled' between official histories and dominant accounts, allowing them to operate subtly and effectively, even while appearing subordinate to prevailing structures.

Such tactical narratives can take the form of family stories or local histories, which circulate within social circles with the aim of preserving the collective memory of excluded groups. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969), a renowned structuralist anthropologist, examined the significance of narration in the context of myths and orally transmitted histories, particularly in indigenous communities, analysing them as carriers of social and cultural structure. His approach to myths as symbolic systems provides an example of narratives that serve a cohesive and identificatory function, helping to preserve group identity. In the Polish context, this perspective can be observed in folk tales and regional myths, which reflect the value systems and beliefs passed down through generations. Examples include Polish folk legends such as the tale of the Wawel Dragon or Pan Twardowski, which, despite being regarded as fiction, function as symbolic carriers of regional and national identity. These stories play a unifying role, establishing shared frameworks of meaning and bringing members of a community closer together by emphasising the traits and values that the group considers significant. Lévi-Strauss suggested that such narratives are 'structural' in the sense that

they help groups resolve or come to terms with fundamental social tensions and conflicts, expressing universal human concerns in symbolic form. These types of narratives do not merely recount events; they also help communities navigate tensions, adapt to difficult circumstances, and maintain continuity of identity. In doing so, narration becomes not only a means of self-expression for the marginalised but also a symbolic space in which their identity is recognised and affirmed.

## 4. Narrative hospitality: A space for dialogue and collaboration

According to Michel de Certeau, narration has the power to open up spaces in which diverse stories can coexist, creating a foundation for mutual understanding and dialogue. In the concept of narrative hospitality, the key element is the ability to accept and acknowledge versions of reality as presented by others. This approach fosters peace and collaboration, as it enables the integration of experiences and values that might otherwise be excluded or ignored.

The idea of narrative hospitality has roots in the ethics of otherness – especially in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1998). He insisted that the Other cannot be reduced to a reflection of the self. They remain fundamentally different, beyond our full grasp. For Levinas, ethics begins with this encounter: the moment we are called to respond, to remain open to stories that are not ours, that we cannot fully know. In terms of narrative, this openness means something quite basic, yet difficult – letting another's story exist without turning it into our own. Not explaining it away. Not fitting it into familiar categories. Just listening. Paul Ricoeur (1992) added to this by suggesting that narrative isn't just about telling stories – it's how people make sense of who they are. Identity, in his view, is shaped in relation to others. There's no self without dialogue. So hospitality to another's narrative isn't just a generous gesture. It's something more – an ethical stance. One that makes mutual recognition possible. Maybe even peace. As Ricoeur puts it, recognising someone else's story as part of a shared world is not optional. It's necessary.

Recent reflections on interculturality and dialogue – particularly in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) and Charles Taylor (1991) – have helped shape the idea of narrative hospitality. Both philosophers stress that personal and cultural narratives, even if divergent, deserve to be heard. Gadamer, especially, insists that genuine interpretation depends on an openness to what is unfamiliar. This openness isn't simply a neutral stance, it implies a kind of ethical gesture, a form of hospitality that takes place within dialogue itself.

But listening, in this sense, is never passive. For Gadamer, to engage with another's story is to enter a space of mutual transformation. Narrative hospi-

tality, then, involves more than receiving. It requires the willingness to let the stories of others revise how we understand the world. It is learning through relation, not from a distance, but from within shared meaning. Such attentiveness becomes especially urgent for those whose voices have been excluded (deliberately or by omission) from dominant histories. Ranajit Guha (1996, p. 9), writing from within the Subaltern Studies movement, evokes this necessity through a striking image: "To listen is already to be open to and existentially disposed towards: one inclines a little to one side in order to listen." There is something bodily in this posture, a certeain a leaning that signals not only receptiveness but responsibility.

Michel de Certeau brings a different texture to this reflection. In his thought, voices are simultaneously present and absent in writing, stemming from his belief that reality – an elusive, polyphonic excess of life – shapes discourse, even as discourse attempts to capture and organise it (de Certeau, 1984) Language gestures toward reality, but cannot contain it. Reality, as he sees it, shapes discourse, but at the same time eludes it. And the unconscious – the terrain through which this reality is accessed – is not outside language, but somehow inside it, not as expression but as residue, trace, pressure (Highmore, 2006). This is where de Certeau speaks of 'poaching in the cracks' of dominant structures. He gives us a way to think about resistance not as confrontation, but as subversion through adaptation. Consider the practices of colonised peoples who take the language, customs, or symbols of the coloniser and bend them – quietly – into something else. The gesture is subtle, but not insignificant. It marks a reclaiming, a reweaving of meaning from within imposed frames. De Certeau's cartography is not one of fixed spaces. It isn't territory in the strict sense. It's fluid, shifting, a lived topography where discourse and reality meet, touch, pull apart again. Nothing is fully stable. Presence and absence interlace. And within that instability, something like agency appears.

De Certeau perceives the dynamics of culture as constantly permeating language and discourse, while simultaneously resisting their full enclosure and control. It is precisely the 'noise' and traces of reality within discourse that constitute the essence of his topography – a dynamic, permeable, and open space, receptive to diverse and ambiguous voices that operate at the margins and within the cracks of the dominant order. De Certeau suggests that "the oceanic rumble of everydayness" breaks through the surface of culture, emerging as its fundamental substance. Popular culture, with its 'oceanic rumble', represents a heterogeneous, constantly pulsating force, one that remains free from subjugation by social control structures and cultural managers (de Certeau, 1997, p. 92). In this way, everyday practices, according to de Certeau, give voice to the repressed, becoming more than mere forms of expression – they serve as a force

that, at the level of speech and narration, reveals what repression has done to the oppressed.

De Certeau sees in this rumble an echo of the 'oceanic feeling', which Freud described as an inseparable sense of belonging to the external world (Freud, 1930). This is a kind of secular theology of everyday life, in which the energy of popular culture symbolises an underlying revolution in language and speech. In this vision, revolution is not a matter of social reform but takes place at the level of speech and everyday practices, in which moments occasionally emerge that allow for the expression of suppressed violence and intense emotions.

Narrative hospitality does not erase difference but creates space for it – inviting voices shaped by distinct histories, tensions and wounds to be heard and included in a social narrative. In contexts of conflict, especially where cultural or collective identities are at stake, such hospitality is not merely an ethical gesture, but a political practice (understood here as action grounded in relations of power and representation). It invites the Other not only to speak, but to be heard as Other. In this way, the possibility of encounter, and perhaps even of reconciliation or forgiveness, begins to take shape. Narrative strategies become not only a means of articulating one's own identity but also a tool for fostering peaceful coexistence. De Certeau, through the concepts of tactics and the reinterpretation of cultural spaces, presents narration as a subtle yet effective form of transforming social relations. As de Certeau writes:

> Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game, that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 18)

Thus, narration becomes more than a vehicle for expressing identity. It opens provisional, yet meaningful space of encounter, not to erase difference, but to make it visible and negotiable. In this shared ground, disagreement is not resolved by erasure but by recognition and the effort to understand. Here, the past may be spoken without fear of disqualification, the present may be questioned, and something yet unformed may be imagined, in the interval between memory and possibility.

## 5. A narrative approach to conflict and identity: Implications and conclusions

The analysis of the role of narration in shaping identity and resolving conflicts leads to several key conclusions. Narration enables individuals and groups not only to express their own experiences but also to create spaces for dialogue and

mutual understanding (Rumianowska, 2025, this volume). Through narrative identity, individuals and communities construct a coherent story of their lives, while narrative hospitality – defined as openness to others' stories and their inclusion in a dialogue of equal narratives – becomes a foundation for peaceful coexistence. Michel de Certeau demonstrates that narratives function as "tactics" that allow marginalised groups to reclaim symbolic space and agency within a dominant reality. These subtle forms of resistance hold the potential to transform social relations and act as bridges between different realities, supporting reconciliation and the integration of diverse perspectives.

In de Certeau's view, narrative identity becomes something more than a conceptual tool – it acts, rather subtly, as a remedy for absence. Not by filling in what's missing in the past, but by letting the gaps speak, transforming absence into meaning. In doing so, narration creates a space – not perfect, but possible – for coexistence to take root.

This approach has tangible relevance in contexts where language, identity and interaction carry particular weight – in education, therapeutic practice, or intercultural dialogue. Within inclusive pedagogy, narrative tactics make room for students shaped by different social and cultural backgrounds to voice their own stories – not just to be heard, but to experience their value. In therapy, narrative serves as a medium through which individuals come to revise, and sometimes reclaim, parts of themselves long shaped by silence. And when histories clash, narrative hospitality offers a fragile but vital frame where conflicting perspectives might meet – not to agree, but to understand.

In summary, de Certeau provides tools for fostering mutual understanding and identity construction in a dynamic and flexible manner, which proves effective in the complex context of contemporary societies. As Donna Haraway suggests, marginalised perspectives – while requiring exceptional skill and sensitivity – offer a more balanced and transformative view of the world:

> 'Subjugated' standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world. But how to see from below is a problem requiring as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the 'highest' techno-scientific visualizations. (Haraway, 1988, p. 584)

Similarly, de Certeau views the narratives of everyday practices as essential for a more profound understanding and for fostering lasting transformations in social relations.

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# Shaping the Self-Image of Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities: An Individual and Social Perspective

**Abstract**
Identity does not form in a vacuum. It happens gradually, often unevenly, shaped by encounters, language, and the simple yet complicated act of being with others. Especially for young people, the spaces they move through – schools, homes, peer groups – carry weight. They are not neutral. They help shape how someone comes to understand who they are, or might be. This chapter takes a closer look at how individuals with intellectual disabilities come to see themselves. Not in idealised terms, but in the everyday reality of how they live, speak, and are perceived. Although scholars are paying more attention to these issues, much remains unclear. We still know too little about how identity forms when communication is strained, or takes unfamiliar forms. If we hope to support people more meaningfully, we must learn to listen better. And to rethink what we mean by development, support, even dignity.

**Keywords:** identity, language, agency, disability, self-awareness

## 1. Introduction

The idea of identity has been approached in many different ways depending on the academic context. It often overlaps with other concepts such as self, ego, or self-schema, all of which appear in psychological and philosophical discussions (e. g., James, 1890; Markus, 1977; Kihlstrom et al., 2003). Victor Tausk (1919), for example, introduced the term 'identity' in psychoanalytic writing, referring to how individuals perceive themselves as both stable and in flux over time. The balance that remains central in identity theory today. In Erikson's (2004) model, identity is framed as a collection of beliefs about oneself, the surrounding world, and others. He argued that a sense of consistency and uniqueness develops across life stages. While Erikson's ideas were innovative, some scholars, like Kroger and

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Marcia (2011), raised concerns that his work relied too heavily on metaphor and lacked clear operational definitions. This led Marcia (1966) to introduce the identity status model. His approach focused on the interplay of exploration and commitment in the formation of identity and was supported by empirical findings in subsequent studies (e. g., Marcia & Friedman, 1969).

Now, not all frameworks treat identity the same way. Machaj (2017), for instance, draws a line between two broad views. One is more observational – where identity is shaped by one's routine, behaviours, and the societal roles others expect. The other is introspective and focuses on self-awareness and internal processes of identification. What's valuable in Machaj's view is that he doesn't treat these as opposing camps but rather as overlapping frameworks that can both inform how we understand social belonging and personal agency.

On the linguistic side, Gajda (2008) goes beyond just saying identity is a "stable web of meanings." He discusses how this web forms through repeated language use and how certain patterns of speech reflect embedded social roles. For instance, the way someone introduces themselves or describes their own role in a group often reveals their identity position, even when they're unaware of it. It's this everyday dimension, drawn from actual linguistic practice, that makes Gajda's contribution distinct.

There's also the notion of a "sense of identity" as introduced by Mandrosz-Wróblewska (1988), which isn't quite the same as identity itself. Rather, it acts as a psychological signal or awareness of having a coherent self. Depending on perspective, this can be treated as the essence of identity (in the subjective view), or as something more cognitive and representational (in the objective sense). The distinction may sound subtle, but it's quite relevant when working with people who experience developmental or cognitive differences.

This chapter draws on previously collected qualitative data, not to revisit old conclusions but to ask new questions. Specifically, it considers how identity is shaped in individuals with intellectual disabilities, and more precisely, how communication and language practices contribute to that process. It's worth noting that secondary analysis, as a method, isn't just about reusing data. It's about reinterpreting it through a new lens, often revealing insights the original researchers might not have been looking for (Bartnikowska et al., 2017; Corti & Thompson, 2007).

## 2. Ways of shaping identity and self-image

The formation of self-esteem and self-image begins at the very start of an individual's life. Practically all experiences, feelings, and emotions that a person encounters throughout their life influence this process. A particularly significant

role is played by the social environment in which an individual grows up. The primary setting for development is the family, making parental attitudes towards the child crucial. For a child's proper self-esteem – especially in the case of a child with a disability – parental acceptance is of particular importance. Beyond the family, social attitudes held by others are key in shaping a positive and healthy self-image. The attitudes of peers, teachers, and other individuals are especially significant; if they are based on acceptance and understanding, both individuals with and without disabilities will develop a proper perception of themselves and the surrounding world (Borowiecki, 2015, pp. 109–126; Głowala, 2025, this volume).

According to Erikson (1968), a well-formed identity is linked to psychological well-being. In his theory, he identified eight stages of identity development, each involving a psychosocial conflict that must be resolved. Erikson also distinguished seven dimensions along which identity develops: temporal perspective, self-confidence, role experimentation, anticipation of achievement, sexual identity, leadership polarisation, and ideological polarisation (Szubert, 1976).

An interesting perspective on self-knowledge can be found in the works of Kozielecki (1981), who identified three stages of self-awareness development:

1. The stage of elementary knowledge, occurring in the first 3–4 years of a child's life.
2. The stage of differentiated self-awareness, spanning ages 4 to approximately 11–12.
3. The stage of mature self-awareness, emerging between ages 12 and 24.

Self-esteem functions as a form of theory about oneself, primarily concerning internal factors that determine goal attainment. Aronson, Akert, and Wilson (1997) define self-esteem as the evaluation of one's own worth, assessing to what extent individuals perceive themselves as good, competent, and decent. According to Branden (1998), self-esteem consists of two interdependent components. The first is self-efficacy, defined as confidence in one's cognitive abilities, capacity for learning, decision-making, and problem-solving. The second component is self-respect, which is the belief that one has the right to happiness and success, is a valuable individual, and deserves to have their needs and desires fulfilled. Niebrzydowski (1989) describes self-esteem as a fundamental element of an individual's self-knowledge system, forming the core of self-image.

William Howard Fitts argued that an individual evaluates themselves in relation to five distinct domains, which together provide a comprehensive overview of their functioning. These domains include the physical self, the moral-ethical self, the personal self, the family self, and the social self. In his theoretical framework, each of these dimensions is assessed at three levels: identity, self-satisfaction, and behaviour. This approach offers a panoramic view of self-per-

ception (Kirenko, 1998). Individuals must continuously engage in self-identification and self-actualisation, as identity undergoes a cycle of integration, disintegration, and reintegration (Szpunar, 2005). Identity is one of the most crucial concepts for human development and psychological well-being. Erikson (1968) argued that a well-developed identity is essential for psychological health.

Marcia (1966) identified four identity statuses, ranked from most to least mature: identity achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, and diffusion. Moratorium identity occurs when an individual explores their environment but does not commit to any particular area of activity. Foreclosed identity – also referred to as assigned or mirrored identity – emerges when an individual engages in minimal exploration but adopts socially prescribed commitments. Diffused identity occurs when an individual lacks opportunities for both environmental exploration and commitment, displaying little interest in forming a personal identity. The optimal identity status is identity achievement, which arises when an individual engages in extensive exploration and subsequently makes independent decisions about their lifestyle. Marcia (1966) explained identity achievement as an awareness of one's strengths and limitations, accompanied by self-acceptance and stable, realistic self-esteem that is independent of external opinions. Vleioras and Bosma (2005) examined the relationship between identity styles and psychological well-being using C. Ryff 's (1989) model, arguing that identity should not be viewed as a fixed state or status but rather as a dynamic, lifelong process.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities actively seek to participate in various social situations, thereby shaping their self-image from both individual and social perspectives. The ability to shape one's own life and be its creator reflects a fundamental aspect of human functioning – agency, which includes self-awareness. This entails perceiving one's identity as stable over time and experiencing recognition of this continuity by others (Erikson, 1950). At some point, every person reflects on their self-perception, self-acceptance, and life goals. No individual exists in a 'social vacuum'; rather, their development is reinforced or hindered by social interactions. However, individuals possess the capacity to overcome limitations by independently shaping their lives and attributing meaning to their experiences. The process of gaining autonomy is lifelong, progressing along a continuum from total dependence to independence and interdependence (Pilecka, 1996; Sękowska, 2000). The development of identity is strongly influenced by an individual's ability to exercise control over their own life. However, individuals with disabilities often face greater constraints in this regard compared to their non-disabled peers (Bauman, 2007).

## 3. Language and communication as the foundation for shaping identity and self-image in children

Language shapes human identity while simultaneously serving as one of its most significant manifestations. The language in which a child undergoes primary socialisation determines how they perceive the world. In the process of self-awareness and identity formation, language plays a crucial role. According to Stanisław Gajda (2008):

> Language serves as the material, tool, and vehicle of identity. We identify primarily within and through language. It provides the material for self-identification as someone distinct, thereby sustaining our identity. As a carrier of identity, that is, the self-image (I/We), language influences how the subject represents themselves […] becoming an integral part of their being. A person acquires identity along with the language of their environment and, through it, shapes their self-understanding. Language does not so much reveal identity as create it […], as identity is a discursive construct rather than an inherent feature.

According to Waldemar Czachur (2011), language performs crucial identity-related functions, as it not only serves as a primary means of expressing identity-related content but also constructs and organises it. Although most information in direct communication is transmitted non-verbally, language remains a fundamental component. Alongside tradition and religion, language is one of the key elements that define ethnic and national identity (Grabowska, 2008).

The process of communication, in which identity develops, is described by the theory of *symbolic interactionism*[1] (Szczurek-Boruta, 2008). The core of symbolic interactionism lies in human relationships, which are based on symbols and their creation and use in individual and cultural communication. Symbolic interactionism posits that a minimum level of intersubjective understanding among participants is necessary for interaction, facilitating the exchange of perspectives and the social construction of interactions through a shared communication system. A fundamental condition for comprehensible interactions is language (Hałas, 2006, p. 16).

Communication, therefore, is a symbolic process. It is also a social process, as it involves at least two individuals and occurs within a social environment. It represents a reciprocal relationship between the parties involved in the exchange. Since communication is based on the individual interpretation of messages, it must assume a shared understanding of the meanings assigned to specific

1 The term *symbolic interactionism* was first introduced by Herbert Blumer in 1937 to describe researchers studying group life among humans – those who rejected deterministic approaches, both in the form of various naturalistic perspectives and cultural determinism (Hałas, 2006, p. 35).

messages. It occurs within a defined context and is a conscious and purposeful action (Potocki, Winkler, & Żbikowska, 2003, p. 45).

According to Charles Cooley (1909), communication is a mechanism through which human relationships exist and develop, with symbols created by the human mind being transmitted across space and preserved over time. John Dewey (1916), on the other hand, argued that society exists not merely through the transmission of information and communication but that its very existence depends on these processes. The purpose of communication, according to Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska (2006), is to exchange thoughts, share knowledge, information, and ideals.

Communication can also be defined in various ways: as transmission, meaning the process of conveying information; understanding, referring to the process through which an individual comprehends others and seeks to be understood; interaction, serving as a tool for interpersonal relations and influencing others' behaviours; community-building, in which communication facilitates the formation of a cohesive group sharing certain attitudes; and as a social process, which allows the expression of group norms and the articulation of expectations (Goban-Klas, 1999). Communication processes can occur simultaneously at multiple levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and public (Potocki, Winkler, & Żbikowska, 2003, p. 46).

Interpersonal communication is understood as the negotiation of meanings regarding how individuals perceive the surrounding world, themselves, and others. It involves a mutual interpretation of reality, which operates through a feedback loop (Nyklewicz, 2003).

Self-awareness is always a response to messages received from others. An individual's identity is shaped and maintained through social interaction (Dziekanowska, 2015). Identity is not an innate attribute, but rather it is constructed through the process of self-understanding. This process involves interpreting past life events through an internal dialogue from the present perspective. Furthermore, the meaning of a particular event in self-narrative depends on subsequent experiences. The function of this process is to assign meaning and coherence to life events, ensuring their alignment with broader life experiences (Kociuba, 2007). However, self-narration is only part of self-development; it is insufficient on its own to create meaning in life or establish a coherent, stable identity. Ricoeur, in his work *Oneself as Another* (2003), argued that self-narration is a stage on the path from merely possessing a character to becoming a morally good person. Through self-narration, the self is able to grasp its unity over time and, by overcoming unnecessary doubts, establish itself as a coherent whole (Dilthey, 2004).

## 4. Communicative deficits of individuals with intellectual disabilities and the formation of their identity and self-image

Disability has many dimensions, and there is no single universally accepted definition. Disabilities can be classified as physical, intellectual or social. Agency is an inherent and integral aspect of human functioning. Therefore, in line with the personalist approach (Bartnik, 1995; Granat, 1985; Wojtyła, 1976; Mounier, 1964; Scheler, 1960; Teilhard de Chardin, 1993), it is recommended to use the term *individual with a disability* rather than *disabled individual*, as disability is merely one characteristic among many that define a person (Kurowski, 2014).

Based on the degree of intellectual impairment, language development, social functioning, motor skills, learning abilities, and overall adaptability in different life domains, intellectual disability is categorised into four levels: mild, moderate, severe, and profound.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities, due to their lower intelligence quotient (IQ: 55–69)[2] compared to other groups with disabilities, exhibit differences in their functioning. Intellectual disability is not always immediately visible; if no additional impairments are present, it may remain unnoticed (Gajdzica, 2017). Individuals with mild intellectual disability generally demonstrate good attention to concrete material; however, difficulties arise when dealing with abstract concepts. Similarly, their perception abilities are challenged when distinguishing essential details. They tend to have strong mechanical memory but weaker logical and voluntary memory. Their thinking is primarily concrete, with difficulties in defining abstract concepts. They may also struggle with formulating thoughts and verbal expressions, exhibit agrammatical structures, have a limited vocabulary, and frequently experience speech disorders.

The development of linguistic competence, including the mastery of speech and communication rules, often poses challenges for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The more severe the intellectual disability, the greater the delays in speech development and the more significant the accompanying articulation and interpersonal communication difficulties (Konarska, 2015).

For individuals with mild intellectual disability, reduced communication abilities are associated with thinking impairments. Lev Vygotsky (1989) strongly emphasised the relationship between language and thought. Impairments in cause-and-effect reasoning and abstract thinking contribute to difficulties in understanding jokes, proverbs, and metaphors, as noted by Anna Olechowska (2016). Studies on the communication abilities of students with intellectual disabilities indicate that these individuals function better in the pragmatic do-

2 The intelligence quotient (IQ) was determined based on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-R).

main than in the syntactic and semantic domains. Compared to their neurotypical peers, students with mild intellectual disabilities exhibit deficits in lexical, syntactic, and morphological structures, which are crucial for describing attitudes, opinions about events, and emotional states (Kaczorowska-Bray, 2017).

Individuals with intellectual disabilities often struggle with forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships. This is likely due to the fact that effective social functioning requires abstract thinking, the ability to anticipate consequences, and an understanding of messages conveyed by others. Successful communication does not rely solely on the literal meaning of words; instead, it involves interpreting verbal content in relation to the situational context and nonverbal cues from the speaker. Since cognitive processes are impaired in individuals with intellectual disabilities, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships becomes significantly more difficult, and in some cases, nearly impossible. Because individuals with intellectual disabilities often misinterpret social cues, their reactions may be inappropriate for the given situation, leading to misunderstandings within their social environment. As a result, frustration may increase, as these individuals struggle to comprehend both the messages directed at them and the reasons behind rejection or a lack of understanding from others (Przetacznik-Gierowska & Włodarski, 1994).

Collective identity is a social and cultural phenomenon, which is inherently linked to language and communication. Just as cultures cannot emerge without linguistic communication, a shared identity and sense of belonging to a community cannot develop without language and social interaction (Bartmiński, 2009).

Each individual with mild intellectual disability is unique, possessing individual communication abilities. Some may experience significant communication challenges, while others may have a rich vocabulary and the ability to understand humour and irony. Every individual has different needs and limitations, which is why support should be tailored to their personal predispositions. The social barriers that individuals with intellectual disabilities encounter often limit their ability to make choices and freely construct their adult self-image. Greater social acceptance and inclusion could contribute to improving public perceptions of intellectual disability and, in turn, enhance the self-esteem and sense of security among individuals with intellectual disabilities.

## 5. Review of existing research

For identity formation, key cognitive development competencies include self-awareness and self-knowledge. Self-awareness and self-knowledge are fundamental to cognitive development and play a crucial role in shaping one's sense of identity. Self-esteem, as one of the most important psychological structures, helps individuals distinguish themselves from their environment and define their essence (Malec, 2002, p. 14). Individuals facing various forms of disability – especially physical, auditory, and visual impairments, as well as speech disorders – tend to exhibit inappropriately low, negative, and unstable self-esteem (Larkowa, 1974; Pichalski, 1978; Bielecki, 1999; Ossowski, 2001). This is because their self-evaluation is often based solely on their limitations and failures. The formation of self-esteem is a complex process influenced by multiple variables, including cultural norms, individual successes and failures, opinions of others, and social comparisons. Additionally, self-esteem is shaped by an individual's status within their primary reference groups and their socio-economic position. Self-esteem is thus a socially constructed phenomenon that develops through interactions with others (Doliński, 2000). However, the process of self-esteem development is somewhat different in individuals with intellectual disabilities. It can follow two distinct trajectories. On the one hand, these individuals often struggle with daily tasks of varying complexity, leading to frequent failures, negative feedback, and reduced belief in their own abilities. This can result in a lowered sense of self-agency and the development of diminished self-esteem. On the other hand, reduced self-criticism and increased susceptibility to external influence can lead to exaggeratedly high self-esteem. Adam Mikrut (1995, 1998) noted that even minor, unexpected successes can increase expectations, desires, and self-assessment of one's competencies and abilities. Existing research suggests that, among individuals with intellectual disabilities, the second mechanism – overestimated self-esteem – appears more frequently (Mikrut, 1995; Mikrut, 1998; Witkowski, 2000; Janiszewska-Nieścioruk, 2000). Compared to neurotypical peers, individuals with intellectual disabilities exhibit high, often unrealistic self-esteem, which remains relatively resistant to change. Despite shortcomings or unfulfilled tasks, they often continue to perceive themselves in an overly favourable manner (Żółkowska, 2003). To summarise, one can imagine that when attempting to answer the central identity question, "Who am I?", an individual constructs a self-definition in a way that provides the most comprehensive representation of themselves (global criterion), allows relatively easy identification within the social environment (differentiation criterion), and reflects their self-perception in accordance with their own values and significance (subjective importance criterion) (Marcia, 2002; Erikson, 1997).

For many years, the identity of individuals with intellectual disabilities was underexplored in academic literature. Researchers have recently sought to bridge this gap. Globally, contributions come from Arnett (2000), Branco, Ramos, and Hewstone (2019), and Chalk (2016), while in Poland, notable studies include those by Brzezińska and Rękosiewicz (2011), Mróz (2018), Sikora (2008), Stelter (2007), and Kumaniecka-Wiśniewska (2006).

Significant insights have emerged from studies on adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities conducted by Levy-Schiff, Kedem, and Sevillia. These studies revealed considerable variation in identity profiles among participants. While the identity development of individuals with disabilities differs from that of neurotypical individuals, the researchers attribute this variation not only to cognitive functioning but also to specific social experiences. Similar to individuals with other types of disabilities, their identity is shaped by parental influences and broader social interactions. Nevertheless, the researchers emphasise that the order of identity development stages in individuals with intellectual disabilities is comparable to that of their neurotypical peers (Evans, 1998, pp. 462–480).

Research conducted by Małgorzata Rękosiewicz provides important findings on identity development among individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. The study indicates that identity development occurs similarly in both groups; however, among individuals with disabilities, there was a notable but small increase in commitment to identity formation during adolescence. While this represents positive developmental progress, it remains slow. Despite environmental limitations, such as fewer opportunities for participation in activities and less flexible parenting styles compared to neurotypical peers, identity development still occurs. However, over a 12-month period, research in three study groups revealed no significant increase in commitment to identity formation. Additionally, no instances of identity achievement were observed at any stage of measurement. These findings appear to confirm the phenomenon of delayed adulthood among neurotypical individuals. Consequently, given that the results for individuals with intellectual disabilities closely resemble those of neurotypical individuals, it is plausible that their identity development is progressing at a slower rate compared to earlier studies by Marcia and Friedman (Rękosiewicz, 2016, pp. 161–162).

Adolescents with intellectual disabilities ask the same existential questions about the meaning of life as their neurotypical peers. These questions are highly individualised and specific (Gołaszewska, 1998, p. 21). However, as they transition into adulthood and undertake various developmental tasks, they may encounter unique psychological difficulties. For example, studies involving individuals with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities found that during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, they often became targets of aggression from people outside their immediate social circles (Larkin, Jahoda,

MacMahon, & Pert, 2012, pp. 29–38). Coping with such challenges is particularly difficult, as these individuals frequently experience stigmatisation and social labelling, making them more vulnerable to emotional distress. The researchers suggest that prior experiences of stigma may intensify emotional responses to negative social interactions. For all young individuals, positive social attitudes contribute to the formation of healthy self-esteem. Conversely, negative social attitudes can lead to the development of an inaccurate self-image, causing individuals to devalue their worth, downplay their strengths, and deny their developmental potential.

## 6. Conclusions

The process of identity formation is complex and continuously evolving. Individuals with intellectual disabilities follow a developmental trajectory comparable to that of their neurotypical peers, although the pace and character of these changes may vary. This progression involves physical, cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions. Every individual evaluates how they are perceived by others and compares this with their internal self-image. In doing so, they navigate between social expectations and the degree of acceptance they experience, gradually learning to adapt and regulate emotional expression.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities frequently internalise the attitudes and viewpoints of those around them, which significantly influences their self-esteem and the way they construct their identity (Rozen, 2011). Therefore, it is essential to establish environments that actively engage these individuals in experiences that enhance social competence and foster a stable sense of self-worth. Opportunities for self-exploration and the development of self-regulation[3] mechanisms play a central role in this process.

From a practical standpoint, the implementation of educational and therapeutic programmes tailored to the cognitive profiles of individuals with intellectual disabilities is crucial. Interventions grounded in interactive, socially engaging models can support the building of interpersonal relationships and improve understanding of social norms. Inclusive education, moreover, should provide structured opportunities to develop autonomy and social skills, thereby enabling full participation in community life. The consistent support of families

3 Self-regulation is the ability to control one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviour, enabling goal-directed actions such as delaying gratification, resisting impulses, planning, and executing plans. An important aspect of self-regulation is the ability to regulate one's internal arousal state (e.g., emotional regulation) and engage in self-reflection, which allows for conscious decision-making and goal-oriented actions (Schiep, Cieślik, Fila & Bętkowska-Korpała, 2013).

and caregivers further strengthens a positive self-image and nurtures a sense of personal agency.

Future research should examine which strategies most effectively promote identity development, particularly those that align with diverse cognitive and communicative needs. It is equally important to assess how the quality and consistency of environmental support, especially within family and school settings, affect self-image stability and personal independence. Research that accounts for an individual's broader life context, as well as the long-term outcomes of educational and therapeutic interventions, will offer the most valuable insights into supporting psychosocial development.

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# Sense of Identity of People with Intellectual Disabilities

**Abstract**
This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative study examining selected aspects of identity among adults aged 34–37 with mild intellectual disabilities. The aim of the research was to explore how these individuals perceive their own identity. The study focused on the participants' personal experiences and narratives. Data were collected through nondirective interviews and the Three Wishes Test (Dykens, 2007). The study found that participants did not see their mild intellectual disability as a constitutive factor of their identity. Rather, similar to people without a disability, the participants focused on describing their values, character features and experiences. Moreover, despite low self-confidence, self-critical attitudes and social barriers – many showed resilience and employed effective coping strategies. The findings underline that for people with mild disabilities the process of forming their own identity involves difficulties, but also relates to their developmental potential.

**Keywords:** identity, sense of identity, disability, intellectual disability, adulthood

## 1. Introduction

People with disabilities account for approximately 12.2% of the total population in Poland (GUS, 2012). They often face *stigmatised* treatment and social exclusion. Individuals with disabilities are compared with non-disabled individuals and assessed according to dominant social norms and standards (Świtaj & Wciórka, 2012, p. 399). It is common to perceive them as a homogeneous group without considering that they have different needs and expectations. All of this causes their subjectivity and autonomy to be violated.

One form of disability is intellectual disability (classified in ICD-11 as a disorder of intellectual development), referring to deficits in intellectual and adaptive functioning. It is typically diagnosed in early childhood (Bobińska &

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Gałecki, 2012, p. 32). Intellectual disability is identified on the basis of cognitive deficits, communication problems, and difficulties in understanding legal, social, and moral norms (Leśniak, 2019, pp. 32, 39).

There are four levels of intellectual disability: mild (IQ 55–69), moderate (IQ 35–54), severe (IQ 20–34), and profound (IQ 0–19). The more severe the disability is the more difficult the personal development becomes (Stancliffe 2010). Specific behaviours and limited cognitive abilities make people in this group not fully aware of their own possibilities, rights and entitlements. Such a person may tolerate discrimination without protest, adopt a passive attitude, and perceive themselves through social expectations (Maciąg, 2020, p. 244).

In an effort to avoid stigma and labelling, increasing emphasis has been placed on the use of appropriate terminology over the past two decades. Recognising that language constructs reality, the term *mental retardation* was replaced by *intellectual disability*. In Poland this change was formally adopted in 1997 by the Polish Group for Scientific Research on Intellectual Disability (Rozen, 2011, p. 459). Over time, person-centred language became more widely used. The term *disabled person* was gradually replaced by the expression *person with a disability*. From a linguistic perspective, the phrase 'person with a disability' emphasises the individual first. In other words, disability appears as a features characterising an individual. In contrast, the formulation 'person with a disability' refers to an individual, presenting disability as one of many aspects of their life (Giełda, 2015, p. 25). As Wołowicz-Ruszkowska (2012, p. 8) notes, the terms are not linked to negative social reactions towards people with disabilities. Even linguistically correct or neutral expressions can acquire pejorative connotations over time in the process of stigmatisation. According to Ruszkowska, the problem lies not only in language, but above all in social attitudes.

People with mild disabilities make up 85% of all people with intellectual disabilities (IQ 55–69), Their cognitive limitations are less visible than those of people with more profound disabilities. These people often give the impression that they function within the intellectual norm. This is because they usually do not have any outward signs indicating a need for support. Unfortunately, because they are often perceived as non-disabled, they are excluded from support systems dedicated to people with disabilities. These individuals have to overcome difficulties in the social world on their own. Not all of them can cope with this challenge (Gajdzica, 2007, p. 17).

Tylewska-Nowak (2011, p. 19) highlights the lack of a clear societal understanding of what adulthood means in the case of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The phenomenon of adulthood is in this realm often distorted and narrowed, which negatively affects ability of these people to function socially (Żółkowska, 2003, p. 248). It is often ignored, that people with disabilities frequently achieve developmental tasks associated with adulthood either earlier or

later than their non-disabled peers (Piotrowski, 2010, p. 7). From a *developmental* perspective, *adulthood* is characterized by the continued *construction* and consolidation of a personal *identity* (Barłóg, 2020, p. 201). This suggests that a person articulates and defines themselves in relation to others, trying to answer the question of who they are and what kind of person they are.

## 2. Understanding identity

Identity is often regarded as one of the most fundamental categories that organize an individual's relationship with the world (Szczepański, 2015, p. 79). It can be defined as "a person's ability to define themselves, their values, and their sense of belonging to a group that shares common beliefs—while maintaining an awareness of their own individuality" (Babiarz & Garbuzik, 2017, p. 24).

Marcia (1980) describes identity as an internal, dynamic "organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual experiences" (as cited in Brzezińska, 2006, p. 8). Similarly, Szymański (2013, p. 195) views it as "a lifelong construction shaped through continuous self-observation, self-evaluation, and external feedback—a conviction of 'who I am' emerging from life choices, social roles, successes, failures, and personal actions."

In the viewpoint of the above presented research it is crucial to highlight, that identity is both conveyed through language and shaped by it. As Gumienny (2023, p. 69) observes, "it is constructed through naming." Language reflects not only how a person thinks and acts but also serves as a medium for both thought and communication. It is an integral part of emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical individual's existence (Rumianowska, 2016, p. 263).

The most important psychosocial task in a person's life is the identity construction (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2018; Myśliwczyk, 2020). Identity is formed during adulthood. This process includes early adulthood (20–40 years), middle adulthood (40–60 years) and late adulthood (60 years and beyond) (Harwas-Napierała and Trempała, 2007, p. 15). (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2018; Myśliwczyk, 2020). According to Erikson (2004, p. 91), this period involves "studying or working in a chosen profession, forming relationships with the opposite sex, and eventually entering into marriage and family life."

The sense of identity is a narrower construct than identity itself (Żyłkiewicz-Płońska, 2023, p. 105). Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, Pilarska (2016, p. 123) specifically defines the sense of identity as the subjective dimension of identity. She also emphasizes that the term 'sense' encompasses not only emotional experiences (feelings or sensations) but also cognitive components, including beliefs, convictions, and perceptions (Pilarska, 2016, pp. 123–125). Sikora (2008, p. 39) shares this perspective. In her opinion the sense of

identity refers to the cognitive understanding of identity accessible to the individual. It reflects how individuals perceive themselves and answer essential questions such as "Who am I?" and "What am I like?" (Brzezińska, 2006, pp. 8–9). This phenomenon encompasses both social origins (beliefs about how others perceive us) and internal foundations (self-perceptions developed through early self-awareness and reflection) (Brzezińska, 2017, p. 33).

The sense of identity plays a vital role in psychological functioning. It is influenced by changing interactions, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs (Gątarek, 2016, p. 116). There are two dimensions in which the sense of identity can be understood: biographical-vertical and social-horizontal. The biographical dimension refers to temporal continuity—a sense of connection between the past, present, and future. The social dimension concerns the integration of various aspects of the self at a given moment (Wróblewska, 2011, p. 178). A deep sense of identity includes biographical continuity, enabling individuals to narrate and communicate the story of their lives to others (Giddens, 2012, p. 81). Research has demonstrated clear associations between identity and psychological well-being, self-esteem, the ability to form bonds and experience intimacy, as well as susceptibility to depressive disorders and personality pathology (Pilarska, 2016, p. 134).

Disability is a significant factor that can distort an individual's self-concept and hinder the process of identity formation (Oleś, 2003, p. 253; Speck, 2005, p. 361; Rzeźnicka-Krupa, 2009, p. 9). For individuals with intellectual disabilities, this process depends on both self-determination skills (often developed during upbringing) and the degree of intellectual disability. The social environment also plays an important role. Some studies suggest that the identity of individuals with intellectual disabilities is shaped even more by environmental factors than by personal traits (Rozen, 2011, p. 451). Adults with intellectual disabilities are frequently perceived as 'eternal children' requiring support. Such societal perceptions may reduce their motivation to explore and adopt new social roles, which poses a risk to their identity development (Rękosiewicz, 2012, p. 61).

The question is whether intellectual disability constitutes a central aspect of identity. In other words, the question is, to what extent individuals focus on their disability while describing their own self (Logeswaran, Hollett, Zala, Richardson, & Scior, 2019, p. 534).

## 3. Objectives and method of research

The aim of this study was to identify and understand how young adults with mild intellectual disabilities perceive and develop their identity, based on their personal experiences and self-understanding. A qualitative methodology based on

the interpretative paradigm was used. It focused on the subjective perception of personal experience, processes of meaning-making, negotiation and renegotiation of meanings in the context of human actions. This approach made it possible to explore the unique ways in which individuals with mild intellectual disabilities live, think and understand the world. It was crucial to discover the individual and distinctive ways in which they attribute meaning to their experiences. An essential value of the interpretative approach is that it enables people with disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities, to express their own voice (Rzeznicka-Krupa, 2009, p. 74). Despite the growing interest in examining people with intellectual disabilities, there is still a relative scarcity of research focusing on self-characterisation in this group (Zasępa, 2016, p. 144).

The primary method of data collection was a non-directive interview. It is a form of unstructured and non-standardised conversation in which the researcher freely shaped the conversation and encouraged participants to share their experiences and emotions. The use of this method allowed insight into the participants' perspectives and an authentic expression of their points of view (Gudkova, 2012, p. 116). In addition, the study used the Three Wishes Test developed by Dykens et al. (2007; see also Zasępa, 2016, p. 144).

Access to the research group was facilitated by a now-retired special education teacher who helped to make contact with two of the participants. Further, these participants asked their former classmates to participate in the study. Before the interview began, the research objectives and procedures were explained to all participants. In order to ensure the safety and privacy of the subjects, the interviews were conducted in the afternoons in an office, where a psychologist was also present. Efforts were made to use appropriate and accessible language during the conversation. The researcher and participants also agreed to address each other by their first names.

The study sample consisted of five women and three men with mild intellectual disabilities:

- **K1:** Female, 34, employed as a hospital cleaner, lives with her partner, no children, graduated from a special vocational school (hairdressing).
- **K2:** Female, 34, school cleaner, lives with her partner, two children, vocational school graduate (tailoring/seamstress).
- **K3:** Female, 35, not professionally employed, receives a carer's allowance for her severely disabled adult brother, married, no children, lives with her husband and brother, vocational school graduate (hairdressing).
- **K4:** Female, 37, unemployed, provides part-time care for an elderly person (five days a week, three hours per day), seeking contract work, lives with her mother, has one child (parental rights terminated; the child is under the legal guardianship of the participant's sister), has a partner currently incarcerated, vocational school graduate (cooking).

- **K5:** Female, 36, not professionally employed, married, two children, left vocational school due to pregnancy.
- **M1:** Male, 35, receives a disability pension (occupational asthma), does various casual jobs (tree trimming, lawn mowing, snow clearing, potato digging and sorting, construction assistance), vocational school graduate (baker, later carpenter to continue receiving his late father's pension), lives with his mother and adult sister (who has moderate intellectual disabilities), single, no children.
- **M2:** Male, 36, unemployed (collects scrap metal), lives with his father, often stays with a friend, dropped out during the first year of vocational school, single, no children.
- **M3:** Male, 35, employed as a carpenter's assistant (furniture assembly), lives with his wife and mother, three children, vocational school graduate (carpentry).

The main research question was: How do the participants perceive their identity in the context of their life experiences and self-understanding?

## 4. Results of the study

At the outset, it is important to note that the participants did not encounter significant difficulties in articulating their thoughts and experiences about themselves and demonstrated an adequate range of communication skills. The analysis focused on domains considered relevant to the research objectives, as identified by the author. These included: self-definition, identification of strengths and weaknesses, valued principles, needs, attitudes toward their own intellectual disability, experiences of difficult situations, relationships with family, work, leisure activities, social interactions, experiences of stress, and sources of support.

