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How to create an icon of pop culture? : a study based on the Internet biography of Oprah Winfrey

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.

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HOW TO CREATE AN ICON OF POP CULTURE? – A STUDY BASED ON THE INTERNET BIOGRAPHY OF OPRAH WINFREY

Abstract

By discovering the uniqueness of each literary genre, people can better mentally comprehend and appreciate what they read. The overall goal of this paper is to uncover and stress some characteristic features of creating an icon of popular culture in the virtual world of the Internet biography of Oprah Winfrey. Bearing in mind the functional aspects of language we should briefly outline the linguistic, sociological and cultural aspects implied though not plainly expressed in the online biographies of the American icon mentioned. The available sources used in this presentation are web pages found with the use of various search engines. The analysis of the collected data is based on 15 online biographies taken from websites having record popularity ratings. Watching how a biography of Oprah Winfrey is enjoying its popularity through hundreds of celebrity portals can tell us a great deal not only about how powerful the functional aspects of the language are but about how much the world's culture is changing. Needless to say, the study also covers how the linguistic units are combined to launch the icon and create her online reality.

Keywords

biography, pop culture, icon of pop culture



1. Introduction

Watching how a biography of Oprah Winfrey is enjoying its popularity through hundreds of celebrity portals can tell us a great deal not only about how powerful the functional aspects of the language are but

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about how much the world's culture is changing. How did complex societies develop? What caused them to change or collapse? What can past societies tell us about our society and its future? In the modern era the pathway to arriving at an answer begins with a key word – the Internet. It works as a colossal cyberspace infrastructure equipped with information within reach in just a few clicks of computer mouse. The overall goal of this paper is to uncover and stress some characteristic features of creating an icon of popular culture in the virtual world of the Internet biography of Oprah Winfrey¹. Bearing in mind the functional aspects of language we should briefly outline the linguistic², sociological and cultural aspects implied though not plainly expressed in the online biographies of the American icon mentioned.

1.2. Notion of biography and the Internet

When reading a written or printed work formed of pages, perhaps one of the most remarkable organs in the human body, the brain not only collects data or facts but also houses vivid and fond memories (Lindgren and Byrne 1971: 182–185). Our vigorous and determined attempts aimed at broadening knowledge commence with reading the first words of a book, article, web page. The mass reader is interested in the information given in the piece of written work, he or she does not direct his or her mind toward the camouflaged focus existing beneath the surface which appears to be the writer. Has the receiver ever thought while reading, why the authors write? „To ask why we write is also to ask why we read” (Sarangi and Coulthard 2000: 1–28), there is no single answer. People write because they have many reasons, but nowadays if you have a good reason for writing you can have a far-reaching and powerful impact on shaping today's society. Starting with cuneiform script³ circa 3000 BC and ending with sophisticated technological advances, innovations in computer science,

¹ The available sources used in this presentation are web pages found with the use of various search engines. In particular the research process was conducted by the use of several Internet pages and search engines: www.google.com, www.yahoo.com, www.biography.com. The analysis of the collected data is based on 15 online biographies taken from websites having record popularity ratings.

² The study also covers how the linguistic units are combined to launch the icon and create her online reality. We have used the text analyzer tool from www.textanalyser.com to analyze the most frequently occurring lexemes in biographies. The material examined contains quoted examples from the analyzed biographies.

³ *The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*, The English Language Institute of America, Chicago 1971, s. 246.

writing has persisted. However, contemporary world has „slightly” changed its image. No matter what technique you apply one attribute is fixed – writing is an act of documenting. Although, different writers use different forms of transmitting their works the text itself does not transform. The knowledge acquired from outstanding artistry of written word serves as a means of conveying ideas visibly constituting a great proportion of the angles content equated with culture. In the 21st century thoughts, ideas, concepts, hypotheses, viewpoints, attitudes, images etc. could be freely unearthed by the emergence of the Internet.