### 4.1. Constructing the self: Participants' identity definitions

The participants' self-definitions provided valuable insights into how they perceive their identity and the personal meanings they assign to it. At the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked to respond to a fundamental identity question: "Who are you?" and "What can you say about yourself?" The participants most frequently described themselves using expressions such as: "I am a good person," "I am a human being," and "I am myself." One respondent highlighted his gender with the statement: "I am a man" [M1]. Participants also

referred to their age and to their occupational or family roles. Only one woman explicitly referenced her disability in defining herself, stating: "I am a bit handicapped" [K4]. One respondent defined himself in terms of social adjustment: "I'm adjusted to people… I don't wear earrings, I look good… if it weren't for my nose… my stomach is a little too big" [M1]. There were also answers focusing on personal transformation: "I was often angry, so anxious and explosive, I was not thinking why… [elementary school period] Now I am changed" [K3]. These self-descriptions reveal the participants' emphasis on positive self-concepts, social roles, and personal growth, while references to disability were rare.

### 4.2. Identifying strengths and weaknesses

The recognition of important and distinctive personal characteristics is a crucial condition for developing a well-established identity (Hołyst, 2016, p. 8). Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the positive and negative qualities that the interviewed women and men perceive in themselves. An analysis of the participants' responses revealed that all of them primarily identified numerous flaws or shortcomings. Most participants, to varying degrees, expressed dissatisfaction with their appearance and believed that these perceived flaws affected their behaviour, motivation, and relationships with others:

> "I'm ashamed of [my nose]; everyone looks at it… so I don't have a wife" [M1].

> "I'm a little fat, you know. All [partners] I had were older, so with them I wasn't so embarrassed" [K4].

One participant acknowledged that her speech was sometimes difficult for others to understand, but she did not feel significant embarrassment about it [K2]. Across the group, participants also reported a lack of resourcefulness and self-confidence, describing themselves as shy or, conversely, as aggressive and demanding. Some also reported problems with aggression:

> "I'm temperamental; I grumble a lot [meaning the use of profanity and insults]. When they bother me, I pretend it's nothing… A neighbour attacked me; he wanted to fight, so I took him with such a knife… I ended up 'in the tank'" [M1].

Addictions were also mentioned, with particular emphasis on alcohol abuse.

It is worth noting that some participants found it difficult to accept their flaws and shortcomings. They reported that they were often self-critical and sometimes angry with themselves. With the exception of one participant [K3], the respondents were not very compassionate towards themselves. They also reported difficulties in accepting criticism from others, especially close family

members: "She keeps talking to me, nothing seems right to her…" [M3, about his wife]; "He should look at himself…" [M2, about his father].

All participants had some difficulty in identifying their strengths or positive attributes. Answering this question often required encouragement and patience from the researcher. Sometimes the question had to be postponed and asked again later in the interview. Participants enumerated the following positive qualities and values: kindness, hard work and helpfulness, and caring for home and family. Individual responses included caring for parents, the ability to sing nicely, to cut one's own hair and to manage money judiciously.

The participants' responses revealed a clear tendency toward self-criticism and difficulties in recognizing their strengths, although they also demonstrated an awareness of their positive qualities and a desire for self-improvement.

### 4.3. Attitude toward one's own disability

The development of personal identity is closely linked to the acceptance of one's disability. The majority of participants said that their disability was not the main factor that defines them. However, they acknowledged its impact on their emotional well-being, intellectual and social abilities. Some of them reported: "Once upon a time … at school I couldn't read at all" [K2]; "I used to be like that [a person with a disability] too…. I didn't like to learn" [K1]; "I am normal, I go to work, I have money." [M3].

One woman, motivated by a sense of shame, hid the fact that she attended a special school:

> "If there was a school trip, for example to the cinema, I wouldn't go to school that day. When the neighbours asked, I'd say that I went to school in… [name of locality]." [K4]

She also concealed the fact that she had received a statement of special education needs. None of her three partners—including the father of her child—were aware of this. Only one participant [K3] disclosed to her husband and in-laws that she attended a special school.

Attitude towards *one's* own disability was also influenced by the social environment. Interviews revealed that participants often experienced negative treatment during their early education in mainstream elementary schools. In contrast, they generally recalled their time at special elementary schools positively or at least fairly positively. Many remembered the names of their favourite teachers and spoke warmly about them. One participant [K3] said that she received a lot of support from her teachers. As a result, she discovered her potential and began to function better in everyday life. The woman appreciated their dedication and understanding. She was grateful for their commitment, and the

fact that she could always count on their help. Over time, she came to believe that these teachers really cared about her. Even today, she still keeps in touch with them, both by phone and in person. When she experiences personal or professional problems, she still trusts them and sometimes asks them for advice.

Unfortunately, as the participants went on to middle school and vocational school, they found their experiences less and less positive. As they recalled:

> "There was only [XY] who was nice. Sometimes she would come and ask how we were doing…. The other teachers were indifferent. Everyone did what they wanted" [M1];

> "At that school I was a good student and even took part in competitions, but the teachers did not care much about the students" [K3].

As the research shows, the process of identity formation by people with disabilities is a complex process. It is influenced by both personal acceptance of their own disability and social attitudes towards their existential situation

## 4.4. Work and family as foundations of identity

In adulthood, identity formation is usually based on involvement in two primary domains: family and work. The persistence required to fulfil responsibilities in both domains is also crucial (Zolkowska, 2005; Prysak, 2020, p. 23). An analysis of the research data indicates that participants demonstrated an awareness that adulthood necessitates both independence and responsibility, although these concepts were interpreted in diverse ways. Most commonly, independence was associated with "doing everything oneself" without assistance from others, as well as achieving financial self-sufficiency. Only one participant [K3] linked independence to the ability to make personal decisions.

All respondents perceived themselves as independent. They also felt responsible for their loved ones (family, partner) and knew exactly what they ought to do in their adult life. A sense of agency was also strongly emphasized. In opinion of the respondents they had real influence on their personal and professional situation. Most of them reported that they managed their household responsibilities effectively, enumerating activities such as preparing meals, keeping the house clean, shopping, paying rent and utility bills. Only three participants [K1, K2, K5] reported difficulties in dealing with interpersonal conflicts and family problems. They mentioned household responsibilities, alcohol abuse by the partner and financial limitations. Several participants also mentioned a sense of loneliness and being misunderstood.

Two individuals explained how the lack of a role model during their teenage years had influenced their lives and made it difficult to build a stable and mature

identity. One woman expressed the belief that her life would have looked differently if her father had not passed away:

> "I would have listened to him. He would never have allowed them to take my daughter away from me" [K4].

She believed her father's presence could have prevented the circumstances that led to her serving a one-year and three-month prison sentence, which was connected to a drug offense involving the older brother of a vocational school friend. Another participant described a lack of a positive relationship with her mother during adolescence, characterizing her mother as insensitive, volatile, and aggressive. She perceived this maternal behaviour as a significant factor negatively affecting her self-esteem [K3].

When facing personal and family challenges, most respondents emphasized receiving support. Two women reported receiving assistance from their mothers, who provided both financial and emotional support as well as help with childcare [K4, K5].

Being a parent was the next theme that came up during the interviews. Four participants had between one and three children. They described their parenting skills as positive, although some acknowledged that their relationships with their children were not always good. Almost all participants perceived themselves as good mothers. Only one woman had failed in this regard and was deprived of her parental rights. However, she acknowledged that she had neglected her 11-year-old daughter and felt guilty for this reason. At the same time, she expressed a desire to mend her relationship with her child.

These findings highlight the importance of family and work not only as practical areas of adult life, but also as key elements in the formation of personal identity..

### 4.5. Work, leisure, and the construction of identity

Each available opportunity and social role provided participants with a means to express their individuality and uniqueness. One such role was work, which influenced their lives strongly and, consequently, the formation of their identity. Although most respondents did not have permanent employment, they did not remain passive. On the contrary, they did casual work: they took care of elderly people, did agricultural and gardening work.

Of the three participants who had steady jobs, none was fully satisfied with their work. The main reason they presented was low salaries. At the same time, they indicated that having a job and being committed to it gave them fulfilment.

This allowed them to believe in their own competence and realise that they were worth something.

Participants reported that they felt like themselves in their free time when they could pursue their needs and interests. They mostly spent their free time watching TV and browsing Facebook. Other activities mentioned included walking dogs, fishing, and shopping. Two participants reported maintaining an active social life by meeting with friends or colleagues. Volunteering also emerged as a noteworthy theme. One male participant spent his free time helping neighbours with gardening tasks at their allotments, without any payment. Another participant [K3] fed local stray cats. She received dry food from the City Council. When the supplies ran out, she bought the food at her own expense.

As the research shows, people with disabilities emphasise work and personal factors quite strongly when they characterise themselves. Professional and leisure activities, allow them to maintain a sense of agency, social connections and provide opportunities for self-expression.

### 4.6. Values and sources of personal difficulties

An individual's identity is deeply connected to their value system. Values are like signposts that show the direction of action. They help to make decisions and cope with problems. During the interviews, participants mentioned several values that were particularly important in their adult lives. They primarily emphasized the value of health, relating it to both themselves and their loved ones. The importance of this value was revealed by them in their adult lives. Family and children were also the main values that gave them motivation to act and pursue long-term goals. Work and financial stability were valued not only as practical necessities, but also as sources of personal pride and independence. Happiness was seen both as a personal aspiration and associated with family wellbeing. Of significance for the participants was also the value of kindness. For example, one participant fondly recalled a teacher who was particularly kind and considerate to him:

> "During my childhood [in elementary school], I went to the mountains and the seaside. Mrs. [teacher's name] bought me a cap. She was good to me." [M1].

Many participants aspired to improve their living conditions, own their own apartments, and achieve greater financial security. Less commonly, they mentioned marriage, travel, and material comfort as desired life goals.

Despite these guiding values, respondents were unable to overcome various obstacles and achieve their goals. The main difficulty they faced was financial. Lack of sufficient financial resources made it impossible to meet basic needs as well as personal aspirations. Low self-confidence was also common and was

related by the participants to negative past experiences. All of this was a source of emotional distress, anxiety, constant worry and a sense of injustice about their life situation. Some participants felt that their lives were much more difficult in comparison to others, as captured in one respondent's comment:

> "No one can tell me that things are not good. You certainly wouldn't want to live like that." [M1].

Finally, exhaustion and loneliness additionally made it hard for many participants to overcome challenges and achieve their aspirations.

These findings reveal the complex phenomenon of values and significant barriers people with mild intellectual disabilities experience in the context of their identity formation.

### 4.7. Stress and life satisfaction in the context of identity

In the second part of the interviews, participants were asked to describe their emotional states. Many of them said that they felt stressed all the time. This persistent state of stress strongly affected their daily functioning and the way they perceived themselves and the world. Stress manifested through headaches, anxiety and nervous tension. The respondents described two main types of stress they experienced in their lives: persistent, non-specific tension and situational stress related to specific challenges. The first type was characterized by chronic anxiety, often described as *terrible* or *horrible.* This enduring stress, even when not linked to clear external threats, contributed to a fragile sense of self and heightened emotional sensitivity. Many participants coped by taking sedative medications:

> "My mother bought me [medication] because I would have exhausted myself… I also buy [medication] for myself sometimes… My mother told me to go to the doctor. But what will he do? He'll give me medicine, and I'll take it." [K4].

Situational stress was usually triggered by interpersonal conflicts, unemployment, work-related concerns, and interactions with new people. These experiences often undermined participants' self-confidence and increased a sense of vulnerability. As one woman explained:

> "I'm always nervous, but I dislike work the most. I clean well. The windows are spotless… Lux. But that [coworker] complains that the stairs aren't clean enough and so on… But I clean well… I'll find another job… And that [porter, name] also complains…" [K2].

Difficulties with literacy further undermined some participants' sense of competence and identity. One man admitted he read poorly and slowly, often

guessing, and could not write. Although he had learned to sign his name, he regretted being unable to read text messages fluently. He coped by recording voice messages but felt ashamed in official settings:

> "I'm ashamed, for example, at the office, that I haven't mastered these skills." [M1].

For individuals with a high tendency toward shame, such challenges often resulted in greater social sensitivity, self-criticism, and instability in their sense of identity. This instability manifested as uncertainty, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Rękosiewicz, 2012, p. 64).

In addition to chronic stress, several participants reported a sense of life failure that affected their self-image and life satisfaction. One woman connected this feeling to dependence on an often-intoxicated husband and the burden of caring for three children [K5]. Another associated it with the loss of parental rights, a prior prison sentence, and the controlling behaviour of her current partner [K4]. A third participant acknowledged failures such as not having a partner, children, or employment but claimed these did not concern him. Despite dropping out of school and not working, he expressed no desire to change his lifestyle, including his alcohol consumption [M2].

A few participants also expressed generalized distrust toward others, stemming from negative past experiences. This distrust further isolated them socially and reinforced a defensive sense of identity:

> "I've learned to live among people. People are liars. They laugh and pretend five times over […] It's best to say nothing." [M1].

By contrast, one woman demonstrated a stable and well-developed identity, characterized by maturity and a clear sense of self. She cared for her brother. She had a supportive husband, a job and, her own flat. The woman was satisfied not to have financial problems. In general, she was proud of her achievements and grateful for the support she received from her special school teachers. All of this enabled her to intensive her personal development and build a fulfilling life [K3].

These narratives are good examples of how emotional experiences – particularly stress and coping strategies – affect the identity formation. Many participants who faced significant emotional and social challenges can be described as successful in this regard.

## 5. Summary and conclusions

People with mild intellectual disabilities, like people without such disabilities, define who they are on the basis of their traits and characteristics, social relationships, roles and membership of social groups. If they are convinced about

their abilities and strengths, their identity has a motivational function (Oyserman, p. 2010). It is what helps one persevere through difficult tasks. The ability to answer questions such as *Who am I? What can I? What resources I have?* determines the constancy of the self and the consistency of behaviour.

The findings showed that participants' perception of who they are is quite complex. People with mild intellectual disabilities have various emotional and personal experiences, play social roles to different extents, and adopt personal values in different ways. Some of them are able to reflect on themselves and their lives and to recognize issues of personal significance. This ability is very important in the context of identity formulation. The interviewed individuals express dreams and aspirations similar to those of the general population. They have families, stable employment, and regular social lives. In these cases intellectual disability is not treated by the respondents as a central element of their self-perception. On the contrary, it is regarded as something irrelevant that belongs to the past.

The interviews also revealed numerous significant challenges in defining and maintaining a stable sense of identity. Some participants demonstrated difficulties in identifying their own strengths. Some also expressed low self-confidence and a deep sense of life failure, which they associated with negative educational experiences, family difficulties, and limited employment opportunities. Their weaknesses caused them not to take on new challenges or to believe in their capacity for change. They described their existential situation as stressful and full of tensions. The state of stress was present in their lives, both in persistent, nonspecific forms and in response to specific challenges related to work, family, literacy difficulties, and social interactions.

At the same time the remaining individuals were able to overcome stressful situations even if they felt pain and inner tensions. It was possible thanks to their specific attitudes, resilience, and ability to adapt. Some described effective coping strategies, such as maintaining social relationships, engaging in casual work, or participating in volunteer activities. For a few individuals, particularly those who had experienced positive support from family members or educators, these strategies were connected with the development of a more stable and achieved identity, characterized by maturity and a clear sense of self.

The *results* of this *study* remain in accordance with the *results* of *previous studies* (Brzezińska, 2011; Rozen, 2011). The findings suggest that the process of identity development in people with intellectual disabilities is similar to that in the general population. Cognitive limitations and environmental barriers are treated as the main factors affecting identity formation. When individuals face difficulties in social and family life and have negative personal experiences, they have problems with defining themselves, expressing their values, and aspirations.

The act of recounting one's experiences, needs, and aspirations during the study had intrinsically positive effects in itself. Answering the researcher's questions encouraged respondents to recall forgotten themes, name their resources and articulate their goals for the future. As Rozen (2011, p. 463) noted, the hidden developmental capacities of individuals can only be awakened through a subjective, person-centred approach. In other words, it is important to create a subjective relationship in which people with disabilities are given a voice and recognised as active agents of their own development (see Prysak, 2020, p. 30).

The issue of identity development among adults with mild intellectual disabilities requires further research. This study is one of many attempts to understand the complex and dynamic processes through which identity is constructed by people with mild intellectual disabilities.

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# Part II – Conflict

Anna Bączkowska

# Offensive Nominal Vocatives: The Case of Insults, Fake Insults and Slurs on Celebrities' Twitter Accounts

**Abstract**
This chapter aims to analyse offensive forms of address teased from the social media accounts of popular celebrities. The study presented here focuses on offensive vocatives that exemplify insults or slurs. A number of examples of offensive insults and slurs deployed as vocatives on select celebrities' social media are discussed in terms of the types of structures, their dispersion in the corpus, the functions they perform, and the lexical choices the offenders resort to. The tweets are analysed from two perspectives: the speaker's intentions and the reactions of those offended. Gender-specific swearwords are also examined. The results show that vocatives built on offensive nouns are very common, especially those referring to female sexual organs; they are deployed to address both females and males, their function is not always offensive, despite the use of language forms encoding offensive referential meaning, and that insults are much more frequently used than slurs. The study proposes a trinary typology of insults/slurs: genuine, attempted (potential) and fake, as well as several strategies for dealing with offensive vocatives observed on Twitter.

**Keywords:** offensive vocatives, forms of address, swearwords, insults, Twitter/X, celebrities

## 1. Introduction

This chapter aims to analyse offensive vocatives teased from Twitter accounts of popular English-speaking celebrities. A specific subtype of forms of address is represented by vocatives that are syntactically loosely integrated with the sentence (described in section 2). The study presented here is narrowed down to offensive vocatives, as well as those that exemplify insults or slurs (described in Section 3). Research results are presented in section 5, wherein a number of examples of offensive insults/slurs deployed as vocatives on select celebrities' social media are discussed in terms of the types of structures wherein the

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vocatives are used, their dispersion in the corpus, the functions they perform and the lexical choices the offenders resort to.

## 2. Forms of address and vocatives – definitions, functions and structures

The terms vocatives and forms of address tended to be confused, as claimed by Leech (1999, p. 107) two decades ago. While they do not denote precisely the same concepts, they overlap inasmuch as vocatives are specific subtypes of forms of address where a nominative "is loosely integrated with the rest of the utterance" (Leech, 1999, p. 107). Therefore, Leech (1999) sees the difference between these terms on the syntactic level. On the other hand, Biber et al. (1999, p. 263, 1110) use the terms interchangeably, and we will adhere to this approach here. Whilst the differentiation between FoA and vocatives is important and fully justified in inflectional languages, especially in languages with the vocative grammatical case (e. g., in Polish, see: Bączkowska 2021), in non-inflectional languages, such as English, which is the language analysed in this study, the distinction is unnecessary.

Generally speaking, vocatives are words or expressions whose aim is to directly address the hearer (Jucker & Taavitsainen, 2003) by denoting him or her (Quirk et al.,1985, p. 773), to mark the speaker's attitude towards him or her, signpost the level of formality/intimacy, social status, and/or to encode politeness or impoliteness (Zwicky, 1974). Vocatives are generally divided into calls and addresses (Levinson, 1983; Quirk et al., 1985; Zwicky, 1974). According to Quirk et al. (1985, p. 773), when utilised in order to call somebody's attention, vocatives instantiate calls. On the other hand, addresses code the speaker's attitude and relationship (Levinson, 1983, p. 71), solidarity with the hearer (Brown & Gilman, 1960), and politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1983). Vocatives can be assigned one of the two (Andersen, 2012, p. 135), three (Leech, 1999), or multiple (Biber et al., 1999) functions. Andersen divides vocatives into communication initiators (conative function) and communication maintainers (phatic function). Conative functions, however, are further divided by him into those which encompass *openers* that invite one who is present to initiate contact, *summons* that "request the presence of an addressee" who is "near-by", and *calls* that "search for verbal contact" with one whose location is unknown. Phatic vocatives bifurcate into those which inform about communicative intent or ensure attention maintenance (Andersen, 2012, p. 136). On the other hand, according to Leech (1999, p. 108), vocatives can have one of the following three functions: (1) summoning attention, (2) addressee identification, and (3) establishing and maintaining

social relationships between the speaker and the addressee. Compared to the previous typologies, Biber et al. (1999, pp. 42, 43, 924, 1047, 1112) propose a wider array of vocative functions, which consist of six cases: getting someone's attention, identifying someone as an addressee by signalling out the addressee from a pool of candidates, emphasising the status of the addressee relative to the speaker, maintaining and reinforcing social relationship, signalling and/or reinforcing membership of particular groups (professional, gender, etc.), having discourse management function. While some of them converge with those previously proposed by the authors mentioned above, there are also some novel cases, such as marking the status of the addressee, group membership and discourse management function, which makes this classification the most comprehensible one.

Another typology is offered by McCarthy and O'Keeffe (2003), which comprises the following categories: relational function, topic management, badinage, mitigator, turn signalling, and summons. The relational function is a rich category that comprises several loosely related categories, such as compliments, positive face boosters, and general evaluations (comments on people, things, situations, etc.). Phatic exchanges, in turn, comprise greetings, ritual offers and thanks. They are all supposed to carry the function of establishing or maintaining social relations. Launching, expanding, shifting, changing, or closing the topic are all subsumed under topic management. Badinage involves "instances of humour, irony and general banter among participants" (McCarthy & O'Keeffe, 2003, p. 11), while mitigators tone down contexts with potential face-threat. Interruptions occur during turn-taking stages and are referred to as turn management. Finally, the last category refers to summons, that is, calling one's attention. Therefore, in addition to their interpersonal regulatory function, vocatives are also assigned discourse organisation functions (topic management). Hence, they have the status of instantiations illustrating (a subgroup of) pragmatic markers (Fraser, 1996; Baumgarten, 2022).

To summarise this part, compared to Biber et al.'s, Leech's, and Andersen's typologies, this classification adds or elaborates on important cases that comprise signalling badinage, turn-taking, and mitigating discourse, which have crucial sociolinguistic functions in dialogic interaction. Along with the predominant discourse organisational and phatic functions present in the earlier proposals, McCarthy and O'Keeffe (2003) highlight and expand what was already signalled in the typologies by Levinson (1983) as well as Brown and Gilman (1960), and partially by Biber et al. (1999), namely, aspects emphasising the speaker's attitude and relationship with the listener as well as signalling group identity and social membership.

Structure-wise, establishing/maintaining social relationships tends to be used sentence-medially (Leech, 1999, p. 108) or in the final position (Leech, 1999,

p. 116). On the other hand, attention-grabbing and signalling the relevant addressee are typically expressed by vocatives in the initial position (Leech, 1999, p. 116). All these cases can be dubbed pragmatic functions of vocatives, i. e., elements that regulate interpersonal orientation. As can be seen from the discussion, the function of vocatives goes far beyond the two coarse-grained types identified by Andersen (2012) of the conative and phatic functions inasmuch as their usage can be derived from a number of more subtle speaker's goals; hence, in the present analysis a wide range of functions will be applied to the data.

In addition to the (socio)pragmatic functions and syntactic aspects of vocatives usage presented above, Leech (1999) also divided vocatives according to the semantic function they may have; thus, he distinguished endearments, kin terms, familiarisers, first name terms, titles plus surnames, honorific addresses and the category of others. Two of these occur in the data analysed here (i. e., in the TwitCorp), that of familiarisers and others. As already mentioned, Leech's semantic functions of vocatives overlap with most of Biber et al.'s (1999) vocative forms discussed above. For Leech, familiarisers are to mark the relationship between interlocutors as familiar, and they are simultaneously claimed to signal both friendly and disrespectful relationships. However, disparaging and belittling vocatives are labelled by Leech as the all-encompassing category of others (they include adjectives, e. g., *lazy*). This makes it difficult to distinguish between the two types, mainly since they can also be used jokingly, meaning they "have a function similar to that of familiarisers" (Leech, 1999, p. 113). The lack of discrete classes makes this typology rather fuzzy. For the purpose of this analysis, to avoid the categorical overlap, familiarisers will be only seen as neutral or joking vocatives, while the category of others will encompass any negative functions.

Most frequently, vocatives are encoded by nominals (titles, gender markings, first and/or last names) and pronouns (you, everyone). Less often, they are expressed by common nouns and adjectives. Several basic forms (i. e., categories) of vocatives can be distinguished (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 1108–1109)[1]: full form of first name (*Elisabeth*), the familiarised first names (*Paulie*, *Tom*), familiarisers (*mate*, *guys*), endearments (*baby, honey*), kinship/family terms (*mummy*, *dad*, *granny*), surnames (*Mrs. Smith*), titles (occupational or status) and other honorifics (*Dr Smith*, *nurse*), others, including nicknames and pronouns (*Hello lazy!*, *you*), as well as more complex nominal phrases (*Those of you who want to bring your pets along*). Under the rubric of 'others', single adjectival nominals (*fatty*, *speedy*) or nouns/adjectives alone (*moron*, *stupid*) are also common, especially in social media, due to the informal language used there, limited number of characters allowed and the often offensive nature of messages. Interestingly, Biber et al. (1999,

1 Leech (1999, p. 109) notices that the boundaries between vocative categories and vocative functions are fuzzy.

p. 1110) distinguish between vocatives that are offensive (*lazy*, *boy*) and cases which they do not include in the category of vocatives – insulting exclamations (*you silly sod*), dubbed by Leech (1999, p. 109) evaluative exclamations. In our study, these two choices are spanned by vocative offensive forms of address, following Culpeper's (2010, p. 3242) proposal regarding structural options of insults (which constitute a subgroup of his conventional impoliteness formulae). Insulting exclamations, which in this study adhere to the '*you* + J/N' (you-exclamations) structure (in line with Culpeper's typology, 2010), may function as forms of address/vocatives. They should be distinguished from elliptic exclamatives (Biber et al., 1999, p. 1102), such as "*What a* + N" (what-exclamations) and "*How* + J" (how-exclamations), which do not take this function.

Nominal addresses have been analysed as examples of titles or kinship terms (e.g., Mulo Farenkia, 2019) or as instantiations of familiarity markers (e.g., Rendle-Short, 2010; Alimoradian, 2014). While insults have already garnered substantial attention in (socio)pragmatic scholarship, they have essentially been overlooked in research focusing on terms of address/vocatives. This chapter is meant to contribute to this mostly neglected aspect of vocatives encoded by adjectives and nouns and used in the offensive function.

Vocatives can express the speaker's positive and negative attitudes towards the addressee. Culpeper (2011) dubs personalised negative vocatives those utterances which involve (1) referring directly to a person (rather than indirectly through invoking places, situations, etc.), (2) building on offensive terms or references, (3) employing adjectives and/or nouns in the function of vocatives. Examples of personalised negative vocatives can be exemplified by nominal phrases, such as *you fat pig*[2], wherein an adjective premodifies a noun and follows a second-person singular pronoun, as well as single-word addresses, such as *stupid*, *thicko*, *slut*, which are either adjectives or nouns (including nouns derived from adjectives). These vocatives are employed in impolite or offensive exchanges to convey negativity and/or hostility towards the addressee. In line with Culpeper's (2011, p. 135) typology, structures like (*you*)+*be*+(J)+N are not taken into consideration in this study as they are not vocatives but personalised negative assertions. On the other hand, *What a slut!!!!!* exemplifies a typical exclamation that encodes a negative evaluation, which is also excluded from the analysis as it falls outside the structural patterns offered by Culpeper, to which this paper adheres. As proposed by Culpeper, the structure of insults that are personalised negative vocatives is limited to the following structure: *you* + adjective (J) + noun (N), which is further subdivided into other fine-grained cases found in the present study.

2 This paper contains examples of language which may be offensive to some readers. They do not represent the views of the author.

## 3. Insults and slurs defined

Insulting means attacking somebody verbally. Insults are understood here as propositions (words, phrases or sentences) that contain information about the target[3] (Jucker, 2000; Bączkowska, 2021), which characterise him/her in terms of physical appearance, character, behaviour, ability, beliefs, possessions or familiar relations (Allan & Burridge, 2006; Jeshion, 2013; Bączkowska, 2021). Allan and Burridge (2006: 79) add to the list social relations, yet in this paper, they will be envisaged as slurs. Jucker (2000) assumes that insults are truth-conditional, unlike slurs.

Insults usually have a semantically neutral counterpart (Martínez & Yus, 2013; Tenchini & Frigerio, 2016). For example, in the proposition *You are a pig* the word *pig* is a neutral word when used to describe an animal, but a negatively charged offence when directed at a person. Similarly, the words *dense* or *thick* meaning *stupid,* or *fatso* meanings *obese*, have their neutral counterparts. Naturally enough, calling somebody, e.g., a *pig*, requires some metaphorical reconceptualisation, yet the facets of a pig salient in a negatively charged description characterise the target's behaviour and personality. The criterion of a neutral counterpart is extended here, following Nunberg (2018), to encompass meanings denoted metonymically. For example, the word *cunt* in *you are a cunt* is treated here as an insult since it attributes pejorative features to the target's personality or behaviour (yet initially to one's body). This is despite the fact that the word refers only to one part of the addressee's body (vagina), and thus metonymically to the whole person, and, metaphorically, to the features of character/behaviour rather than just a body part. This extension is, therefore, contingent on metaphtonymy (Goossens, 2009). Additionally, the word *cunt* is not neutral but strongly emotionally charged and extremely offensive (Dewaele, 2016). However, *cunt* may mean two things: a very stupid or unpleasant person, as well as an offensive way of speaking about the vagina (Cambridge Dictionary, online). Polysemous words can lead to more problematic classifications and thus should be contextually informed. When one describes the offendee by making reference to her body and not a (demographic) group membership, it is assumed here to exemplify the category of an insult since the optics of group membership is typical of a slur (or a slander), as in e.g., *you're gay.*

Once synonymous with insults (Cousens, 2020, p. 1) and sometimes envisaged as subtypes of insults (Meibauer, 2014, p. 145; 2016) or as subtypes of hate speech (Hornsby, 2001; Croom, 2014; Graumann & Wintermantel, 2007; Cepollaro, 2015),

3 By the target I mean the person at whom an insult is hurled. In this study, the target is tantamount to the addressee. The target is thus a part of the communicative situation as a ratified participant.

slurs tend to be treated as propositions which contain words that are not truth-conditional and do not have a neutral counterpart[4]. For example, in the proposition *you are a slut*, the assumption is that the target is not a prostitute but only resembles one, e.g., in the way she behaves or looks. Meibauer (2016, p. 158) claims that slurs hinge on references to social or ethnic groups and are subsumed by an overarching category of insults. On the other hand, compared to insults, slurs are claimed to "*oppress* their targets, whereas insults do not" (Cousens, 2020, p. 2), which entails a stronger pejorative meaning and the offending load of slurs.

## 4. Research aims, methods and material

### 4.1. Aims

Whilst vocatives/forms of address on X (Twitter) were already studied by some scholars (e.g., Kluge and Moyna, 2019), as well as insults on X (Bączkowska, 2021, 2022a, b), to the best of my knowledge, a combination of vocatives and insults, especially those expressed only by nominal or adjectival forms, posted on the X platform, and used to offence the addressee has not been an object of intense scholarly pursuit thus far. For this reason, this paper aims to address the under-investigated topic of insulting nominative and adjectival vocatives on social media, specifically in tweets. It is expected that with the rich corpus of data, it will be possible to observe some patterns of usage and tendencies in the use of nominative vocatives found on social media. In particular, we wish to characterise the offensive vocatives on social media in terms of their types, distribution, syntactic structures and their place in a sentence, lexical choices on which they are built (particularly vulgarisms), their length measured in the number of words, gender-specificity, and the replies to them. Since the celebrities are related to both White and Black communities, the incidence of slurs was expected to be high, or comparable to insults. The last aspect will determine whether the feedback to offensive tweets is significant in terms of the number of replies relative to the provoking tweets, and whether the perlocutionary effect aligns with the speaker's intentions, i.e., whether the targets actually felt offended.

Thus, the research questions revolve around the following:

RQ (1): What are the characteristic features of offensive language encoded by insults and slurs, including their (non-)offensive functions?
RQ (2): Do offensive tweets contain gender-specific swearwords?
RQ (3): What is the perlocutionary effect of insults and slurs?

4 Although Hornsby (2001, p. 128) claims that they have their neutral counterparts.

The big picture that emerges from these specific questions will reveal how offensive vocatives are used on X/Twitter in the case of select celebrities' accounts. Thus, the analysis is hoped to contribute to the studies on this topic, which are part of social media offensive discourse.

The first research question (RQ1) will be verified by analysing the language used by the authors of offensive language, and that would include a number of aspects, such as types of structures where offensive language occurs, their frequency and distribution, the length of offensive phrases (section 5.1), and their functions (section 5.4). This introductory overview will disclose some general structural features of the offensive language under scrutiny here and the functions of insults and slurs, whether they prove to be offensive or non-offensive (despite the use of offensive language in the content of insults and slurs). RQ(2) will examine the gender-specificity of offensive language (sections 5.2 and 5.5). Finally, the targets' reactions (and a lack thereof) will be described to attest to the perlocutionary effect of offensive tweets (section 5.6, RQ3).

## 4.2. Methods

The analysis will follow the structures proposed by Culpeper (2011), mentioned above, and has been extended here to encompass J*+N (where an asterisk indicates one or more adjectives), N, you + N, you + J, and you + J*+N. In sum, seven structures were sought in the corpus, all automatically retrieved with the help of the CQL (Corpus Query Language) enumerated below, together with some examples:

(1) *You+J*+N: you stupid jerk*
(2) *you+J: you stupid*
(3) *you+N: you dickhead*
(4) *my+N: my darling*
(5) *N: jerk, my bitch*
(6) *N+N: mother fucker*
(7) *J+N: stupid jerk*

In addition to that, single nouns, which are vulgar and generally claimed to be insulting (Dewaele, 2016), were also included in the analysis, such as *slut*, *cunt*, *bitch*, *BIH*, *faggot*, *stupid*, *asshole*, *ass*, etc.

The functions analysed here, which were mapped onto our data, were first borrowed from McCarthy and O'Keeffe (2003; MCOK). However, since they were heavily underrepresented, other pragmatic functions were added to the material under study. As a result, the following (socio)pragmatic functions were used in the coding: offensive, jocular/badinage, complementing (a subtype of relational

vocatives in MCOK's classification), bonding/in-group solidarity, phatic exchanges such as greetings (a subtype of relational in MCOC's classification), threat, and advice or request/order. The speaker-intended meaning of offensive language is thus expected to substantially depart from and be independent of the referential meaning. The typologies propounded by Leech (1999) and Biber et al. (1999) were also included wherever applicable in order to provide a fine-grained description.

The data will be analysed both qualitatively, with some examples presented as screenshots from X and interpreted in line with the research questions, as well as quantitatively, with the use of the Sketch Engine platform and AntConc, both are well-known tools used in corpus linguistics that allow automatic retrieval of a number of text features.

### 4.3. Material

The data were gleaned from X, a widely used and one of the most popular social media platforms (according to Statista.com; accessed 2 February 2021). X is classified as a subtype of the overarching term *social media* by Hoffman (2017, p. 6), who extended the meaning of social media to encompass Internet platforms (such as message boards and discussion forums), social network sites (such as Facebook), microblogs (such as Twitter/X), media sharing sites (such as YouTube or Instagram) as well as Skype, SMSs and even WhatsApp. Twitter/X exemplifies a social networking service (SNS) rather than a microblog due to its highly responsive character (Bączkowska, 2021). The data selected for this study were culled from X as it is claimed to host the most critical comments (Bączkowska, 2021). One of the reasons may reside in the fact that the number of characters imposed on the messages used to be very stringent. Short messages often convey the language of the message in a succinct, straightforward, and blunt manner, which can lead to the resorting to crude or even vulgar language (Bączkowska, 2021). Posts saturated with highly critical and offensive language seemed an excellent choice to study insulting vocatives. For this reason, X data were selected as the language source to be analysed here. The posts included in this research (personalised negative vocatives) had to meet the following requirements: (1) referring directly to a person, (2) building on offensive terms or references (linguistic forms), and (3) employing adjectives and/or nouns in the function of vocatives. They may be based on either insults or slurs.

The entire corpus of tweets used in this study spans the years 2011–2021, covering a decade, and comprises almost 0.62 million words, consisting of 61,700 tweets. The tweets were automatically extracted using the Twitter API in February 2021 from several celebrities' accounts. Seven popular celebrities, which included

pop singers, journalists and actors (Eminem, Rihanna, James Blunt, Ellen DeGeneres, Piers Morgan, Amy Schumer, and Amanda Bynes), were selected for the study as they are generally ranked as having one of the highest saturation of hostile, critical, often vulgar, comments (according to many websites with negative comments accounts ranking retrieved through Google search, accessed: 30 January 2021). Nominal and adjectival offensive vocatives were expected to be less frequent than vocatives based on first names. As noted by Biber et al. (1999, p. 1110), first-name terms are often used nowadays between friends, as well as "colleagues and even casual acquaintances", while those signalling "disparaging or belittling forms of address" are "too rare to merit a category in themselves" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 1110). Even though the authors see phrases like *you bastard* or *you silly sod* as a separate category (i. e., insulting exclamations), since they are anchored in offensive language, it was assumed that they may also be infrequent in tweets. Therefore, ten years of data collection were examined, and data from several X accounts known to be heavily infested with hatred were retrieved. As a result, a large dataset was created, which was then converted into a corpus (i. e., tokenised, lemmatised, tagged, and parsed) using the Sketch Engine, a commercial corpus management platform.

Further, fine-grained analysis that required data extraction limited to a narrow syntactic category was performed by resorting to regex-based Corpus Query Language (CQL), as the CQL allows retrieving language patterns (e. g., *you* + adjective or noun, adjective + noun, noun standing alone, *you* + verb, etc.). An automatic search of distinct swearwords (using a list of basic swearwords by Dewaele, 2016) was also conducted to tease out more examples. The automatically extracted data were next manually filtered and selected for the analysis. Despite the size of the corpus well exceeding half a million words and over 60 thousand tweets, the number of tweets that contain offensive language in vocatives, i. e., those which are nouns or adjectives and are used as negative addresses, adds up to ca. three vocatives per 100 words ($n = 168$). This number of tweets constitutes a sufficient collection (henceforth: TwitCorp) to make some tentative statistical observations (ca. 1700 words in size); nonetheless, the number makes the vocatives under inspection a very small fragment of the whole corpus, which is below 1%. This result indicates that nominal and/or adjectival vocatives built on offensive language, mainly vulgar/swear words, are rare on celebrities' Twitter accounts. This result is not surprising, given that a study of LGBT discourse published on Facebook found that the occurrence of adjectival and nominal vocatives (both positive and negative) and name-related vocatives (first name, surname, or both first and last name) oscillates around 2.3% (Bączkowska, in preparation). In the present analysis, the requirements are more rigorous as only the negative contexts are under inspection. The low number of contexts retrieved for this study may also result from X moderation, which

substantially reduces the originally posted comments containing strong, offensive content.

## 5. Research results

### 5.1. Types of structures, their length and distribution

This section provides a general overview of the data, focusing on their structural aspects and their occurrence in the corpus. The most common type of structure in the TwitCorp is "*you* + adjective*/pronoun + noun" (52%). The number of adjectives in this structure ranges from one to four (all in the premodifying position except for one example used in pre- and post-modifying positions). The asterisk signals that the number of adjectives can be one or more. The second most popular structure is *you* + noun (18%), and next is a single noun (16%; this category includes compound nouns like *dickhead*) and adjective(s) + noun (6%). Relatively rare are the following constructions: *my* + noun (over 6%), noun + noun (4%) and *you* + adjective (2%). Overall, it can be concluded that adjective-noun structures predominate in offensive language used in vocatives. The results are presented in Fig. 1.

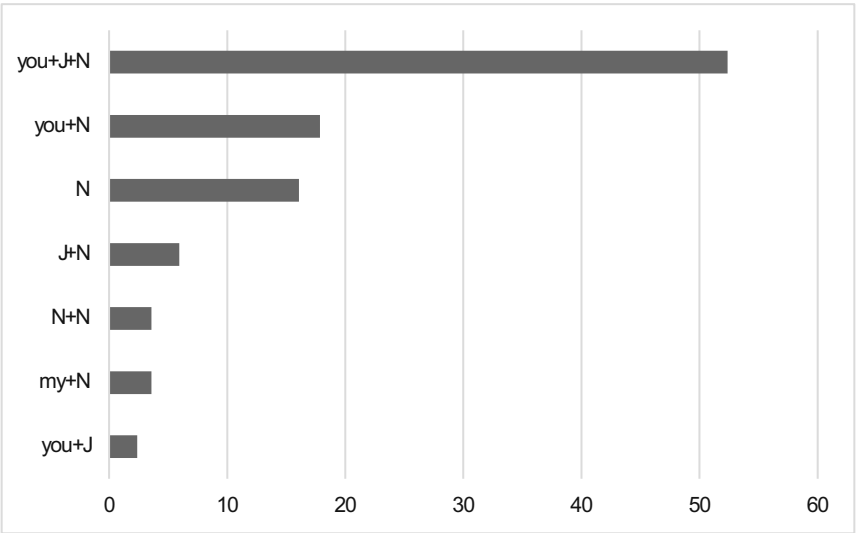


Fig. 1. Vocative syntactic structures in percentage

Most offensive vocatives consist of multi-word phrases (49% of all offensive vocatives) and two words (36%), while single words constitute 15%. Of the multi-

word phrases, the majority is taken by three-word phrases (34%), followed by four-word phrases (12%) and five-word phrases (2%). The insulting vocatives thus vary in length (from simple to complex), counted in the number of words (Fig. 2), yet there is the predominance of three- and two-word phrases. The multi-word sequences which dominate the insulting vocatives reflect the intensity of negative emotions expressed towards the target, which speaks for a high intensity of insulting behaviour on X. They typically involve *ad hoc* nicknames. The longest offensive vocative in the data is nine words long (Fig. 3).

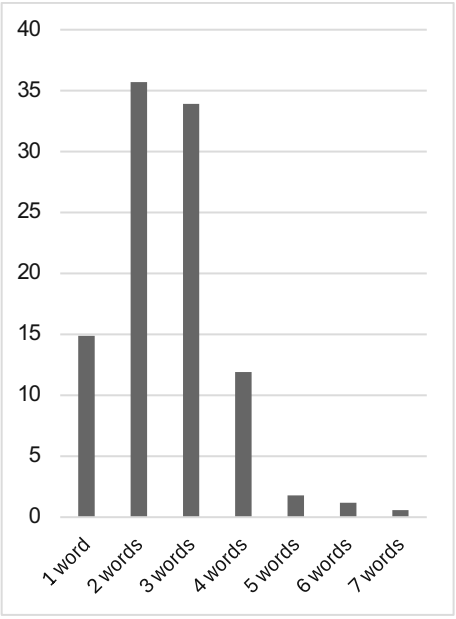


Fig. 2. Length of vocatives (in percentage)


Fig. 3. Complex nominal vocative

As for the distribution of vocatives across TwitCorp (Fig. 4), over 80% of cases illustrate the vocative used in the final position, 8% in the medial position, and only around 10% in the initial position. This observation corroborates an earlier

study by Leech (1999), who investigated vocatives in British and American conversations.

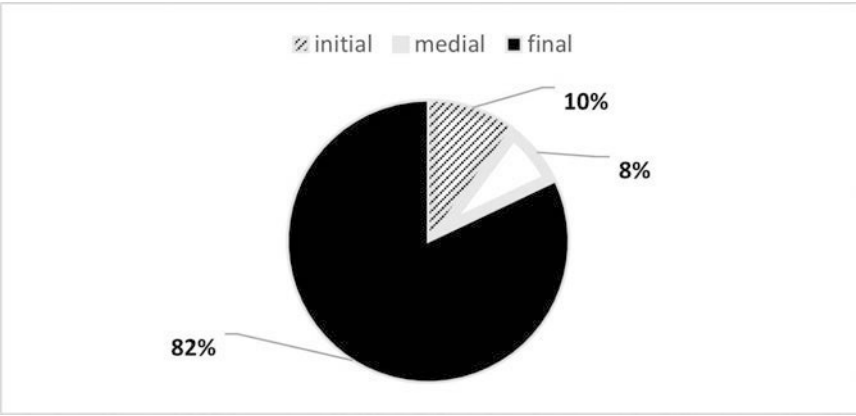


Fig. 4. Position of vocatives in a sentence of vocatives in the TwitCorp

## 5.2. Dispersion

The information displayed by the dispersion plots below (retrieved from AntConc software) discloses two interesting aspects of offensive tweets (Fig. 5). Firstly, they signal whether the search word is spread equally across the whole subcorpus of insulting vocatives, and, secondly, whether the search word occurred on the X accounts of female (on the left-hand side of the plot) or male (on the right-hand side of the plot) celebrities. Interestingly, the majority of tweets in the TwitCorp are targeted at males (ca. 74%), one-fourth addresses females (ca. 23%), and almost 3% addresses either collective addressee (e. g., *my bitches*) or a group whose singular target is attacked (e. g., *journalists*, *niggers*). The tweets published on female celebrities' accounts constitute ca. 20% of all tweets in the TwitCorp. The plots reveal that *cunt* and *fuck* are scattered most equally in the TwitCorp. Moreover, *bitch* is more typical of female accounts and *prick* of male accounts, which is not surprising; however, the popularity of *twat* and *cunt* (denoting the female sexual organ) among discussants of male accounts (most probably with predominating male Twitters) is somewhat surprising. This analysis complements one presented in Fig. 13. Amongst the top frequency and top dispersion offensive tweets there is a female-related swearword.

Fig. 5a. Dispersion of *cunt*

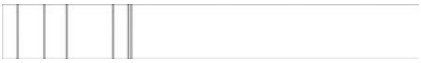

Fig. 5b. Dispersion of *bitch*

Fig. 5c. Dispersion of *fuck*

Fig. 5d. Dispersion of *twat*

Fig. 5e. Dispersion of *prick*

Fig. 5f. Dispersion of *shit*

Fig. 5. Gender-specific dispersion of select words across TwinCorp


Fig. 6a. "N"


Fig. 6b "*you*+N"


Fig. 6c. "J*+N"


Fig. 6d. "you+J+N"


Fig. 6e. "*you*+J"


Fig. 6f. "N+N"

Fig. 6. Tweets illustrating various structures

## 5.3. Insults and slurs in the corpus

Compared to slurs, insults prevail in the corpus (Fig. 7). The former are instantiated by only two words: *whigga* (a white person behaving like a Black person; the words come from a combination of white and nigger), and *nigga* (a derogative term to denote a person of Black ethnic origin). Overall, slurs constitute 5.4% of

all offensive vocatives in the corpus. Not all usages of these slurs are offensive vocatives, as some of them carry other social meanings.

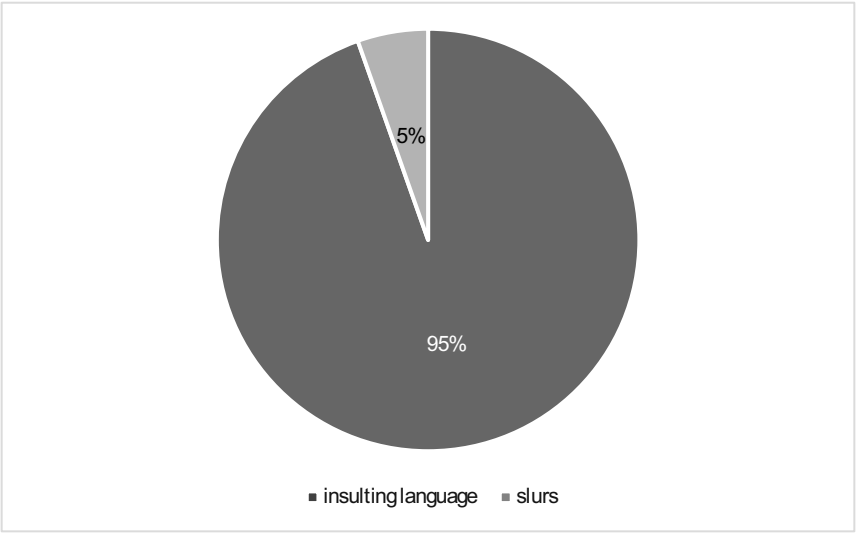


Fig. 7. Occurrences of insults versus slurs in percentage

*Whigga* makes reference to ethnicity-related *reversed* connotations, i. e., *not* being like typical white singers (which is, in fact, a negation of a slur), and the addressee's way of conduct and style (i. e., personality features) that are typical of Black people are implicitly suggested. The demographic factor is confined here to a specific type of music often created by the Black ethnic group (with typical rhythmic speech uttered against a backing beat with monotonous pitch, and vernacular, street language). The properties assigned to insults, on the other hand, include the behavioural style typically associated with rappers, i. e., the laid-back attitude, swearing, loose and often oversized clothes, wearing caps, jewellery, tattoos, etc. The content typical of insults (the addressee's personality features, possessions, behaviour, etc.) overlaps with properties ascribed to a specific ethnic group (Black musicians). The word *whigga* is not a pejorative here, and the word it refers to, i. e., *nigger* does not appear to be a pejorative either, rather a stereotype-based prejudicial yet with connotations shifted to the positive aspects in this context.

## 5.4. Functions of insults and slurs

While over 85% of the posts illustrate the prototypical meaning of insults (dubbed here *genuine insults*), that is, offensive comments, strangely enough, 13% is taken over by positive comments (dubbed here *fake insults*; Figs. 8 and 9). Bonding and/or affirming in-group membership and/or solidarity are also expressed in the data by resorting to offensive language through fake insults. The insults here are not meant to criticise and denigrate but rather to signal common ground (similar or mutual knowledge) shared by the author[5] and the addressee, thus emphasising social-affiliational convergences (even if the knowledge and experiences are not mutual). Therefore, they serve as markers of in-group identity. The role of insults in expressing bonding and solidarity, as well as humorous comments, dubbed jocular insults by Stapleton, was already noticed by this author (Stapleton, 2017, p. 295). In line with Leech's (1999) typology mentioned above, 90% of cases constitute the category of "others" and 10% of "familiarisers".

The somewhat less expected function is resorting to offensive language to compliment the addressee (target is not the appropriate term here as it entails attacking to hurt). Generally speaking, "a compliment is the expression of approval" (Slugoski & Turnbull, 1988, p. 106), yet on social media, it may also be used to ingratiate with the addressee, especially when he/she is a celebrity. Another reason may be that by complimenting a celebrity and other followers and fans of a celebrity, the post author emphasises their membership of the same social subgroup, i. e., enhances social cohesion. Compliments rooted in offensive language (dubbed *complimenting insults* here) rely on falsehood and thus cannot be taken literally.

Many insults in the TwitCorp capitalise on the use of swearwords. As noticed by Stapleton (2010, pp. 298, 300), swearing among women may be a token of interpersonal solidarity building, trust and affection (if used between close friends), thus contributing to establishing or maintaining in-group bonding (as *mother fuckers* in Fig. 10e). On the other hand, obscene words in male discourse have been shown to be a way of masculine identity construction (de Klerk, 1991). Armstrong (2004) makes the point that Eminem resorts to strong and obscene language in his songs, as Brappers do (the community of rappers is dominated by Black singers), while at the same time emphasising his whiteness; in this way, he constructs his identity authenticity as a White rapper. Whilst being a white

5 Technically speaking the author of a post need not be the writer as a message can be delegated by the author to somebody else to put it on social media. Nevertheless, it is assumed here that the author and the writer is the same person as this distinction is not important for the present discussion.

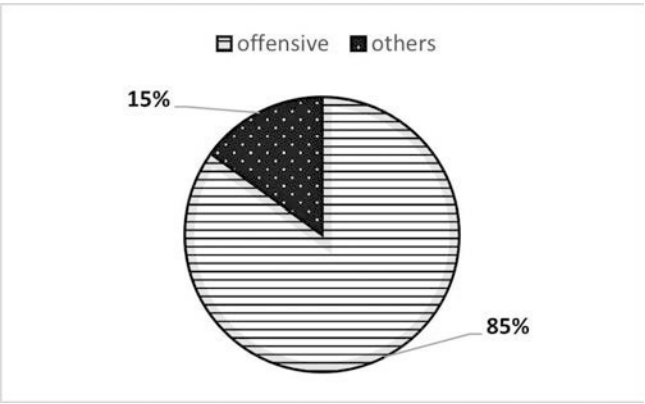


Fig. 8. Offensive function vs other functions

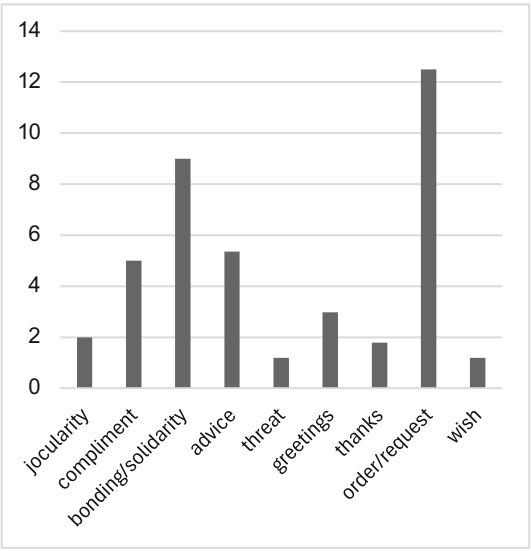


Fig. 9. Functions of vocatives except for offensiveness ('fake insults')

rapper is problematic for the Black community, complimenting his music should be perceived as a strong expression of acceptance and solidarity with him.


Fig. 10a. Compliment


Fig. 10b. Jocular

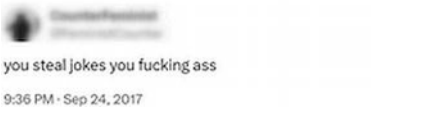


Fig. 10c. Offensive


Fig. 10d. Bonding


Fig. 10e. In-group solidarity


Fig. 10f. Greetings


Fig. 10g. Familiarizer


Fig. 10h. Others

Fig. 10. Functions of vocatives

In sum, the functions of insults/slurs recognised in vocatives in the data can be subsumed by two coarse-grained types: genuine insults/slurs and fake insults/slurs. Fake insult/slur vocatives can be further divided into those that communicate a compliment, convey solidarity, or serve humorous purposes for the sender, as well as a combination of these (such as jocular bonding or insulting vocatives). A binary division of insults was offered by McVittie et al. (2021), wherein genuine vs attempted insults were elaborated based on tweets. In their analysis, the categorisation depended on the target's reaction, i. e., whether the speaker-intended perlocutionary effect of an insult hurled at a target was experienced by him or her, which was verified by the content of the reaction (see section 5.6). The typology of offensive language can thus be trinary and span, in fact, three options, including the non-offensive "insults" (that is, genuine, attempted, and fake insults), despite the use of offensive language. Genuine insults/slurs are meant to offend and actually manage to make the addressee feel offended. Attempted ones are intended to offend but fail to do so. Fake insults, in

turn, resort to offensive language but have no intention of offending the addressee.

Within the semantic functions distinguished by Leech (1999), familiarisers and others occurred in our data. Familiarisers encode neutral or positive signals of knowing the addressee (or behaving as if one knew the addressee) or encoding respect. The broad category of 'others' is fulfilled mainly by negative expressions/words (realised primarily by vulgarisms) that prototypically capture disrespect (Fig. 8). It must be borne in mind, however, that resorting to negative expressions does not necessarily entail disparaging the addressee since one can employ such expressions to manifest solidarity or even to compliment the addressee, yet these functions are seen here as pragmatic ones.

## 5.5. Swearwords

Of all the posts, 81% contain swearwords, which speaks for a high saturation of the corpus with explicitly offensive language. All of these are rooted in vulgarisms, specifically words referring to excrement, sexual organs, scatology, etc. (Fig. 11). The three most common ones comprise *twat* (8.3%), *fuck*(*er*) (8.3%) and *cunt* (7.7%). The second most popular nominal group includes the following words: *prick* (7.1%), *bastard* (6%), *ass*(*hole*) (4.8), *nigga* (4.2), *shit* (4.2%), *bitch* (3.6), *dick*(*head*) (3.0), *cock* (1.8), *whigga* (1.2%), *slut* (1.2%), *faggot* (1.2%).

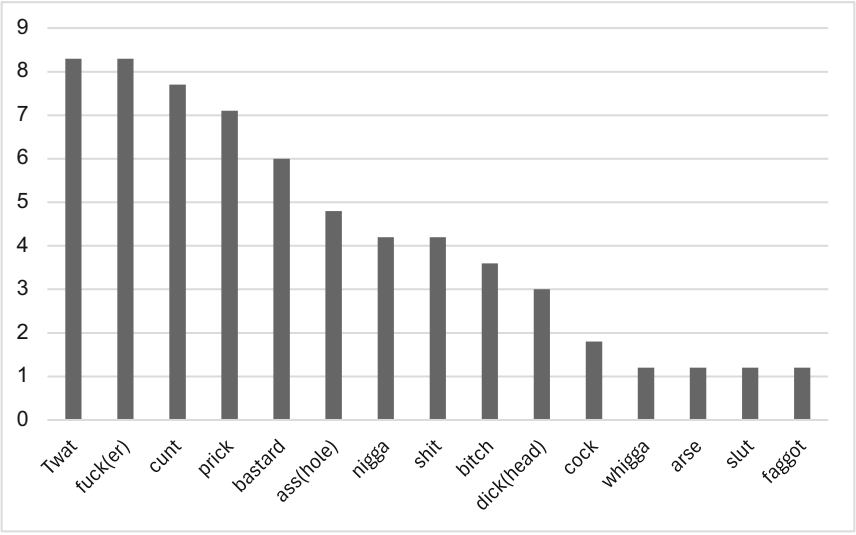


Fig. 11. Most frequent swearwords in percentage

Animal names are sometimes used to designate the insultee, such as *cow*, *old goat*, *baboon*, *weasel*, *bat*, *bug* or just *animal* (e. g., Fig. 6d, *Wake up you lazy cow*). The animal name-calling vocatives constitute 5.4% of all vulgar words (excluding *bitch*). The remaining nouns illustrate other words that made non-standard insulting vocatives (e. g., *penis carrot*, *smegma*, etc.), which occurred only once. In line with Ljung (2011), the names of animals used in offensive language are classified as swearwords.

The most typical vulgarisms (Fig. 12) refer to female sexual organs (15%) and male sexual organs (13%), e. g., *cunt*, *twat*; *prick*, *bellend*, *dick*(*head*). Another way of vulgar name-calling involves various descriptions of men (11%) and women (9.5%), such as *faggot*, *bastard*, *tit*, *sod*; *bitch*, *cunt*, *slut*, *whore*. Body parts (5.4%) focus primarily on the term *ass*, *arse*, and *asshole*, and sexual behaviour is mainly realised through the morphological process of conversion wherein nouns are created from verbs, e. g., *fuck*(*er*) and *wanker*. The category of intellect deficiencies, that is, ableism, takes up 11% and is expressed through, inter alia, the following vulgarisms: *twerp*, *moron*, *idiot*, *plonker*, *imbecile*, *fuckwit*. Finally, excretory and scatological waste occupy 3%, and they comprise *shit*, *shite*, *smegma*, and *turd*. The most represented vulgarisms apply to female sexual organs.

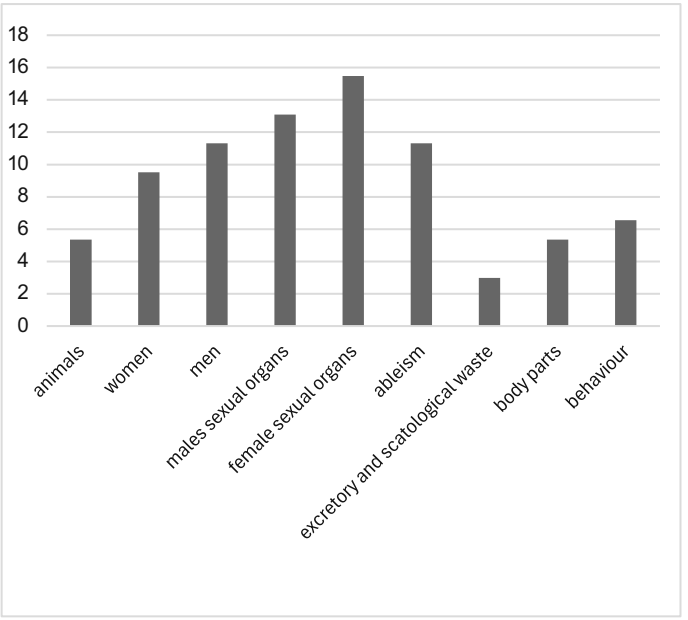


Fig. 12. Types of swearwords according to the object of reference

Swearwords tend to be gender-specific in TwitCorp. The predominant words employed to insult women are *bitch*, *ass*, and next *cunt* and *fuck*, with **hore* (often misspelt *whore*), and *shit* being in the third frequency band (Fig. 14). On the other hand, on male celebrities' Twitter accounts, the following vulgarisms are most common: *twat*, *prick* in the first frequency band, *cunt*, *bastard* and *fuck*(*er*) in the second band, next in the third frequency group *ass*, *dick*(*head*), *bitch* and *wanker* (Fig. 13).

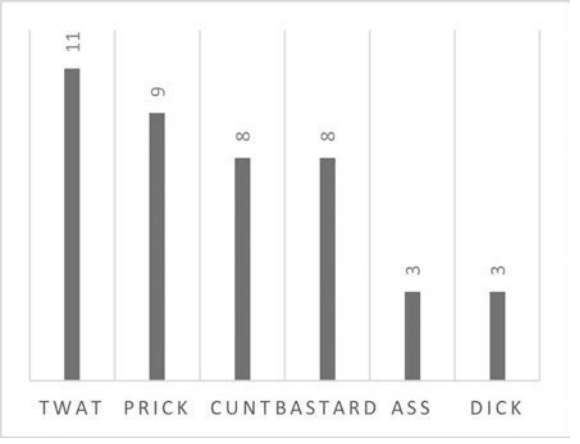


Fig. 13. Swearwords in vocatives on male celebrities' accounts


Fig. 14. Swearwords in vocatives on female celebrities' accounts (**hore* often substituted *whore*)

The surprising observation is that descriptors of the female sex organ, typically associated with offensive name-calling addressed to women (*twat* and *cunt*), are frequently applied to men. The term *cunt*, the strongest vulgarism in British

English as already mentioned above (Dewaele, 2016), is even more often used on male celebrities' accounts, while *twat* is absent on female celebrities' accounts (Fig. 15). The predominant swearwords on female accounts are *bitch* and *asshole.* In both gender tweets, *cunt* has a spiteful and attacking role, whereas *bitch* primarily performs a jocular or complimenting function. Thus, gender constraint is widely ignored. Furthermore, the percentage of vulgar forms addressed to male account owners (the 'to' direction) or used by them in replies (the 'from' direction) amounts to 73%, whereas the to/from direction on female accounts adds up to 100% of tweets containing vulgarisms.

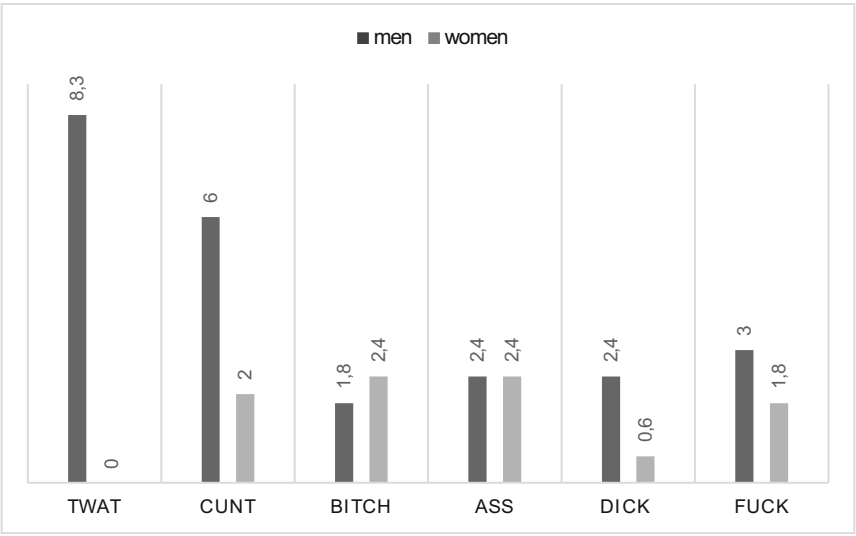


Fig. 15. Swearwords in vocatives on female vs male celebrities' Twitter accounts

Overall, the offensive language used in insults has been utilised by X users for at least three purposes: to hurl a genuine insult at a target, to introduce a jocular tone (jocular insults), and to positively appraise an addressee, either through compliments or praise. Whilst jocular insults have already received some attention in impoliteness scholarship (e.g., Kotthoff, 1996), positive appraisal insults have been extremely rare (see Slugoski and Turnball, 1988). Vocatives deriving from insulting comments will thus be divided into those which hinge on genuine insults and fake insults, the latter further bifurcating in this study into jocular insults and complimenting insults.

## 5.6. Replies

The explicitly insulting language forms analysed thus far focused on the speaker and their intentions; therefore, they do not consider whether the critical tweet affects the target. Some authors claim that an insult is insulting only when the offended person actually feels offended (Hom & May, 2018, p. 116; Jucker, 2000, p. 377); put differently, when the perlocutionary effect is noticeable. The speaker-intended texts may be left unnoticed by the target or noticed but ignored, in which case we could classify them here as offensive, i. e., exemplifications of offensiveness, wherein the offensive load is *potentially* offensive. On the other hand, when they affect the target and cause offence in them, then they encode offendedness (Bączkowska, 2023, 2024); that is, they have a perlocutionary effect manifested by the target in the form of a fight-back retort. The attacking comments are potentially insulting due to the words used; for example, using a swearword may likely be intended to offend, denigrate, or criticise the target, thereby bearing the symptoms of offensiveness. If we adhere to the perlocutionary effect as the decisive argument of classifying a comment as insulting or not, then the potentially offensive comment may not be offensive at all; instead, it may be received as jocular or supporting solidarity and bonding. In sum, if the offended feels offended, the comment can be classified as an exemplification of offendedness (rather than offensiveness) as the perlocutionary effect is realised.

Examples of offence were difficult to verify, as many tweets have been deleted or users' accounts have been revoked. Those X users who reply to insulting tweets testify that at least they have noticed a comment and, depending on the original message, they either attack back (by another insulting comment, e. g., by resorting to insults or irony) or mitigate it (e. g., by resorting to jocularity). Fig. 16 shows that 87% of tweets (marked "0") were left unanswered, i. e., they were either unnoticed or noticed and ignored by the target. This category also includes cases where the reply was deleted or the whole account was removed; thus, verifying the perlocutionary effect was impossible. "RT" stands for a retweeted post, that is, one that the addressee certainly notices, and this category accounts for 2% of all cases. Replies to offensive comments also occupy 2% of all messages. 9% refers to "1" which signals situations where the target replied to a potentially offensive comment, but the reply suggested that he/she was not offended. For illustration purposes, Fig. 17 shows samples of tweets that are replies to offensive comments, wherein the offended person fights back by writing offensive comments.

Figure 17 presents several contexts wherein the target (in this case, Piers Morgan) fights back in his reply to offensive comments using various strategies. In Fig. 17a. the reply written by Piers Morgan clearly shows indignation by calling the offender *you dreadful little weirdo*. A similar type of offensive structure appears in 17c (*you impertinent old goat*). In 17b., in turn, he corrects the

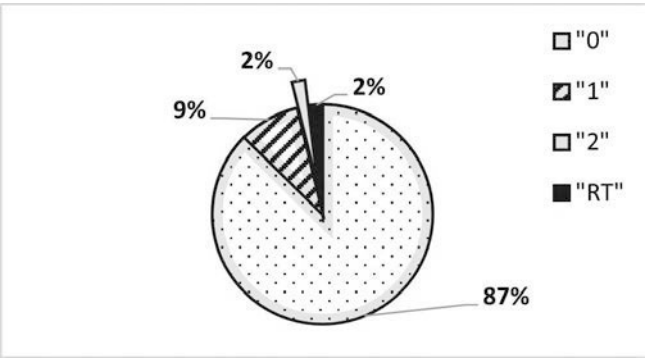


Fig. 16. Replies in percentages

offender's spelling mistake (*your* in place of *you're*) thus discrediting the author of this tweet, yet without resorting to a strong offensive language used in 18a and c. Similarly, in Fig. 17d., Piers Morgan resorts to a three-word insult with two degrading modifiers (*mercenary*, *little*) of the noun *berk*, embedded in the you + noun phrase structure. The use of *you* with a noun phrase strengthens the insulting load of what follows *you,* as it precisely hints at the target. In Fig. 17e, two insults are present: one is impersonal and sees addresses as a generic group (of *foul-mouthed trolls*), and the next one is personal and addresses the offender straightforwardly (*Terry, you ignorant imbecile*). The latter relies on the you +noun phrase structure and is still reinforced by the first name vocative, which specifiers the reference (thus creating a referent expression) and leaves no doubts who the offender attacks. Finally, in Fig. 17f., the offender downgrades and belittles the target by placing the addressee in a teacher-pupil schema. The offender signals his superiority and seniority (*I was editing your paper at your age*) by evoking his advanced professional experience and against this background he attacks the target (*you rude little twerp*), reproaches him and adopts the position of a boss, or a parent, by giving orders to a naughty child (*Now take these stupid ears off, stop whining and get back to work*).


Fig. 17a


Fig. 17b.


Fig. 17c.


Fig. 17d.


Fig. 17e.


Fig. 17f.

Fig. 17. Replies to offensive tweets

In sum, the strategies used in the examples above illustrate (1) aggressive retorts, overtly attacking the offender by resorting to *you* + (modifiers) noun structures, (2) domination schema, based on teacher-pupil or boss-employee subordination pattern, and (3) indirect criticism.

## 6. Summary and discussion

While generally speaking, tweets may be categorized as either offensive or non-offensive, in this proposal, the categories are more specific, and they are trinary, where three options are taken into account, i. e., non-offensiveness, offensiveness and offendedness (RQ3). It was assumed that the target may notice the offensive content and either feel offended (which illustrates the category of offendedness) or not (which illustrates the category of offensiveness). The latter represents tweets that are *potentially* offensive (dubbed here attempted offensive insults) but they fail in reaching their offensive illocutionary or perlocutionary purpose

(the target may, for example, ignore them, find them non-offensive or simply may not notice them). The third option refers to cases where, even though offensive language is used, the illocutionary effect is intended to be non-offensive. A binary division of insults into offensive and attempted insults offered by McVittie et al. (2021) is also challenged here as their proposal ignores cases where the speaker's goal is to entertain, compliment, praise, express bonding, solidarity, and the like. Such non-offensive insults and slurs (dubbed fake insults here) have been identified in our study (RQ1). The offensive vocatives thus can be divided into genuine, attempted and fake. McVittie et al's study examines tweets which contain offensive language whose offensive content relies on both explicitly and implicitly offensive language (such as irony). Contrary to this account, the investigation presented here revolved solely around tweets which contained explicitly offensive language, yet it is believed that the trinary approach can also be applied to comments contingent on irony, metaphor and other forms of implicitness (Bączkowska, 2024).

The present study is also an extension of an interesting investigation revolving around literal vs non-literal insults (Slugoski and Turnbull, 1988), wherein literal insults[6] were likely to be interpreted non-literally among the liked persons (as opposed to disliked ones). In our data, too, offensive language was interpreted as either offensive or non-offensive (e.g., as jocular), depending on whether the sender overtly expressed a dislike or a favourable attitude towards the receiver.

Secondly, there is no division of swearwords occurring in insults/slurs in our data into those that characterize males only or females only (RQ2). While swearwords describing male sexual organs or male sexual behaviour are mostly reserved for offensive language targeted at male addressees, words that label female sexual organs or female sexual behaviour are applied to both female and male addressees. Thus, *cunt* and *twat* are often encountered in tweets criticizing and offending men (as well as women). The study partially supports research conducted by Beers Fägersten (2012, p. 83) based on questionnaires, wherein women-related swearwords received the highest ratings (*cunt*, *motherfucker* and *bitch*). As for gender preferences, in her study, females used these words more often than males, whereas in our study, the situation is reversed (gender was identified based on the account owners' photos). This may be connected with another observation made by Beers Fägersten (2012, p. 12) that men have a higher threshold level for swearwords than women, and thus the same swearword may be burdened with obscenity and strong emotions to a smaller extent for men than for women. Interestingly, the study by Berger (2002) proves the opposite, namely

6 The term literal insults meaning interpreted as insulting is not, however, a pertinent one as an insult can be encoded both literally and non-literally (figuratively) and still be experienced as offensive (or as non-offensive).

that women may have obscenity threshold level the same or even lower than men. The fact that there is abundance of swearwords related to females in our study may also speak for swearing being primarily the domain of men (Beers Fägersten, 2012, p. 14), and that calling a man by resorting to female features (indicating softness and weakness compared to men and often subordination relative to men) is more offensive than by referring to male features. The distribution of obscene language may also stem from racial differences inasmuch as African Americans tend to swear more often than White Americans, Hispanic and Asian Americans, whereas age seems to have no effect on swearing (Beers Fägersten, 2012, pp. 29, 38). This demographic aspect is hardly possible to verify on X. Unlike the study presented here, many studies conducted so far are based on questionnaires, and rating void of context, i. e., via offline communication, and thus data derived from online communication may depart from the observations cited above and reveal verbal behaviour typical of social network sites, such as X. As noted by Palacios Martínez (2023, p. 96), studies "on nominal vocatives in X discourse are (…) quite limited", and the one conducted by this author, while involving gender differences, elaborates primarily on non-offensive nominal vocatives. What he noticed about the use of vocatives by women was that they mainly illustrated endearments (e. g., *babe*) while men resorted to familiarizers (e. g., *bro*). In our data, 65% of the vocatives used by women expressed offensiveness and 35% positive attitude (complimenting, bonding, group solidarity or jocularity), and in the case of men, 90% of vocatives expressed offensiveness and 10% some positive attitudes. The offensive vocatives in our data thus partially support the results by Palacios Martínez (2023) inasmuch as women tend to use vocatives as softeners more often than men.

Finally, a number of other features of the tweets of minor importance have also been observed that might be of interest to researchers of social media discourse (RQ1). For example, the study has shown that insults are deployed more often than slurs, mostly through structures composed of the pronoun *you*, followed by nominals with adjectives modifying nouns. The length of the majority of offensive tweets oscillated between two and four words, yet one-word and vocatives exceeding more than five words are also common, and the longer they are, the stronger their offensive content. The vast majority of offensive tweets are located in the clause-final position. The swearwords most frequently used in the corpus are related to females (*twat*, *cunt*). Words related to male sexuality are *prick* and *bastard,* which are not only less frequent but also less offensive, yet they provide rich observations.

## 7. Conclusion

Overall, the study has proved that a linguistic form encoding offensiveness does not necessarily entail a negative, offensive social meaning. Moreover, X/Twitter users do not always make an effort to reply to (potentially) offensive tweets as the majority of those analysed here were left unattended. The type of language used in offensive tweets surprises in several respects, including the length of offensive vocatives (with three- and four-word long vocatives being frequent cases), the names of female-related sexual organs used across genders, and resorting to a racial slur that is affirmative and complimentary. The contribution of this study to the already existing scholarship, and at the same time its limitation, is that our investigation provides observation regarding contexts that were narrowed down to (1) solely (selected) celebrities' accounts, (2) posted in X/Twitter messages only, (3) the language found in vocative forms of address, and (4) expressed exclusively by means of nouns, adjectives or adjectival nominals. The conclusions thus are valid solely for these specific types of data, yet they provided insightful observations.

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# Third Spaces of Discourse: Migration Narratives in German-language Online Parenting Communities

**Abstract**
This chapter examines discourse in German-speaking online parenting communities and explores how these digital forums function as hybrid arenas for political communication, especially between women. Based on van Leeuwen's (2008) social actors theory and the third space model (Wright, 2012), it will analyse how users express socio-political views in a relational and emotionally grounded manner. This research focuses on gender diverse discursive practices and the role of language in discussions of migration, identity and belonging in online spaces. Empirical material was collected from German-language parenting forums, subjected to qualitative linguistic discourse analysis, paying attention to linguistic strategies such as hedging, disclaimers, and identity positioning. Findings show that these forums facilitate a form of 'intimate citizenship' (Plummer, 2003), where personal narratives intertwine with civic engagement. In light of the widespread nature of online incivility, parenting forums promote relatively supportive communication norms that allow for discussion of sensitive topics.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, third spaces, migration narratives, online parenting forums, social actors theory

## 1. Introduction

This chapter explores the discursive construction of migration narratives in German-language online parenting forums, based on the concept of *third spaces,* to examine how these platforms function as hybrid environments for political expression, particularly among women. While these forums do not have an explicitly political character, they allow for the natural development of civil discourse through personal stories, everyday experiences, and emotional dialogue. Positioned at the intersection of the private and public spheres, they offer a semi-private space where users – often mothers – negotiate politically sensitive

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topics, such as migration, integration, or national identity in a seemingly non-adversarial, empathetic manner. Gender plays a significant role in this communicative dynamic, as women tend to avoid open confrontational environments due to widespread incivility.

Parenting forums thus constitute an alternative discursive space where political views are articulated through relational linguistic practices rooted in caregiving and personal experience. These spaces question the conventional dichotomy between public and private discourse, enabling users to express civic concerns through everyday conversations and supportive interactions with peers.

Based on van Leeuwen's (2008) *social actors theory*, Wright's (2012) *third space framework* and Oldenburg's (1989) earlier *third place concept*, as well as Evans and Boyte's (1986) *free spaces concept*, this chapter analyses linguistic strategies such as *hedging*, *disclaimers*, and *narrative positioning* to better understand how participants interact in civic dialogue while maintaining empathy and cohesion. The findings aim to enrich our understanding of gendered digital participation and the role of language in shaping political discourse in informal communicative contexts.

## 2. Third spaces in communication and linguistics

### 2.1. Reconceptualization of public interactions

Oldenburg's concept of the *third place*, originally introduced in 1989 and later elaborated in the 1999 edition, describes informal public spaces that exist beyond the binary of home (*first place*) and work (*second place*). These are neutral spaces, such as cafes, pubs, or community centres, where people regularly meet, discuss, and cultivate social connections. As Oldenburg explains, "The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public spaces that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals" (1999, p. 16). Oldenburg highlights that such environments are essential for promoting citizenship and strengthening democracy by providing spaces where individuals practice citizenship through dialogue, negotiation, and mutual respect as part of everyday civic life.

Building on Oldenburg's concept, the notion of *third places* (1999) can be understood in a broader context of earlier civic engagement theories. This perspective builds upon the earlier theory of *free spaces*, developed by Evans and Boyte (1986, pp. 17–18), which are defined as particular kinds of public places within communities that serve as environments in which individuals can learn self-respect, cultivate a stronger group identity, develop public skills, and engage

in collaborative civic action. In essence, free spaces are understood as settings between private life and major institutions, where ordinary people can act with dignity, independence, and vision (see also Graham, 2015, pp. 67–68). Boyte (2014) also presents the concept of *middle spaces*, which exist "between the individual and the impersonal structures of modern life," such as work and government. These spaces describe "full of dynamism and democratic energies," and they serve as potential sites of citizen power, continuity, and a culture of freedom.

While *free spaces* (Evans & Boyte, 1986) and *middle spaces* (Boyte, 2014) emphasize community empowerment and civic agency, Oldenburg's (1999) concept of the *third place* offers a complementary perspective by focusing on informal physical venues. It focuses on informal physical venues such as cafés, bookstores, and parks, that foster openness and inclusivity. These kinds of everyday situations create platforms where democratic practices are not subject to formal structures but arise from habitual, informal contacts.

Expanding on Oldenburg's foundational idea of the *third place*, Wright (2012) adapts the concept for the digital age by introducing the notion of the *third space*. In fact, Wright's phrase "from third place to third space"[1] explicitly reflects this conceptual evolution. It emphasizes the theoretical and spatial shift from physical, informal gathering places to digitally mediated environments where political discourse can organically emerge within everyday interactions. While third places refer to traditional physical settings, like neighbourhood cafés or local gathering spots, where informal social interaction fosters civic engagement, third spaces are digital environments shaped not by geography but by shared interests and thematic discourse. In these online spaces, although not explicitly political in purpose, political engagement can emerge organically through everyday conversations. As Wright (2012) explains, "Third spaces are online environments that are primarily non-political but allow for political discourse to emerge organically" (p. 6). Such spaces facilitate the convergence of private and public communication, enabling individuals to articulate opinions, share personal experiences, and negotiate identity in ways that contest conventional dichotomies of the political and the non-political, or the personal and the public. This conceptual evolution highlights the fluid and hybrid nature of digital interaction, reflecting broader changes in the way political participation and discourse unfold in mediated social contexts.

1 This phrase directly refers to the title of Wright's 2012 article: "From 'third place' to 'third space': Everyday political talk in non-political online spaces."

## 2.2. Linguistic hybridity and discursive practices in third spaces

The evolution from the concept of *third place* to *third space* reflects broader changes in the nature of political communication, particularly in online forums, where informal discussions often blur the lines between personal narrative and public reflection (Wright et al., 2016). In parenting communities conversations about migration may start with personal anecdotes, but quickly take on political overtones as users express views on integration, cultural identity, or government policy (Wright, 2012). This dynamic nature highlights how third spaces support hybrid forms of discourse that are simultaneously personal and political.

Recent empirical studies (Graham, 2015; Vochocová, 2018; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2018) demonstrate that online platforms, especially lifestyle communities such as parenting or finance forums, constitute dynamic arenas for political engagement. In these seemingly apolitical spaces, political discourse often takes place within the context of everyday concerns, including topics like education, taxes, and social policy. Such conversations often evolve into tangible forms of civic participation: filing or signing petitions, contacting elected officials, coordinating grassroots initiatives (e.g., boycotts, protests, and consumer activism) (Graham, 2015, p. 69).

The hybrid nature of third spaces is reflected not only in their thematic openness, but also in their linguistic structure. Analyzing linguistic practices within third spaces requires attention to hybridity, code-switching, and discourse markers that signal shifts between personal experience and public debate. In parenting forums, users often employ mitigation strategies (e.g., hedging, politeness markers) when discussing controversial topics such as migration (Wright et al., 2016). Additionally, these forums are characterized by a unique combination of informal and formal language, reflecting the dual function of these forums – as a support network and a space for socio-political engagement. From a linguistic perspective, third spaces offer fertile ground for exploring discursive hybridity – the intermingling of personal and political registers, formal and informal language, and individual and collective markers of identity. These environments foster discursive practices in which the boundaries between private storytelling and public argumentation are linguistically blurred. Drawing on Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity, third spaces become sites of enunciation where traditional oppositions (e.g. *public* vs *private*, *political* vs *personal*) disappear, giving rise to fluid and hybrid forms of discourse. In such spaces, established identities and monologue forms of communication are disrupted. Users navigate between registers, tones, and discourse strategies, negotiating their positions in discussions that intertwine the personal with the political. In such contexts, language becomes a tool enabling unique implications for expression, interpretation, negotiation of identity, and action (p. 36).

In online parenting communities, this hybridity is particularly visible in migration-related discussions. Users often employ discursive strategies such as hedging, politeness markers, and code-switching to navigate sensitive topics such as migration (Wright et al., 2016). These linguistic choices reflect an awareness of the semi-public nature of this space and its dual function as both a network of emotional support and a space for socio-political expression (Jackson et al., 2013). Mothers, for example, may use narratives with an emotional dimension to describe their personal or family experiences, while also embedding politically resonant statements about integration, politics, or national identity. Such statements are often softened by the use of mitigating expressions (e.g., "I'm not an expert, but…"), politeness strategies, or disclaimers that present the contribution as a personal perspective rather than an overt political judgment (Wright et al., 2016; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2018). These types of strategies allow users to express controversial or political opinions while maintaining group cohesion and avoiding confrontation in these semi-public digital spaces.

Moreover, linguistic analysis of third spaces reveals a rich interaction between formality and informality, assertiveness and empathy, and empirical and abstract language. This balance reflects the dual function of these forums as spaces for emotional support and civic debate. As Jackson et al. (2013) point out, political discourse often appears in discussions that are not explicitly labeled as political. As they observe, "Whilst accepting that anything can be seen as political, because it can be linked to something that politicians talk about, it does not mean that it is seen that way by the participants involved" (p. 209). This highlights the value of examining how forum users linguistically construct their identities and relationships in the context of broader social issues, as researchers can better understand the micro-level mechanisms that sustain civic discourse in seemingly apolitical environments.

In this context, van Leeuwen's (2008) concept provides a systematic set of tools for analysing how social actors are represented in discourse. The author distinguishes between *discursive strategies* that structure the roles, visibility, and relational positioning of social actors in texts, and their *linguistic realizations* that manifest these strategies through grammatical, lexical, and syntactic means.

The following core *discursive strategies* identified by van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 28–54) shape how agency, identity, and inclusion are constructed: *exclusion* versus *inclusion* (whether social actors are made visible or are erased entirely from the discourse) (Fig.1.).

*Exclusion* omits actors entirely from discourse:

(1) *suppression* (no reference to the actor is made);
(2) *backgrounding* (the actor is mentioned elsewhere but not in the specific proposition).

*Inclusion*, which entails representing social actors through different relational and semantic roles, includes:

(1) *activation* vs *passivation* (whether social actors are represented as active agents or as subjects of an action);
(2) *participation* (positions actors as direct participants of processes) vs *circumstantialization* (refers to their presence as a circumstance, e. g., time, place) vs *possessivation* (involves representing actors as owners of something);
(3) *personalization* vs *impersonalization* (actors are presented as human individuals with subjectivity or their own identity, or as abstract, institutional or non-human entities).