In 1973 DARPA⁴ established a research program to generate „communication protocols” which unquestionably would license networked computers to share and exchange information across linked networks. This point in time has changed the whole societies and their access to knowledge, education, and wisdom. Fifty years later the Internet links more than 100 countries and it has flourished into a vast intercontinental facility (Crystal 2001: 224, 242). Such powerful authority to exchange data has resulted in the creation of many new, virtual societies along with lifestyles, customs and predominantly cultures. Remarkably, the Web empowered individuals to control their information, and to make information public without stringent limits. Apart from photographs, pictures, animations, banners web pages contain letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, texts constituting, larger forms – genres (Grzenia 2008: 150–178). It may be assumed that the Internet serves as a source of materials which appear to have specific characteristics in the linguistic context. Undeniably, the central task of future and oriented linguistics is the development of many new web genres. In the long run, this task will ensure the development of computer – oriented, modern reality, using specific types of texts created by web developers at any time. Presumably, recently developed new genres can be invented and moreover identified on the basis of agreed set of rules. All the texts constitute separate categories of discourse applying to every single kind of human activity such as culture, religion, medicine, sport, politics, business and multiplicity of others.

A broad explanation of the term ‘biography’ is provided in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. It points that it is: „an account of a person’s life (...) the history of particular men’s lives” (Cuddon 1977: 78). To be

⁴ DARPA – The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, a military agency established by the United States Department of Defense in early 1970’s in the USA, it conducts research in data transmission technologies; www.defense.gov.

more precise an Internet biography is of course an account of someone's life written by another person and available in an online version. The English term „biography” (*The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* 1971: 97) is composed of two elements. Both originated from Greek: *bios* meaning ‘the mode of life’ and *graphia* derived from *graphein* meaning ‘to write’. Thus, the term „internet” (*New Oxford American Dictionary* 2009) was invented in the late 20th century and consists also of two elements. The first element is „inter” meaning „mutual, reciprocal”, while the second element „net” form „network” meaning „a system of interconnected machines, computers etc.” Having portrayed the history of the genre we can draw one general conclusion: authors have been writing biographies about figures who make an impression on societies, who affect the culture of particular period, who are famous icons.

1.2.1. Characteristic types of biographies

We could carry on with giving more definitions from different sources, but there is not enough scope for that. It is very crucial to emphasize that some sources like *The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English language* consider biography as a larger „form of nonfictional literature, the subject of which is the life of an individual”. Another highly important issue is to present basic types of biographies patterns existing in English. One classification is based on the criteria proposed by *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (1993: 186–187). The list is based on the objectivity of approach the examples recognized by biographers cannot be treated as model standardizations of classification since no standard classification of life writing has been established yet. Basing on the classification developed by an American biographer Clifford (*Leksykon Terminów Literackich* 1972: 42–53) we distinguish five categories of biographies.

- Objective biography – presents an account of someone's life written on the basis of gathered pieces of information, as many as possible, the author avoids interpretation and comments, portrays the story of someone's life in chronological order;
- Historical biography – presents an account of someone's life written on the basis of evidences and facts, the author does not use any fictional elements or psychological speculations. The technique used applies selected events based on facts in chronological order;
- Artistic biography – presents an account of someone's life written on the basis of evidences and facts, the author uses the linguistic richness of language through means of expression. The linguistic form

may cover dialogues, monologues etc but the text must be relevant to authentic documents or other biographical sources;

- Narrative biography – presents an account of someone's life written on the basis of examined documents. It can be depicted e.g. in the form of a dialogue, taking into account impermissibility of fiction;

- Fictionalized biography – presents an account of someone's life written on the basis of evidences and facts, but does go into details whether they are accurate, reliable, authentic. The materials are embodied in second-hand news. If biography has some gaps they can be meticulously filled in with fictional elements.

Compared with 'Clifford's classification, *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* recognizes the following types of biographies:

- Standard biography – the category depicts someone's life in a very faithful way relating to the mainstream of biographical literature;

- Informative biography – the category is very objective in its form, facts are presented in chronological order;

- Critical biography – the category employs a scholarly form, facts are presented in chronological order with the art of selection and arrangement;

- Interpretative biography – the category involves subjective form of writing, facts are reorganized, but the author does not create new materials. The evidences are guided and manipulated by the author with interpretation;

- Fictionalized – the category involves the invention, interpretation of evidences. Secondary sources are required to establish the biographical scheme of writing;

- Fiction presented as biography – the category creates a fictional figure and presents the course of life which forms an outright fiction.