The last group (*personalization* vs *impersonalization*) encompasses a range of strategies, such as: *genericization* vs *specification* (individuals are described as generic representatives of a group or as specific persons), and subsequently: *individualization* vs *assimilation* (representing actors as individuals or as part of a group), *collectivization* vs *aggregation* (representing them as a collective entity or as statistics or quantities). The next scope consists of *determination* vs *indetermination* (identifies actors clearly and distinctly or leaves them vague or unspecified), and subsequently e. g.: *association* vs *dissociation* (positioning actors in relation to others, either as aligned or distanced/opposed), *categorization* vs *nomination* (defines actors by function, identity, classification, or refers to them by name or title), *functionalization* vs *identification* (actors are represented in terms of what they do (roles, tasks) or who they are (attributes, origin, status)).

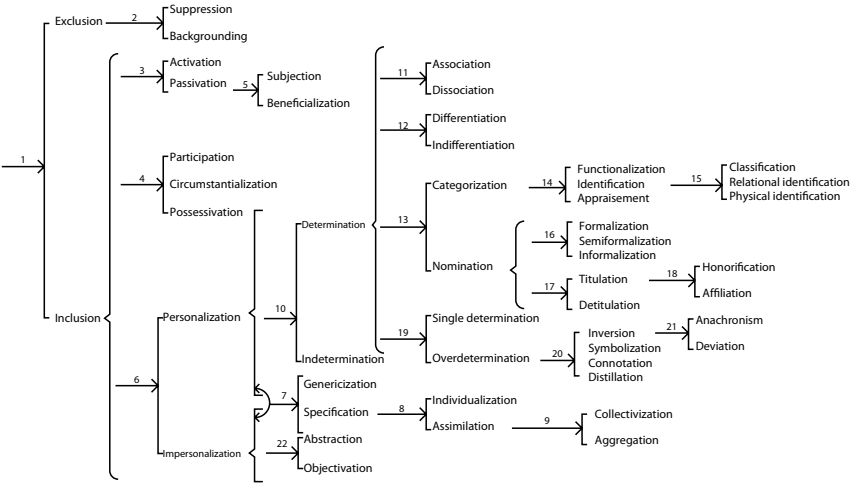



Fig. 1. Social Actor Network (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 52)

These strategies are implemented linguistically through specific grammatical and lexical means, and syntax plays a key role, particularly in the use of the passive voice, ellipsis, and nominalisation, which can effectively obscure agency or responsibility. Lexical choices, such as group nouns (e. g., *migrants*), occupational roles (e. g., *educators*, *teachers*), and categorical labels (e. g. *foreigners*) reflect *functionalization* and *categorization.* Pronouns, especially the inclusive forms (*we*) and exclusive forms (*they*), are used to mark group boundaries, while quantifiers such as percentages or vague expressions (e. g., *most*) enable *aggregation.* Finally, contrasts between proper names and categories distinguish *nomination* from *categorization.*

Based on the discussive and linguistic strategies, van Leeuwen's concept applied to parenting forums explores how users construct boundaries of belonging, otherness, and authority. For example, strategies of foregrounding parental identity (*nomination, identification*), appealing to group-level statistics (*categorization, genericization*), or omitting institutional actors in critique (*exclusion, passivation*) reflect strategic choices that balance political critique with social cohesion. Such strategies are important in (semi-)public forums, where expressing one's opinion is central for participating in respectful debates on controversial topics such as migration or integration.

These findings illustrate the complicated connection between linguistic practices in third spaces and dynamics of participation, and digital citizenship, especially in gender and migration contexts. Ultimately, third spaces in digital parenting communities simplify everyday political discussions, but also present a context for micro-level discoursive practices that clarify themes of identity, and inclusion. As such, they are relevant for understanding how women navigate socio-political engagement in environments that are perceived as safe and meaningful.

## 3. Online political participation and incivility

Political participation in the digital era has expanded beyond traditional forms, to encompass expressive and deliberative activities on online forums and social media platforms (Holt et al., 2013). This includes not only participating in votes or protests, but also practices such as publishing political opinions, engaging in debates, sharing information, or commenting on current events. Holt et al. (2013) emphasize that young people are "more frequent users of social media for political purposes" (p. 27), and that these platforms can act as a "leveller of political interest and offline political participation between younger and older citizens" (p. 32). Such platforms not only provide access to information, but also allow users to participate in civic life through personalized, informal communication

styles. This discursive shift, towards everyday, informal, and expressive modes of communication makes political engagement more accessible to underrepresented groups, allowing language to become a tool for both identity expression and social commentary.

Although social networking sites (SNS) enable political engagement, they are often characterized by incivility and hostility, especially towards women (Papacharissi, 2004; Jane, 2014). Incivility in digital environments can manifest through trolling, offensive comments, and provocative language intended to intimidate or silence those expressing dissent (Stryker et al., 2016). Stryker et al. (2016) define political incivility as encompassing behaviours such as "name-calling, ridiculing, deception, and behaviors tending to shut down inclusive ongoing discussion" (p. 535). These actions can harm democratic discourse, discourage participation, undermine trust, and shift the climate of communication – from dialogue to aggression. The authors warn that "excessively hostile political discourse threatens democratic values and effective democratic governance" (p. 536), and enhances the social consequences of such practices.

However, parenting forums represent a unique alternative to traditional political spaces. These platforms can mitigate hostile environments by offering a space where users, primarily women, may express their views without fear of direct confrontation (Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2018). As the authors note, the e-mothers' forum serves as a kind of 'discursive shelter' that enables women to engage with politically charged topics, such as migration, while maintaining a tone of empathy and mutual support (p. 149). Unlike conventional political spaces marked by confrontation and ideological polarisation, these forums provide affective support and validate the personal experiences of users. They encourage a communication style that favours cautious, relational language over overt antagonism, often expressed through personal storytelling and hedging. This dynamic allows women to articulate politically relevant views while protecting themselves from the risks of online incivility (Vochocová, 2018). Therefore, parenting forums can be seen as alternative public spheres, where civic reflection is intertwined with everyday emotional discourse (Wright, 2012; Wright et al., 2016). These dynamics demonstrate that even in forums not explicitly dedicated to political discussion, important civic conversations can flourish in the right discursive and emotional conditions.

### 3.1. Gender, migration, and online discourse

Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actors theory provides a useful tool for analyzing how users on online forums construct and negotiate social identities through language. His model examines how individuals are included in or excluded from discourse, how subjectivity is attributed or deprived, and how different roles are discursively constructed. Applying this perspective to parenting forums enables an exploration of how mothers, in particular, articulate socio-political positions while simultaneously navigating their subjectivities and social roles in a supportive online environment. Specific discursive strategies relevant to van Leeuwen's model include anonymization (e.g., using generic terms like 'some people'), activation (which presents users or migrants as agents of action), and passivation (which emphasizes what is being done to them). These linguistic choices shape the way responsibility, agency, and moral stance are distributed in discourse, especially in emotionally charged discussions such as those related to migration.

Gender plays an essential role in online political communication, as women are often marginalized in traditionally male-dominated political arenas (Vochocová, 2018; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2018). Research by Jane (2014) and Herring (1999) shows that women are more likely to prefer dialogical, collaborative forms of interaction and avoid spaces perceived as overtly political due to the prevalence of sexist, aggressive, or dismissive commentary. As Herring (1999) argues, "Men dominate online discourse not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, often employing strategies that marginalize or dismiss female contributors" (p. 153). This research examines how men dominate online communication, using tactics such as mockery, condescension, and verbal aggression that collectively silence or discourage women from participating in public discourse.

In the context of migration discourse, women on parenting forums frequently navigate between personal anecdotes and politically charged statements, thus establishing a form of 'intimate citizenship' (Plummer, 2003). As Plummer explains, this concept hints "at worlds in the making, worlds in which a public language of 'intimate troubles' is emerging around issues of intimacy in the private life of individuals" (p. 13). By embedding political commentary into everyday parenting issues, these users are actively engaging with what Plummer defines as "the decisions people have to make over the control (or not) over one's body, feelings, relationships; access (or not) to representations, relationships, public spaces, etc." (p. 14). In this way, they break down conventional boundaries between the personal and the political, and between private and public discourse. Vochocová and Rosenfeldová (2018) describe how parenting forums simplify this hybridity: "The communicative strategies of e-mothers help to maintain a supportive, safe and mutually empowering discursive environment" (p. 150).

Their hybrid contribution challenges the polarized, ideologically driven narratives that dominate mainstream political debates, fostering a more empathetic and experiential understanding of migration.

Vochocová (2018) further emphasizes that female users tend to engage in political conversation in a way that reflects care, responsibility, and relational awareness. The author notes that women's expression of political views online is based on social values and communication security, which allows them to share their views without adopting an overtly confrontational style. Instead of distancing themselves from expressing emotions, these users incorporate empathy and life experiences into their arguments, creating what Vochocová calls "supportive political communication." Parenting forums are therefore spaces where political subjectivity is redefined through relational and affective discourse that challenges conventional, masculine norms of political debate.

### 3.2. Impoliteness and online interactions

As Bączkowska (2021) notes in her study of impoliteness on Twitter that humour, irony, or sarcasm often embed linguistic aggression, which may mask its offensive nature and make it more socially acceptable. Expressions like the title *"You're too thick to change the station"* exemplify how (verbal) insults can be strategically formulated to emphasize the sender's superiority while simultaneously avoiding responsibility. Bączkowska (2021, p. 65) argues that the audience alignment plays a key role in legitimising impoliteness, as offensive language may be accepted when the audience signals solidarity with the sender's position. This perspective helps explain why impoliteness thrives in overtly political discourse on Twitter, but is suppressed in more relational, semi-private forums such as parenting communities.

Impoliteness and verbal hostility are prevalent in many online spaces, especially in politically charged or anonymous environments. These behaviours can take the form of sarcasm, mockery, and direct insults that undermine respect and fairness in the discussion. As Culpeper (2011) notes, impoliteness is often expressed through 'bald on record' insults or a dismissive tone, deliberately threatening the recipient. For example, calling someone 'stupid' or undermining their credibility with irony can serve as an exclusion tactic. According to Bousfield (2008, p. 72), such expressions are "designed to cause social disharmony" and can significantly reduce users' willingness to participate in public discourse.

However, studies on informal political discussions in third spaces suggest that such environments can promote more reflective, subtle, and civilized interactions (Wright et al., 2016). Parenting forums provide a compelling example of this dynamic. Their discursive tone often combines emotional support with

socio-political commentary, creating a community ethos that discourages open hostility. Vochocová and Rosenfeldová (2018) observe that mothers on online parenting forums often express their political views in a cautious and emotionally supportive way. Rather than engaging in confrontational rhetoric, they tend to embed political statements in personal stories and employ a tone that prioritizes group cohesion and empathy. Typical expressions, such as "I'm not trying to offend anyone, but…" or "That's just my opinion," exemplify how users combine civic voice with relational sensitivity. Users moderate their language using mitigation strategies (hedging, indirectness, disclaimers) while still expressing political views in a manner consistent with forum norms. This form of discourse, shaped by norms of care and empathy, provides a counterweight to the polarizing tendencies prevalent in other digital spaces. As such, these spaces are invaluable for analysing how identities and political narratives emerge in everyday conversations, particularly on sensitive topics like migration (Wright et al., 2016).

Together, these findings reveal how parenting forums function as hybrid discursive environments that balance socio-political critique with interpersonal care, thereby redefining political discussion in the digital public sphere.

The reviewed literature suggests that parenting forums, understood as third spaces, allow for political expression through communication based on relationships and emotions. Rather than replicating the confrontational styles typical of mainstream political discourse, users of parenting forums engage in civic discussion characterized by care and personal storytelling. This points to the role of informal, (semi-)private platforms that can diversify political participation and support inclusive forms of digital debate, especially on sensitive topics.

Applying the concept of third space to online parenting forums reveals how digital communities function as hybrid environments where discourse, and agency intersect. The focus is on (hidden) political debate, and how users interweave personal stories with general socio-political reflections. In this way, the third space model fits into social actors theory and emphasizes how individuals find their place in specific roles and represent themselves in discourse.

## 4. Research aims, methods and material

### 4.1. Aims and methods

This study examines how political discourse on migration is constructed in German-language online parenting forums. Drawing on the theoretical framework of third spaces and the social actors model (van Leeuwen, 2008), it seeks to

identify the discursive strategies through which users, primarily mothers, negotiate political expression in relational and emotionally supportive contexts.

The research addresses the following questions:

(1) How is the topic of migration discussed in German-language parenting forums in ways that reflect or challenge political discourse?
(2) What discursive strategies are used to express political positions in semi-private digital environments?
(3) How do language choices reflect the negotiation between personal narrative and public issue, especially in the context of gendered digital spaces?

The analysis employs a qualitative discourse-analytic approach based in:

- Theo van Leeuwen's *social actors theory* (2008) to explore inclusion/exclusion, agency, and role assignment in the representation of migrants.
- The *third space theory* (Wright, 2012; Vochocová & Rosenfeldová, 2018) presenting parenting forums as hybrid discursive arenas.
- Linguistic tools such as *hedging*, *modality*, *politeness strategies*, and *narrative framing* are used to explore how political content is embedded in personal or emotional expression (Bączkowska 2021, Bączkowska et al., 2024).

## 4.2. Material

The empirical material consists of forum posts collected from three major German-language parenting websites: *urbia.de, eltern.de,* and *rund-ums-baby.de*. These platforms were selected based on their popularity, accessibility, and relevance to the target audience. The selection was supported by traffic data obtained from *SimilarWeb* (https://pro.similarweb.com), which confirmed that these websites are among the most frequently visited and actively engaged parenting communities in the German-speaking digital sphere. Within each site, subforums related to parenting, pregnancy, and family life were analysed, in particular threads concerning migration, integration or related socio-political issues.

The selection of these forums was based on the following key criteria:

### (1) Popularity and active user base

The chosen forums consistently rank among the top parenting platforms in Germany, characterized by high user engagement and frequent content updates. According to *SimilarWeb* data (for a summary of traffic on the websites studied, see Fig. 2.), these indicators are presented to visualize overall traffic trends on selected platforms. They serve as a contextual basis for assessing seasonal fluc-

tuations in user activity and support planning of data collection strategies from parenting forums (SimilarWeb, 2025)[2].

- *urbia.de* recorded a total traffic of 16.52 million visits between December 2024 and February 2025, with 5 million in February 2025 alone.
- *eltern.de* recorded a total traffic of 5.790 million visits during the same period, of which 1.7 million in February 2025.
- *rund-ums-baby.de* recorded a total traffic of 4.714 million visits between December 2024 and February 2025, of which 1.5 million in February 2025.

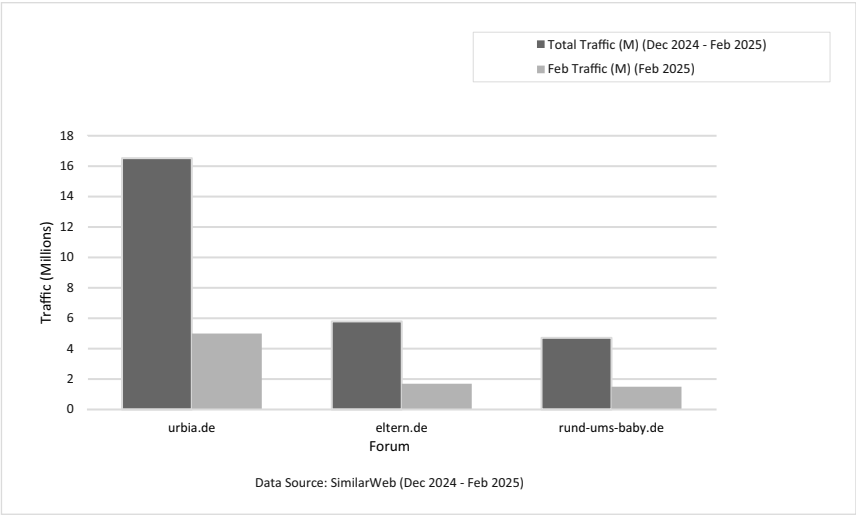



Fig. 2. Traffic data for selected German parenting forums

These numbers indicate a significant dominance of the first website discussed (*urbia.de*). However, given the relatively comparable values of the other forums, they form a coherent user base, which makes all of these platforms valuable tools for discourse analysis.

### (2) Geographical distribution of users

The forums were also selected based on their geographic reach, targeting primarily German-speaking audiences:

- on *urbia.de*, 86.70% of traffic comes from Germany, followed by Austria (7.69%) and Switzerland (2.17%).

2 Website traffic and engagement analytics for *urbia.de, eltern.de* and *rund-ums-baby.de*, data available upon login on: https://pro.similarweb.com (retrieved February 28, 2025).

– on *eltern.de*, 87.42% of traffic comes from Germany, 6.13% from Austria, and 3.92% from Switzerland.
– on *rund-ums-baby.de*, 83.43% of traffic comes from Germany, 8.75% from Austria, and 4.15% from Switzerland.

This geographical distribution confirms that these forums are primarily aimed at German-speaking parents, making them suitable for analyzing migration discourse in a linguistic and cultural context.

### (3) Forum structure and accessibility

Each platform offers separate, well-organized discussion boards focusing on different aspects of parenting, enabling thematic exploration of migration discourse. The existence of designated subforums for social and political topics ensures easy identification and accessibility of migration-related discussions. Within the methodological framework of this study, an analysis of the structure and accessibility of selected German-language online parenting forums is significant for understanding the contexts in which migration discourse may emerge.

The posts were collected from publicly available subforums and published primarily between January 2023 and February 2025, including the thread from 2018 *Frage Migranten/Ausländer* ("The question of migrants/foreigners"). The topics were selected by searching for keywords such as *(I)Migration* ("migration/immigration"), *(I)Migrant* ("migrant/immigrant"), *Migrationsanteil* ("proportion of students with a migration background"[3]), *Migrationshintergrund* ("migration background"), *Integration* ("integration"), *Geflüchtete* ("refugees"), *Ausländer* ("foreigners"), *Zuwanderer* ("immigrants"[4]). The selection criteria prioritized user-initiated threads with at least five replies to ensure depth of conversation. The corpus includes a total of approximately 450 posts in 15 threads).

3 The term "percentage/proportion of students/people with a migration background" is the most accurate translation of *Migrationsanteil* in the educational context, especially in discussions on parenting forums. It is often paraphrased due to the lack of a direct equivalent in English. The alternative terms "participation in migration" or "migration share" appears in political or economic discourse, but is less precise and potentially ambiguous.

4 *Zuwanderer* – literally "incomers" – is commonly translated as "immigrants". While the literal meaning emphasizes the act of arrival, the standard English version reflects the accepted use of the word in migration discourse. The term is often used in official or statistical contexts and is usually more neutral than alternative terms such as *Ausländer* ("foreigners").

## 5. Research results

This section presents the results of a qualitative analysis of discussions about migration in three German-language online parenting forums. Data were analysed using a theoretical framework of third spaces and social actors, with a particular focus on how political content is expressed, mitigated, or transformed within the affective and supportive norms of these digital communities.

The analysis revealed several recurring discursive patterns and thematic concerns, which are presented in three interconnected sections:

1. framing migration through personal experience – how users embed migration-related comments within parenting, family life, or personal history narratives;
2. discursive strategies of appeasement and empathy – how users employ linguistic techniques, such as hedging, disclaimers, and politeness, to navigate politically sensitive topics;
3. representation of migrants as social actors – how migrants and migration are linguistically constructed through inclusion, exclusion, activation, or passivation.

Each subsection includes representative excerpts from the corpus, illustrating the nuances of everyday political expression in these hybrid digital spaces.

### 5.1. Context of the research

The *Urbia Community* is one of the most comprehensive and diverse online parenting platforms in the German-speaking community. It offers a wide range of discussion forums that cover various stages of family life, from planning to have children to raising school-age children. The structure of the *Urbia Community* is as follows, along with a selection of subforums that received the most comments in each category (Table 1.).

Table 1. Structure of the *Urbia Community* Forums (https://www.urbia.de/forum)

| Category | Subforum (German) | Subforum (English) | Number of Posts |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Kinderwunsch** (Desire to have children) | Kinderwunsch | Desire to Have Children | 976,009 |
| | Unterstützter Kiwu | Assisted Reproductive Technology | 207,253 |
| | Ovulations- und Schwangerschaftstests | Ovulation and Pregnancy Tests | 80,866 |
| | Kinderwunsch Plus | Desire to Have Children Plus | 8,279 |
| **Schwangerschaft** (Pregnancy) | Schwangerschaft | Pregnancy | 1,108,170 |
| | Baby-Vorbereitung | Preparing for the Birth of a Baby | 83,910 |
| | Geburt & Wochenbett | Birth & Postpartum | 36,219 |
| | Vornamen | First Names | 35,643 |
| **Baby & Kleinkind** (Baby & Toddler) | Baby | Baby | 374,195 |
| | Kleinkind | Toddler | 213,018 |
| | Stillen & Ernährung | Breastfeeding & Nutrition | 154,905 |
| | Schlafen | Sleeping | 48,697 |
| **Kinder & Familie** (Children & Family) | Kindergartenalter | Kindergarten Age | 98,394 |
| | Kids & Schule | Kids & School | 42,028 |
| | Familienleben | Family Life | 37,402 |

The most actively used subforums in the *Urbia Community* are *Pregnancy* (1,108,170 posts) and *Desire to Have Children* (976,009 posts). This high level of activity suggests that users primarily engage in discussions about family planning and pregnancy experiences. Additionally, subforums dedicated to *Baby and Toddler* care (such as *Breastfeeding & Nutrition*, which has 154,905 posts), also receive significant engagement, indicating the community's emphasis on early parenting support.

The thematic structure of the *Urbia Community* is intentionally designed to facilitate focused discussions by categorizing content according to specific life stages and parenting concerns. This organization significantly increases the usability of the platform and helps users find relevant information efficiently.

The *Eltern-Forum* (https://www.eltern.de/community/) previously offered the categories: *Schwangerschaft* ("Pregnancy"), *Baby* ("Baby"), *Kleinkind* ("Toddler"), *Familie & Partnerschaft* ("Family & Partnership"), and *Schulkind* ("School-age Child"). However, *eltern.de* has recently undergone structural changes, including the merger of *Eltern-Forum* with *Urbia-Forum,* creating a larger, shared family community. As a result of this integration with *urbia.de*,

users wishing to discuss these topics are now redirected to the appropriate subforums on *urbia.de*.

The website *rund-ums-baby.de* offers parenting forums covering a wide range of topics: *Kinderwunsch* ("Desire to Have Children"), Schwangerschaft ("Pregnancy"), *Monatsforen*[5] ("Monthly Forums"), *Familie* ("Family"), *Baby* ("Baby"). As stated on the website:

> You are not alone – other couples wanting to have children, pregnant women, and moms and dads with children of all ages, as well as friends and anyone involved in these topics, are at home with us in the Rund ums Baby community. Here you have the opportunity to ask your questions, gather other opinions and perspectives, read testimonials, exchange ideas, and network. Check out our forums; we have something for you on every topic. (https://www.rund-ums-baby.de/eltern-forum)

The level of user interaction in threads on social issues makes these forums suitable for sociolinguistic analysis, particularly for understanding how parents negotiate and express their views on migration within a semi-private, community-based setting.

The bar chart below presents the relative frequency of migration-related keywords (Fig. 3.) appearing in user-generated posts on German-language parenting forums. Data were collected and analysed using MAXQDA, quantitative and qualitative data analysis software (https://www.maxqda.com/), which allowed for systematic coding of lexical items in a selected set of forum threads.

The following keywords were selected for the lexical analysis: *Migration* ("migration"), *Migrationshintergrund* ("migration background"), *Migrationsanteil* ("proportion of students with a migration background"), *Migrant/Migranten* ("migrant/migrants"), *Ausländer* ("foreigners"), *Migrationskind* ("child with a migration background"), and *Zuwanderer* ("immigrants").

Each keyword was tagged according to semantic relevance and context of use, which enabled comparison of frequency across the entire corpus. This quantitative overview supports subsequent qualitative analysis by identifying dominant lexical fields and recurring terminologies related to migration discourse. The prominence of certain keywords, such as *Migration* ("migration"), *Migrationshintergrund* ("migration background"), and *Migrationsanteil* ("proportion of students with a migration background"), provides empirical grounding for the patterns discussed in Sections 5.2–5.4, particularly in relation to narrative frames, the mitigation of linguistic tensions, and the representation of migrants as social actors.

5 Of particular note are the *Monatsforen* (Monthly Forums), which provide a platform for the exchange of experiences and mutual support for parents expecting a baby in the same month. An example of such a forum can be found on the website *rund-ums-baby.de* (e.g., January 2025: https://www.rund-ums-baby.de/monats-forum/januar/2025).

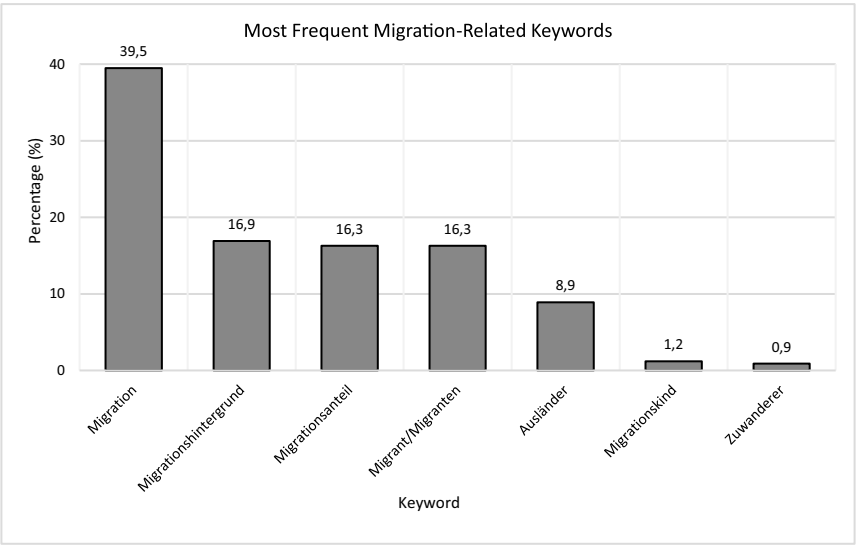



Fig. 3. Most frequent migration-related Keywords

The most frequently occurring keyword, *Migration* ("migration") (39.5%), suggests that users often discuss migration in general, but this broad concept appears more in context-specific, personalised narratives than in abstract policy debates. This is consistent with previous qualitative research findings, where users situate migration in their family life – for example, by discussing how school demographics influence their children's development or how linguistic diversity shapes daily activities.

Moreover, the dominance of the terms *Migrationshintergrund* ("migration background") (16.9%) and *Migrationsanteil* ("proportion of students with a migration background") (16.3%) indicates the frequent invocation of statistical or institutional labels in parental narratives.

These terms are often embedded in descriptions of school enrolment, class composition, or integration experiences, which serve as personalised frames for articulating broader social issues while maintaining narrative authenticity.

The predominance of institutional or technical terms (e. g., *Migrationsanteil*) over emotionally charged or explicitly racially charged labels (e. g., *Ausländer* – "foreigners", only 8.9%) reflects a strategic shift in discourse. Users appear to mitigate potential offensiveness by adopting neutral or bureaucratic vocabulary. This tendency is consistent with strategies of hedging, disclaimers, and politeness, that allow authors to raise politically sensitive issues while protecting group cohesion and avoiding direct confrontation.

The low frequency of the term *Migrationskind* ("child with a migration background"[6]) (1.2%) and *Zuwanderer* ("incomers/immigrants") (0.9%), which more clearly designate individuals, suggests distancing oneself from personalised or potentially essentialising categories. This may reflect user's sensitivity to overgeneralisation or a reluctance to single out children or individuals in public discussion spaces.

From a social actor theory perspective (van Leeuwen, 2008), the data suggests a preference for impersonal, aggregated representations of migrants, e. g. through the terms *Migrationsanteil* ("proportion of students with a migration background") or *Migrationshintergrund* ("migration background"). These terms passivize social actors by framing them as statistical variables rather than individuals with agency. This is consistent with qualitative research findings, where children or parents with a migration background are often mentioned in the context of class proportions or generalised impact on education, rather than as active participants.

The relative rarity of the more direct term *Migrant/Migranten* ("migrant/migrants") (16.3%), and even more so *Zuwanderer* ("incomers/immigrants"), reinforces the view that the voices of individual migrants are often pushed into the background in favour of a broader systemic framework. This reflects a discursive environment in which migration is institutionally problematized rather than interactively personalized – a tendency that simultaneously neutralizes conflicts and obscures the subjectivity of migrants.

The analysed examples presented in Sections 5.2–5.4. represent a carefully selected qualitative sample drawn from a broader dataset of forum posts; each was chosen for its illustrative value and examined in the context of the discursive and linguistic strategies discussed in the adequate subsections.

## 5.2. Framing migration through personal experience

One of the most prominent discursive patterns observed in the analysed forum threads is the frequent anchoring of migration-related opinions in personal experiences and family contexts. Users rarely perceive migration issues as abs-

6 Alternatively, in the U.S. educational sector the term "migratory child", means "a child or youth who made a qualifying move in the preceding 36 months—(A) as a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher; or (B) with, or to join, a parent or spouse who is a migratory agricultural worker or a migratory fisher" (https://dese.mo.gov/quality-schools/migrant-el-immigrant-refugee-education/migrant-definition). This specific legal term may therefore suggest that the child emigrated on their own or came with a guardian (parent, spouse) to improve their qualifications. Therefore, in the German educational context, the more precise translation "child with migration background" is preferred.

tract or ideological; they refer rather to everyday life, local environments, or parenting issues. This is consistent with the nature of third spaces, where political discussions occur in the context of personal narratives.

A representative post from urbia.de illustrates this pattern:

(1) "Meine Tochter wird dieses Jahr eingeschult und wir hatten letzte Woche bereits den Informationsabend für die zukünftigen Erstklasseltern. Es war sehr interessant und aufschlussreich, aber ein Punkt hat mich zugegebenermaßen schon ein bisschen geschockt: der Rektor erwähnte, dass der Migrationsanteil an der Grundschule aktuell 65 % beträgt und ein Großteil mittelmäßig bis gar kein Deutsch kann und pro Klasse 2–4 Inklusionskinder mit Entwicklungsverzögerungen, Autismus, Verhaltensauffälligkeiten etc. dabei sind. Auch im Teilnehmerkreis ist mir aufgefallen, dass sehr viele Eltern da waren, die einen starken ausl. Akzent hatten oder gebrochen Deutsch gesprochen haben."[7]

["My daughter is starting school this year, and we had an information evening for future first-grade parents last week. It was very interesting and informative, but I must admit that one point shocked me a bit: the principal mentioned that the migration rate at the elementary school is currently 65%, and a large proportion [of the children] have intermediate or no German skills, with 2–4 inclusion children per class with developmental delays, autism, behavioural issues, etc. I also noticed that many parents at the event spoke with a strong foreign accent or broken German."]

Post #1 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2025-01-15* | Username: *Turoqueen*

In this case, concern for the child's educational development is used to address overarching concerns of integration, language learning, and support for students with special needs. The user expresses anxiety through a detailed narrative based on direct parenting experience. This allows them to offer criticism without overt political confrontation.

In the context of van Leeuwen's (2008) discursive and linguistic analysis, it can be seen that the phrase *65% Migrationsanteil* ("65% proportion of students with a migration background") introduces *aggregation*, transforming individuals into numerical data, while the label *Migrationsanteil* ("proportion of students with a migration background") is a form of origin-based *categorisation*, consistent with *identification* (actors defined by who they are). The sentence *ein Großteil mittelmäßig bis gar kein Deutsch kann* ("a large proportion [of the children] have intermediate or no German skills") describes linguistic deficits without identifying the actors responsible for language teaching or its integration. In this way, students are treated passively (*passivating*) and systemic or institutional causes are pushed into the background (*backgrounding*). The reference to *Inklusionskinder mit Entwicklungsverzögerungen, Autismus, Verhaltensauffälligkeiten*

7 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5962248-grundschule-mit-65-migrationsanteil-ist-das-normal-und-wie-wirkt-sich-das-auf-den-schulalltag-und-die-lernziele-aus?page=3.

("inclusion children with developmental delays, autism, behavioural issues") combines *functionalization* (based on educational roles) with *identification* (based on cognitive or behavioural characteristics), reflecting how institutional language enters parental discourse. The *nomination* "*der Rektor*" ("the principal") attributes authority to a specific institutional figure, without mentioning teaching staff or language support specialists – an example of *suppression* of key actors involved in integration processes. Phrases such as *ein Großteil… kann mittelmäßig bis gar kein Deutsch* ("a large proportion [of the children] have intermediate or no German skills") use unclear quantifiers and lack personal references. This leads to *genericization* that risks *deindividualizing* children into abstract categories of deficiency.

Another user responds more directly:

(2) "Ja in staatlichen Schulen ist das heutzutage normal. Je nach Stadtteil ist der Anteil der Migrations- und Integrationskinder hier zum Teil sogar noch höher. Ich bin ehrlich, ich würde mein Kind dort nicht einschulen lassen wenn keinerlei Integrationsbedarf besteht."[8]

["Yes, in public schools that's normal nowadays. Depending on the district, the proportion of migrant and integration children can be even higher. Honestly, I wouldn't enrol my child there if they didn't have any integration needs."]

Post #2 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2025-01-16* | Username: *wirdschon*

This post merges general observations with personal opinions about educational conditions in multicultural environments. It frames the school setting as a place that may be unsuitable for children without a migration background, suggesting that the high proportion of students with limited German language skills or special educational needs may hinder learning for other students. An attitude of exclusion can be sensed, which is mitigated by some personal tone. Overall, it reflects the tension existing between ideals of inclusion and the practical challenges in diverse school environments, and illustrates how parental discourse balances empathy and anxiety.

A third example reflects critical reflection on language policy and parental responsibility:

(3) "Ist natürlich auch ein komischer Kommentar vom Direktor: die Eltern sollen zu Hause Deutsch sprechen. Oft können sie es nicht, oder zumindest nicht gut. Denn wenn sie wirklich gut ( fehlerfrei) sprechen könnten, würden sie es sicher tun. Fehlerhaftes Deutsch sprechen zu Hause bringt aber gar nichts. Dann lieber fließend in der Muttersprache sprechen, vorlesen etc und Deutsch als Fremdsprache lernen. Das hilft oft viel besser!"

8 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5962248-grundschule-mit-65-migrationsanteil-ist-das-normal-und-wie-wirkt-sich-das-auf-den-schulalltag-und-die-lernziele-aus.

["That is a strange comment from the principal: that parents should speak German at home. Often they can't – or not well. If they could speak it fluently and without mistakes, they would. Speaking broken German at home doesn't help at all. It's better to speak fluently in the mother tongue, read aloud, etc., and then let the child learn German as a second language. That often works much better!"]

Post #3 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2025-01-17* | Username: *beeke22*

Here, the speaker questions institutional expectations and presents his or her own perspective based on linguistic knowledge. Instead of viewing German as a language spoken at home as universally beneficial, the user defends the development of the native language as a legitimate and often more effective basis for learning a second language.

The final post reflects a heightened sense of anxiety regarding the quality of education and the composition of the group:

(4) "Empfinde ich als höchst problematisch und würde mein Kind nicht auf diese Schule schicken… dass der Unterricht nur schleppend vorankommen wird ist damit ja quasi schon vorprogrammiert."[9]

["I find this highly problematic and wouldn't send my child to that school… the fact that lessons will progress very slowly is almost a foregone conclusion."]

Post #4 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2025-01-16* | Username: *Kamillala*

This example uses a statistical framework combined with emotional evaluation. The speaker predicts negative consequences for the quality of teaching, invoking a tone of concern rather than open hostility. This personalised projection illustrates how collective conditions (e. g. demographic composition) are interpreted through individual parental expectations.

Collectively, these posts demonstrate how migration discourse is often embedded in experiential narratives focusing on perceived changes in social infrastructure, linguistic environments, and educational standards. By grounding their concerns in realities, users express political sensibilities in an emotionally mediated and socially justifiable way.

While many of these examples highlight disadvantages or cultural distance, others draw on personal biography, questioning the very categories used in institutional contexts. One such case reflects symbolic privilege and internal criticism:

(5) "Meine Tochter und mein Sohn haben einen Migrationshintergrund: Mein Mann wurde in Marokko geboren und kam zum Studium nach Deutschland. Mittlerweile besitzt er die deutsche Staatsangehörigkeit. Meine Kinder haben Akademikereltern

9 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5962248-grundschule-mit-65-migrationsanteil-ist-das-normal-und-wie-wirkt-sich-das-auf-den-schulalltag-und-die-lernziele-aus.

(inkl. Promotion), wuchsen mit Deutsch als Muttersprache auf (ich bin Bio-Deutsche), sind hochintelligent und schulische / universitäre High-Performer. In der Statistik Eurer Schule sind sie ein Teil der Gruppe 'Kinder mit Migrationshintergrund'."[10]

"My daughter and son have a migration background: my husband was born in Morocco and came to Germany to study. He now holds German citizenship. Our children have academic parents (including a PhD), grew up with German as their native language (I'm a native German), and are highly intelligent, high-achievers at school and university. But according to your school's statistics, they belong to the group 'children with a migration background'."]

Post #5 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2025-01-19* | Username: *nichtsfuerungut*

This post illustrates how personal experiences are used not to highlight marginalisation, but to contest it.

The speaker initially accepts this label, only to deconstruct and reformulate it through detailed biographical context: the children's linguistic assimilation, academic success, and parents' social capital are brought to the fore, aiming to question the premises associated with this category. The mention of *Bio-Deutsche* ("ethnic Germans") and *Promotion* ("doctoral degree", "PhD") reinforces this contrast, suggesting a sense of injustice or misrecognition embedded in undifferentiated statistical classifications and critiques the flattening effect of broad categories such as *Migrationshintergrund* ("migration background").

Rather than presenting a narrative of hardship, the post reflects a corrective identity positioning – an attempt to redefine the family's social position in opposition to imposed classification. The tone is assertive yet balanced, revealing how third-space narratives can also be a site for boundary work and the redefinition of civic identity.

This personalised approach allows for the expression of politically sensitive views in a non-confrontational way and illustrates how users navigate the boundary between their private lives and public debate. This is also an example of the process of intimate citizenship (Plummer, 2003), in which the personal becomes a tool for expressing civic sentiments.

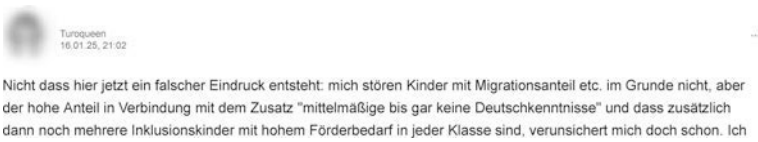
## 5.3. Linguistic and discursive strategies in online forum third spaces

In the German-language parenting forums analysed for this study, political discourse rarely takes the form of open confrontation or ideological polemics. Instead, the contributors embed politically relevant observations into autobiographical narratives, employing linguistic devices that minimize conflict and

10 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5962248-grundschule-mit-65-migrationsanteil-ist-das-normal-und-wie-wirkt-sich-das-auf-den-schulalltag-und-die-lernziele-aus.

emphasize empathy, caring, and relational positioning. This subsection identifies three recurring strategies that organise such *third-space*-discussion (Bhabha, 1994): (1) *hedging* and *disclaimers*, (2) *narrative embedding*, and (3) *relational alignment.*

*Hedging*, often implemented through explicit disclaimers, allows speakers to express doubts while preemptively dismissing accusations of bias. In the thread *Grundschule mit 65% Migrationsanteil. ISt das normal und wie wirkt sich das auf den Schulalltag und die Lernziele aus?* ("Elementary school with 65% of students having a migration background. Is that normal, and how does it affect everyday school life and learning objectives?"), user *Turoqueen* writes[11]:

(6) 


["Not that I want to give the wrong impression: I'm not fundamentally bothered by children with a migration background, etc., but the high proportion combined with the note 'moderate to no German skills' and the fact that there are also several inclusion children with high support needs in each class does unsettle me."]

Post #6 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2025-01-16* | Username: *Turoqueen*

The introductory disclaimer – the concessive clause *Nicht dass hier jetzt ein falscher Eindruck entsteht…* ("Not that I want to give the wrong impression") – contains a classic mitigation of threat: it anticipates reprimand and legitimizes the upcoming criticism. The assurance *mich stören Kinder mit Migrationsanteil etc. im Grunde nicht* ("I'm not generally bothered by children with a migration background, etc.") distances the speaker from the discriminatory intention, while the affective verb *verunsichern* ("unsettle/make unsure") functions as an epistemic attitude marker, framing the concern as a personal concern rather than a moral judgement. This hedged formulation exemplify the hybrid communication norms of online third spaces, where participants must tailor criticism to expectations of politeness and mutual support.

Within van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor model, migrant children are *passivated*, presented as contextual variables rather than agents, while the poster positions herself as a "concerned parent," claiming epistemic authority without provoking overt confrontation. The simultaneous enactment of critique and solidarity, the concessive safeguards and the coexistence of the degrading hedges

11 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5962248-grundschule-mit-65-migrationsanteil-ist-das-normal-und-wie-wirkt-sich-das-auf-den-schulalltag-und-die-lernziele-aus.

(*im Grunde, doch schon* – "basically, but already")[12], illustrate how linguistic form and social action intertwined: hedging and disclaimers maintain community cohesion while enabling the articulation of politically sensitive concerns.

The use of quantitative language *hoher Anteil* ("high proportion"), *mehrere Inklusionskinder* ("several/few inclusion children"[13]) reduces individuals to statistics, enacting *aggregation.* Moreover, the children are described in vague, unspecific way as *mittelmäßige bis gar keine Deutschkenntnisse* ("moderate to no German skills"), which contributes to a *generalization* that deindividualizes and homogenizes. Institutional agents responsible for language acquisition or inclusion policy (e. g. teachers, policymakers) are completely absent from the narrative. Their roles are *suppressed*, or *backgrounded*, shifting the focus of interpretation from systemic responsibility to the presence of perceived 'problematic' groups.

Another example from the same thread demonstrates *relational politeness* (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and *identity positioning.* The user states[14]:

(7) [redacted] Turoqueen
17.01.25, 09:02

Ich zeige auf niemandem mit dem Finger. Aber natürlich mache ich mir Gedanken, ob meine Tochter in der Schule zurecht kommt, ordentlich lesen und schreiben lernt und ausreichend gefördert wird - in der 3. oder 4. Klasse oder gar später brauche ich mir die Gedanken dann nicht machen, denn dann ist das Kind m. E. schon den Brunnen gefallen.

["I'm not pointing fingers at anyone. But of course I'm concerned about whether my daughter will manage at school, learn to read and write properly, and receive adequate support – by third or fourth grade, or even later, I don't think it will make much sense to worry anymore, because by then, in my view, the damage will already have been done."]

Post #7 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2025-01-17* | Username: *Turoqueen*

In this case, the sender engages in the relationship by emphasizing his or her parental care. The preemptive disclaimer *Ich zeige auf niemandem mit dem Finger* ("I'm not pointing fingers at anyone") functions as a *disclaimer* and

12 The German expressions *im Grunde* and *doch schon* function as hedging devices. The former is best translated as 'fundamentally' or 'essentially', signalling general acceptance or lack of objection, while the latter – rendered as 'actually', 'after all', or 'still' – softens or qualifies the speaker's emotional stance, often indicating latent concern or discomfort.

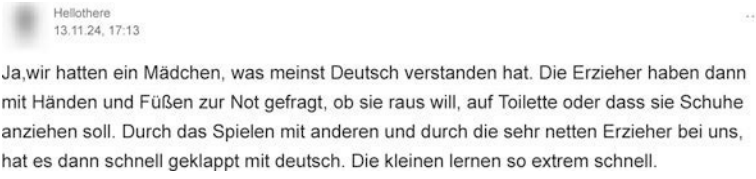
13 The term *Inklusionskinder* (lit. 'inclusion children') is commonly used in German educational discourse to refer to children with special educational needs who are integrated into mainstream classes. In English, the literal translation 'inclusion children' is sometimes used informally, but more accurate and widely accepted equivalents are 'children with special needs,' 'students receiving inclusive education,' or 'students in inclusive settings,' depending on the context.

14 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5962248-grundschule-mit-65-migrationsanteil-ist-das-normal-und-wie-wirkt-sich-das-auf-den-schulalltag-und-die-lernziele-aus?page=2.

*hedging device*, a potential threat and signals a non-confrontational tone. Such disclaimers are typical of third-space discourse, in which participants expect resistance and emphasize that their position is personal, not accusatory. The sender's use of first-person pronouns and the light verb construction *sich Gedanken machen* ("to worry"/"to be concerned") reflects an empathetic and emotionally anchored voice. This expression, common in German parental discourse, is a *Funktionsverbgefüge* ("light verb construction") that emphasises introspective care rather than external blame. Linguistically, the concessive connector *aber* ("but") and the abbreviation *m. E.* (*meines Erachtens*, "in my opinion") further weaken the impending judgment. The rhetorical structure avoids direct accusation while expressing doubt about the institution's capacity, subtly invoking migration as a contextual backdrop. The emphasis therefore shifts from systemic criticism to caring for the child, strengthening a discourse based on emotional resonance rather than political aggression.

*Narrative embedding* is another common strategy observed in the dataset. Instead of engaging in abstract discussions about migration policy, users often talk about personal experiences involving schools, kindergartens, and healthcare systems. These micro-narratives locate broader political concerns and frame them in emotionally resonant and non-confrontational terms.

The following example, taken from the thread *Versteht kein Deutsch und Kita* ("Doesn't understand German and daycare")[15], illustrates *narrative embedding* and the use of *positive evaluative framing*.

(8) 


["Yes, we had a girl who barely understood any German. The educators would use gestures – asking if she wanted to go outside, go to the toilet, or put on her shoes if necessary. Thanks to playing with the other children and the very kind educators we have, she picked up German quickly. Little ones learn incredibly fast."]

Post #8 | urbia.de – Forum *Kleinkind* | Date: *2024-11-24* | Username: *Hellothere*

The narrator constructs a mini-narrative in which linguistic differences are presented as a challenge that can be overcome. The use of intensifiers (*so extrem schnell* – "so extremely fast," *sehr netten* – "very nice") and the evaluative verb *geklappt* (from *klappen* – an informal expression meaning: "worked out," "went

15 https://www.urbia.de/forum/3-kleinkind/5942889-versteht-kein-deutsch-und-kita.

well," and "was successful") signals a positive attitude, emphasizing the child's agency and institutional support. Integration is presented as a relational process, supported by empathy and everyday interactions, rather than as a source of conflict or deficit.

This rhetorical approach is characteristic of third-space discourse, where affective storytelling, politeness, and mitigation allow users to address civic concerns (migration or educational inequality) within the context of shared parenting experiences. Rather than relying on categorical or essentialist claims, speakers position themselves through lived, local relationships that resonate with other members of the community. Expressions of empathy and building relationships further shapes the tone of political discussion. Users show solidarity by validating the experiences of others (*Das kenne ich auch…* / "I've experienced that too…") and using inclusive language (*wir als Eltern* / "we as parents"). This fosters group cohesion and strengthens the forum's hybrid role as a space of peer support and civic reflection.

In sum, these linguistic and discursive strategies create a communicative environment in which politically sensitive issues can be explored without generating antagonism. They reflect the hybrid character of third spaces – balancing personal narrative with collective negotiation of identity, belonging, and shared social values.

## 5.4. Identity construction and social actor representation

Within the threads analysed, users not only express opinions about migration, but also engage in acts of identity negotiation and positioning, both on behalf of themselves and the groups they describe. This is evident in the way they linguistically construct categories such as *wir Eltern* ("we as parents"), *die Migranten* ("the migrants"), or *unsere Kinder* ("our children"). Such phrases are not neutral; they are strong determinants of inclusion and exclusion, belonging and otherness.

Drawing on van Leeuwen's (2008) *social actors theory*, this section examines how agency is attributed, social roles are categorised, and individuals or groups are activated or passivated. The use of collective nouns and vague quantifiers plays a central role in shaping the audience's perception of group identity and legitimacy.

A post on urbia.de is a clear example of group-based *generalisation* and *backgrounding:*

(9) "Dort sind über 90 % Kinder mit Migrationshintergrund aus eher bildungsschwachen Elternhäusern, es ist mehr Gewalt an der Tagesordnung, dafür ist"[16]

["There are over 90% children with a migration background from rather educationally disadvantaged families, violence is more common there, and that is…"]

Post #9 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2023-12-11* | Username: *Siena*

In this example, children are not *individualised* but *aggregated* through the quantifier *über 90%* ("over 90%"), which reduces individual variability to a statistical abstraction. This is consistent with van Leeuwen's concept of *aggregation*, a subcategory of *assimilation*, in which actors are represented as numerical entities rather than persons. Furthermore, the term *Kinder mit Migrationshintergrund aus bildungsschwachen Elternhäusern* ("children with a migration background from educationally disadvantaged families") combines *identification* (via ethnic or migration background) with the *functionalization* of the parents' educational status. Children's identities are thus constructed through inherited attributes, not personal characteristics or agency. They are *passivated*, presented as products of social conditions rather than as active subjects. The mention of *mehr Gewalt an der Tagesordnung* ("more violence is the norm") implicitly links this violence to group identity rather than to situational or structural causes. This reflects a strategy of *backgrounding* or even *suppression* of contextual or systemic factors (e.g., school funding, social services), and instead highlighting perceived group deficiencies. By omitting any mention of the institutional or societal context that might mediate these results, the poster reinforces the narrative of cultural causality. Finally, the spatial deixis *dort* ("there") contributes to *dissociation* by creating a discursive separation between the speaker's own position and that of the school environment being described. This highlights how identity construction functions relationally, defining who is *not* part of an imagined in-group.

In contrast, the comment below adopts a more defensive relational strategy:

(10) "Dein Kind wurde noch nicht mal eingeschult und du zeigst schon mit dem Finger auf Kinder mit Migrationshintergrund und Förderbedarf."[17]

["Your child hasn't even started school yet, and you're already pointing your finger at children with a migration background and special needs."]

Post #10 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2025-01-17* | Username: *kati543*

16 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5843788-wuerdet-ihr-eine-schule-mit-hohem-migrationsanteil-nehmen?page=2.

17 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5962248-grundschule-mit-65-migrationsanteil-ist-das-normal-und-wie-wirkt-sich-das-auf-den-schulalltag-und-die-lernziele-aus?page=2.

This post contains a relational correction directed at another user, addressing group labels while also alleviating guilt. This reflects the way forum users police the boundaries of acceptable speech. By explicitly naming "children with a migration background and special needs," the author acknowledges existing categories but questions their use as a basis for preventive assessment. The institution is attributed to the parent rather than the children, which again passivates the latter, but with a more empathetic intention.

The next post in the thread *Grundschule mit 65% Migrationsanteil. ISt das normal und wie wirkt sich das auf den Schulalltag und die Lernziele aus?* ("Elementary school with 65% of students having a migration background. Is that normal, and how does it affect everyday school life and learning objectives?") foregrounds structural rather than cultural explanations:

> (11) "Wenige Jahre Stützunterricht ab drei machen den Unterschied, ob Kinder von Migranten voll am Leben im deutschsprachigen Raum teilhaben können, erfolgreich die Schule besuchen können oder eben nicht."[18]
>
> ["A few years of support classes from the age of three make the difference between whether children of migrants can fully participate in life in the German-speaking world, successfully attend school – or not."]
>
> Post #11 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule Forum* | Date: *2025-01-16* | Username: *schweinenaeschen*

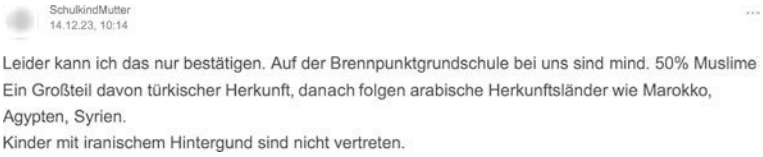
This comment illustrates empowerment: migrant children are presented as potential actors whose development depends on educational opportunities. The sentence focuses on inclusion and conditional agency, dependent on institutional support. The use of the phrase *voll am Leben teilhaben können* ("fully participate in life") introduces a civic perspective, framing integration both as a right and as a result of systemic contribution. Unlike many posts, this one avoids framing deficits and instead attributes potential agency.

Another strategy evident in the posts is *aggregation* – users make *generalizations* about groups (e. g., *die Araber* ("the Arabs"), *die Flüchtlinge* ("the refugees"), *die Ausländer* ("the foreigners")[19]) without differentiating between individuals or contexts. This homogenisation obscures variation within a group and flattens diverse experiences into essentialised identities. However, moments of individualisation also emerge, offering more detailed, differentiated representations. One such example from the thread *Würdet ihr eine Schule mit hohem*

18 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5962248-grundschule-mit-65-migrationsanteil-ist-das-normal-und-wie-wirkt-sich-das-auf-den-schulalltag-und-die-lernziele-aus?page=2.

19 When used with the definite article, such forms may produce stereotypical group effects in colloquial or media discourse, and can carry dehumanizing or exclusionary connotations.

*Migrationsanteil nehmen?* ("Would you choose a school with a high proportion of students with a migration background?")[20] is:

(12) 


["Unfortunately, I can only confirm that. At the underprivileged elementary school near us, at least 50% are Muslims. A large portion of them are of Turkish origin, followed by Arab countries of origin such as Morocco, Egypt, Syria. Children with Iranian background are not represented."]

Post #12 | urbia.de – Forum *Kids & Schule* | Date: *2023-12-14* | Username: *Schulkind-Mutter*

In this example, the speaker begins with a *generalization* (*mind. 50% Muslime* – "at least 50% Muslims"), but then differentiates by nationality, creating a taxonomy of origins that suggests familiarity with sociocultural distinctions. While this may appear as *individualization*, the mention of absence (*Kinder mit iranischem Hintergrund sind nicht vertreten* – "Children with an Iranian background are not represented") paradoxically reinforces *categorization* by ethnicity. This discursive move combines *aggregation* with selective *specification*, reflecting how users construct social knowledge through comparative ethnicity.

From the perspective of social actor theory, this example reflects both *classification* and *backgrounding:* the groups mentioned (Turks, Arabs, Iranians) are referred to only because of their origin, without any causal role assigned to them. Children remain *passivated*, described in demographic terms, not as participants in social life. The speaker, in contrast, sees himself as a knowledgeable person – someone who can verify statistical or sociological facts based on personal observations, thus claiming epistemic authority.

The term *Brennpunktgrundschule*[21] ("underprivileged or problem school") functions as a socio-spatial marker, implicitly linking ethnicity with exclusion. This reinforces the boundaries of belonging while appearing descriptive. The use of the adverb *leider* ("unfortunately") introduces a value-laden attitude, portraying the demographic composition as deplorable, which signals implicit value judgments while maintaining the appearance of objectivity.

20 https://www.urbia.de/forum/6-kids-schule/5843788-wuerdet-ihr-eine-schule-mit-hohem-migrationsanteil-nehmen?page=2.

21 *Brennpunktgrundschule* refers to an elementary school located in a socially and/or economically disadvantaged area, often associated with a high proportion of students with migration backgrounds or complex support needs.

Finally, a comment with a more neutral yet strategic connection to identity illustrates how discursive positioning operates in geographically differentiated categories:

(13) "Bei meinen Kindern an der Schule gibt es wenige SuS mit Migrationshintergrund (und diese sind gut integriert, ländlicher Raum)."[22]

["At my children's school, there are few students with a migration background (and they are well integrated, rural area)."]

Post #13 | rund-ums-baby.de – Forum *Aktuelles* | Date: *2023-10-09* | Username: *cymbeline*

In this example, the user constructs a spatially anchored contrast by combining a demographic observation ("few students with a migration background") with a positive evaluative statement ("well integrated"), implicitly differentiating their experience from urban contexts often associated with integration challenges. The phrase *ländlicher Raum* ("rural area") functions as an implicit legitimising frame, suggesting that a rural environment may foster more effective or harmonious integration processes.

From the perspective of van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor theory, several discursive strategies are at play: the phrase *SuS mit Migrationshintergrund* ("students with a migration background")[23] classifies a group based on a single attribute, abstracting from individual identities or experiences. By referring to the actors as *SuS* (*Schüler und Schülerinnen* – "pupils") the author conceptualizes them in terms of their *institutional* role, adapting to their function in the school context, rather than their agency as social actors. The group undergoes collectivization (*assimilation*), which reduces individual differentiation in integration experience or origin. Using the phrase *gut integriert* ("well integrated") in the passive voice omits the entities or structures responsible for integration (e. g., teachers, parents, institutional support), thus relegating the systemic dimension of integration to the background. The sender identifies themselves with a successful, local educational model, *bei meinen Kindern an der Schule…* ("at my children's school"), thereby confirming his epistemic authority and claiming a position of credibility as an engaged parent.

This example illustrates how interlocutors can maintain narrative distance from controversial *generalizations* while simultaneously participating in boundary-setting discourses. By prioritizing successful integration in his place of

22 https://www.rund-ums-baby.de/eltern-forum/aktuell/was-ist-heute-in-den-schulen-los__1907746.

23 *SuS* stands for *Schüler und Schülerinnen* (male and female pupils) and corresponds to the neutral English term *students*. *SuS mit Migrationshintergrund* is a standard term in German educational discourse referring to students who are officially classified as having a migration background, often based on parental origin or language spoken at home.

residence, the speaker subtly emphasizes shared civic values while avoiding overt criticism or confrontation. These types of rhetorical maneuvers exemplify the low-conflict, identity-preserving strategies characteristic of third-space communication, and demonstrates how linguistic and discursive choices shape perceptions of inclusivity, place, and belonging.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter has examined how migration is discussed and discursively constructed in German-language parenting forums, with particular emphasis on linguistic strategies, identity positioning, and the representation of social actors. Drawing on the theoretical framework of third spaces, these forums are conceptualised as hybrid discursive environments, semi-private, spaces with an emotional dimension where personal experience and public discourse intersect.

In response to the first research question, the analysis demonstrates that migration is rarely discussed in ideological or political terms. Instead, it is framed by everyday concerns, especially those related to parenting, education, and neighbourhood life. Political discourse is thus domesticated and personalized, allowing users to express concerns without resorting to overtly polarized narratives. Some participants reinforce dominant societal discourses (e. g., linking high migration rates to declining educational attainment), while others challenge essentialist or stigmatizing categories through individualized or counter-narratives.

Regarding the second question, the forums reveal a consistent use of discursive mitigation techniques. Users frequently use hedging, disclaimers, narrative embedding, and relational alignment to soften potentially controversial claims. Such strategic politeness serves both to maintain community cohesion and to manage the risks of social judgement. At the same time, the chapter illustrates moments of discursive boundary work in which users reaffirm identity and group membership, sometimes reinforcing exclusion and other times formulating more inclusive or critical positions.

In response to the third question, the forums exemplify a gendered dimension to political communication. Parenting spaces, often feminized in their communicative ethos, emphasize potential empathy, care, and relational positioning. Users apply personal narrative as a bridge to political reflection, embedding macro-level issues (e. g. migration, integration, educational inequalities) within a micro-level storytelling. Language becomes a medium for negotiating civic identity in intimate terms, what Plummer (2003) calls “intimate citizenship”.

Applying van Leeuwen’s *social actor theory* (2008) for the analysis revealed how migrants and their children are variably passivated (e. g., as subjects of state

support, or as statistical burdens), aggregated (e.g. as undifferentiated ethnic blocs), or occasionally individualised (e.g., as engaged mothers or high-achieving students). These patterns reflect both the reproduction and resistance to dominant representations, with users positioning themselves in relation to institutional frameworks, social norms, and their own experience.

In summary, German-language parenting forums function as discursive third spaces in which political discussions emerge not despite, but through personal and emotional engagement. Users navigate the tension between critique and care, expressing political anxieties in ways that are linguistically careful, emotionally resonant, and socially meaningful. The communication practices observed here reveal how gender-diverse digital audiences contribute to shaping civic discourse – not by replicating mainstream political discussion, but by transforming it into the language of everyday life.

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Agnieszka Głowala

# The Semantic Space of Peace Education in the Reflection of Preschool and Early School Education Students

**Abstract**
In a world increasingly marked by armed conflicts, the teacher's role in implementing axiological education—including peace education—has become particularly significant. This approach fosters both national and personal identity. This chapter examines key educational aspects of teacher preparation, with a focus on the linguistic space created through dialogue with children and the understanding of essential concepts and practices related to peace education. It is assumed that language serves as a fundamental pillar of a culture of peace and a vital tool for educating children toward peaceful values. The study aimed to examine how female preschool and early school education students understand peace, envision the process of educating children for peace, perceive the teacher's role, and define the expected outcomes of peace education. A solid understanding of peace education concepts enables future preschool and early school teachers to create linguistic, conceptual, and emotional conditions that support children in developing peace-related values within today's cultural context. A qualitative pedagogical approach was employed using document analysis.

**Keywords:** value, peace, peace education, teacher, culture of peace

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, peace education has become a key priority at all levels of schooling in Poland. This shift has been driven by both international initiatives promoting global security and growing unrest, including the outbreak of war in a neighbouring country. As Cudak (2016, p. 116) observes, educating children and adolescents for peace involves promoting values and fostering attitudes of kindness and respect toward others. These efforts aim to prepare individuals and groups to work together to address threats to peace, both personal and societal.

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Preparing teachers for peace education requires the recognition that sustainable, total social peace is probably unattainable. Conflicts, tensions, and disagreements are permanently embedded in human life. They arise from the complexity of factors at the micro- as well as the macro-social level (Piejka 2017, pp. 41–42). Human beings must find themselves in a world of constant changes, meet new challenges, and become familiar with otherness. Doing these tasks triggers a range of complex emotions and makes people aware of the limits of their own agency.

The role of schools is to implement peace education and thus build a culture of peace. However, in order to fulfil this task, the teacher must first undertake this education themselves. They need the right skills to promote peace, to take personal responsibility for peacebuilding. Their work for peace begins in pre-school and early childhood education. Its role is to prepare children to perceive peace as a fundamental value and to foster pro-peace attitudes.

This study examined the views of female preschool and early school education students on key aspects of peace education, including the value of peace, approaches to educating children for peace, the teacher's role, and expected outcomes. The study contributes to the broader discussion on preparing teachers to meaningfully integrate peace education into early childhood curricula. Particular attention was given to communication between teachers and children and among children themselves. From this perspective, language plays a crucial role. Through language teachers express their attitudes towards others, name new phenomena, and attribute certain meanings to the peace phenomenon. Emotional markers attached to situations and actions are also important in fostering a culture of peace in early education.

## 2. The role of discourse in shaping peace-oriented educational practices

The concept of peace has gained growing interest in pedagogical discourse in recent years. Scholars who have contributed to a better understanding of the educational perspective on peace education include, among others, Eugenia Wesołowska (1989, 1993), Irena Wojnar (2000, 2016), Agnieszka Piejka (2017), Ryszard Rosa (2007), and Halina Gajdamowicz (1997).

The concept of discourse takes on particular significance in the context of educational research. It is useful for analysing how values, knowledge and social practices – including peace education – are communicated and shaped in educational environments. The concept of discourse has become an increasingly common focus in educational research. Teresa Hejnicka-Bezwińska (2008,

p. 467), drawing on Habermas's theory of communication, identifies four types of educational discourse: normative discourse, which addresses values, goals, and educational norms; instrumental-technical discourse, which concerns strategies, methods, means, and principles for achieving educational goals; practical-moral discourse, which requires understanding and agreement while ensuring the elimination of potential communication distortions; and reflective discourse, focusing on critical reflection within educational contexts.

From the perspective of pedagogical research on educational processes, three additional types of discourse are distinguished: (1) discourse as a genre of speech used in schools, (2) discourse as an interactional event, and (3) discourse as a form of expression and the production of educational knowledge shaped by historical conditions. These forms of discourse reflect three key educational processes: (a) natural growth and integration of individuals into family and cultural contexts, (b) intentional processes related to institutionalised education and upbringing, and (c) socialisation, particularly in relation to theories of subjectivity.

Helena Ostrowicka (2014, p. 59) proposes an archaeological, institutional, and interactional approach to educational discourse. Similarly, Justyna Dobrołowicz (2016, p. 38) highlights that educational discourse can be understood as (1) a specific way of constructing statements about education, often using argumentation that includes persuasive or expressive elements and shaping perceptions of social order and truth; (2) a genre of speech used in schools and educational practice; and (3) an interactional event facilitating the exchange of messages within educational processes.

Discourse analysis provides insights into both the content of messages and their social functions as expressed through language. Its aim is not only to interpret socially constructed meanings or explore how participants form their identities but also to understand broader processes within education (Dobrołowicz, 2016, p. 39). Discourse analysis in educational contexts addresses themes such as socialisation, upbringing, teaching and learning, globalisation, professionalisation, and nationalisation (Ostrowicka, 2014, p. 60).

## 3. The essence of values and the culture of peace

In today's axiological education, it is essential to promote flexible, multi-dimensional thinking and awareness of living in a multicultural, changing world. While values are often seen as universal, they are understood and applied in diverse ways and serve more as sources of meaning than fixed moral guides. A key aim of peace education is to develop attitudes grounded in understanding values, which are the foundation of meaningful communication. Such reflective

attitudes grow through both educational activities and the learner's personal development (Gołaszewska, 1994, p. 25). A central principle of peace education is the shared discovery of peace-related values through communication, fostering moral and axiological awareness.

The concept of peace is difficult to define and cannot be easily reduced to singular terms. It is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that requires, above all, openness and flexibility (Polus-Rogalska, 2002, p. 52). Traditionally, it was understood narrowly as the absence of war (*absentia belli*) (Piejka, 2017, p. 27). In this sense, peace simply referred to the lack of conflict or violence (Piwowarski, 1986, pp. 6–7). However, a broader understanding indicates that it is not enough to avoid conflict situations. True peace requires adopting positive values that shape human relationships.

Peace is associated with both individual and social needs (Kostecki, 1990, p. 55). From an educational perspective, it is identified with harmony, modesty and the common good. At its root lies the idea of the coexistence of individuals sharing common rights and values (Stańczyk, 1996, p. 53). Peacekeeping is possible on the condition that others' freedom is recognised and that there is a willingness to cooperate, to negotiate and to satisfy diverse interests. A rapidly changing world requires the promotion of a particular concept of peace. Peace should be seen as a dynamic and continuous process that addresses personal, social, cultural, political and global relationships (Piejka, 2021, pp. 41–42). From an educational point of view, this interpretation entails focusing not only on 'education for peace' but also on 'education for peacebuilding'. The idea here is to emphasise that peace is always a work in progress. In contemporary education, the concept of a peace culture also deserves special attention. According to UNESCO (Mayor & Bindé, 2001, p. 468), a culture of peace refers to such phenomena as coexistence, freedom, justice, democracy, tolerance and solidarity. It rejects violence and instead emphasises the prevention of conflict, the promotion of dialogue and negotiation, and the development of positive social attitudes. It also ensures full rights and participation for all. As Irena Wojnar (2000, p. 66) notes, a culture of peace is not a fixed program but a creative, evolving concept that encourages innovation and constructive change. This approach can be effectively applied in educational practice.

## 4. Educating for peace values

Today's world is characterised by uncertainty, anxiety and unpredictability. It is also marked by complexity, a multiplicity of concepts, information and opportunities. A consequence of socio-cultural changes is the promotion of the ideas of individualism and freedom, understood as the ability to make autonomous de-

cisions and take control over one's own life (Szymański, 2012, pp. 12–13). Human rights, freedom, solidarity, dialogue, and mutual understanding are fundamental values that underpin the culture of peace. These are not merely abstract concepts, but rather qualities that individuals experience in concrete, personal situations and interpret in relation to their own needs and beliefs. In this context, it is essential to develop critical thinking, creativity, and emotional awareness. In the context of education, cognitive, emotional and moral dispositions of the individuals should be engaged (Piejka, 2021, pp. 49–50). Of course, the required competencies must be developed in a safe and respectful atmosphere. Only then can students learn to acknowledge differences and try to understand other perspectives (Piejka, 2021, p. 51).

Teaching peace is a challenge. It is hampered by phenomena such as social contradictions, cultural ambivalence, migration, refugee crises and security threats. According to Jacques Delors (2001), the key principles of peace education should include fostering public awareness, encouraging schools to pursue peace education and constantly updating curricula and teaching methods.

Teachers must also accept that peace education is an open and evolving process. This means that the curriculum cannot address all the complex aspects of promoting peace. The ability to act for peace depends on an appreciation of slowly unfolding processes. As Piejka (2021, p. 47) emphasises, teachers need both sensitivity and practical competencies. They must recognise their influence and take responsibility for promoting peace. Their tasks include:

- Encouraging young people to take responsibility for peace.
- Helping students recognise situations that promote peace and develop imagination, creativity, and agency.
- Helping students understand and manage emotions and motivations, especially when facing differences or conflicts.
- Strengthening reflection and problem-solving skills.
- Using peace education programs that support dialogue and cooperation.
- Fostering long-term thinking and responsibility for future generations.

Despite its importance, peace education often faces challenges. Many students struggle to reflect on their own values or organise them into clear frameworks for making decisions, especially when faced with value conflicts.

Katarzyna Olbrycht (2012, pp. 89–104) offers a useful approach to value-based education, including peace values. She identifies five key elements:

(1) Learning the language of values—understanding and using value-related vocabulary.
(2) Raising awareness of value hierarchies—recognising which values are more important in different situations.

(3) Developing sensitivity to values—learning to notice and respond to values, starting in early family experiences.
(4) Acting on values—applying values consistently in behaviour.
(5) Engaging with role models—interacting with people who exemplify key values.

This approach highlights the importance of language in peace education. In a rapidly changing world, reflective thinking—expressed through language—is essential for developing new ways of understanding and acting (Dróżka, 2006, p. 31).

## 5. Assumptions of the pilot study

As discussed earlier, the foundation of peace education lies in shaping a value system and fostering responsibility—the building blocks of a culture of peace. This culture can be understood as a meaningful space where the educational process takes place. The teacher's reflections, expressed through language that reveals an understanding of key concepts related to peace education, provide insight into their readiness to promote pro-peace attitudes.

### 5.1. Objective and method of the study

The pilot study aimed to examine how female students of preschool and early school education understand the value of peace, envision educating children for peace, perceive their own role as teachers, and define the expected outcomes of peace education.

Based on this objective, the following research questions were formulated:
(1) How do female students define the value of peace?
(2) How do they describe the process of educating for peace, including the teacher's role?
(3) How do they describe the expected outcomes of peace education?

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The primary research method was pedagogical document analysis, following an internal technique involving detailed examination, interpretation, and explanation of the content (Łobocki, 2001, pp. 213–345).

The analysis focused on informal, intentionally written documents prepared by the participants. These consisted of individual written responses, with no limits on length or time.

The study included 68 female students of preschool and early school education, selected through purposive sampling.

## 6. Description of the results of the author's research

### 6.1. Understanding the concept of peace

Students were asked to define the value of peace. Many provided incomplete or superficial responses, and 13.2% did not attempt to answer at all. More than a quarter (27.1%) described peace primarily in terms of its importance, using phrases such as 'important,' 'the greatest value,' 'extremely important,' 'fundamental,' or 'superior to other values.' Approximately 65% of students combined elements of both negative and positive peace in their definitions. Common examples included:

> "A world where I live free from poverty, with shared development, mutual support, respect for cultural and religious diversity, and acceptance of others."

> "The absence of conflicts, but also the building of harmonious relationships, empathy, and respect for others."

> "Peace is not just the absence of conflicts and wars but also a state of mind."

Some students formulated more complex and comprehensive definitions emphasizing both external and internal aspects of peace:

> "Peace is not only the absence of conflict or aggression but also a culture of respect, empathy, and cooperation. Peace is a world without wars, hatred, and rivalry."

> "Peace guarantees security, which is essential for human development. When we feel safe, we can grow properly."

Around 42% of the statements linked peace to values and behaviours important to both individuals and society. Common themes included respect, empathy, cooperation, stability, security, and personal growth. Notable examples were:

> "Peace is respect for others, including their principles, appearance, and beliefs."

> "It means solving problems together without violence."

> "Peace is stability and calm that promotes human well-being."

> "It is freedom, the ability to build relationships, and resolve conflicts peacefully."

Only one respondent explicitly described peace in negative terms, stating: "no blood, no killings, no murders."

Overall, two dominant approaches to defining peace emerged. The first combined negative and positive peace within a single concept. The second focused entirely on positive aspects. Recurring ideas included conflict, the absence of violence, respect, empathy, cooperation, understanding, security, stability, and personal well-being.

It is concerning that over 13% of future teachers did not attempt to define peace. This gap may reflect not only a lack of content knowledge but also insufficient analytical, critical thinking, and academic language skills—key competencies required for future educators.

### 6.2. Describing peace education practices and the teacher's role

The aim of this study was also to explore how respondents perceive the teacher's role in peace education and what areas they find most important in this regard. First of all, the cognitive dimension of child development was highlighted. The respondents reported the importance of providing knowledge about the nature of war and peace. The cognitive aspects were also connected to the necessity of raising children's awareness about the world and their position in it. Further, the quest for discussing challenging topics openly was mentioned. Such an aspect was reflected in statements such as: "We should present the real world, including war, assassinations, and other dangers," "We must make it clear that war leads to nothing," and "Topics should cover not only war but also aggression and criticism."

In the opinion of the respondents, it is impossible to teach about peace without emphasising the positive aspects of this phenomenon. They enumerated such values as respect, empathy, and tolerance. Common responses included: "The teacher should explain to the pupils how important peace is both in the country and the world. First and foremost, they should teach tolerance and respect for others," "We are expected to help children to understand that conflicts are not always necessary and we can resolve them through dialogue," "It is most important to teach the students about human rights and responsibilities," and "We should explain to children what peace is, how we can achieve it, and show the consequences of its absence." Some students also linked promoting peace with teaching about patriotism, national traditions and other cultures.

About 35% of students specifically reported that the most important task of the teacher is to develop children's understanding of peace and conflict. Pupils should be able to attribute a concrete meaning to the concept of peace. One participant summarized: "Understanding is a key step in building a conscious attitude toward conflicts and resolving them."

Over 60% of respondents associated peace education with value education. According to them, children should be introduced into the world of fundamental values and be encouraged to express their personal beliefs. It is essential to support pupils' emotional, moral, and motivational development. There is no sense in scaring or upsetting children telling them about the negative consequences of a war. On the contrary, it is the role of the teacher to focus on positive aspects of the presence of peace. Educators should foster students' empathy, promote harmony, and teach respect for others. The participants expressed their opinions as follows:

> "Children should be educated in the spirit of empathy and taught how to resolve conflicts."
>
> "The most important task is to teach children to recognize and manage their emotions."
>
> "Students should be sensitized to the suffering of others."

Among the most frequently mentioned values were: respect, love, tolerance, morality, empathy, kindness, safety, acceptance, and openness.

Many respondents highlighted the importance of social relationships among children. In their opinion, teachers should foster dialogue, tolerance, and constructive conflict resolution. *Positive and harmonious relationships* in peer *groups* are seen as the best teaching effect, contributing to peace education. The respondents expressed their views on this matter as follows: "Children should be taught responsibility and conflict resolution," "The most important task of a teacher is to promote dialogue and tolerance,"
"It is important to develop communication skills", and "We should develop children's emotional skills and foster values such as empathy, tolerance, and cooperation".

In the second part of the interview, respondents were also asked to describe specific activities related to peace education and to propose practical methodological strategies. In the second part of the interview, respondents were also asked to describe specific activities for peace education and to suggest practical methodological strategies. The ideas listed by the interviewees included carrying out various projects on global issues such as reconciliation in the world, democratization, mutual respect, cooperation across countries and religions, as well as pollution and disease. Projects should be run and implemented through dialogue and open communication. It is worth mentioning the importance of creating a supportive educational environment, demonstrating values through everyday actions and organising thematic talks on acceptance and communication. The respondents also suggested arranging meetings with school psychologists, incorporating various games, role-playing, creating special classes

dedicated to the issue of peace, organising historical excursions, and facilitating international exchanges.

According to the interviewees teachers play a central role in peace education. They were described as mentors, role models, and guides. Common descriptions included: "The teacher can act as a mentor promoting peace, empathy, and tolerance through their behaviour and actions," "They should embody warmth and patience," and "Create a positive classroom atmosphere." One participant effectively summarized this view: "The teacher should support the development of students as active citizens ready to promote peace and social justice, both locally and globally." In the opinion of the respondents, their task is to foster cooperation, emotional intelligence, and moral growth. Teachers are expected to serve as an example for others, to demonstrate peace-related values through their teaching practices and personal life.

Several respondents also emphasized the necessity of engaging parents and broader communities in the peace education. They noted that this process should be extended beyond the classroom: "Adults should be involved because they are role models for children, especially parents and teachers," and "Peace should be a shared value for both parents and teachers." Both students and their parents are expected to adopt positive attitudes towards other people, countries and religions.

### 6.3. Formulations describing the expected outcomes of peace education

The respondents pointed out numerous benefits resulting from peace education. They primarily focused on advantages associated with group relations, highlighting a wide range of skills that can be useful in problematic, tense, and stressful situations. First of all, they indicated possibilities related to conflict resolution through dialogue. Respondents identified several positive aspects of peace education, such as a reduction in aggression among children and adolescents, improvement of interpersonal relationships, and greater mutual understanding. The collected research material included the following statements: "resolving conflicts through dialogue," "building a friendly atmosphere free from aggression," "strengthening positive relationships," "learning to respect others," "encouraging to constructive communication and fostering openness towards others." Additionally, in the opinion of the respondents, positive outcomes of peace education are closely linked to such essential values as group solidarity, security, and empathy. Without these qualities, it would be highly difficult to advocate for global peace and embrace diversity.

The interviewees not only focused on global benefits resulting from peace education but also referred to their own life situation. They emphasized the

development of such personal and social competencies as the ability to cope with emotions, to be more aware of their own emotions, to be more empathic, to communicate their own thoughts in constructive manner and to engage in activities promoting peace. Among the most frequently cited statements were:

> "Experiencing a peace atmosphere makes it easier to me to cope with stress."
>
> "People should learn to be empathetic and understand what peace means for all of us."
>
> "Individuals who grow up in peace atmosphere are more likely to build harmonious relationships in the future."
>
> "When individuals can manage negative emotions effectively, they feel better and achieve well-being."
>
> "The most important task in times of crisis is the ability to build peaceful communities."

Several statements referred to global and societal approaches:

> "One of the main goals is to build a society where people can cooperate with each other, respect their own need and rights, and in this way contribute to a better world."
>
> "Children who will be raised in an atmosphere of respect and empathy will also express more openness to diversity and cooperation. As a result, this will significantly contribute to social integration."
>
> "It is important to foster the attitude of openness to diverse cultures, to develop empathy, effective communication and problem-solving skills."
>
> "We should maintain a sense of security, belonging, and solidarity. People should be taught to act with dignity and take care of global issues."

In conclusion, the research findings highlight key trends related to the posed research questions:

(1) Defining the Value of Peace: Most respondents defined peace primarily as a fundamental value. Approximately 65% referred to both negative and positive peace. About 42% provided positive definitions, emphasizing peace's significance for individual and societal development through specific behaviours and character traits. Only around 13% of respondents did not attempt an explicit definition.
(2) Descriptions of Peace Education and Teacher's Role: About half of the students recognized the importance of openly discussing war and threats, while a comparable group emphasized positive aspects and the values associated with peace education. Roughly 80% stressed the necessity of promoting values and supporting children's emotional and moral development. Nearly 60% underscored the importance of nurturing interpersonal and group relationships. Methodological suggestions were relatively rare (about

25%), while most respondents (around 80%) emphasized the critical role and responsibility of early childhood education teachers in peace education.
(3) Expected Outcomes of Peace Education: Approximately 60% of responses focused on outcomes related to group functioning, whereas around 75% emphasized personal developmental benefits for students.

Overall, the respondents' readiness to implement peace education in early school education (grades I–III) appears generally positive and motivated by strong pro-peace values. However, it lacks comprehensive methodological preparation and professional rigor. The frequent occurrence of unclear and linguistically imperfect statements suggests that respondents prioritized the promotion of peaceful attitudes and values over focusing on technical language accuracy and methodological precision.

## 7. Conclusions

In today's rapidly changing and unpredictable world, teachers must be well prepared for peace education. The number of social tensions and conflicts is still increasing. New threats are emerging and new wars are breaking out. In such a situation, the role of peace education is of particular significance. Future generations should be taught to be more empathetic, tolerant, and respectful. In order to make people aware of what peace really means to the world, it is crucial to begin peace education from an early age.

It is widely known that teaching quality strongly influences the final learning outcomes. Teachers are not only expected to convey knowledge and develop students' skills but also to help them to discover a deep sense of their lives, and to develop their own potential (Cudak, 2016, p. 116). In this regard, particular attention should be paid to value education. It is not sufficient to speak about values or to convince others of their importance. Values must be expressed through actions, learnt through observation and experienced in complex social situations. The teacher's role is to create various situations in which children can realise the significance of empathy, cooperation and mutual understanding. It is crucial to achieve a coherence between what the educators say and how they act. In other words, teachers should function as a model, giving examples of valuable actions and constructive communications.

Candidates for preschool and early childhood education should have opportunities to discuss the issues of peace education during their university studies. Various pedagogical attitudes, methodological strategies and educational activities should be considered and explored in this regard. It is essential not to ignore the role of language in shaping social realities and educational

situations. Language not only allows people to convey information but also to express values, and therefore, to build positive interpersonal relationships and to interpret the world (Rumianowska 2025, this volume). Educators must be equipped to navigate the subtleties of language in fostering an environment where peace and understanding are promoted.

The research results confirm the need for educating future teachers in the area of organizing and implementing peace education in schools. In this regard, it is essential to take into account the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of teaching and learning, and to develop professional skills needed for creating effective peace education programs. These programs should not be limited to theoretical knowledge but also include practical approaches that enable teachers to promote peace, understanding, and cooperation among students.

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# Part III – Interaction

Agnieszka Grażul-Luft

# Relationality and Accessibility in the Communication of Selected Family Businesses[1]

**Abstract**
Family businesses have a unique set of resources referred to as 'familiness'. Furthermore, they can benefit from the potential of positive valuation connected to the concept of family and the qualities assigned to it, such as relationality and community. The purpose of the presented initial research was to determine the level and type of relationality in the communications of several selected businesses and to find out if they refer to the family in their communications. The analysis was based on a sample of texts from the websites of the five entities listed in the ranking of the most valuable Polish family businesses made by *Forbes* magazine. In the first stage of research, which used the IT tool Logios, the Plain Language Index was defined. Then, an analysis of the linguistic exponents of the sender and receiver was conducted: fundamental uses and transpositions in the scope of the person category. During the third stage, texts were studied in terms of thematic references to the family. Analyses show that the potential connected with *familiness* and the positive valuation of the concept of family is an unexploited resource.[2]

**Keywords:** plain language, relationality, brand communication, category of person, family business

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## 1. Familiness and relationality in brand communication

Relationality in business[3] and its impact on business efficiency and success has been an issue studied and described for decades. Simultaneously, the concept of relation marketing, which highlights the benefits of good relations between the company and the customer, is developing and popularizing (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002; Smith, 1998). A high level of relations impacts the increase of competitive advantage, and customer retention is more beneficial than constantly searching for new ones (Cooil et al., 2007; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990). The key to relationships in business is communication (Andersen, 2001; Dwyer et al., 1987; Geiger & Martin, 1999; Leek et al., 2002). The value of effective communication is growing, especially in the age of internationalization, and it is necessary for running a business (Håkansson, 1982). Currently, an especially important factor that impacts the efficiency of communication and improvement of business relations is the usage of the Internet (Boyle & Alwitt, 1996; Golik Klanac, 2005).

Family businesses, despite being a diverse group of entities, share a common and unique set of resources known as 'familiness'. This term means unique value resulting from the involvement of family in economic activity and mutual trust of its members. It's a kind of resource that can generate competitive advantage and wealth (Habbershon & Williams, 1999; Leszczewska, Moczydłowska & Sadkowska, 2023; Pearson, Carr & Shaw, 2008; van Wyk, 2012). Many family businesses, however, do not see the potential and benefits of exposing the fact that they are a family business.

> The decision concerning company identity is thus a strategic decision, causes the combination of an overlapping of an organisational identity and a family identity, the tightening of the impact of a family on the company, the reinforcement of a belief that a family shall take care of the company and shall apply its knowledge and experience in business management, as well as shall use their knowledge and experience to move the company ahead (Barcińska & Więcek-Janka, 2024, p. 252).

In the case of business in Poland, an important factor influencing the perception of family businesses is also the historical and social context (in particular, the period of the communist system 1945–1989 and the period of predatory capitalism of the 1990s). It can negatively influence the perception of consumers (Leszczewska, Moczydłowska & Sadkowska, 2023).

3 This is assuming that relationality in business is the relationship occurring between the company and the customer. It is a consequence of activities (including communication and marketing) to build and maintain relationships (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner & Gremler, 2002; Raciti & Dager 2010).

The way family businesses are perceived, however, does not remain in isolation from the linguistic image of the world, especially the linguistic image of the family, which replicates the way it is perceived by language users. The category of linguistic image of the world (abbreviation in Polish: JOS) is one of the main terms of cognitive linguistics.

> The linguistic image of the world is not a mirror reflection of reality, and the features that build the image of the object are not a faithful reflection of real features. First of all, they are the effect of choice: some features are emphasized, others are diminished, and some – eliminated (Maćkiewicz, 1999, p. 13)[4].

JOS "is contained in language, variously verbalized interpretation of reality, which can be expressed as a set of judgments about the world" (Bartmiński, 2012, p. 12). It is an interpretation from the point of view of the average language user, "reflecting their mentality, corresponds to their point of view and their needs" (Bartmiński, 2012, p. 14). This process leads to the creation of concepts and categories, "the units of language are nothing more than the result of a person's subjective view of the world around them" (Tabakowska, 1995, p. 55)[5]. Members of different cultures and users of different languages make different, often unique interpretations of reality. Therefore, the categorization of the world, knowledge, and valuation contained in the language may differ in different languages.