The majority forms of historic knowledge and the picture of those times we know is because of monumental sculptures, ancient temples, decorated pottery, remarkable artifacts and archaeological discoveries. Above all, biographies are one of the best sources reflecting the manners of the particular period. The fabled, fabulous, influential figures, as depicted in the short description of the genre, are all subjects of biographies usually restricted to leading political, cultural, religious elite and famous celebrities. In contemporary world of the Internet era, the Web writers strive to portray someone's life through the computer screen.

2. Oprah Winfrey as an Icon

One could choose any number of icons as emblematic representations of the values and standards embedded in popular culture. Oprah Winfrey's status as an icon guides through discussions of VIPs, power correlation, gender roles, sensuality and sexiness. Above all, the role of entertainment as the standard of modern lifestyle. The model of analyzing the socio-cultural creation of an icon in the Internet biographies which has been chosen as the basis for this discussion is generally based on the work of Mary F. Rogers *Barbie Culture*. Rogers claims that the culture of the moment is the culture of the West forming its rich environment for such *fabrications* as Barbie, it promotes qualities, standards, opinions due to which something – a doll can become an icon (Rogers 2003: 1–42). According to the *The Cambridge English Dictionary* we use the term „icon” in reference to a person regarded as a symbol or representative, in our research process Oprah Winfrey represents many symbols. As opposed to Jim Forest's theology about an icon expressed in the form of a painting or portraying a holy figure (Forest 2008: 11–17). Furthermore the research process does not refer the term „icon” to computing and its role as a symbol or graphic representation on the computer, video screen. We also opt not to treat the icon as Grzegorzczkova (1995: 26–76) states „a sign whose form directly reflects the thing it signifies” from the linguistic approach.

Almost every human being dreams of a life overflowed with prosperity, luxury that fears destitution. Is it possible to have a world without impecuniousness or never ending penury? It's a dream as old as humanity. Some may ask: is it possible to have a world without culture? Is it true that a world cannot maintain its existence without suffering the same way as it cannot maintain its existence without culture? There can be many questions asked and many answers found. *Panem et circenses* wrote Juvenal circa 100 AD (Edgar & Sedwick 2008: 54–56, 134). This conceptual unit composed of three words was good enough to placate the masses during barbaric, vicious gladiators contests occurring live in the coliseum. Some theoreticians proclaim that this ancient metaphor indicates the genesis of mass culture just like the Biblical story of creation. Sociologists investigate the impact of media icons on society, how people are identifying with them and how far-reaching is their image. For the purpose of this research paper we have googled the name „Oprah Winfrey” and we were not taken by surprise to find out the colossal number of entries viewed: circa

9,060,000⁹. If there is any doubt about the extent of Oprah's industry exposure in American culture and around the world, the statistics are overwhelming. The amounts of entries found lead to several conclusions and prove how influential Oprah is, regarded as a symbolic representative of popular culture. The culture of the 20th century is defined by Kłoskowska (1980: 4–156) as a culture engaged in commerce so commercial culture based on the grounds of popular taste. Winfrey has become the trademark for the American media industry of all these family-oriented enterprises, but even more, she has become an icon. In her iconic status, what linguistic themes or issues does she represent? Among many possibilities, here are three sample suggestions:

2.1. Oprah Winfrey as an icon of media ubiquity

There is no doubt that she can be portrayed as a symbol of ubiquity. Nowadays it needs to be remembered that when you are ubiquitous, omnipresent you are popular. Edgar and Sedgwick mention that the adjectives „mass” and „popular” are strongly determined by the terms „culture”, „media”. This mutual relationship is strongly associated with mass media „each depends on the other in an intimate collaboration” (Shuker 1994: 4).

The data analyzed confirms that in popular culture lexemes like „show, talk show, media, television” are all important part of existing as an icon in the world of mass marketing. By publicizing on the largest media channels, feasibly multi-exposure to the Oprah's figure is maximized. As the mass launching suggests the largest audience possible is required and the best way to achieve it is the use of the Internet. Popularity is central aspect of popular culture and the linguistic form which portrays its power is the noun „a show” meaning „a spectacle or display of something, typically an impressive one or a public entertainment, in particular a program on television or radio” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2009). The idea is to entertain the public by appealing to the people and broadcasting a good show.