> It is possible to replicate and compare images of the same objects in the minds of speakers of different languages and members of different cultures. For the individual, the linguistic image of the world is a bridge between the objective world and its representation in the mind, while for the community it is an integrating factor (…) (Kaszewski, 2018, p. 133)[6].

Research on the linguistic image of the world of the family and their profiles in modern Polish indicates that the basic features of the family are kinship, community, and the emotional bond that unites its members (Bielińska-Gardziel, 2009a). The meaning of the concept is associated with strong positive valuation, and despite social changes and the influence of ideological discourses[7], the family remains an important value for Polish people (Bielińska-Gardziel, 2009a). This is confirmed by social studies, which show that Polish people value the family most highly; it is the key area of cooperation for them, and they rarely cooperate outside the family (Wasilewski, Wekselberg, 2021). Relationality, being a basic

4 Translation mine.
5 All the quotations presented in the paragraph – translation mine.
6 Translation mine.
7 In public discourse, the family is often valued in extremely different ways, "is praised or criticized, presented as a source of pride or an object of concern (…)" (Bielińska-Gardziel, 2009b, pp. 8–9) – translation mine.

characteristic of the family, is at the same time a property that is transferred to the perception of family businesses, due to the factor described above called 'familiness'. But does this characteristic affect the way family businesses communicate externally?

Research conducted by the international consulting firm Siegel+Gale, creator of the World's Simplest Brand ranking, shows that customers value brands that provide the simplest experiences, including clear communication, transparency and honesty in their dealings, consumer care understood as simplicity, comprehensibility, and usefulness of all processes.

Customers are ready to pay more for products and services and also recommend to other users brands that provide simplicity of experiences (Siegel+Gale [8]). It becomes an essential element of building relationships. Therefore, the accessibility and relationality of the communication of the selected family businesses were chosen to be studied in relation to the plain language index, among other things.

Initiatives associated with simplifying the language of public communication in Poland have been carried out for more than a dozen years, mainly in the Warsaw, Wrocław, and Poznań centers. Researchers from Wrocław's Plain Polish Language Workshop define simple language as "a way of organizing a text that provides the average citizen with quick access to the information it contains, a better understanding of it, and, if necessary, effective action based on it" (Piekot, Zarzeczny & Moroń, 2019, p. 199). Creating statements that comply with the plain language standard contributes to increasing the effectiveness of public communication, especially with a wide and diverse audience. The term *przystępność*, which is defined as "comprehensibility" (Piekot, Zarzeczny & Moroń, 2015, p. 99) is the Polish equivalent of "readability".

The concept of readability, which originated in the 1920s, resulted from the need to adapt (e.g., for didactic purposes) texts in such a way that they are comprehensible for the recipient (Crossley, Greenfield & McNamara, 2008). Readability in some approaches is defined, thus, as a measure of reading ability, the level necessary to understand the text that is being read (Badarudeen & Sabharwal, 2010; Piotrowska & Bączkowska, 2023). Over the decades, many concepts and consequent readability formulas have been developed. However, they can be narrowed down to two main approaches:

- focused on the reader's competencies: reading ability, including reading speed, general experience, basic knowledge, level and profile of education, etc., and the effort they need to put into understanding the text;
- focused on the features of the text itself: including lexical, syntactic, stylistic, and text organization (Bączkowska, 2021; Piotrowska & Bączkowska, 2023).

The presented research refers to the Wrocław model, built with reference to the second approach mentioned above.

## 2. Research aims

The pilot study of a quantitative-qualitative nature, which is the subject of this paper, was conducted as a result of the following research questions:

1. What is the level of accessibility and relationality in the communication of the studied businesses, and how does the sender-receiver relationship develop?
2. Do family businesses reference the category of family in their communication?

The analysis included a selected area of communication-related to the activities of five family businesses ranked first in the ranking of "the most valuable Polish family businesses with revenues exceeding PLN 100 million" organized by *Forbes* magazine.

## 3. Research data and methods

The premise was to submit to the study a sample of texts from the own websites of companies ranked 1–5 in the ranking of the most valuable family businesses, published in *Forbes* magazine in 2023. The top five companies in the ranking were: Euro-Net Spółka z ograniczoną odpowiedzialnością (Limited Liability Company), Agata Spółka Akcyjna (Joint-Stock Company), Aflofarm Farmacja Polska Spółka z ograniczoną odpowiedzialnością (Limited Liability Company), Correct – K. Błaszczyk i Wspólnicy Spółka Komandytowa (Commandite Partnership) and Budmat Bogdan Więcek[8]. The Correct company has a very simplified version of its website[9]. It contains only basic formal information and a contact form. Therefore, the company was omitted from the study, and the publications of Pruszynski Spółka z ograniczoną odpowiedzialnością, which ranked sixth, were analyzed instead.

The ranking of the most valuable family businesses was created by Dun & Bradstreet in cooperation with the editors of *Forbes Poland*[10]. The list includes companies that have existed for at least 8 years, with at least two shareholders

8 These are registered names. The companies are listed according to the order of ranking (from 1 to 5).

9 [1] www.vcorrect.eu (Retrieved June 25, 2024).

10 Businesses submitted themselves for the ranking. The organizers verified that they met the accepted criteria.

having family ties and a minimum of 50% plus 1 share. Although the companies have different business profiles, they are connected by their net revenue of at least PLN 10 million in 2021, their regularly positive financial results in recent years, and their good reputation[11].

The research data included samples of texts of five types from each company's own website[12]:
- information about the company, company's history;
- work, career – general, introductory text;
- questions and answers (a.k.a. FAQ) – three questions and their answers;
- news feed, advice – three texts;
- slogans – 10 texts.

Such a way of acquiring the texts (a specified number of a particular type) made it possible to see significant differences in the number of words in the samples taken: Euro-Net – 5072 words, Agata – 3092, Aflofarm – 2430, Pruszyński – 1753, Budmat – 815. This means that the shortest texts have the two construction-related entities, although Pruszynski's sample has more than twice as many words as Budmat's sample. However, the longest texts of the Pruszyński brand were not about the company's main focus but about sponsored sports projects.

The research was divided into three phases:
1. Quantitative research using the Logios tool in order to determine the Plain Language Index (PLI) and the type of relationality that is measured by the H2H index.
2. Qualitative research – analysis of sender and receiver exponents.
3. Qualitative research in terms of references to family themes.

### 3.1. First phase

The study was conducted using a methodology developed by researchers at the Plain Polish Language Workshop (PPP) at the University of Wroclaw (Poland) and an IT tool called Logios Researcher[13] built on the basis of a simple language model created at PPP. That's because the application allows analysis of the relational aspect (presence of sender and receiver exponents). Researchers of this center refer to plain language in terms of four levels of speech organization: the substantive content of the text, its structure and appearance, the phrasing of

11 [2] https://www.forbes.pl/rozmowa-redaktora-naczelnego-firmy-rodzinne-w-polsce-gdzie-tkwi-impuls-do-rozwoju/0pq8zy6 (Retrieved June 25, 2024).
12 [3] www.euro.com.pl; [4] www.agatameble.pl; [5] www.aflofarm.com.pl; [6] www.budmat.com; [7] www.pruszynski.com.pl.
13 [9] https://logios.dev/.

thoughts (the length and complexity of sentences), and the sender-receiver relationship (Zarzeczny & Piekot, 2017). Plain Language Index (PLI) allows one to assess the extent to which the text meets the requirements of plain Polish (percentage score). It checks 10 properties of style.

1. Formal words (FORMAL) (they make the style formal and official).
2. Terminology of style (TERMS) – appearance in the text of two-word specialized expressions with the order: noun + adjective (they make the text incomprehensible to a non-professional).
3. Most frequent words (TOP100) from the frequency list of 100 words – they make the topics of the text seem easy.
4. Difficult words (DWORDS) – the parameter shows how many rare and simultaneously long words are in the text.
5. Pronouns (PRON) – this parameter measures the percentage of pronouns in the text. Their high frequency makes the language natural and the text coherent.
6. Verbalization (N/V) – noun style is unwanted; it is the verbs that increase the accessibility of the text.
7. Confusing grammar (GRAM) – the parameter indicates how many action names occur in the text in the form of participles, the passive voice, verbal nouns, and impersonal forms.
8. Sentence length (ASL) – the parameter specifies the number of words in a sentence. The texts are considered accessible if the sentences are no longer than 15 words.
9. The presence of the sender (SENDER) – revealed through the use of pronouns or first-person verbs. The presence of the sender's exponents makes the text more relational.
10. The presence of the receiver (RECEIVER) – revealed in phrases to the recipient (second-person pronouns and verbs). The more of such exponents, the more relational the text is (Romanik, Piekot & Tymiński, 2022, pp. 307–308).

In the presented study, key parameters were those related to sender-receiver relationships, captured by the H2H index, which, by calculating the ratio of sender exponents and receiver exponents, one can determine the type of relationality. This index used by the Wrocław researchers refers to Bryan Kramer's work with the notable title "There is no B2B and B2C. Human to Human: H2H." Referencing the popular B2B (Business to Business) and B2C (Business to Consumer) categories in business, the author proposes H2H (Human to Human) as a response to a kind of 'dehumanization' in business communication:

> I saw the complexity around me. This complexity, combined with the rise of social and digital, had produced a pretty cold, anonymous ecosystem. We needed to bring back the human side of communication, in all its imperfection, empathy and simplicity (Kramer, 2014, p. 3).

In the Wrocław model, in the acronym H2H, the first H is the sender's exponents, and the second H is the receiver's exponents. There are four types of text relationality:

1. H2H – recommended type, dialogue partner (strong exposition of both sender and receiver, noticeable primarily in the grammatical category of person);
2. H2h – self-presentational, asymmetrical, not recommended (dominance of the sender);
3. h2h – impersonal, not recommended (the text lacks the exponents of the sender and receiver, impersonal and formal tone);
4. Type h2H – receiver-oriented, recommended especially in instructional texts (dominance of receiver's exponents) (Andrzejewska, 2022; Wróż, 2019).

A high H2H index for a text means that it is focused on the sender-receiver relationship. At this point in the research, information on PLI and the H2H index was obtained using the Logios Researcher IT tool.

### 3.2. Second phase

The linguistic exponents of the sender and receiver allow modeling at the level of the text of the relationship between the sender and receiver and the formation of a linguistic picture of the participants in communication. Crucial for determining the H2H index is the category of person, encoded in the forms of verbs and pronouns: especially first person (sender) and second person (receiver) in the singular and plural forms[14]. In communication practice, however, there may be transposition of personal forms when the index of the number or communicative role is transformed (Sitkowska, 2013).

The category of person in Polish has been described in many works, both of a theoretical and practical nature (including Andrzejewska, 2022; Jopek, 2001; Kaszewski, 2018; Kłosińska, 2004; Kochan, 2012; Kowalski, 2015; Lalewicz, 1983; Łysakowski, 2005; Nabrdalik, 2008; Okopień-Sławińska, 2001; Pałucka-Czerniak, 2002; Rittel, 1985; Siekiera, 2018; Sitkowska, 2013; Sobstyl, 2008; Szczepan-

14 The sender can also communicate about themselves and the recipient in the third person. However, this kind of construction formally refers to objects outside the speech act, is a departure from directness, and creates distance.

kowska, 2012; Topolińska, 1967; Wilkoń, 1986; Witosz, 1981; Wojtak, 1988; Zielińska, 2016). The research covered a variety of thematic and genre areas: literary works, scientific, political, media, PR communication, marketing, and other texts.

As Janusz Lalewicz wrote:

> […] the use of person categories in the practice of communication is almost never just and only an update of the grammatical system […]. The communication convention transforms and expands the system of grammatical categories so as to create a system of personal forms that would serve to distinguish not only the communicative roles indicated in people's statements but also the positions they occupy in relation to each other on the level of social relations. (Lalewicz, 1983, p. 272)[15]

The first person occurs in the form of I (of singular form) and WE (of plural form). The I category is rarely transposed and usually indicates the sender. However, it can occur, for example, in quasi-quotation marks usage, in which the sender impersonates the receiver, as it were, "suggesting in this way that it is the speaker who could or should say so" (Okopień-Sławińska, 2001, p. 78). I can also express WE (indicating the higher status of the sender). Transposition also occurs when the sender's I is expressed by WE or YOU. Such a procedure makes it possible to mark the difference in statuses of the sender and receiver (c.g.. 'pluralis maiestatis', 'pluralis modestiae') (Łysakowski, 2005).

The WE category is more complex in meaning and function. Depending on whether the group identified as WE includes only the sender or both the sender and the receiver, we can speak of exclusive WE or inclusive WE.

> The prototypical variant of exclusive WE should be considered to speak on behalf of a group, informal or organized (institution, enterprise, etc.), to which the sender belongs and which allows him to communicate on its behalf (or even obliges him to do so). In this way, he not only communicates about the collective entity but also emphasizes its personal character and his own—temporary or permanent—affiliation with it. Exclusive WE can, moreover, perform a distinctive function; that is, it serves to emphasize the distinctiveness of the group and its identity, especially if it is contrasted with the form THEY (Kaszewski, 2018, p. 114)[16].

WE exclusive is often used in communication and is used by companies to express themselves, to self-present.

Another type of transposition is WE expressing universality – WE didactic, universal. In this type of use, the category of person may be neutralized (Bańko, 2012). WE used instead of YOU (singular form) or YOU (plural form) can also be a sign of condescension (Kłosińska, 2004).

15 Translation mine.
16 Translation mine.

The category YOU, a phrase to the receiver, can also undergo transformations for stylistic and pragmatic purposes, e.g., distinguish the receiver from the general public, even though the matter concerns the collective receiver (Kłosińska, 2004; Sitkowska, 2013) or even (e.g., in the form of an internal monologue) indicate the sender (Kaszewski, 2018).

The category of person allows modeling the sender-receiver system, but because of the multitude of possible transformations, identification and interpretation can sometimes be difficult and ambiguous. Especially since the sender often uses the categories of person inconsistently, in a single text or even in a single sentence using the categories I, WE, YOU, under which other people or groups can be identified.

It is also worth mentioning international studies, in the psychological current, related to the use of pronouns (Pennebaker, 2003; Pennebaker & Stone, 2003). The analyses show that there is a correlation between the pronouns used and the psychological features of the sender of the statement. The way language is used can be an element indicative of a mental state, personality profile, or stage in the development process:

> For example, the most commonly used word in spoken English, *I*, is used at far higher rates by followers than by leaders, truth-tellers than liars. People who use high rates of articles – a, an, the – do better in college than low users (Pennebaker, 2013, p. 10).

The pronouns used in the utterances can not only testify about the sender but also allow the creation of a sender-receiver relationship, shaping the style of statements to achieve the types of H2H or h2H recommended in communication, with the focus on the needs of the receiver postulated in plain language (Kimble, 2012).

In the second phase of the research, a qualitative analysis was made of the sender's and receiver's grammatical exponents occurring in the texts.

### 3.3. Third phase

It was checked whether words from the thematic field of family occur in the texts. For this purpose, a list of words from the thematic dictionary of the *Great Dictionary of the Polish Language* edited by Żmigrodzki was used: the sphere "daily life of man" – thematic field 'family' – 'family members'[17]. The types of references to family in the selected samples were analysed. The main objective of the study was to find out whether the studied companies refer to family themes in

17 [10] https://wsjp.pl/slownik_tematyczny# (Retrieved September 12, 2024).

their communications (particularly in connection with their status as a family business).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Study using the Logios Tool[18]

The study provided an answer to research question No. 1. The highest level of implementation of the plain language standard was achieved by the Euro-Net company (61%). The least accessible were the texts of the Aflofarm company (49%). Other companies achieved the following results: Budmat – 59%, Agata – 58%, Pruszyński51%. The average result of the five companies is 55.6%, which means that the standards for text readability are about half achieved in them.

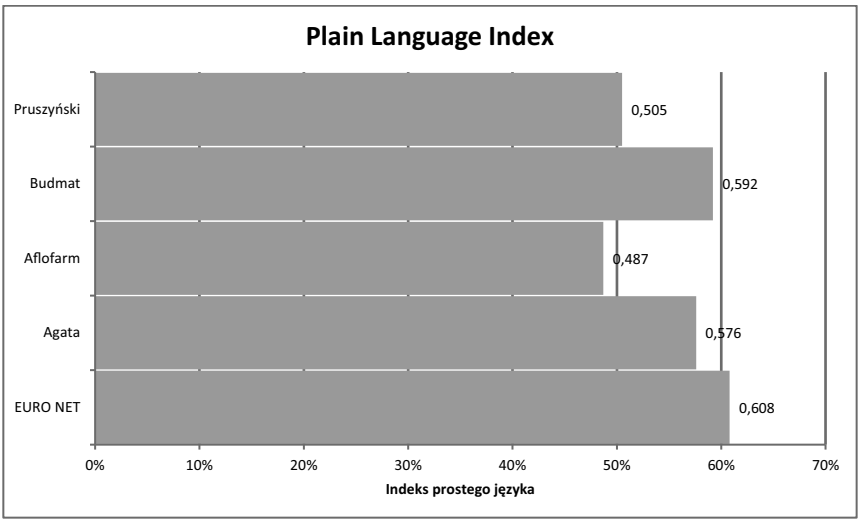


Chart 1. PLI level.

With regard to the 10 parameters of the Plain Language Index, the highest average result of meeting the standard was recorded for the sentence length index. (67%). This means that most sentences in the analyzed texts do not exceed 15 words in length. As many as four of the five companies achieved a result of more than 60% in this parameter. The PLI component with the lowest average result obtained in the study is the pronouns (18,6%). This parameter helps to

18 https://logios.dev/.

measure the percentage of pronouns in the text, which, by replacing repeated terms and concepts, strengthens the inter-sentence consistency of the text.

Especially important in the conducted study was the result related to sender-receiver relations, that is, parameters measuring the degree of presence of the sender and receiver in the text (pronominal and verb exponents of the sender and pronominal and verb exponents of the receiver). The percentage score obtained in the study does not indicate a high degree of implementation of the text relationality standard adopted in the Logios system: Euro-Net S/R[19] – 25/50%, Agata S/R – 30/43%, Aflofarm S/R – 68/17%, Budmat S/R – 51/22%, Pruszyński 34/33%. This means that the way the text is structured does not do enough to shorten the symbolic distance between the sender and the receiver, which is an important strategy for effective communication.

The chart below illustrates the level of relationality:

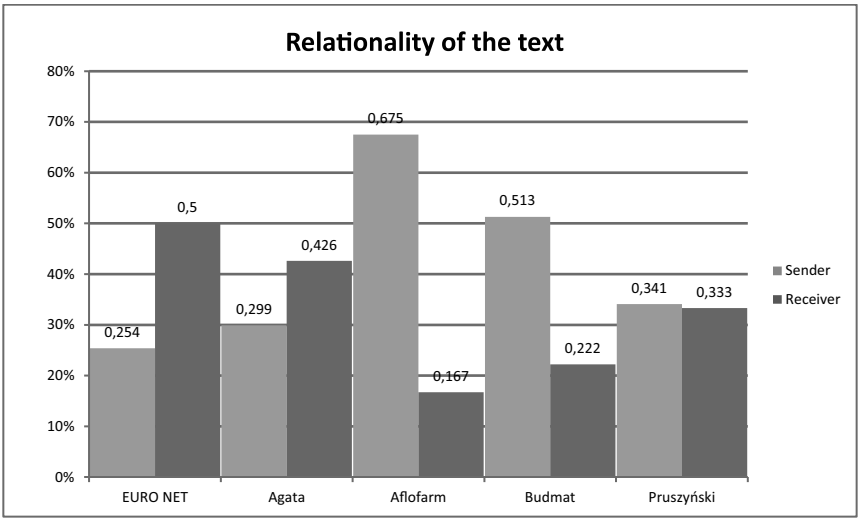


Chart 2. Relationality of the text (the degree of implementation of the standard adopted in the Logios app).

From the above, it can be seen that the most symmetrical result applies to the communication sample of the Pruszyński company. Simultaneously, the index, however, is low, which means that the exponents of the sender and receiver are not much in the texts, and the tone of speech is quite impersonal and formal. The lowest rate of receiver exponents, only 17%, was obtained by Aflofarm company, with the simultaneous highest score among the studied companies for the sender parameter. This indicates a high asymmetry and imbalance in the company's

19 S/R – Sender/Receiver.

communication (H2 h type). The significant advantage of sender presence and the same type of communication (H2 h) can be mentioned in the case Budmat. In Euro-Net and Agata companies, the receiver index is higher (than the parameter determining the exponents of the sender), which can be attributed to the type of h2H communication. This is the relationship model recommended in the plain language standards. However, it is important to remember that the companies' performance in the sender and receiver parameters was 50% or less.

## 5. Linguistic exponents of the sender and receiver

The qualitative analysis presented below provided an answer to research question No. 1.

### 5.1. Linguistic exponents of the sender

The formal exponents of the sender in the studied texts are: forms of the first-person singular and plural of the verb, possessive and personal plural pronouns, as well as forms of the third-person singular of the verb and nouns.

#### First-person form of the verb

The presence of the sender is usually revealed in the text in the plural forms of the verb (WE exclusive). This grammatical form allows you to "personify the sender (company), which automatically greatly adds to its image" (Kaszewski, 2018, p. 196[20]). Furthermore, increasing numbers is a way to increase respect and the performative (agentive) power (Wasilewski, 2006). First-person plural verbs are used in all types of texts, in descriptions of actions, image presentation, and presentation of an offer, e. g.:

(1) Polecamy szczególnie meble bielone, w jasnych odcieniach drewna, z szarym lub białym wykończeniem.
[We especially recommend white-washed furniture, in light shades of wood, with a gray or white finish][21].

(2) Jesteśmy firmą farmaceutyczną, której celem jest poprawianie zdrowia i jakości życia ludzi.
[We are a pharma company dedicated to improving people's health and quality of life.]

20 Translation mine.

21 For quotes from company texts, source information is provided at the end.

The plural as an exponent of the sender in persuasive texts creates a perception of group action, which can increase the impression of efficiency in performing tasks for the receiver:

(3) Zachęcamy do kontaktu: kontakt@aflofarm.pl.
[We encourage you to contact us: kontakt@aflofarm.pl.]
(4) Że są tu fani driftu to nie mamy żadnych wątpliwości.
[That there are drift fans here, we have no doubt.]

In the texts analyzed, the first person plural form also appears in a function other than the main function, including a metatextual function. The sender undertakes the role of text guide, WE includes both the sender and the receiver, e. g.:

(5) W tym artykule odpowiemy na podstawowe pytania dotyczące kredytu 2 procent, a także doradzimy, jak najlepiej wykorzystać uzyskane środki na budowę domu.
[In this article, we will answer basic questions about the 2 percent loan, as well as give advice on how best to use the funds obtained to build a house.]

In other examples, the WE category, which includes the receiver[22], makes it possible to mark the universality of phenomena, to emphasize that something affects everyone (Kaszewski, 2018; Sitkowska, 2013):

(6) Sypialnia jest tym miejscem w domu, do którego na koniec każdego dnia prowadzą wszystkie drogi. Powinniśmy czuć się w niej dobrze, by móc zrelaksować się po całym dniu.
[The bedroom is the place in the house where all roads lead to at the end of each day. We should feel comfortable in it so that we can relax after a long day.]
(7) W Indiana Jones i Wielkim Kręgu przez większość czasu widzimy oczami Indy'ego, czyli właśnie z perspektywy pierwszej osoby, jednak czasami, np. podczas skradania się, rozwiązywania zagadek i unikania śmiertelnych pułapek, gra przełączy się na widok trzecioosobowy.
[In Indiana Jones and the Great Circle, most of the time we see through Indy's eyes, that is, from a first-person perspective, but occasionally, such as when sneaking around, solving puzzles, and avoiding deadly traps, the game will switch to a third-person view.]

The sender also reveals their presence in the first person singular form. These types of exponents occur only a few times and only in one type of text of the Euro-Net company. These are review and advice articles in which the author (signed with a full name) offers their own opinions on electronic equipment, e. g.:

(8) Na potrzeby tego testu Galaxy A55 5G dostałem model w tym ostatnim kolorze i muszę przyznać, że prezentował się całkiem elegancko.

22 The WE category includes both the sender and the receiver.

[For the purpose of this Galaxy A55 5G test, I received a model in the latter color, and I must admit that it looked quite elegant.]

(9) Podobnie jak tryb portretowy, którego używałem również do robienia zbliżeń zamiast, trybu makro.
[Like the portrait mode, which I also used for close-ups instead of macro mode.]

The first-person singular form, which does not indicate the sender, also occurs in the texts studied. These are uses of quasi-quotation marks in which the sender impersonates the receiver (Okopień-Sławińska, 2001). This form appears, for example, in questions related to customer service:

(10) Czy muszę założyć konto żeby dokonać zakupu?
[Do I need to create an account to make a purchase?]

(11) Czy mogę zamówić towar na adres inny niż ten podany przy rejestracji?
[Can I order goods to an address other than the one I provided at registration?]

The first-person singular form was also used as a quotation:

(12) Sporo sprzętów smart potrafi mówić lub pisać w wielu językach. Wysyła werbalne komunikaty typu: rozpoczynam czyszczenie, wracam do bazy.
[Quite a few smart devices can speak or write in multiple languages. It sends verbal messages like: starting cleaning, returning to base.]

There are also examples of the use of conjunctural WE, when the sender "shines a reflected light" (Łysakowski, 2005, pp. 49–50). This means that the sender is usually not the actual performer of the activity or is not directly involved in the occurrence in question. Despite the lack of agentive and direct involvement, by using the form WE, it attributes agency to some extent. Pruszyński Company informs about the activities of the athletes it sponsors as if they were its own, e. g.:

(13) Z fazy grupowej wyszliśmy z fantastyczną ilością ogólnie wygranych setów, a także najlepszym ratio (ilość setów wygranych do przegranych), widać było, że drużyna jest na fali.
[We came out of the group stage with a fantastic number of overall sets won, as well as the best ratio (number of sets won to lost); it was clear that the team was on a roll.]

### Pronouns

The sender, for self-presentation purposes, reveals their presence in the analysed texts in the plural form of personal and possessive pronouns (WE exclusive) (Zielińska, 2016). In this way, it highlights the importance of community in image creation:

(14) Dołącz do naszego zespołu.
[Join our team.]

(15) Ponad 60-letnie doświadczenie w branży meblarskiej pozwala nam nie tylko trafnie rozpoznawać potrzeby naszych Klientów, lecz także kreować trendy i inspirować do ciekawych zmian.
[More than 60 years of experience in the furniture industry allows us not only to accurately identify the needs of our customers but also to create trends and inspire interesting changes.]

Similar to verbs, the first plural form of the pronoun also allows including not only the receiver but also third parties to emphasize the universality of the experience:

(16) Nie dość, że ułatwia nam codzienne życie, to jeszcze zwiększa bezpieczeństwo i pozwala na lepsze zarządzanie energią elektryczną czy wodą.
[Not only does it make our daily lives easier, it also improves security and allows for better management of electricity or water.]
(17) Za nami nie lada siatkarskie emocje.
[Quite a bit of volleyball excitement is just past us.]

### Nouns and verbs in the third person (IT)

The sender also reveals their presence in the text by using the company's own name (registered name) or, for example, its constituent companies and brands, e.g., RTV Euro AGD (Euro-Net), Blachy Pruszyński (Pruszyński) or Bioliq (Aflofarm). Pointing out the name has an identifying and self-presentation function. To avoid repeating the name, nouns are used in sentences: *company, brand, enterprise*. The noun exponent is accompanied by a verb in the third-person singular form, e.g.:

(18) Aflofarm powstał w Pabianicach w 1989 r. pod nazwą Aflopa.
[Aflofarm was established in Pabianice in 1989 under the name Aflopa.]
(19) Przez kolejne 70 lat przedsiębiorstwo przeszło szereg transformacji, by finalnie stać się prywatną spółką akcyjną z wyłącznie polskim kapitałem.
[Over the next 70 years, the company underwent a series of transformations to finally become a private joint-stock company with exclusively Polish capital.]

## 5.2. Linguistic exponents of the receiver

In the texts studied, the linguistic exponents of the receiver are mostly the 2nd person singular forms of the verb, personal and possessive pronouns in the singular and plural.

### Verbs in the second person (YOU)

Verbs in the second person singular form are used in all types of texts. The sender, speaking of themselves, emphasizes plurality. The receiver, however, is individualized by the sender. The statement is directed at the individual and has a persuasive function. The receiver is persuaded and encouraged with verbs of various intensity of categoricality, e. g.:

(20) Możesz ustawić je na prostym, białym kwietniku, komodzie lub przy łóżku.
[You can set them on a simple white flower bed, a dresser or by the bed.]
(21) Jedyne, o czym musisz pamiętać, to by oświetlenie tworzyło spójną całość i pasowało do siebie pod względem wizualnym.
[The only thing you need to keep in mind is that the lighting should form a coherent whole and match each other visually.]

Addressing the receiver takes the form of a proposal (example 20), an invitation (example 23), or a categorical command (example 25). However, the senders are not consistent, and it is not possible to see a homogeneous communication pattern of the company, e. g.:

(22) Jeśli chcesz zgłosić działanie niepożądane produktu kosmetycznego firmy Aflofarm, prosimy wydrukować i wypełnić załączony poniżej formularz zgłoszenia.
[If you wish to report an adverse reaction to an Aflofarm cosmetic product, please print and fill out the report form attached below.]
(23) Jeśli chcesz do nas dołączyć, zapraszamy do zapoznania się z naszymi aktualnymi ofertami pracy!
[If you would like to join us, please take a look at our current job offers!]

The imperative mode is often used in the form of short sentences in persuasive statements encouraging, for example, the use of a company's offer or action within a website:

(24) Bądź na bieżąco z najnowszymi informacjami na temat tego co się dzieje w Blachy Pruszyński.
[Keep up to date with the latest news on what's happening at Blachy Pruszyński.]
(25) Podążaj ścieżką kariery w Budmat.
[Follow the career path at Budmat.]

The sender also addressed the receiver with rhetorical questions. A rhetorical question is a procedure by which they can make a proposition without being intrusive:

(26) Marzysz, by swoje kulinarne pasje rozwijać w przytulnej, swojskiej przestrzeni pachnącej aromatycznymi ziołami, prowansalskimi oliwkami lub toskańskimi winoroślami? […] Oliwkowa kuchnia inspirowana aurą prowansalskich plantacji może przenieść Cię do romantycznego regionu pachnącego rozmarynem, bazylią

i tymiankiem, którego kulinarne tradycje będą natchnieniem do odkrywania unikalnych kompozycji smaków i aromatów.
[Do you dream of developing your culinary passions in a cozy, homey space fragrant with aromatic herbs, Provençal olives, or Tuscan vines? […] Olive cuisine inspired by the aura of Provençal plantations can transport you to a romantic region fragrant with rosemary, basil, and thyme, whose culinary traditions will inspire you to discover unique compositions of flavors and aromas.]

In the studied corpus, there is only one example of the use of a second-person plural verb:

(27) A letnie miesiące, musicie przyznać, to prawdziwa gratka dla wielbicieli driftingu.
[And the summer months, you have to admit, are a real treat for fans of drifting.]

Sender (Budmat) forces confirmation of their own opinion. This usage is an exception, however; the company regularly addresses the receiver in the singular form.

### Pronouns

Sender-receiver relations are also shaped in the texts analyzed through the use of personal and possessive singular pronouns:

(28) Zmieniamy się dla Ciebie.
[We are changing for you.]
(29) Jeżeli dojdzie do takiej sytuacji, a Ty złożysz zamówienie lub rezerwację, niezwłocznie poinformujemy Cię o tym mailowo.
[If this situation occurs, and you place an order or reservation, we will immediately inform you by email.]

The use of pronouns in sentences is often not obligatory. Their use, however, makes the statement more direct, and less formal:

(30) Dołożymy wszelkich starań, aby towar dotarł do Ciebie jak najszybciej.
[We will make every effort to ensure that the goods reach you as soon as possible.]

In the analyzed corpus, only one type of text and one company used the formal courtesy phrase Mr./Ms. and (in collective form) Mr. and Mrs. In the case of information regarding the storage of personal data:

(31) Uprzejmie informujemy, że jeżeli Pan / Pani wyśle do nas e-maila na powyższy adres i przekaże nam swoje dane osobowe, ich administratorem będzie Aflofarm Farmacja Polska sp. z o.o. z siedzibą w Pabianicach przy ul. Partyzanckiej 133/151, 95–200 Pabianice, tel.: +48 42 22 53 100.
[We would like to kindly inform you that if you send us an e-mail at the above

address and provide us with your personal data, their administrator will be Aflofarm Farmacja Polska sp. z o.o. with its registered office in Pabianice at Partyzancka 133/151, 95–200 Pabianice, tel: +48 42 22 53 100.]

The rest of the information is equally formal:

(32) Jeśli chcecie Państwo zgłosić działanie niepożądane, prosimy kierować wiadomość na adres: pv@aflofarm.pl.
[If you wish to report an adverse reaction, please direct your message to: pv@aflofarm.pl.]

In the sentence shown above, the more formal third-person form of the verb that accompanies the word Mr. and Mrs. has been replaced by the slightly more confidential second-person form (if you wish).

It is worth mentioning that the pronoun forms you, your, you are usually, according to Polish rules of politeness, written in the analyzed texts from a capital letter. However, companies are not consistent in their communication. Both examples shown below are from the texts of Euro-Net company:

(33) Dokładamy wszelkich starań, aby sprzęt dotarł do Ciebie jak najszybciej.
[We make every effort to ensure that the equipment reaches you as soon as possible]

(34) Współpracuje z aplikacjami mobilnymi, dzięki czemu można je obsługiwać lub monitorować na odległość, nawet z dala od domu – w dogodnym dla ciebie miejscu i czasie.
[It works with mobile apps, so you can operate or monitor it remotely, even away from home – at a time and place convenient for you.]

The inconsistency relates to many aspects of the sender-receiver relationship, including but not limited to the transformation of the numerical index or communicative role[23], uppercase and lowercase spelling. This adversely affects the clarity of the message. The regularly used direct address to the recipient (second person singular form) in some statements is replaced by the noun customer/customers, e. g.:

(35) Oferując szeroki wybór mebli i artykułów wyposażenia wnętrz, pragniemy stać się częścią przestrzeni, która wyraża charakter, styl i wartości naszych Klientów.
[Offering a wide selection of furniture and home furnishings, we aim to become part of a space that expresses the character, style, and values of our Customers.]

23 The semantic value of personal forms is different from that implied by the grammatical category used, e. g., the non-collective sender uses the plural form of the pronoun or, using the first-person singular form of the verb, does not report their own actions, but those of the receiver.

(36) Dostosowujemy swoją ofertę do wymogów architektów oraz oczekiwań klientów corocznie rozszerzając asortyment oferowanych produktów.
[We adapt our offer to the requirements of architects and the expectations of customers annually expanding the range of products offered.]

The receiver of the texts on the company's website is not necessarily the customer, so this sentence construction makes logical sense. Thus, however, the distance between the receiver and the customer increases; it is the receiver and not the customer who becomes a participant in the act of communication. The customer is in some way excluded from this communication, and the receiver, while reading, is unlikely to feel like a customer, a beneficiary of the goods of whose existence the company communicates.

## 6. References to family themes

In the next phase of the research, references to the 'family' thematic field were looked for in the texts. The analysis provided an answer to research question No. 2. It showed that only Aflofarm and Pruszyński companies inform that they are family businesses:

(37) Aflofarm to polska firma rodzinna o zasięgu międzynarodowym, działająca w sektorze ochrony zdrowia już od ponad 35 lat.
[Aflofarm is a Polish family business with international reach, operating in the health care sector for more than 35 years.]

The company reports that the enterprise was founded by a married couple, and over time Aflofarm was passed on to their sons. It is worth mentioning the patriarchal style of communicating about family matters:

(38) Andrzej Furman wraz z żoną zakłada przedsiębiorstwo Produkcyjno-Handlowe Aflopa.
[Andrew Furman and his wife established the Aflop Production and Trading Company.]

The sentence above is constructed in such a way that the roles of husband and wife in starting a business do not seem equivalent. In another part of the text, more balance is maintained. However, the wife is mentioned second, despite the fact that in the Polish cultural circle, according to the rules of etiquette, the woman's name usually appears first:

(39) Założycielami Aflofarmu są Andrzej i Grażyna Furmanowie, którzy są związani z przemysłem farmaceutycznym od początku lat 80.

[The founders of Aflofarm are Andrzej and Grażyna Furman, who have been involved in the pharma industry since the early 1980s.]

In a further passage of the text, agency is already attributed only to the father, it is he who passes on the inheritance to his sons:

(40) W 2006 roku Pan Andrzej Furman przekazał firmę synom – Jackowi, Wojciechowi oraz Tomaszowi.
[In 2006, Mr. Andrzej Furman passed the company on to his sons – Jacek, Wojciech and Tomasz.]

The father-founder is given special respect, as evidenced by the addition (capitalized) of the word *Mr.*, which is not used for other people.

The topic of Pruszyński's family status appears only briefly:

(41) Pruszyński Sp. z o.o. to firma o charakterze rodzinnym.
[Pruszyński Sp. z o.o.is is a business of family nature.]

However, the sentence is ambiguous and can only imply that there is a good atmosphere in the company. The theme of family atmosphere at work is often used in the image communication of companies, and the wording of *family nature* indicates a feature of the activity rather than the legal status of the entity. Especially since the sentence appears in the company's text regarding employment:

(42) Pruszyński Sp. z o.o. to firma o charakterze rodzinnym. Stawiamy na stały rozwój wsłuchując się w potrzeby rynku, dostosowując tak swoją ofertę, żeby najbardziej odzwierciedlała aktualne jego potrzeby. Nie zapominamy przy tym o ludziach, naszych pracownikach, dla których stwarzamy takie warunki pracy, aby czuli się potrzebni i identyfikowali się z misją firmy.
[Pruszyński Sp. z o.o. is a business of family nature. We focus on constant development by listening to the needs of the market and adjusting our offer so that it most closely reflects its current needs. At the same time we do not forget about people, our employees, for whom we create such working conditions that they feel needed and identify with the company's mission.]

The theme of family appears in the analyzed texts in only two more cases:

(43) Reklama Bioliq z udziałem Agnieszki Sienkiewicz i jej córki Zosi to nie tylko promocja wyjątkowego produktu, ale także opowieść o rodzinnych więziach i pięknie, które dostrzegamy w najbliższych. Na ekranach możemy zaobserwować pełną ciepła i miłości relację między mamą a córką.
[The Bioliq advertisement featuring Agnieszka Sienkiewicz and her daughter Zosia is not only a promotion of a unique product but also a story about family bonds and the beauty we see in our loved ones. On the screens we can observe the warm and loving relationship between mother and daughter.]

(44) Poznaj rodzinę dachów modułowych Budmat.
[Meet the Budmat family of modular roofs.]

These examples are not directly related to the status of family businesses, but they demonstrate the use of positive valuation that the concept of family carries.

## 7. Conclusion

The research shows that the communication of selected family businesses is not shaped with an awareness of the benefits of taking care of the sender-receiver relationship. An average PLI of 55.6% indicates that plain language criteria, the application of which raises the level of readability of the text, are not being applied sufficiently. What's more, the result for the parameter related to relationality is even lower. Neither company's communication can be considered a H2H (partnership, symmetrical, recommended) type. In the case of two companies, the advantage of receiver exponents over sender exponents is noticeable, but the companies' results in the sender and receiver parameters were equal to 50% or lower.

The analysis of the linguistic exponents of the sender and receiver shows that the sender usually presents themselves using plural forms, which helps to increase their performative power. The verb and pronominal exponents of the receiver are mostly singular forms. They make it possible to address the receiver directly, without unnecessary formality, and have a positive effect on the level of relationality of speech. The text presents examples of transposition of personal forms. They can disturb the effective reception of the text. What's more, an analysis of the statements leads to the conclusion that companies are inconsistent in their communication, not only in terms of personal categories and associated transformations of personal categories but even in writing (e.g., uppercase and lowercase in Mr./Ms.).

Spectacularly successful companies, positioned at the top of the *Forbes* magazine ranking, do not always build a corporate identity in relation to their status as a family business. A study of the identification of a brand's family identity, conducted for the 48 companies in the *Forbes* ranking, shows that despite fairly broad criteria for the expression of this identity, the identification associated with the status of a family business is demonstrated by 66% of them. However, this percentage is higher than that indicated in the 2009 and 2017 reports for small and medium-sized companies in Poland (Barcińska & Więcek-Janka, 2024). The research on which this publication is based shows that only one company (Aflofarm) clearly identifies itself as a family business. This is the company that, simultaneously, has the most asymmetric result regarding the

send-receive exponents (S/R – 68/17%). Furthermore, it obtained the highest sender's exponent index and the lowest receiver's exponent index among the companies. This indicates a strongly self-presentational communication style of this company.

All forms of corporate communication and all types of texts, regardless of their dominant function, affect the company's image. It is shaped, among other things, under the influence of direct and indirect contacts with the company and as a result of processing various messages about it (Kaszewski, 2018). A company, by creating its statements, can influence how its receivers perceive it. Any text: of an advisory nature, for the presentation of products, being an instruction related to customer service, etc., is at the same time a self-presentation text and affects the image of the company. Modelling at the text level the relationship between sender and receiver is an important tool that companies do not seem to use properly. In accordance with the presented pilot study and in the case of the analysed communication samples of family businesses, it can be seen that the potential associated with 'familiness', positive valuing of the concept of family, as well as a communication strategy focused on comprehensibility and relationality, turns out to be an unrealized resource.

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## Charts

1. PLI level.
2. Relationality of the texts.

## List of examples from the text

(1) https://www.agatameble.pl/porady/sypialnia-w-stylu-angielskim-harmonijna-i-romantyczna-przestrzen/24377 (Retrieved July 26, 2024)
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Waldemar Tłokiński / Henryk Olszewski

# From Written Words to Lost Words: On Abandoning Reading from the Perspective of a Linguist and a Developmental Psychologist

**Abstract**
Regular reading is key to psychological and emotional health. Abandoning it may lead to several negative outcomes which could influence various aspects of everyday life. Both the linguistic and psychological (psycholinguistic) perspective equally strongly confirm the importance of man's contact with the written word, both in scientific texts and fine literature. The paper presents a brief view of the outcomes of an evident divergent trend within the mutual relationship between the world of the linguistic symbolism and the visual culture, predominantly biased towards the latter. This leads to a significant pauperisation of communicative competence as the basis of social life. The authors apply linguistic and psychological theoretical framework in the study.

**Keywords:** linguistic symbolism, visual culture, reading, outcomes of not reading

*The importance of reading*
*cannot be overstated. It enriches the mind,*
*nourishes the soul, and equips individuals*
*with essential tools*
*for personal and professional success.*
Tomas Kucera

## 1. Introduction

This text closely relates to the area of communication anthropology, which combines aspects of anthropology, sociology, linguistics, psychology and other social sciences, in order to understand how humans communicate and how communicative acts evolve under the influence of civilisational factors (Otten heimer & Pine, 2019). The authors hereof point to dangerous changes in relations

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to abandoning reading in favour of communicating through visuals, shifting away from the verbal reality towards thematic iconography. The conceptual terminology applied throughout the paper comes from psycholinguistics and language-communication pragmatics as well as psychology, in particular human developmental psychology.