Winfrey's profession includes working in „a television or radio show in which various topics are discussed informally and listeners, viewers, or the studio audience are invited to participate in the discussion” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2009). The results show that our online icon must be constantly in the centre of attention, without this medium of modern broadcasting Winfrey could not reach her broad audience. Thus, one may say it is because of her profession of being a talk show host, news anchor. However the phrase „talk show” con-

tains the information connected with the values of being the star of the silver screen.

Other most popular words among the top words analysed are „a host, a reporter, an anchor”. All the items refer to the main means of mass communication like television, used for transmitting sound and visual images on screens. Furthermore „a host” together with „an anchor, a reporter” express the act of speaking on behalf of someone in a figurative sense chiefly used for representing forms that are derived from life of an artist, work of art. Winfrey is an emcee of a television program who performs and entertains other people as guests or the public as a master of ceremonies. She is the central head of the show, attention is focused on her as being the host in charge of performances.

Our contemporary world is rapidly developing. It follows that the pace of scientific, technological, social progress tends to be speeding up continuously. Winfrey is forced to live in the world of media, after all she could not have been such an iconic figure without the existence of media. In the 1920s we have witnessed the first gradual signs of the rise of national radio networks, mass and wide circulation of newspapers (Fairclough 1995: 44–48). Today, 90 years later, the scope of the term „media” also covers high-definition, digital television, and the wireless, international Internet. In practice, the term „media” acts as a collective noun, it can take either a singular or a plural verb (for example „staff”). In the collective sense the lexeme „media” covers such spheres as: the press, radio, television and the Internet all together collectively (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2009). Although it must be admitted that the word „media” is derived from Latin plural form of *medium* and taking into account the traditional view it should be regarded as a plural noun and therefore be used with a plural rather than a singular verb. In reality it is acceptable in standard English for the noun „media” to take either a singular or a plural verb. Strictly speaking, our analysis prove that authors use „media” with a singular verb more frequently. Moreover „media” is used as a mass noun „the media” e.g. „the media was overreacting” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2009).

The last basic lexical unit that obviously needs to be discussed is the noun „career”. For the purpose of this research it ought to be depicted with another lexeme, which have just been discussed in particular „media”. Between the two terms „media” and „career” lies a plain and visible layer of mediation. No one should argue that Oprah’s brilliant career has been carved out through media expansion. In the glamorous world of celebrities „career” is indispensable, and absolutely desirable. In the sense of popular culture we use the word to re-

fer to the course of life together with the person’s occupation, life stages, remarkable periods of that person’s life. The advent of media communication has largely influenced the access to mass audience. „Career” is based on Latin word *carrus* meaning „wheeled vehicle”. You can reach the large audience when you have the right means to do it. The origins of the word „career” are rooted in the 16th century you were the master of the world if you had a wheeled vehicle like horse and cart which could transport things to places or help at rural works (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2009).

Table 1. Top words and their frequency of occurrence, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
a show	144
a talk show	44
a host	41
television	39
an anchor	20
media	18
a career	12
a reporter	10

The authors of all 15 biographies use the terms which all apply to popular culture. The aim of mass communication is to reach the largest audience possible, notwithstanding, mass communication has resulted in creating mass societies strongly susceptible to the impact of modern innovations namely the Internet. The high frequency of usage of all the words connected with mass media, popular culture proves that the iconic Oprah Winfrey must be displayed on the screen, and must be existing in the cyberspace and therefore she is readily recognized. To some extent all the media lexemes view some kind of advertising to emphasize how prestigious, distinguished the figure of Oprah is. How far-reaching is her image and ubiquitous among the TV, radio, and web network.

2.2. Oprah Winfrey as an icon of distinction

The function of discourse in sociological studies is based on empirical qualities of actual, real experiences of a specific social class, group. The culture of the moment is somehow incorporated in Oprah’s life story. The subject of the biography is its author who reflects Oprah’s life through the spectrum of distinctive attributes of moral values of an average African American family and their cultural stereotypes noted in the social memory (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008: 86–125). This type of biography has much to offer for the modern reader and sociologist. The author is not developing the figure of Oprah, he is quite instrumental in shaping the overall idea of a person. The biographies examined contain cultural data defining a large segment of the population, their ambitions, fantasies, and goals. The author refers to second-hand sources websites, books, interviews, and all the suppressed details being used fall in with the broad theme which he wishes to convey. Sociologists are interested in the functioning of human society, they study social problems, to clarify, they design overall schemes of behavior applied to a given culture. They look at the social models of behavior and social trends. Nowadays the excellence that sets a person apart from others is strongly desired, just like the personality of Oprah Winfrey. She is a perfect representative of a woman who is brilliant, perspicacious, discerning a model of *omnia praeclara rara* (Dubínski 2005: 426).

The most frequent types of words describing psychical features, such as personality, found in the examined material are descriptive and descriptive-evaluative lexemes. Adjectives describing character denote Oprah’s intelligence, her natural ability to acquire knowledge and skills, they all refer to her talent of being a charismatic talk show host.

Table 2. Top words and their frequency of occurrence, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
gifted	4
excellent	3
smart	2
quick-witted	1
talented	1

The authors of Oprah’s biographies prefer to use expressions characteristic of moral values in order to show how sympathetic, kind and loyal she is towards other people. Those adjectives create a symbol of goodness revealing Oprah as the virtue of high moral standards, a kind of moral excellence which is an example to follow for many people. An example which is in the minority of contemporary social behaviors.

Table 3. Top words and their frequency of occurrence, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

honest	1
devoted	1
warm-hearted	1

While it is true that terms associated with intellectual capacity and reasoning are not so frequent, they cannot be omitted. The reason for this is the fact that an average Internet user considers Oprah’s psychical possibilities and virtues as morally desirable in a person. Rationality as common sense, astuteness as the ability to accurately understand abstract or academic matters, situations and turn this to one’s advantage. Besides her artistic flair expressed in lexemes „gifted, talented” proves that she is an example of „the something” which is special. Those adjectives attract the attention of hypothetical fans, readers etc.

The creation of an icon is mostly discussed via adjectives. Nonetheless the excellence, greatness, preeminence is strongly numerously demonstrated in the properties of the adjective in their superlative form.

Table 4. Top words and frequency of usage, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
the best	16
the most	9
the highest	5
the wealthiest	4
the richest	3

The superlative form of an adjective indicates its highest degree of the quality that a given thing or a person possesses. It is mainly used to emphasize how great something is in positive or negative aspect. When reading the biographies we are struck by the usage of the superlative form of the adjective „good”. The authors distinguish the person of Oprah from other people, celebrities by indicating and strongly emphasizing her ability of being the best in everything she does. Let’s take a closer look at the superlative of „many, much” pointing out how great the given quality is with the greatness in amount and degree. In the same way emphasizing the majority of something as occurring in the great number e.g.

- „the richest women”;
- „the highest-rated program”;
- „country’s wealthiest women”;
- „the highest-rated show”;
- „most influential women”;
- „Emmy Award for best daytime talk show host”;
- „For the best supporting actress”;
- „The most successful female talk show host”.

As opposed to cardinal number „one” we follow very high frequency of usage of the ordinal number „the first” taking the meaning „never previously done or occurring” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2009). What is more indicating the order in a sense „the earliest”.

Table 5. Top words and frequency of usage, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
the first	37

Later and only at the beginning of the 1970s, if we are talking of major movements in media industry, came the great boom of talk shows. Oprah was not one of many objects which were appearing on TV, she anchored for WTVF-TV station in Nashville, coming before all other African-American news anchors, she arrived to become the first dark-skinned, female presenter. Following years of her career illustrate Oprah as being the pioneer in her professional life, moreover she constantly holds to be foremost in position, rank, importance. Her natural, entrepreneurial flair leads her to coexist with everything considered to be the first occurrence of something notable e.g.

- „The first female African-American news anchor”;
- „The first black African-American woman”;
- „The first African-American host”;
- „The first woman in the history”;
- „in its first outstanding direction”;
- „Her first speaking part”;
- „The first stroke of good luck”;
- „first place in the ratings”;
- „Oprah’s first time appearing as anchor”.

The next item on the list which should be discussed is the regular expression „one of” denoting a particular quality of a group of people having similar characteristics (*The Oxford English Dictionary* 2009). The expression works as a pattern, a kind of string for describing the pattern. The phrase deals with Oprah’s excellence, fame, reputation in the spirit of the popular culture icon being still evident.