## 2. Reading – from written to printed text

According to the National Media Institute (Krajowy Instytut Mediów), in 2021–2022 in Poland as much as 56% respondents did not hold a single book of literature in their hand – neither as hard copy nor electronic. The research shows that men consume significantly fewer books (64% do not read). Among women, however, 48.8% do not read. Most respondents who did not read a single book within the period under investigation live in the countryside (over 65%). In cities over 500,000 residents 38% do not read books. Non-readers are mostly respondents with a vocational secondary education (over 72%) and primary (67%). In turn, the biggest group of respondents who actually did read at least one book are people with a higher education (over 69%) (Sokal, 2022). The data does not look promising. Nonetheless, the reading levels, after many years, are ultimately rising in Poland. In 2023, at least 43% of respondents claimed to have read at least one book within a twelve-month-period prior to the study, which gives a higher result by 9 percentage points compared with 2021 and 2022. On the other hand, one might also take a stand that reading in its own right is little valuable, depending which books one goes for and for what purpose. It is also often emphasised that there are other forms of acquiring knowledge and broadening one's horizons, hence drawing conclusions and forming opinions based on previously cited statistics makes little sense outside a wider context; for instance, should an internet user avidly watching lectures in quantum physics or economics be comparable with somebody who reads detective stories or romance books? While negating the study findings regarding reading trends what becomes forgotten is an unusually important aspect; namely, contact with the word, which naturally establishes human individual linguistic experience (quantity and quality of lexis as well as grammar competence).

Kucera (2024) in his article *Why People Stopped Reading: Unraveling the Decline of a Book-Loving Culture* remarks that there is no such thing as a reading gene. Thus everything depends on our upbringing and environment. According to Kucera, we experience a striking decline in comparison with a culture of avid reading from just a few decades ago; we have ended up at critical moment in the history of reading and writing skills. The author claims that this change to reading habits, however subtle, bears profound consequences. Yet, one must

remember that reading, often pushed towards the background of our fast life, is still enormously worthwhile. It is a key factor to personal enlightenment and professional development, which caters for our mind in a way that is rarely possible when it comes to digital content ephemerality. Kucera poses that despite this evident disappearance of traditional reading habits, the need to invigorate this vital activity is more urgent than ever; not only as a way of spending free, but also as a corner stone of our cognitive and emotional development.

In his article, the author attempts to determine the falling reading trend mechanism by listing such aspects as the easiness of fast digital reading combined with the attractiveness of screen entertainment. Next, he draws attention to an increase in screen time, where the media compete with one another for the recipient's attention altering their entertainment expectations. Society's desire to increase the efficiency in their activities when under constant time scarcity and, at the same time, increasingly fast-paced lifestyles make reading a less attractive activity, requiring constant attention and engagement for longer periods of time. Kucera sums up this list of elements to the falling reading trend mechanism in a statement that in the educational context more and more emphasis is placed upon skills to use digital technology as well as training in multimedia use at the expense of traditional reading. Simultaneously, what can observed is that entertaining content takes precedence over educational. This points to a significant shift in preferences regarding education and entertainment, whereby media formats which are visually engaging and easy to comprehend gain an increasing popularity in comparison to formats which are more challenging intellectually, such as reading.

What makes reading a boon which offers numerous benefits that significantly contribute to a better quality of life? The answer requires reflection upon the genesis of the skill in humans, which should be linked to the history of writing.

The history of reading written text dates back thousands of years, whereas reading printed text started in the 15$^{th}$ century with the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg. The invention of print initiated an era of mass access to literature and knowledge, which in turn had an enormous impact on the development of culture and society (Manguel, 1997). It is worth remembering that the history of writing begins with cuneiform (around 3200 BCE): The oldest known writing systems developed in Mesopotamia, where Sumerians created cuneiform. It was used mainly for administration and trade purposes.

Then, Egyptian hieroglyphics came (around 3100 BCE): In ancient Egypt hieroglyphics were developed which were use to record religious, administrative and literary texts.

Next in turn, Chinese writing (around 1200 BCE): In China, the first writing systems appeared on oracle bones, later on bronze and silk. Chinese writing evolved into the logographic system still in use today. The next writing system to

appear was the Phoenician alphabet (around 1200 BCE): Phoenicians developed one of the first phonetic alphabets, which became the basis for the Greek alphabet, and then Latin. Eventually, the Greek and Latin alphabets (around 800–700 BCE): Greeks adopted and modified the Phoenician alphabet, whereas Romans adopted the Greek alphabet, which gave rise to the Latin alphabet, still used today in many languages (Fisher, 2003; Robinson, 2007).

On the other hand, the history of reading includes writing development, printing technology and changes in reading habits over centuries. In ancient civilisations, reading was reserved for social elites, such as priests, officials and students. Written texts were often hidden away in temples and libraries. In the medieval times, reading was still mainly the clergy's and elites' domain. Monasteries were centres of education and transcribing manuscripts.

As was said above, the invention of print opened up new possibilities of accessing written works. The oldest known printed book is called *Diamond Sutra* woodblock-printed in China and dated 868. It was also in China where moveable type was invented made from baked clay and metal, which facilitated text printing. In Europe, in 1450 CE, Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press with moveable font. His invention revolutionised book manufacture, making them more available and accelerating knowledge dissemination (Febvre & Martin, 1997; McLuhan, 1962).

Thanks to the print invention, books became more available, which contributed to the spread of the Renaissance and Reformation. Printed bibles and reformation treaties played a key role in propagating new ideas. In the Enlightenment era increased numbers of printed books and newspapers contributed to the development of education. Better access to literature allowed the spread of academic, philosophical and political ideas. In the 19th century, the development of printing technology and an increasing number of schools caused a literacy increase. The production of cheap books and newspapers contributed to the popularisation of reading among wider social circles. Ultimately, the 20th and 21st centuries, with the development of electronic media, including e-books and the Internet, changed the way in which people read and share information. However, printed books and newspapers still play an important role within the reading culture (Cavallo & Chartier, 2003).

Printed text has become then another historical form of communication, information expressed intentionally and subjected to not only semantic comprehension, but most of all the interpretation of the perceived sense. The latter, in turn, is of highly individualised nature.

According to the authors of the monograph *A History of Reading in the West* (see Cavallo & Chartier, 2003), books and other texts have not always been read the same way we read them today. The modern reading habit – in private, quietly, using only one's eyes – is only one of the ways to read, and it has existed in the

company of many other forms of reading for centuries. In the ancient world, in the Medieval times, and only in the 17th century many texts were read out loud. They were addressed equally to the ear and the eye, and utilised forms oriented towards the requirements governing oral performance. The authors hereof investigate not only technological innovations which have changed the physical aspects of books and other texts, but also evolving forms of reading and the development as well as transformation of the reading audience.

Referring back to the psycholinguistic image of everyday communicative activities (where written text (read) is a form of communication) it should be agreed that we are our own authors of the ways in which we arrive at the senses in language, and we ourselves create our own speeches; the senses precede the construction of own speeches, in order through the semantic creation of words, their grammatical structurisation and the linearisation of the speech format (or writing) (Tłokiński, 1979).

Although the Bible says "in the beginning was the word", it is nonetheless a psycholinguistic metaphor pointing to *an intentional thought, a motif,* initiating the creation process. In the anthropological reality there was no verbal word at the beginning, although the externalised activity of the human brain contains the same as is realised later in the word – *embodying a certain sense.* Further stages in wielding a symbol gained the form of a linguistic instrument, combining the expression with the content plain, which conditioned agreed (arbitrary) semantisation of communicative behaviour.

Passing through the sense stage (vie the so-called inner speech) to the semantic stage is an individualised process; it leads to constructing a product exclusively from the elements available to the user. The inner speech is a concept proposed by Lew Wygotski (1989), who claimed that inner speech plays a crucial role in thinking and cognitive development. Aleksander Łuria, Wygotski's coworker, developed his theories within neuropsychology (Łuria, 1976) Łuria's works provided additional information on the function of inner speech with reference to brain injuries and neuropsychological disorders. In other words, the material determines the product, the linguistic experience defines a speech.

From the perspective of the language convention uniting the whole speech community this does not sound dangerous as it does not cancel the effectiveness of the communication process. However, from the point of view of language pragmatics this reality is far from communicative success. Why does the text comprehension process (and its creation) focus so much on language pragmatics? It should be emphasised that language pragmatics is indispensable when it comes to full understanding how humans use language in real communicative situations. It fosters an analysis not only of what was said, but also of how and why it was said, taking into account the context, speaker's intentions, social norms and hidden meanings. Due to this, pragmatics delivers tools to under-

stand the human communication dynamic more deeply (see Levinson, 1983; Searle, 1969).

## 3. The culture of the word *versus* the civilisation of the image

Individual linguistic experience with its terminological instruments and communicative pragmatics develop singularly through contact with texts. The contemporary young generation of learners favours fast information, mainly visually obtained from the cyberspace. *The culture of the word* is being replaced by *the civilisation of the image*, imposing the embodiment of senses for which the user does not make an effort to find semantisation conditions. The circle of impaired human communication inability thus becomes complete, the living linguistic code (verbal) is being replaced with engram slang creating social subcultures, where phonic skills are being supplanted by finger and keyboard techniques.

The aforementioned culture of the word refers to the communication tradition based on speech and writing. It is a culture where the written and spoken word play a key role in passing information, knowledge, tradition and values. What characteristics of the culture of the word can be shortlisted? They include the fact that the written and spoken word allows a precise transfer of complex content and abstract concepts. Next, the fact that written texts (books, articles, documents) can last centuries, which enables knowledge and tradition to be maintained. It is also important that words require interpretating and understanding the context, and this, in turn, engages the recipient's mind and develops critical thinking skills. Ultimately, it should be stated that traditional educational systems are mainly based on the written and spoken word.

Conversely, the civilisation of the image refers to modern culture where visual images, such as photographs, films, advertisements and multimedia, dominate communication. It is a fact that images can transfer information and emotions quickly, which is particularly important in the era of social media and the Internet. They are often universal and can be understood regardless of the language, which makes international communication easier. From the psychological point of view, images exert a strong emotional influence, can rapidly evoke recipients' response and engagement (Mitchell, 1992, 1994; Rudera, 2014).

It is easily noticeable that the realism of the civilisation of the image is an issue which does not refer to the fact that it exists, but rather to the fact that it has become a dangerous and possessive competition for the culture of the word. A potential comparison between both realities than the culture of the word allows a deeper understanding and analysis, whereas the civilisation of the image is characterised by a fast and easy content transfer. The written word is durable and

can last centuries, whereas images (particularly digital ones) can quickly become forgotten and replaced with new ones. Eventually, words require interpretation, which engages the recipient's mind, while images often pass their message directly.

To sum up, it can be claimed that in today's world the culture of the word and the civilisation of the image, while coexisting, should supplement each other. For instance, articles and books often contain illustrations and photographs in order to better transfer information, and visual media (such as films or commercials) often use texts to reinforce the message. It is important to be able to use both forms of communication so as to transfer and receive information effectively in a variety of contexts. This, however, is not the case as the culture of the word is being unilaterally replaced by the civilisation of the image.

Reading is becoming an unbearable struggle: it takes much time, requires activisation of the underdeveloped mechanisms of linear dealing with the meaning of speeches with simultaneous interpretational processing at the sense level, it forces imaging involving memory, attention and imagination. It requires processual 'biting' rather than fast satiation through 'devouring.' Reading written texts better guarantees language mastery application than images created ad hoc in cyberspace. Admittedly, a Russian proverb says that it is better to see once than hear ten times, yet contradictorily it confirms our argument that a bigger struggle is required to understand verbal texts in comparison to holistically captured image content.

Reading concerns the activisation of the analytical code, which is a primary code in relation to the synthetic code (writing, speaking) (Tłokiński, 1979). As a result, it is difficult to overrate its role in creating own linguistic instruments enabling effective and satisfying communication. Realising the synthetic code is a function which is conditioned by receptive resources one possesses and implementation practice thereof. Reading does not only improve the effectiveness of our speeches, thus permanently increasing the pragmatic potential, but also protects against linguistic non-memory, premature death of unused words and phrases. Although verbal language is a living creation and a document of current socio-cultural life, narrowing verbalisation possibilities in interpersonal communicative acts is progressing so dangerously fast that language risks losing a very important social function, namely, the function of uniting the society for the entire generational complexity.

The art of speaking (writing) stems from the art of understanding (reading). Does anybody from the Polish younger generations know the meaning of words: buchadło (archaic Polish for *a bomb*), hecny (archaic Polish for *gladdening*), nakastlik (archaic Polish for *a nightstand*), pachciarz (archaic Polish for *a leaseholder*).

Or if we take a Polish word like 'mizdrzyć się' (to ogle). Can one say, for instance, that an MP is ogling in front of the camera? But that word is almost gone language! It has disappeared! 'Birbants' (archaic Polish for *womanisers*) are also vanishing. Instead of 'impertinent' (Polish for *impertinent*), most say 'cham' (Polish for *a boor*). Additionally, nobody 'taszczy' (lugs) groceries any more, but 'dźwiga' (carries) (cf. Budzińska, 2022). It can be added that many contemporary literary works contain a criticism of the excess of images and the influence of the media on society. An example of a critique of the civilisation of the image is Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*, where the author explores the relationship between memory, image and identity (Pamuk, 2018). Paradoxically, the civilisation of the image introduces new challenges, but also new opportunities for literature, influencing the way literary works are created, structured and received. Contemporary literature often converses with visual culture, adapting to new forms of expression and technology while retaining the depth and complexity of the traditional word art. This particular coexistence of the two realities – image and belles-lettres – is unfortunately entirely overlooked by those members of society who are fully, and exclusively, immersed in the world of the civilisation of the image, instrumentalising its communicative functions.

Such a way to participate in communication is based on a pictorial code and uses keypad technology (telephone, computer). Within the pictorial code, information is represented by images or icons. This has its applications, e. g. in education, to teach children or students with learning difficulties who might struggle with the traditional teaching methods, but also for people with communicative disabilities for whom speaking or writing might pose problems. What is central to realise pictorial communication is technological support by way of, e. g. pictograms, adaptive keyboards and software to learn writing skills (see Beukelman & Mirenda, 2013; Light & Drager, 2007).

It is easy to see that the image civilisation, along with progress in science and technology, has its application in socially important areas of human life, and provides unique techniques to support impaired developmental processes, whereby it economises information transfer, breaking time and distance barriers. These are undisputable advantages to the image civilisation, which, being the only dominating and subsidiary one, significantly limits human functioning in communicative processes, thus making him disabled in selecting means of expression, impairs the possibilities of expressing the extent of emotion and may lead to misunderstandings in comprehending texts under creation.

Albeit, language is undoubtedly a living creation. Innovation becomes a habit which then turns into a language norm. It is undesirable when the norm is underpinned by a code which for many resembles a foreign language, excluding, gathering only like-minded people. The social function of language without due respect therefor, expressed through exercising perfection by exposure to literary

texts, becomes impaired. Such behaviour on behalf of language users, observable in everyday communicative discourses, is undoubtedly a form of sin against oneself. Reading negligence, deepening more and more clearly, deprives members of a given ethnic group of one of the most beautiful and strongest instruments at humanity's disposal, the instrument of verbal transfer of thought and emotion.

The deliberations and statements above are characterised by concepts from linguistics in a broad sense, thus they concern the instrumentation aspect of human communication acts. The art of wielding the linguistic symbol has provided the man with unique possibilities of communication to match his intellect and emotion. Undoubtedly, the unique art of manoeuvring in the world of the linguistic symbol requires a deep understanding how language and signs create meaning and how they can be used to communicate as well as influence others (Saussure de, 1983). The art is not only a theoretical research area, but also a practical skill which has its application in many areas of life, from literature and art to politics and marketing (Eco, 1976). It must be emphasised that the unique art of manoeuvring in the world of the linguistic symbol requires a skilled application of signs and symbols for communication, expressing thoughts, creating meanings and influencing others. This is a complex art and covers many aspects, including linguistics, semiotics, rhetoric, literature. This does not cancel the fact that it covers simultaneously different forms of visual and multimedia communication.

The art of manoeuvring around the world of the linguistic symbol by man displays a certain complexity which consists of key unique elements. They include understanding the structure of language, semiotics, metaphor and metonymy, rhetoric, intertextuality, cultural and social context as well as pragmatics. Wielding the world of the linguistic symbol can also be described in terms of its practical application, as mentioned above, and concerns such spheres as literature and poetry, advertising and marketing, politics and public speeches, art and design, teaching and education (see Chandler, 2002).

## 4. The Psychological context of exposure to the word

Reading is a complicated process which engages many areas of the brain to cooperate in order to recognise letters and words, perform phonological decoding, semantic integration as well as to engage the working and long-term memory. Knowledge regarding these mechanisms is crucial for understanding how the brain processes textual information, which may be significant in education as well as treating reading disorders (Dehaene, 2009).

The most important brain mechanisms engaged in the reading process include (1) *Recognising letters and words.* The basis of the reading process is recognising letters and words, and this happens mainly in the left temporal lobe, especially in the area known as the fusiform gyrus. The area is responsible for fast and effective recognition of letter shapes and word patterns; (2) *Phonological decoding,* i. e., a process of transforming written text into speech sounds, is crucial for learning how to read. It engages the areas such as the superior temporal gyrus as well as the angular gyrus, which are engaged in the phonological and semantic processes; (3) *Semantic integration,* required to understand the meaning of read text, takes place mainly in the left temporal lobe and frontal lobe. These areas, including the inferior temporal gyrus and the inferior fontal gyrus cooperate in order to combine particular words into sentences and extracting meaning out of them; (4) *Working and long-term memory* which allows temporary storage and manipulation of information, which is necessary to understand longer pieces of text. The working memory engages mainly areas in the frontal lobe including prefrontal cortex. However, the long-term memory, which stores a reader's knowledge and experience, engages such structures as hippocampus (Spitzer, 2007).

In turn, reading from the point of view of a psychologist points to the fact that it is also a complicated cognitive process which engages a series of skills and psychological mechanisms. The psychology of reading explores how people process text, recognise words, understand sentences and how different factors, such as age, cognitive abilities or emotions, influence the effectiveness of the process. Thus, in the relevant order:

1. *Word recognition* is a fundamental element of the reading process. Psychologists distinguish two main approaches to word recognition: the phonological approach and the visual approach. The phonological approach relies on decoding letters and transforming them into sounds, which is particularly important in learning how to read. The visual approach, in turn, relies on recognising whole words based on their shape and structure.
2. *Text comprehension* is a process which requires integrating various information, both from the text itself and from the reader's previous experiences. It is key to use background knowledge, the skill to draw conclusions and an ability to retain information in the working memory. Psychologists investigate how different reading strategies, such as metacognition, influence text comprehension.
3. *Reading processes automation* means that word recognition and decoding processes become fast, and require minimal cognitive effort. Automation allows concentrating on text comprehension and analysis. Research shows that practice and exposure to text are key to automation development.

4. *Motivation and emotions* play a significant role in the reading process. Motivation to read influences how often and how long an individual engages in their reading activity. Positive emotions connected with reading may boost engagement and improve text comprehensions, whereas negative emotions may act in the opposite way.
5. *Reading skill developments* is a dynamic process which begins in childhood and lasts a lifetime. Early experience of spoken language, learning the letters and sounds as well as support received from the family and teachers are crucial for reading skill development. Psychologists also investigate how different teaching methods influence the developments of these skills (Perfetti et al., 2005).

In Polish literature, a broad definition of reading was presented by Krasowicz-Kupis:

> Reading as written text reception is a complex psycholinguistic process based on text decoding and interpreting its content. It requires from the reader a linguistic competence on the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic level as well as cognitive skills, mainly in the area of visual and auditory perception, memory processes, and performing intellectual operations on the conceptual thinking level. (Krasowicz-Kupis, 1999, p.19) [translation]

As can be observed, the psychology of reading delivers important information on how people process text and develop reading skills. Understanding these processes is key for finding effective teaching and intervention methods for people with reading difficulties, and developing reading comprehension skills is one of the most challenging issues in modern teaching. Research in this area shows that both cognitive as well as emotional factors play a significant role in the reading process. In the light of this, negligence in reading may lead to a series of psychological effects which may influence various aspects of psychological and emotional health.

The most important effects include 1. impairment of cognitive functions: reading is one of the best forms of exercise for the brain. Regular reading helps maintain intellectual ability, improves analytical skills, and develops imagination. Lack of reading may lead to weaker skills in this area, which, in turn, may influence everyday functioning and decision making; 2. A decrease of lexicon and communicative skills: reading enriches one's lexicon and expression ability. People who read rarely may have difficulties with precise expression of their own thoughts and feelings, which may lead to frustration and problems with interpersonal communication; 3. an increased risk of stress and depression: reading, belles-lettres in particular, may act is a form of escape from everyday stress and problems, allowing one to be momentarily removed from the reality. Deprivation

in this form of relaxation may lead to an accumulation of stress and negative emotions, which, in time, may facilitate depression development; 4. empathy decrease: literature, especially novels, allows readers soak in the situation and emotions of other people. Regular reading may develop empathy and understanding for others. Abandoning reading altogether may weaken this ability, which may affect interpersonal relations; 5. impairment of focus and concentration skills: reading requires a certain level of focus and concentration, which helps develop these skills further. Lack of regular exposure to reading may lead to difficulties with attention and maintaining concentration on the task, which can negatively influence the effectiveness of one's work or study; 6. imagination and creativity limitation: literature is a source of inspiration and creativity. Breeding develops imagination and an ability to think creatively. People who do not read may have difficulties with coming up with new ideas and solving problems; 7. poorer emotional life: Reading literature exposes one to different emotions and experiences, which makes emotional life richer. No contact with literature may lead to poorer emotional experiences and lower introspection skills (see Goleman, 2007; Gumperz, 1983; Lakoff & Johnson, 1981; Ottenheimer & Pine, 2019; Taboł, 2005).

To sum up: regular reading is key to psychological and emotional health. Abandoning this activity altogether may lead to numerous negative effects, which may influence different aspects of everyday life. Both the linguistic as well as psychological perspectives (psycholinguistic) confirm in equal measure the significant importance of human contacts with the written word in scientific texts as well as belles-lettres.

What can be observed nowadays is that tendencies to abandon reading as a form of contact with the written word in favour of the iconographic world, boosted by digital technology, leads to unfavourable and longer lasting changes to human development. The ultimate result will manifest as significant changes in the communication competence sphere, which undoubtedly are the most important constituent of human social competence. Shortages in this aspect are difficult to overrate.

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# Making the silent speak: Involving the Reluctant Students into Oral Communication Activities

**Abstract**
The chapter looks at the development of oral communication skills in ELT classroom, particularly among learners who are initially reluctant to participate in spoken classroom activities due to their deficits. The author outlines factors impeding participation in oral interactions, pointing to the limitations resulting from external factors and learner-dependent ones, such as anxiety, low self-esteem or poor motivation, and takes an overview of the communication abilities that an effective language learner should develop. The study that was carried out shows how students with three different language learning challenges gradually improved, how they benefit from the applied instructional methods and techniques, as well as from the support offered by their teacher. The author also signifies how the person of the teacher and their approach can influence students' progress.

**Keywords:** communicative competence, oral communication, learning deficits, teacher's role

## 1. The importance of oral communication in the EFL classroom

The ability to communicate efficiently in speaking is crucial for the mastery of all language skills, as it takes the role of a mediation tool between other language skills. The definition of communicative competence goes far beyond the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Chomsky defines two distinctive notions: linguistic competence, the knowledge of the language itself, and linguistic performance, involving language processing through decoding and encoding meaning within specific contexts (Chomsky, 1965). Richards and Rodgers further point out that "language and communication are interdependent in the sense that language must serve the purpose of communicating the speaker's objectives", and entails "knowing how to vary use of language according to the setting and the participants," "how to produce and understand different types of

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texts," and "how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge" (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 86).

According to Brown (2014), second language acquisition (SLA) is not only a predictable developmental process but also a meaning-making endeavour through interpersonal negotiation (pp. 206–210). He emphasises the varied interpretations of communicative competence and its evolution over time (Table 1), summarizing Cummins' differentiation (1979), Canale and Swain's framework, and Bachman's perspective (1990). Recent advancements by Littlewood (2011) consolidate earlier theories into five sub-competencies.

Table 1. Perspectives in communicative competence based on Brown (2014, pp. 206–210)

| Authors | Time | Elements of communicative competence | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cummins | 1970s/ 1980s | basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) | everyday use of the language to negotiate meaning in natural exchanges, usually informal, including elements of slang and metaphor. |
| | | cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP) | more conscious use of language, usually connected with performing educational tasks. |
| Canale and Swain | 1980s | Grammatical | Mastering the linguistic code of the language, 'knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology' (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 29). |
| | | Discourse | The ability to form stretches of language to convey meaning. |
| | | Sociolinguistic | Following sociocultural rules and norms relate to the language. |
| | | Strategic | The application of verbal and nonverbal elements to maintain communication, especially when there appear linguistic insufficiencies. |
| Bachman | 1990s | Organizational | The applications of language forms at the level of sentences (grammatical competence) and stretches of language (discourse). |
| | | Pragmatic | The application of functions of language (illocutionary competence), connected with negotiating specific meanings, and the sociolinguistic aspects of the language, e. g. politeness, register, metaphor. |

*(Continued)*

| Authors | Time | Elements of communicative competence | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| Littlewood | 2010s | Linguistic (grammatical) | The applications of language forms at the level of sentences. |
| | | Discourse (textual) | The ability to form stretches of language to convey meaning. |
| | | Pragmatic (strategic) | Learner's ability to 'use linguistic resources to convey and interpret meanings in real situations, including those where they encounter problems due to gaps in their knowledge' (Littlewood, 2011, p. 546). |
| | | Sociolinguistic | Following sociocultural rules and norms relate to the language. |
| | | Sociocultural | Learner's awareness of target language culture which can affect the negotiation of meaning. |

As Larsen-Freeman and Anderson point out, referring to the understanding of communicative competence, it is a process and just "knowledge of the forms of language is insufficient." They imply that learners "must be also able to manage the process of negotiating meaning with their interlocutors" (2011, p. 139).

Learner's communicative competence, due to the mediating nature of speaking, affects the overall linguistic performance of the learner. As Brown argues, "the construct of interactional competence provides a context for understanding a number of aspects of communication: the nature of discourse, conversation, styles, pragmatic conventions, and even the place of nonverbal communication" (2014, p. 217). Being able to express ideas in the target language extends the learning opportunities: the oral exchange in the classroom takes place in the target language, minimizing or eliminating the use of the learner's mother tongue, which results in better overall learning outcome. Not only does such an attitude enhance the development of linguistic skills but it also builds up learner's confidence, and both their cultural understanding and social competence.

## 2. Verbal communication in the language classroom

Educators should be aware of the fact that all learning situations in the classroom, to a greater or lesser extent, involve communication, which always happens between at least two parties: the person conveying messages and their recipient. Direct verbal interaction, which tends to be more intentional than the non-verbal

one, encompasses all classroom verbal exchanges, defined as "the use of language forms to accomplish purpose" (Brown, 2014, p. 217). It can be discussed in terms of applying various language functions through multiple techniques: drills, dialogues, role-plays, simulations, Q&A sessions, discussions, interviews, presentations, story-telling, etc. The teacher can conduct the activities in a more or less controlled way, depending on students' abilities. Dialogues, for example, can be fully structured, with students just using the lines given and replacing only highlighted phrases, semi-structured, when students get questions or prompts to create questions and answers, or not structured at all, when students' task is to talk about the topic given or reach agreement.

Teachers should also be aware of and control their taking time (TTT) and student talking time (STT). As Kostadinovska-Stojchevska and Popovikj suggest, STT ideally occupies up to 80% of lesson time. Sometimes teachers give students information which they can easily find by themselves or which may be tedious to follow, such as grammar rules or corrections (2019, pp. 25–26). Excessive TTT limits learner autonomy and hinders their responsibility for learning. Haliti's research shows that "students who were exposed to a higher TTT showed worse results both when it comes to short and long term period of time" (2019, p. 19), proving prior research right (Skehan, 2001). However, teachers' goal should not be just minimizing TTT itself, but rather focusing on "the quality or effectiveness (contents) of TTT rather that the quantity" (Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Popovikj, 2019, p. 27). On the one hand, teachers' task is to expose learners to the target language as much as possible, but on the other, teachers' ability to control and limit TTT gives the floor more to the learners. Overall, TTT is "crucial in class if the teacher knows how to get the best of it, how to direct it for the benefit of a good atmosphere within the classroom and the improvement of teaching" (Haliti, 2019, p. 14).

Feedback in the classroom, though commonly associated with error correction and assessment, can serve multiple purposes: it helps personalize learning, keeps students engaged, and gives them useful tips or quick adjustments. Feedback can be verbal or nonverbal and may come from teachers, students, parents, or higher authorities (Herra & Kulińska, 2018, p. 128). Its main goal is to maximize learning opportunities and help students avoid future mistakes by providing accurate information about their progress and areas for improvement. It can clarify concepts, suggest focused study tasks, and support skill development.

Verbal corrective feedback includes explicit correction, recast, elicitation, clarification request or repetition (ibid, p. 131). Applying the nonverbal corrective feedback, teachers usually make use of facial expressions or gestures to signal that there is a problem with what the student is saying. Although verbal information is more precise and provides the learner with practical information

that they can employ, nonverbal clues are more discrete and provide more opportunities for the learner's self-correction and reflection.

Feedback in the language classroom should enhance learners' engagement and motivation. It extends beyond mere assessment or evaluation of progress. Teachers can observe and evaluate how students are working on tasks, comment on their work, offer constructive criticism so that learners can adjust and improve their performance, or simply acknowledge their focus. Effective feedback should be clear and personal, not just a generic "well done!" For instance, a comment such as "I like the linking words you used in your presentation" is more meaningful.

The feedback from teachers and classmates can significantly shape how students respond and feel about learning the target language. Therefore, awareness of the verbal and nonverbal messages conveyed to students is crucial.

## 3. Student based factors impeding oral communication

Reluctant learners in the ELT classroom often exhibit behaviours and attitudes that hinder the development of speaking skills and, consequently, overall language proficiency. These learners may face various internal and external factors that impede their willingness and ability to engage in speaking activities, which can be categorized into three areas: inadequate language skills, personality traits and learning deficits.

### 3.1. Inadequate language skills

Difficulties in producing linguistic output are often the direct consequence of limited input. Learners who are not exposed to the target language frequently enough lack sufficient reading or listening practice to transform input into production. Exposure limited to the 90 minutes of lesson time in a week, with classes often conducted partly in the native language, makes it impossible for the brain to strengthen neural connections, and results in limited vocabulary, structures, and discourse issues.

The knowledge of essential vocabulary and grammar structures that should be used conditions the learner's effectiveness in their oral communication, for example, limited knowledge of adjectives complicates description, while insufficient verb knowledge impedes storytelling. It is not learners' shyness, unwillingness to speak or having nothing to say – students lack the linguistic resources to convey their message. As Nation states, explaining the interrelation of language output and vocabulary learning, "vocabulary knowledge enables language

use, language use enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge, and knowledge of the words enables the increase of vocabulary knowledge and language use" (1993, p. 6).

For efficient oral communication, learners need practical means to convey their message rather than explicit language knowledge. Although it is not necessary for them to explain how various tenses and grammar structures work, some information seems helpful: the awareness that an English sentence always starts with the subject or that the past form carries the -ed ending. Additionally, learners' dependence on the mother tongue can hinder exposure to and practice of English. Translation-based thinking slows down speaking and increases reluctance to speak spontaneously, as learners first structure sentences in their mother tongue before saying them in English.

Also pronunciation, which is critical for oral communication, can be challenging for language learners. When they struggle with pronouncing words correctly, learners are less likely to take part in speaking activities, as they worry about being misunderstood or judged. This self-consciousness also results in hesitating, frequent pausing, and overusing filler words, further inhibiting fluency, and resulting in anxiety and withdrawal from spokes activities.

Similarly to problems with pronunciation, inadequate language skills, especially limited vocabulary, make it hard for students to express themselves. Reluctant learners tend to start speaking only when they feel confident or when stakes are low, consequently missing out on regular practice essential, without which they are unable to improve. Some personality traits can compensate for these limitations, but less supportive features become obstacles.

### 3.2. Affective factors

Learning a foreign language is a cognitive process, however, it is also influenced by affective factors to a great extent, particularly in developing oral skills. According to Imai, "emotions do not merely facilitate, filter, or hinder an individual's inner cognitive functioning; rather, they can in any forms mediate development, especially when learning is embedded in an interpersonal transaction" (2010, p. 278). Brown (2014) identifies various affective factors impacting classroom communication, including anxiety, self-esteem, attribution theory, self-efficacy, willingness to communicate, inhibition, risk-taking, empathy, extroversion and introversion, personality type, motivation, and learners' attitudes towards the language and its culture.

Reluctant learners often experience significant anxiety when asked to speak in English, driven by a fear of making mistakes or being judged by peers. Horwitz et al. define Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (henceforth: FLCA) as "distinct

complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from a uniqueness of the language learning process" (1986, p. 128). As marked by Brown, there are three main reasons of FLCA: language-based communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation, and text anxiety (2014, p. 151).

Botes et al. (2020, p. 31) further explain that FLCA significantly affects oral communication, to the point of paralyzing effect and 'freezing up' during speaking activities. Learners with high FLCA struggle with regular oral interactions during lessons, need more time to comprehend and produce language, and might not feel positive about their learning experience. And although, as indicated by Brown (2014, p. 151) language anxiety can have both positive and negative effect, and certain level of 'facilitative anxiety' can appear beneficial (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, pp. 61–62), on more occasions it "has been found to interfere with the grammatical precision and interpretative ability of the language learner" (Botes at al., 2020, p.31). Learners whose anxiety is high tend to understand spoken language worse, and consequently withdraw from discussions or hesitate to participate in speaking exercises. Also, as indicated by Lightbown and Spada, "anxiety is more likely to be dynamic and depend on particular situations and circumstances" (2006, p. 61), and oral exchanges are the situations that usually result in higher anxiety levels.

Low self-esteem and confidence exacerbate FLCA, as "learners who doubt their language skills are more likely to experience anxiety" (Pandya, 2024, pp. 1698–1699). Similarly, learners with low self-efficacy, often due to negative past experiences, doubt their ability to speak English effectively. Self-efficacy is closely related to attribution theory, covering the two aspects dependent on the learner, namely ability and effort, and two that external features: task difficulty and luck (Brown, 2014, p. 145). Reluctant learners often fear their contributions will be poorly received, leading to a preference for silence.

Another possible reason for a reluctant attitude is willingness, or actually unwillingness, to take part in oral exchanges. Willingness to communicate, defined by MacIntyre et al. as "the intention to initiate communication, given a choice" (2001, p. 369), is influenced by FLCA, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Learners who worry excessively about peer judgement often participate less in spoken exchanges. This reluctance is often linked to inhibition, personality type and introversion. Brown (2014, p. 148) notes that learners "with weaker self-esteem maintain stronger 'walls' of inhibition to protect what is self-perceived to be a weak or fragile ego or a lack of self-efficacy". Reluctant learners may be naturally shy or introverted, finding it difficult to speak up in group settings or in front of others. This social discomfort frequently exacerbates in a foreign language context.

Although studies on the influence of learner's personality on the development of their communicative competence show varied results (Erton, 2010; Astuti, 2024), it is clear that some personality traits will affect learner's oral performance in the classroom. Brown (2014, p. 154) remarks that "it is not clear (…) that extroverion / introversion helps or hinders the process of second language acquisition." Extroversion / introversion does, however, influence oral communication. Introvert learners are the ones who enjoy "spending time by themselves, focusing on themselves, and enjoying quiet, private moments with a select group of friends" (Astuti, 2024, p. 97), and although it is not true they have nothing to say or don't know how to say it, they often need more time to open up in social interactions. They may not feel the need to share their opinions. And this withdrawal actually limits their speaking skills development. Another personality trait, inhibition, which discourages risk-taking, necessary in language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 61), has particularly negative influence on learner pronunciation.

Motivation also plays a critical role. Reluctant learners often rely on external motivation, such as grades or teacher approval, rather than intrinsic motivation. Lightbown and Spada emphasize that learners motivated by the communicative value of the language are more likely to acquire proficiency (2006, p. 63), and those who lack intrinsic motivation may not see the relevance or importance of developing speaking skills, leading to disengagement from speaking practice. Learners' attitudes towards the language and its culture, along with cultural differences, can also influence their willingness to speak. Learners who show genuine interest in the language and the culture of the country are naturally more intrinsically motivated to work on their language proficiency. These learners will often seek for opportunities to interact in the foreign language also outside school, and consequently, they extend their learning opportunities. Lack of such interest or negative attitudes may result in no need to seek contact with the target language, or even avoiding it, significantly decreasing their learning prospects.

Also, the existence of cultural differences between the learner's culture and the one of the target language can result in reluctance to speak. Pandya notes that "learners from different cultural backgrounds may experience additional stress due to unfamiliar social norms and expectations in the target language" (2024, p. 1699) and consequently, learners may be less willing to engage in speaking activities.

### 3.3. Learning deficits

The factors impeding oral communication in the classroom – insufficient language skills and affective influences – can be partially controlled and modified by learners, in contrast to learning deficits that lie beyond the control of either learners or teachers. Therefore, it is essential to organize the learning process, including oral communication, acknowledging these deficits and the way they affect language acquisition.

Many teachers are aware that dyslexia affects written language, not realizing it also impacts oral communication due to difficulties in recognizing and manipulating language sounds that are vital for pronunciation. Learners with dyslexia may confuse similar sounds and produce pronunciation errors or face challenges in comprehending spoken language. This can result in reduced intelligibility and confidence in speaking (Snowling, 2000). Jurek (2004, p. 105) identifies specific areas where dyslexic learners face difficulties compared to their non-dyslexic counterparts, including stress and intonation (three times more frequent), pronunciation (2.5 times) and free speaking (twice as often). However, Kulińska et al. (2023, p. 247) note, that there is no single model of dyslexia due to varying severity and support strategies.

Similarly, learners with attention deficits, such as those associated with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD), frequently face challenges in oral communication. It is particularly hard for them to maintain focus, organize tasks, manage impulses and their speech can be disorganized or tangential, complicating comprehension for peers. They consequently miss out cues and are unable to participate in discussions.

Learners who suffer from apraxia, a neurological disorder, understand commands, yet struggle with producing sounds of the language in the correct sequence. This can give the impression of distorted or garbled speech (Duffy, 2013). Students with this deficit may know what they want to say and how to say it, still the physical limitation makes it difficult or impossible. The situation is completely different for students with developmental aphasia, whose both comprehension and production of language are affected. These learners struggle with understanding grammar and learning vocabulary, and because of deficits in short-term memory their ability to store linguistic information essential for oral communication is limited (Minkina et al. 2017).

As apraxia and aphasia often co-occur, they may lead to potential confusion due to overlapping difficulties in verbal expression. However, individuals with aphasia struggle with effective word use and comprehension, while those with apraxia typically understand language but face challenges initiating and completing the motor tasks required to speak.

## 4. External factors impeding oral communication

The development of learners' speaking skills is also influenced by external factors, which can mitigate or exacerbate learner anxiety. Learner's engagement depends on many reasons, such as classroom organisation, types of activities and teaching materials. It is also the teacher who can either encourage the learners or just the opposite, discourage them from speaking.

### 4.1. Learning environment

While non-inclusive or rigid settings hinder student participation and elevate their anxiety levels, positive and supportive classroom atmosphere helps students cope with excessive anxiety correlates improved language proficiency (Horwitz et al. 1986).

While grammar, receptive skills, and writing can be practiced independently, speaking inherently involves interaction with peers. Learners often do not select their classmates, which can lead to discomfort when interacting with the classmates, who can appear to be both supportive and critical. Learners may experience high levels of anxiety and feel inhibited to take part in speaking activities when e. g. their mistakes are corrected, and other students' reaction does not show support.

Moreover, as speaking is considered a time-intensive activity, it is often limited in ELT classrooms due to insufficient lesson time. If the teachers wants every student to say something in class, it requires considerably more time compared to other activities, like grammar or writing exercises. This makes some teachers give up or reduce speaking opportunities for students, and discouragers reluctant learners from participating in oral exchanges even more. Also, classes which take place early in the morning may be less effective. Teenagers' cognitive performance typically peaks later in the day, and then they are easier to get involved. Similarly, lessons scheduled late can be less efficient, because of learners' mental and physical fatigue. Class size also significantly affects oral interaction quality; smaller groups facilitate engagement by minimizing competition for attention and reducing anxiety due to fewer evaluative peers. In larger classrooms, reluctant learners may easily remain disengaged.

### 4.2. Teaching process

The teaching methods and materials teachers select and design influence the development of speaking skills in language learners significantly. Communicative, task-based and student-centred approaches make it easier for students to start speaking, while depersonalized methods which prioritize accuracy over fluency may impede speaking skills development. According to Nation and Newton (2008, pp. 152–153), three conditions that must be met for effective fluency development: focus on meaning, all language items being within learners' previous experience, and encouragement to perform at a higher level.

When learners show limited interest in communication, classroom interactions tend to be strictly pedagogical, whereas real-life contexts foster intrinsic motivation. Also, topics unfamiliar to students can present additional challenges due to the lack of structures and sufficient vocabulary. Brown (2014, p. 236) outlines the four guidelines for fostering learner communication: focus on all of its components, application of suitable techniques aimed at accomplishing purposes rather than mastering language forms, balancing between accuracy and fluency, and creating opportunities for students to use the language in various contexts. It is essential to understand that insufficient opportunities for pragmatic and authentic language use, particularly controlled practice time, can hinder the oral skill development of all, and especially reluctant, speakers.

Teaching materials also play a significant role in motivating learners to speak, especially if they are well-designed, facilitate meaningful communication, engage students in authentic use of language, and address various aspects of speaking proficiency such as fluency, accuracy and pronunciation. On the other hand, materials of poor quality, irrelevant or unengaging can have the opposite effect. Tasks in which learners are involved in real-life situations and solve problems make them so involved that they manage to overcome their insecurities. Predictable course-book or worksheet tasks may easily reduce students' interest and do not encourage them to speak. Therefore, teachers should also refer to interactive and meaningful resources to supplement traditional materials, diversify teaching methods and cater for various learners' need. Thanks to these resources, the lesson becomes more dynamic, and the use of competitive activities, such as games, helps students overcome their personal limitations.

As most ELT classes are the mixed-ability ones, teachers should take this fact into consideration and prepare the materials that suit learners at various proficiency levels, in order toensure meaningful participation for all students. Overly simplistic materials may fail to engage, while excessively challenging ones can elevate anxiety and hinder interaction. Well-structured teaching materials should encompass all four language skills – speaking, listening, reading, and writing – alongside linguistic mediation, vocabulary development, grammar, and

pronunciation instruction to promote comprehensive language competency. Overemphasizing specific skills can restrict time allocated for others. If significant time is devoted to accuracy through grammar-focused materials, the opportunity for oral practice may diminish, particularly for learners who are hesitant to express themselves verbally. Consequently, these learners may continue to engage in silent exercises and give up on speaking activities.