Table 6. Top words and frequency of usage, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
one of	20

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The authors direct the reader towards icon’s rarity, her quality of being rare is distinguished very often through the phrase „one of” Oprah has particular value recognized as out of ordinary, unusual, unique e.g.

- „one of the most successful (...)”;
- „one of the wealthiest women”;
- „one of the 100 most influential people”;
- „one of the most influential people ”;
- „one of the partners”;
- „one of the richest women ”;
- „one of the most respected and admired public figures”;
- „One of the The Most Admired Women”.

It is one of the aims of the authors of Internet biographies to present the person’s life in its course together with the period of time he, she lives in. In 1970’s the general utility The Boeing 747 entered commercial service for customers of Pan American Airways. It was the time when something „new” as the world’s first „jumbo jet” was treated with deep, genuine admiration. Oprah was flourishing to be on top in her leading, dominant position in TV industry. We use the adjective ‘top’ to form other compound adjectives to describe the most famous,

significant figures in a particular area of activity or work in highest degree, rank or position.

Table 7. Top words and frequency of usage, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
top-rated	8
top-most	3

- „top-rated show”;
- „top-rated daytime talk show”;
- „top-most actress”.

For more than 20 years Oprah’s shows have been considered to be the most successful, reaching the highest records of audience ratings in the USA. Some miscellaneous examples „138 stations in the USA bought the Oprah’s talk show, the show has been syndicated to more than 50 countries by King World, the show rose to number one in the ratings within a month” (Oprah 2012).

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2.3. Oprah Winfrey as an icon of an inescapable power

Oprah’s life has offered a shared point of reference for members of American society, she is not only widely recognized, she inspires keen interest and great dedication, if not obsession. But not necessarily about her beauty, body, her as a physical human being. The sort of obsession or even addiction to her current life, the life of a prosperous celebrity and „a powerful force in the world of day-time television in 2003”. She has become a part of the world’s culture. White argues that a symbol is a thing which has got value or meaning given by those who use the thing. Taking into consideration those two points of view we may compare Oprah to the real living human as being the thing and having the monetary value, and on the other side she can exist as a figure, so a kind of meaning which is applied to her by the people in general.

Let us consider how the life of Oprah Winfrey portrays the lifelong, utopian dream of becoming a role model and being fabulously rich. The question arises how does the icon of pop culture affect contemporary societies and their way of perceiving the environment they live in? There is no doubt that America has go many cultural icons an example is the figure of Michael Jackson or Marlin Monroe. The fact of

becoming famous does not make the person an icon. It could be viewed, to some extent, as an extremely important factor leading to having a mass appeal to people of all ages. The Internet biography serves as an enormous cultural force illustrating the charismatic distinctiveness, individuality of particular culture. Oprah is a person which is a representative of specific culture – the culture of Afro-Americans inhabiting the territories of the USA. Oprah together with many other celebrities has given rise to the nearly simultaneous emergence of the Internet biography.

Thorstein Bunde Veblen’s writings stress how fatal, disastrous the production for profit is. Even though Oprah’s capacity to affect strongly the emotions or intellect of her audience, it is clearly seen that her figure is aiming at yielding substantial profit. Velben’s conspicuous consumption proves that you are what you have – material goods impress others. People tend to dispassionately collect and weigh their goods.

The icon of consumerism, materialism makes use of ownership, and considers material possessions as more valuable than spiritual values. All examined biographies prove that the adjective „own” is ineluctable since it reflects to all the things the icon possesses. Material goods and the icon’s life are closely interrelated. This idea is all about the something which belongs or relates to the person under consideration.

Looking how constantly is growing Oprah’s financial empire we draw conclusion that progress, success are the highest values in life. Oprah owns her empire, everything she has is her own, to such extent that it has increased to form an empire. The usage of the word picturing the highest financial status confirms how powerful Oprah’s figure is. The lexemes „own, empire media magnate” evinces the doctrine of materialism. Many studies found the poem *The Nature of Things*, written by Roman poet Lucretius, as the genesis of materialism and its philosophy. The following examples show how much holds Oprah as an icon:

Table 8. Top words and their frequency of occurrence, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
own	25
empire	10
media magnate	6

- „own studio”;
- „own production company”;
- „own talk show”;
- „own book club”;
- „own school”;
- „media empire”;
- „talk show empire”;
- „media magnate”.