### 4.3. The teacher

Teachers' role in developing learners' oral proficiency should not be underestimated. Not only do they shape the learning environment for their students but also to a great extent affects students' perception of the language itself, language learning, motivation, and ultimately, oral proficiency.

Teachers who manage to adopt a facilitative approach encourage their students to take risks, without fearing mistakes. Strict or tense teachers, on the other hand, may increase anxiety, making students withdraw from oral interactions. A safe environment, where learners feel comfortable experimenting with language, is essential for developing fluency, and therefore teachers role in designing learning opportunities and materials should not be underestimated.

Teachers can apply the whole array of tools to motivate their students: discussions, questions, expressing opinions, evaluation and criticism. Ineffective motivation by teachers reduces learners' chances of mastering communicative competence. There are certain personality traits, or attitudes, which can negatively affect motivation and involvement in language learning: authoritarian and rigid attitude, negative or critical demeanor, impatience, intolerance, lack of enthusiasm, inflexibility or resistance to change (Stern, 1983).

Authoritarian or rigid teachers tend to create environments where students fear speaking or expressing themselves, which leads to reduced participation and limits learners' creativity. On numerous occasions, teachers who seems negative and overcritical foster fear and tension, and this makes students withdraw from speaking tasks, as they want to avoid negative feedback. Teacher who overcorrect their learners can also diminish their confidence, increase anxiety and reduce willingness to communicate. Patience and acceptance, which authoritarian teachers are short of, are crucial for reluctant learners to engage in oral exchanges.

Furthermore, teachers' enthusiasm and involvement are vital for student engagement. Not only do unenthusiastic or disengaged teachers demotivate students, but monotonous lessons are difficult for students, especially nowadays, when they are constantly overstimulated through omnipresent technology. And inflexible teaching approaches or resistance to adapting teaching methods to the

needs of individual learners can leave some students behind, particularly those who require more support or alternative approaches, and in the long run diminish students' sense of responsibility for language learning.

## 5. Developing leaners' communication abilities

Communication abilities that effective language learners present include, among others, linguistic fluency and accuracy, willingness to communicate, self-confidence, cultural awareness, and sensitivity. They should also master skills specific to communication, namely routines, strategic competence, and adaptability.

### 5.1. Routines

Effective communication, particularly in language learning environments, is based on mastering routines. Unlike immutable personality traits, routines can be established, familiarized, and relied upon to help learners internalize communicative structures and reduce anxiety. By establishing consistent patterns of interaction, learners develop and internalize communicative structures, and consequently reduce their anxiety. Routines offer a form of predictable framework within which learners can experiment with the language and reduce cognitive load. Once learners feel the safety of the scaffolding, they can fully focus on content rather than mechanics. For instance, whet the teacher starts the lesson with predictable interactions, such as discussing daily experiences, can enhance confidence and fluency. Ellis (2017) also notices that routines make it easier for learners to focus on the communicative goals, rather than on language structures.

Routines also build speaking fluency by encouraging regular participation in predictable activities, lowering anxiety, and promoting a sense of safety (Thornbury, 2005; Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). Repeated exposure to familiar communicative scenarios can lower anxiety and provide the feeling of safety. Another consequence of resorting to classroom routine is more consistent participation from all learners. Nation and Newton (2008, pp. 116–121) highlight that structured routines in classroom settings promote equal participation among learners, ensuring that everyone has a chance to speak

### 5.2. Negotiating skills

Complex communication situations require well-mastered negotiation skills from their participants: paraphrasing, asking for clarification, and using gestures. These skills involve both negotiation of meaning and interaction. Negotiation of meaning includes active listening, clarification and paraphrasing, and also problem-solving, persuasion and argumentation (O'Keefe, 2015), which facilitate understanding and engagement.

Active listening allows learners to pick up on subtleties, emotions, and underlying concerns, facilitating more effective negotiation. Active listeners can go beyond the straightforward message of the utterance as they also pay attention to the tone and context. Clarification and paraphrasing, while seemingly straightforward, are challenging for learners to employ effectively, similarly to restating ideas in their own words, without altering the original meaning. Some learners struggle when they should find appropriate synonyms or alternative expressions, which leads to paraphrases that are either too similar to the source or that lose essential details. Students with limited grammatical knowledge find restructuring sentences problematic, and their paraphrases may sound awkward or use incorrect structures. These learners, especially the ones with low self-esteem and high anxiety, also find it hard to give and ask for clarification, mainly for fear of being judged or exposing their lack of understanding.

Reluctant speakers may experience particular difficulties in negotiating interaction, as it involves adjusting, clarifying, and modifying speech to prevent misunderstandings. Proper interaction patterns are crucial for communication in the target language and working on them provides real-time practice opportunities. Learners discover how to employ politeness strategies, such as using polite language, hedging, and making indirect requests, which helps them maintain a positive tone and avoid conflict during negotiations. They should also be encouraged to manage their emotions, stay calm under pressure, and prevent misunderstandings when they speak in the target language. Teacher's task is to help learners become effective language users who can leverage these negotiation skills to navigate complex communication scenarios, and consequently reach agreements, resolve conflicts, and build positive relationships.

### 5.3. Linguistic awareness

An effective language user is the one who, on the one hand, can speak the language spontaneously and in a natural way, but is also aware of genre and discourse types and integrates adaptability and flexibility to communicate ef-

fectively across various contexts. Deficiencies in any of these skills can lead to reluctance in undertaking speaking tasks.

Adaptability allows language learners to modify their communication style so that it suits different contexts, audiences, and purposes. Students should know how to adjust the linguistic form, tone and nonverbal cues to communicate effectively with others. Additionally, as foreign language learners, they must adapt to communicating in situations where the language they have not yet mastered is the primary communication tool. Learners presenting deficits in adaptability may sound rigid and conversations they try to maintain can miss the natural flow. Flexibility equips language learners with the willingness and ability to modify their communication approach in response to unexpected circumstances. Students who are flexible are more open to new ideas, perspectives and alternative ways of expression (Martin & Nakayama, 2017), and the one who lack the skill will struggle with new or unforeseen situations. The better linguistic awareness of the learners, the higher levels of adaptability and flexibility they possess, as it is easier for them to understand the expectations associated with different types of communication and adjust their language structure, style, and content appropriately. They can shift between formal and informal language, modify their speech based on the listener's proficiency, and use various strategies to clarify meaning when communication breakdowns occur (Griffiths, 2018). Shortcomings in language awareness can result in inappropriate language use, leading to awkwardness and discouraging feedback.

All these skills, whether dependent on the teacher, the learner, or external circumstances, shape the conditions for both language learning and communication. The research section will present examples of learners facing different types of difficulties.

## 6. Research (case study)

The primary aim of this research was to observe how learners with various learning deficits overcome challenges in oral communication in a foreign language. For this study, three final-year secondary school students with different learning deficits were selected:

Student A: diagnosed with developmental aphasia (affecting speech production and comprehension, reading and writing) and short-term memory deficits, exhibiting poor language skills due to these deficits.

Student B: possesses poor language skills but has strong communication abilities in her mother tongue, an extrovert with positive self-esteem.

Student C: a shy, introverted student with an adequate vocabulary range and good command of grammar.

The specific objective of the research was to determine *what coping mechanisms and strategies the learners employed to overcome their obstacles.* Additionally, the research aimed to identify *how the teacher and the teaching process affected the learners' performance.*

The study involved observing learners' oral performance and foreign language learning outcomes during their final year of the secondary school in Poland. The participants, all aged 19, attended different study groups but were taught by the same teacher. All three learners were preparing for the final oral exam in English at B1+ level and written exams at B1+ / B2 levels.

The initial stage of the research involved selecting learners whose language performance would be analysed. This selection was based on researcher's prior experience teaching the three study groups and her knowledge of the learners and their learning difficulties. Three students with distinctive learning difficulties affecting oral interaction were selected.

The data collected in the research included:

- observation notes, divided into four sections: student's particular difficulty in performing oral activities, the source of the difficulty, student's coping mechanisms, and teacher's support;
- test results during the school year;
- the results of final external exams taken after graduation.

The students were observed and notes on their oral performance and test results were collected for the 8 months of the study (from September 2023 to April 2024), while the results of the final external exams were added in September 2024.

## 6.1. Analysis of learners' performance

The performance of the three learners was analysed based on their oral interactions, personal involvement in classroom work and achieved results (Table 2).

Table 2. Learners' performance during the school year

| | Learner A | Learner B | Learner C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Type of deficit | developmental aphasia; deficits in short-term memory processing | extremely limited vocabulary and grammar | shyness and introversion |
| Group characteristics | 12 students, most B1/B1+, two learners at C1 | 13 students, most B1+ | 15 students, B2/C1 |
| Learner's level | A1+ | A2+/B1 | B2+ |

*(Continued)*

| | Learner A | Learner B | Learner C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Attendance | 89% | 86% | 92% |
| Vocabulary test results | 4%<br>13%<br>5%<br>0% | 24%<br>60%<br>72%<br>80% | 84%<br>88%<br>65%<br>96% |
| Formal assessment | Mock exams:<br>Written 16%<br>Spoken 0%<br>Final exams:<br>Written (B1+) 30%<br>Spoken 30% | Mock exams:<br>Written 71%<br>Spoken 60%<br>Final exams:<br>Written (B1+) 60%<br>Spoken 60% | Mock exams:<br>Written 90%<br>Spoken 76%<br>Final exams:<br>Written (B1+) 97%<br>Written (B2) 90%<br>Spoken 98% |

### 6.1.1. Student A (learning deficit)

Although Student A is highly motivated and diligent and consistently completes written homework, she struggles with oral communication in lessons. The severity of her limitation posed a significant risk of failing both the year and the external spoken examination. Student A struggles with all aspects of language learning, with short-term memory deficits complicating task such as memorizing words and forming even simple sentences in the target language. Additionally, she encounters difficulties in understanding spoken language and producing speech, particularly with pronunciation. The learner struggles significantly with phonemes absent in her native language, such as the varied pronunciations of the single vowel "e," represented phonetically as /e/ (*bait*), /ɛ/ (*bet*), /æ/ (*bat*), /ə/ (*about*), and /ɚ/ (*bird*). She has difficulty hearing these variations and retrieving the correct sounds.

She consistently engaged in completing homework, often with the help of extra teachers. However, she did not refer to her peers in class even if she found the tasks challenging. Both the teacher and other students could easily notice the discrepancy between her homework and the limited language she used in class. In her homework, the submitted properly structured complex sentences, yet she struggled to produce even simple sentences in class. In some situations, she could not articulate the content of her homework and was unable to justify her grammatical choices, which was critical for task completion.

Oral interactions posed the most significant challenge for Student A. Even with prepared notes, she found it difficult to express thoughts beyond simple sentences, often using incorrect verb forms and mispronunciations that compromised intelligibility. She had a tendency to speak in a very quiet voice, which was likely connected with the fear of negative feedback from her classmates.

The teacher tried to support the student in overcoming her challenges, by e. g. offering continuous encouragement, giving extra time for responses, prompting useful vocabulary and using nonverbal cues to elicit answers. As the student's limitations resulted from her short-term memory deficits rather than lack of motivation, she frequently underperformed in test, despite her efforts to learn the assigned vocabulary. Similarly, results in grammar, listening, and reading tests also fell below passing rates. Even though she failed, she kept trying.

One of the biggest challenges was Learner A's reluctance to interact with her classmates. She often sat alone. Initially, she did not want to answer questions from either the teacher or peers and responded with silence or head shakes. Although she tried to read sentences from her homework, she struggled with producing even simple responses. At the end of the school year, Learner A began to respond to some questions with short, simple utterances. The teacher adjusted her approach by selecting less complex questions that required simpler vocabulary, thereby recognizing the learner's efforts.

### 6.1.2. Student B (poor language skills)

Student B is self-confident, sociable and extroverted. She demonstrates a certain level of motivation and willingness to engage. However, her limited vocabulary resulting from insufficient effort and a reluctance to confront educational challenges in previous years significantly affected her performance. Although she knew what she wanted to say, expressing her thoughts in the target language often proved difficult, posing a substantial risk of failing the external spoken exam.

Her individual work on language assignments was inconsistent; she occasionally relied on classmates and online resources for assistance. Initially, she responded to challenging tasks with statements such as "I can't do it" or "It's too hard," often resorting to having the texts from her course-book translated into her native language. She was generally reluctant to participate in oral activities and tended to avoid speaking tasks. Learner B's attitude shifted after the first two months of the school year. She began to recognize the connection between studying for vocabulary tests and her ability to independently complete assignments and engage in discussions. Gradually, she faced more challenges and became more willing to participate in speaking activities, although her limited vocabulary did not make the task easy.

Similarly to Learner A's situation, the teacher continuously encouraged her. The hardest task was to make Learner B stop translating her thoughts from Polish and convince her to try constructing simple sentences in English. She was encouraged to independently enhance her vocabulary, and the teacher recommended some applications to assist with the task. Additionally, she was advised

to prepare short notes for potential discussion topics, which provided her with a sense of safety during speaking activities. Gradually, she relied less on her notes. Learner B benefited notably from the speaking opportunities created by the teacher: students practised speaking in almost every lesson, some classes were devoted solely to speaking activities. She quickly realised that participation was inevitable, and increasingly engaged in discussions.

The teacher appreciated Learner B's efforts, she was given ample time to begin speaking, with the teacher demonstrating genuine interest in her contributions, even when the language was imperfect. For errors that impeded communication, the teacher would simply echo the sentence correctly, e. g. "oh, you *brought* your friend with you," or ask clarifying questions. When there was need for more substantial feedback and explanations, the teacher provided them after speaking activities.

### 6.1.3. Student C (shy, introverted)

Student C was a highly motivated, diligent, and hard-working young person. He was always prepared for lessons and demonstrated a solid understanding of grammar and vocabulary. He seldom collaborated with peers or supported less advanced learners, prioritizing his own development. Due to difficulties in engaging in in oral interaction, prolonged hesitation before speaking, and a tendency to limit his contributions, there was a risk that Learner C would perform below his abilities in the external spoken exam.

His shyness and introversion, despite his moderate self-esteem, substantially limited his oral interactions during lessons. Although he often knew what he wanted to say and could express his thoughts in the target language, competing for speaking opportunities in the classroom frequently felt overwhelming. As an extreme introvert, he preferred to listen and observe rather than actively participate in discussions. He was consistent in his individual work on language assignments at home. His knowledge of grammar and vocabulary was an asset when undertaking speaking tasks; however he was often reluctant to engage in oral interactions, favoring the role of an attentive listener. The reluctance was exacerbated by his study group, which included several articulate and dominant students, making the classroom environment particularly challenging for him emotionally and increasing his fear of negative social evaluation.

Learner C typically waited for his turn patiently and spoke last, usually directly addressed by the teacher, who asked him to refer to previous speakers or summarize discussions. Initially, he required significant time before speaking, which caused his frustration and withdrawal. However, as the year progressed, he became more self-assured and occasionally expressed his opinions without being prompted by the teacher.

## 6.2. Research results

All three learners described in the sections above managed to overcome their limitations and performed well, and even exceeded initial expectations for their speaking skills development, and proved it final language exams.

The results obtained in the study clearly show that these achievements resulted from the collaborative efforts between the motivated learners and the teacher, who created suitable learning conditions and continuously encouraged their progress. Sustained effort was essential, as immediate rewards were not forthcoming, making ongoing engagement crucial.

When referring to the first research question, the copying mechanisms and strategies employed by the learners to overcome their obstacles, it is important to notify that for Learners A and B, linguistic constraints, particularly limited vocabulary, posed significant challenges. They were advised to immerse themselves in the target language by reading in English and watching English series. Learner B adhered to this advice, while Learner A was more reluctant. Vocabulary work was integrated into lessons, benefiting all students. Words were taught in context, as language chunks, in order to facilitate recall and use. The teacher reinforced learning vocabulary through speaking tests, which required the use of recently studied phrases, and encouraged learners to use simple language to minimize reliance on their native language and translation. Learner B effectively reduced her dependence on translation, and significantly improved her speaking skills. However, Learner A continued to rely heavily on her mother tongue, and her progress was slow.

Learner A also struggled with pronunciation. Her short-term memory and language processing deficits, together with limited exposure to spoken English outside the classroom, resulted in strong Polish accent. In contrast, Learner B's increased language exposure, her open attitude, and proactive approach to receiving pronunciation guidance from the teacher and peers were her assets. Learner C, who did not struggle with individual word pronunciation, initially showed limited engagement in oral interactions, slowing his development.

Overcoming FLCA was another challenge for all three learners. Table 3 presents the levels of learners' anxiety based on sources suggested by Brown (2014, p. 151) and their personality.

Table 3. Learners' levels of FLCA and their sources

| | Learner A | Learner B | Learner C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Communication apprehension, arising from learners' inability to adequately express mature thoughts and ideas | high | high | low |

*(Continued)*

| | Learner A | Learner B | Learner C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fear of negative social evaluation, arising from a learner's need to make a positive social impression on others | high | moderate | moderate |
| Test anxiety, or apprehension over academic evaluation | high | high | moderate |
| Reluctance to speak for personality reasons | moderate | low | high |

For Learner A, three sources contributed to high FLCA, making oral interactions emotionally demanding and sometimes nearly impossible. Such elevated anxiety levels not only impede speaking but also hinder comprehension. Learner B experienced two strong sources of FLCA, along with one moderate source, which facilitated her ability to navigate emotional challenges more effectively. In contrast, Learner C had only one strong source of FLCA, accompanied by two moderate sources; however, his struggle to engage in oral activities was significant, as personality traits are less easily modified than vocabulary acquisition.

Addressing the second research question, the teacher's influence on learners' performance was significant. Being aware of each learner's FLCA levels, she sought to create various opportunities for them to overcome their anxiety by diversifying interaction patterns and tasks. and create opportunities for less confident students to voice their opinions. Lessons were structured to include speaking tasks not only for the whole class but also pairs and small groups. During whole-class discussions, the teacher ensured that every student participated, and occasionally asked more dominant students to wait their turn. Students had adequate preparation time for speaking activities and they could use their notes. The teacher was careful to minimize negative social evaluation and did not allow negative comments or laughter at others' mistakes. Strategies employed by the teacher to foster a favourable learning environment included encouragement and constructive feedback, ensuring students understood their areas for improvement. Feedback was not restricted to lesson time; the teacher often spoke with learners privately after class, facilitating a less defensive reception of comments. The teacher did not limit her expectations of any student, with their awareness that the limitation should make them work harder, not achieve lower.

These efforts resulted a learning environment that encouraged student participation and fostered a sense of belonging and acceptance (Pandya, 2024, p. 1699). The teacher was fully aware that students need time to begin speaking, and sometimes extended the usual waiting time of 5 seconds. Although this occasionally caused anxiety among other students, the teacher patiently explained that everyone requites their own time to respond. Additionally, she

encouraged active listening and attention to peers, promoting an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The teacher also aimed to align teaching materials and methods with both student needs and examination requirements. She adhered to the three guidelines outlined by Nation and Newton (2008, pp. 152–153): activities were meaning-focused, learners were engaged in tasks which practised familiar language items, and the teacher provided support and encouragement for learners. During the lessons, both the teacher and the students consistently used English, and communication in learners' native language was permitted only when it was absolutely necessary. Students had opportunities to discuss topics that were relevant to them and their experiences. This connection to personal experience was particularly evident in Learner B, who actively tried to express her opinions, despite limited vocabulary, often using gestures to supplement communication. Similarly, Learner C occasionally participated in discussions spontaneously, as he wanted to express his views on personally relevant topics.

In summary, the teacher's approach, characterized by creating safe environment, which welcomed language experimentation and motivated oral interactions, significantly supported the development of communication competence in all learners, particularly those who struggled and were initially reluctant to speak.

## 7. Recommendations for developing communicative competence

The following recommendations can be applied to develop communicative competence:

- achieving an optimal balance between anxiety and safety;
- creating inclusive atmosphere that promotes peer support and emphasizes activities that leverage resilient students' strengths, such as problem-solving discussions or leadership roles in group tasks;
- the teacher should be caring yet firm, providing assistance and constructive feedback while also encouraging learners to confront challenges;
- promoting peer-cooperation, e. g. through role-playing and simulations;
- using a variety of interactional patterns, such as pair-work, team discussions and activities allowing students to switch groups;
- beginning with simpler tasks that allow for preparation, ultimately progressing to more complex and spontaneous scenarios;
- incorporating interactive games and activities, both traditional and digital, to engage learners.

Concluding, the fact that reluctant students begin to engage in speaking activities successfully requires a collaborative effort. Teachers should create conducive environments by ensuring emotional safety, providing appropriate materials, and employing techniques to enhance communicative competence. In turn, learners should reciprocate this effort through active participation and a commitment to overcoming challenges.

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Iwona Szczęsna

# Intergenerational Dialogue as one of the Determinants of Understanding Old Age

**Abstract**
Research conducted globally on human population structures clearly shows that modern societies are experiencing an ageing trend. This demographic shift is reflected in various indicators, and the ageing population is expected to grow even more pronounced in the coming years. National analyses indicate that while most Poles recognize the importance of the older generation (Wądołowska, 2009), their views often diverge from broader societal perceptions of the elderly and old age. This study aimed to explore communication dynamics from the perspective of young adults who are family members of seniors involved in the public initiative 'Passion – a recipe for eternal youth'. Responses were categorized into three key communication aspects: listening, speaking, and understanding. The migration of young people from rural areas to urban centers, coupled with rapid urbanization and digitalization, has altered life patterns, leading to a decline in daily interactions among family members. As a result, intergenerational dialogue has become increasingly difficult, presenting a significant challenge for modern societies. Rebuilding this dialogue is crucial, and fostering mutual trust and open communication is essential. This can be achieved by raising awareness among both young adults and seniors about the importance of empathy, patience, commitment, and understanding – key components of effective communication.

**Keywords:** intergenerational dialogue, communication, young adult, senior citizen

## 1. Introduction

The ageing of society is recognized as one of the most significant social issues in the modern world. This phenomenon also affects Poland, where, in 2022, the number of people aged 60 and over reached 9.8 million, marking a 0.7% increase compared to the previous year (GUS, 2023). Demographic projections for Poland through 2060 suggest a continued rise in the senior population, which is expected to comprise 38.3% of the total population (GUS, 2023). Consequently, it is vital to

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engage in discussions aimed at reintegrating old age into the collective consciousness and restoring its rightful place within the hierarchy of human life stages (Fabiś, 2005, p. 5). There is growing recognition of the importance of well-being in late adulthood, emphasizing that this stage should not be viewed merely as the inevitable decline of human existence (Semków, 2004, p. 127).

A laconic, dictionary definition of old age describes it as "the period of life following adulthood" (Szymczak, 1989, p. 322). Piotrowski, however, views old age as a cultural phenomenon with a biological foundation, closely linked to the weakening of strength (Piotrowski, 1973, p. 6). In contrast, Wiśniewska-Roszkowska defines old age as physical and mental degradation, characterized by withdrawal and the increasing need for help and care from others (Wiśniewska-Roszkowska, 1989). Alongside the biological aspect of old age, attention is also given to its psychological and social dimensions. The social aspect focuses on the person's functioning in society during old age, while the psychological aspect addresses the intellectual, personality, and cognitive changes that occur with age (Jaroszewska, 2013, pp. 21–22). Based on these criteria, the literature categorizes old age into the following:

(1) Social Old Age – Linked to the loss of social contacts, withdrawal from professional activities, and relinquishing previously held social roles.
(2) Psychological Old Age – Associated with a sense of life's meaninglessness, feelings of loneliness, dwelling on past events, and escapism expressed through egocentrism or pessimism.
(3) Physiological Old Age – Characterized by frailty and reduced immunity (Bugajska, 2012, p. 13).

A similar division is proposed by Trafiałek, who defines old age as a natural life phase following youth and maturity, representing the culmination of the ageing process. The biological aspect of old age includes weakened immune forces, reduced mobility, and the decline of bodily functions. Psychological old age involves a decreased ability to adapt to change, and in a socio-economic context, it is linked to impoverishment and loneliness. Social old age is marked by marginalization from social life, while economic old age refers to the need for support from others (Trafiałek, 2006).

Szatur-Jaworska (2000) defines old age as the final stage in life, beginning when one reaches a conventionally defined threshold. This phase represents a dynamic interplay between psychological and biological processes and changes in an individual's social activity. However, it is important to note that there is no universally agreed-upon boundary for old age. Literature on the subject highlights that discrepancies in defining the onset and periodization of old age are due to the individual pace of ageing, the extension of human life expectancy, and

the heterogeneous nature of old age in psychosocial or biological terms (Steuden, 2011).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), three key stages are identified when defining old age:
- Old age, or early old age – From 60 to 75 years
- Elderly age, or late old age – From 75 to 90 years
- Advanced old age, or longevity – From 90 years and beyond (Piekarska, Piekarski, 2017, p. 15).

There is increasing attention on the negative perceptions of old age that exist in the public sphere and are often reinforced as stereotypes. In this view, old age is frequently depicted unfavorably, as a distorted or stigmatizing image, highlighting social uselessness, passivity, social exclusion, and illness (Rudnik, 2016; Bryniewicz & Bulsa, 2017, p. 204).

Seniors are often stereotypically perceived as a homogeneous group, in contrast to vigor, independence, health, attractiveness, youth, and development (Lemartowicz-Skrzypczak, 2009). Common stereotypes about old age include terms such as mental and physical frailty, depression, malaise, the end of meaningful activities, withdrawal from social roles, loneliness, neglect, isolation, inflexibility, conservative thinking, unproductivity, and the need for comprehensive care (Topaz, Doron, 2016). Research indicates that, while most Poles recognize the role and importance of the elderly (Wądołowska, 2009, p. 9), these views often conflict with societal beliefs about old age and seniors (Rudnik, 2016a). Studies have shown that the middle generation tends to be the most supportive of older people, valuing them for their knowledge, experience, and their contribution in caring for grandchildren. In contrast, children and young people tend to have the least favorable attitudes towards seniors (Wądołowska, 2009, p. 9). They often perceive older individuals as abusing privileges, needing help, lonely, sad, dependent, ailing, and as people who do not contribute to health and social insurance, the labor market, or healthcare financing (Halicka & Halicki, 2011, p. 18). Furthermore, young people tend to dismiss the activities of seniors, such as providing family support, engaging in religious practices, performing household chores, and caring for grandchildren, seeing them as insignificant contributions to society (Krupa, 2012, p. 38).

This negative image of seniors, particularly from the perspective of young people, contributes to the deterioration of intergenerational relations, i. e., the bonds between individuals from different generations. The literature attributes this decline to various changes within the modern family structure, including a reduction in the number of family members, lifestyle changes, the desire for children to become independent quickly, the separation of successive generations, and the increasing institutionalization of care (Wawrzyniak, 2017, p. 44).

The deterioration of these relationships is also exacerbated by what is often described as a 'gap between generations,' creating the impression that each generation lives in separate, parallel worlds (Kuzma, 2023, p. 2). Technological advancements, mass media, and growing digitalization have contributed to this divide. Young people now have their own symbols, vocabularies, cognitive categories, emotional patterns, and forms of communication (Godlewski, 2002, p. 60). A significant barrier in intergenerational dialogue is the disparity between the language used by older people and that of younger generations (Milewski & Kaczorowska-Bray, 2019, p. 156). These differences arise from various factors, including biological (bodily changes), cognitive (knowledge, life experience, etc.), psychological (psychological features and developmental changes typical of certain life stages), environmental (origin, place of residence), and socio-cultural and historical influences (Obuchowska, 2001, pp. 163–199).

Given the growing senior population, fostering good intergenerational communication is crucial. It is also important to acknowledge the intangible benefits that positive intergenerational relations bring to older people. These benefits include increased vitality and energy, improved emotional well-being, reduced feelings of alienation and loneliness, a greater sense of being needed, enhanced self-esteem, and a decreased sense of social exclusion (Kuzma, 2023, p. 4).

## 2. Senior Policy – A public task 'Passion – A Recipe for Eternal Youth'

Since 2012, Poland has implemented a system of actions within social policy aimed at people in the post-productive age and their families, known as senior policy (Zych, 2019, p. 108). Its primary goal is to address the needs of older individuals, improve their living conditions, and meet the various demands related to this stage of life. Senior policy represents a systematic, long-term, and purposeful intervention by the state, targeting both public and non-public entities. It aims to shape social, economic, and legal conditions in order to create a favorable living environment for seniors, tailored to their evolving needs as they age (Trafiałek, 2016, p. 74).

The subjects of senior citizenship policy include three categories of individuals: senior citizens, those approaching the age threshold defined as senior citizens, and all those who will eventually become senior citizens. The implementation of senior citizens' policy occurs at three levels: government, local government, and non-government organizations. Currently, senior citizenship policy is directed toward four main objectives:

- Shaping perceptions of intergenerational relations, old age, and seniors (e. g., reducing age discrimination and promoting the silver economy).
- Activities focused on others, including economic and civic activities, as well as intergenerational initiatives.
- Activities aimed at personal development (including recreational, sports, cultural, and educational services).
- Sustaining independence (e. g., promoting new technologies as sources of services and information for seniors, and developing a system of care services) (Zych, 2019, pp. 109–110).

One of the critical challenges in senior policy is to extend the active life of seniors. The activity and activation of seniors are closely connected to the need to adapt to changing physical abilities, social expectations, and conditions, as well as the realization of life plans, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and personal development. Activity, seen as a condition for proper development, is classified as one of the basic human needs. It enables a harmonious and creative lifestyle and serves as a foundation for combating various diseases, thus delaying the ageing process. It is an area of engagement that "provides individuals with the opportunity to express themselves in a form that is accessible and highly individual, shaped by their habits, tastes, and abilities" (Rynkowska, 2016, p. 93).

Research and social experiences suggest that a sense of uselessness, lack of social contacts, and inactivity can lead to loneliness, social emptiness, and isolation, which are often considered forms of social death (Rynkowska, 2016, p. 94). Activities undertaken in old age can fulfill a variety of functions, including psychosocial, recreational, leisure, educational, integrative, and adaptive roles (Mielczarek, 2011, p. 148). Stimulating both social and mental activity helps maintain relationships through interaction and is essential for the proper psychosocial development of seniors. It also facilitates the exchange of experiences and ideas. Mental activity engages the imagination, thoughts, and attention of seniors, helping to prevent dementia and cognitive decline in old age.

The *Senior Policy Program for the Mazowieckie Voivodeship for 2022–2026*, adopted by the Board of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship, responds to the need to implement activities aimed at activating seniors. The program's goals are reflected in the tender for non-governmental organizations and entities listed in Article 3, paragraph 3 of the Act on Public Benefit Activity and Voluntary Work, titled *Activities for Seniors in Terms of Increasing Independence and Counteracting the Threat of Social Marginalization.* The Mazovian Board, under annual contracts, expects bidders to undertake activities such as providing access to new digital media, fostering intergenerational dialogue, organizing attractive leisure activities, and hosting workshops and events tailored to seniors.

As part of this call for proposals, the Foundation for Safety *Feniks* (hereinafter referred to as the Foundation), based in Płock, has been implementing the public task titled "Passion – A Recipe for Eternal Youth" for the past five years. Due to the complexity of needs arising from the dynamics of ageing, the significant diversity within the senior population, and the individual characteristics of seniors, the Foundation conducts regular evaluations, including an annual assessment of the needs of seniors participating in the public task. In response to these needs, adjustments are made to the activities undertaken within this public initiative.

Currently, the activities proposed to seniors are grouped as follows:

- Theme 'Safety':
  - Workshop "Don't let yourself be deceived, insulted, ridiculed, etc."
  - Workshop "Safe senior in the world of new technologies"
  - Workshop on strengthening seniors' skills and competencies
- Theme 'Passion':
  - Workshop on individual exercise sets with fitness elements
  - Nordic walking workshop
  - Artistic and craft workshops
  - Culinary workshops
  - Ecological and gardening workshops
  - Music and vocal workshops

Throughout the implementation of the activities outlined in the public task, it became clear that one of the key elements necessary to achieve the desired outcomes is effective communication. Proper communication helps reduce feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and fear, while building trust, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging to a social group. However, the literature suggests that "the discussion about real communication with an older person is traceable" (Ozga & Ozga, 2018, p. 277).

## 3. Objectives and method of research

The research conducted between 2022 and 2023 aimed to examine the specific nature of communication with seniors involved in the "Passion – A Recipe for Eternal Youth" project. The first phase of the research focused on understanding communication from the perspective of the seniors themselves, with the findings published in the article *To Listen, To Talk, To Understand: Interpersonal Communication in a Senior Project* (Szczęsna, 2024). The results presented in this section pertain to the second phase, which explored communication from the viewpoint of young adults who are family members of the seniors involved in the

project. The primary research question was: What factors influence effective communication with older adults from the perspective of young adults who are their family members?

A qualitative approach was employed to collect and analyze the data, utilizing semi-structured interviews that allowed for in-depth exploration of the experiences of young adults. This approach provided the flexibility to ask follow-up questions as needed. The author had ongoing contact with both the participating seniors and their families, ensuring a smooth process for obtaining a sample group. The trust established throughout the project led to comprehensive, fact-based, and reflective responses.

The study involved 46 young adults who were family members of seniors living in rural areas of the Mazovian Voivodeship, specifically in the municipalities of Bielsk, Radzanowo, Nowy Duninów, and Bulkowo. Purposive sampling was used, guided by knowledge of the target population and the study's objectives. The majority of respondents were between 18 and 25 years old (89%), with 11% aged 26 to 35. Most respondents were female (91%). All respondents were grandchildren of the participating seniors, and the majority (79%) lived with them

## 4. Results of own research

The presentation of the research results can be divided into three areas related to communication: listening, conversation, and understanding. These elements are important tools for transmitting and revealing information, as well as for understanding the perspective of others.

### 4.1. Communication in the area of listening

According to the participating seniors, there is a significant communication issue in the family environment regarding listening. They claim that their family members lack patience and empathy in this area, explaining this situation by a lack of time, being busy, and problems in their professional or personal lives (Szczęsna, 2024, p. 73). The young adults participating in the study admit to avoiding listening to their grandparents, often using the argument of a lack of time or offering other reasons. According to the statements of the respondents, several factors contribute to this, but the most important one is the seniors' focus on the past. Frequently, they compare past situations with the present, which is often criticized by them. It is much easier for older people to relate to the past when they were more proactive and active, with a good understanding of the world and the laws governing reality. Due to their lack of understanding of the

mechanisms affecting the world today, their inability to adapt to changes, they often prefer to adopt a denialist attitude. Those interviewed admit that the constant revisiting of past situations is very annoying: "When grandma starts saying In my time…, I immediately try to think of something to escape as quickly as possible. It annoys me terribly" (R2). The seniors' negation of young adults' lifestyles and comparisons to their past attitudes also become a source of conflict. Another reason why seniors are not listened to by young adults is that their speech slows down and thus takes longer to convey information: "Grandpa speaks very slowly, he often thinks about what he wants to say, sometimes he runs out of words" (R11). The respondents' reluctance to listen to seniors is also due to the repetition of content they have already heard several times: "How many times can one listen to how hard it was in her time, how their generation stood behind everything in queues, how money was scarce, how the elderly were listened to, etc." (R28). Respondents who do not live with seniors but contact them by telephone pointed out that this form of communication with seniors is much easier. It allows them to stop the conversation when it becomes too long or when they don't feel like continuing: "When I hear my grandmother start her ramblings again, I interrupt her and tell her that I have to go back to work or that the bus has just arrived, and I will call later" (R17). Additionally, respondents note that seniors try to be more matter-of-fact during phone calls and do not unnecessarily prolong the conversation: "I call my grandmother on average once every fortnight. At that time, she only tells me the specifics, i.e., how she is feeling, how she is doing. She doesn't dwell on side topics (…) Unfortunately, when I come to visit, that's when she catches up, and I have to listen to what happened in the village, what's going on with the neighbors, etc." (R40). A significant proportion of respondents stated that the seniors in their families are good listeners, which they believe is due to their desire to be at the center of events, their ample free time, and a lack of other activities. A communication barrier in the area of listening is seniors' hearing problems: "My grandfather has been hard of hearing for many years (…) I don't always have the patience to repeat what I said several times." (R33). It is clear from the interviewees' statements that they find listening to seniors tiring, that the content they convey is not attractive, and that they often treat communication with them as an unpleasant chore.

### 4.2. Communication in the area of conversation

For the participating seniors, patience and attention from the interviewer are particularly important during conversations. The most annoying thing for them is being interrupted or having their words belittled. It is also crucial to tailor the

content being communicated to their ability to understand (Szczęsna, 2024, p. 74). In their statements, the young adults participating in the study acknowledge that it is common for them to downplay what seniors have to say. They point out that the most common topics of conversation among seniors in the family are past events and their health issues, which are not always grounded in reality: "Headaches, leg pain, and back pain are probably the only topics of conversation for my grandmother… Her activity and involvement in various activities do not support her words… Sometimes I think that if she really gets sick, no one will believe her" (R20).

Respondents believe that a significant reason for communication problems with seniors in the family is the lack of engaging topics. They see this as stemming from the difficulty seniors have in understanding the modern world, as well as the changes that have occurred over time: "I don't have common topics of conversation with my grandfather… After exchanging information about health and general well-being, the conversation is over… I don't even try to explain what my job is about because he wouldn't understand anyway" (R15).

The overwhelming amount of information, the vast array of its sources, and the overlapping of messages create a sense of confusion and chaos for older people. Seniors struggle with the skills and processes necessary to cope in the modern world, such as selecting relevant stimuli, filtering out irrelevant information, processing data quickly, maintaining attention, and retaining large amounts of information in memory (Byczewska-Konieczny, 2017, p. 29). Respondents also mentioned that the problem with conversing with seniors in their families is that they often don't understand the vocabulary or terminology young people use, especially in relation to modern technology: "Grandma doesn't grasp what Facebook, Instagram, posts, or TikTok are. I used to try to explain it to her, but I gave up. I don't have the patience to repeat the same thing every time" (R12).

In the literature, this situation is explained by the fact that the generation in question has its own sets of codes and communicative contexts, which provide greater opportunity for intra-generational cohesion. At the same time, this leads to a lack of understanding with the older generation, who does not comprehend these codes of meaning (Karmolińska-Jagodzik, 2012, p. 204). Several interviewees pointed out that another issue during conversations with seniors is multitasking and the use of overly detailed statements: "Sometimes when I talk to my grandmother, I have the impression that it is not a dialogue but a monologue… She talks about several things, often focusing on unimportant details… Often, I don't really know what she means" (R42).

In the respondents' statements about conversations with senior family members, it is clear that communication in this area is very challenging. The reasons for this, according to the interviewees, include different interests, topics, and priorities, as well as differing goals and values. The primary cause of com-

munication problems in this area, they argue, is the formation of individual identities under different historical, social, and cultural conditions (Rosińska-Mamej, 2019, p. 199). The social identity of senior citizens is related to expectations regarding their social roles, the various dimensions of their communication with society, and the way they present themselves through their attire. The way older people are treated and the perception of old age influence how their individual and social identity will be shaped. Zofia Szarota (2021, p. 182) distinguishes two styles of treating older people. The first stems from a fear of experiencing old age and is characterized by an aversion to dealing with older people (gerontophobia), while the second stems from an appreciation of their wisdom and is characterized by prestige and the performance of the most important social functions (gerontocracy).

### 4.3. Communication in the area of understanding

Communication problems in the areas of listening and conversation also affect understanding, which further widens the intergenerational gap. Margaret Mead presented the concept of a prefigurative culture, predicting that the growing intergenerational distance due to advancements in civilization and technology would make it increasingly difficult for older people to adapt to modern realities (Mead, 1978). The respondents' statements confirm that they perceive elderly family members as dependent and helpless. The difficulty in communicating with them stems from seniors' failure to accept the arguments of the younger generation: "It often happens that we don't agree. Grandma doesn't accept any arguments. She thinks she knows better" (R35). Young adults say that seniors often use their life experience as an argument in discussions, as well as their contributions to the present reality: "More often than not, grandpa refers to his life experience in conversations, and he doesn't accept my arguments… Often, our arguments end with the statement: 'What do you know about life? When you've lived as much as I have, you will see I was right'" (R18). They also point out that seniors have difficulty keeping up with the changes around them: "Grandma doesn't understand that you can change jobs if the conditions don't suit you. She says you should stick to one place, one employer. She has no idea about the current labor market" (R1).

Three interviewees noted that, in situations where the conversation lacks arguments, their senior family members become argumentative and sometimes even aggressive: "When the conversation goes wrong, grandma starts arguing and sometimes calls me names… A few times, she threw a glass at me out of anger" (R19). Another issue in the area of understanding is the unreflective criticism regarding lifestyle, style of dress, and behavior, without considering the

emotions and feelings of the other person: "Grandma probably doesn't even realize how her words hurt me… The constant criticism of my clothes, my hairstyle, and how I manage my life makes me visit her less and less often" (R22). Several interviewees pointed out that seniors, taking advantage of their age, tend to issue instructions that they believe family members should follow without protest: "When I come to visit my grandmother, she gives me a list of things to do or take care of… There's no discussion about me being tired or not feeling well. It has to be done, period" (R5).

All respondents emphasized in their statements that they understand that, due to changes in the biological and psychological spheres, the seniors in their families are undergoing transformations. However, due to the pace of their own lives, they do not have much time to focus on these issues extensively. They also admitted that they do not treat their senior family members as equal partners in conversation.

## 5. Conclusions

Intergenerational dialogue has become extremely difficult, and rebuilding it is a real challenge facing modern society. Seniors have fewer opportunities to pass on their knowledge, experiences, and traditions. They are becoming subjects of social marginalization and stereotyping. Not only in public spaces, but also among family members, they are increasingly seen as ailing, isolated, unable to keep up with the changes in the modern world, unproductive, and difficult to communicate with.

The young adults participating in the study admit that they avoid listening to their grandparents, and the reasons for this are seniors' focus on topics related to the past, criticism of mechanisms affecting the world today, denial of young adults' lifestyles and attitudes, slower speech, hearing problems, and the repetition of content. It also emerged that talking to seniors is often seen by the respondents as an unpleasant chore. They point out that the most common topics of conversation among seniors in the family are past events and their poor health. They perceive the limitations in the topics they discuss as stemming from difficulties in understanding the modern world and the changes that have occurred over the years. Another communication barrier is the use of incomprehensible vocabulary and terminology, especially related to modern technology. Multithreading, the use of overly detailed statements, divergent interests, different priorities, goals, and principles are all aspects mentioned by young adults as factors contributing to poor communication with seniors. Based on the statements of the interviewees, it can be concluded that the intergenerational distance in communication is likely to increase. Therefore, it is crucial to raise

public awareness of the importance of older people in society and to promote effective communication with them. To build mutual trust and open dialogue, special attention should be given to fostering empathy, patience, commitment, and understanding during communication, both for young adults and seniors. Senior citizenship policy should prioritize the implementation of community projects based on intergenerational exchange, aiming to demonstrate to participants the mutual benefits of intergenerational interaction in both social and individual spheres.

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