The lexical items used in biographies prove that Oprah is a perfect example of how material goods give the means of generating the self identity, enhancing interpersonal relationships. There is a link between the icon’s financial empire and her identity. She always wants to reach the top, gain power, money, large not to say the biggest audience. The top words found refer to ability of completing something successfully in order to have something in one’s possession or control by force. The force that is visible is Oprah’s aptitude which allows her to defeat every little bump on her road, a kind of act of assuming what you want.

Table 9. Top words and their frequency of occurrence, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
to achieve	6
to take over	3
to accomplish	3
to beat	2
to capture	2
to overcome	2
to pursue	1

In this day and age sociologists and anthropologists affirm that culture can be identified with regard to qualitative and descriptive approach. The qualitative point of view depicts the evaluation of individual community. Consequently, we distinguish better and worse, lower

and upper, more or less civilized judgments. All this can be applied to the life of the America’s icon described in this paper. Her life in particular was extremely full of hardship to become in the middle of her twenties quite wealthy to join the affluent and become a part of the American cream: „Oprah Winfrey rose from poverty and a troubled youth to become the most powerful and influential woman in television and, according to Forbes Magazine, the world’s most highly paid entertainer” (Oprah 2012). The analysis of the material depicts that becoming an icon requires going from the poor to the rich. The receivers often strongly wish, desire the icon to come through this state of being an average, normal member of the society and later become the component of the tycoon society. Needless to say Oprah has gone successfully through this extremely difficult stage full of obstacles, barriers to evolve into mature talk show host. As journalists describe her „she was poor, black... and now she owns her own talk show”(Oprah 2012).

Who would have ever thought that such person could be the symbol of glorification for millions of people around the world. The icon’s career must move forward without stopping her life, charm. Her reshaping, transformation of life is pictured with the use of verbs indicating movement, an act of changing something in all spheres of her life.

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Table 10. Top words and their frequency of occurrence, source – lexemes found in the Internet biographies

Word	Occurrences
to become	
to inch ahead	
to take off	
to start	
to lead to	
to attract	

Oprah has always been creating herself to be a perfect housewife and an ideal companion. In order to do that one needs to be constantly on the go being able to show the way to a destination by going in front of someone just like she does during her talk shows.

3. Summary

The language used in order to depict the life of an icon of popular culture is culturewide. It is worthy of critical reflection – the utopian package the language items deliver are almost incessantly reminding us of the principle that language shapes people and reflects people. Whatever the criticisms, language could not exist without culture and the other way. Between the two lies a crucial layer of mediation. The seeming simplicity of language belies the enormously complex ongoing operations of the mind, people speak and talk, do things, work. Internet biographers depict the characteristic spirit of the American culture in the biographies analyzed in this paper. We have to understand why so many Oprah fans watch her, listen to her and write to her. Biographers are concerned about the influence the language has on the readers. Indeed, intentionally encoded essence on our understanding and personal life. The question arises – why do Americans love Oprah Winfrey? When reading the Internet biographies we are faced with this image of how the Internet biography should look like. The vocabulary items should be used in such a way so the readers can imagine the person not only physically but also the spirit, the way of life. The author's task is to lead the reader through the icon's unusual life. The biographies⁵ show that Oprah is one of the American people, was a simple child of two teenagers who could not cope with their everyday life. How does she touch a chord with so many people? It is because the Internet biographers represent, with the use of lexical items, the icon's experience many people yearn for. Every language serves as a very elastic material storing and reflecting historical experiences of community users in the process they participate in. The process possesses its effect in the form of a linguistic portrait of the world defined by Tokarski as „a collection of regularities embedded in the grammatical correlations (inflection, word-formation, syntax) specific way of perceiving the world, its components, hierarchy, and values accepted by the linguistic community” (Kuligowski 2002: 5–8). The language of the Internet biographies is in some way deeply rooted in the life and culture of the icon described.

Today, the language of the Internet biography does not only function as a deliverer of entertainment but also as a compensational

⁵ In the research paper 15 biographies were examined. Every biography was analyzed on the basis of the linguistic features occurring in its contents. All biographies are divided into sections: childhood, teenage life, career, adolescence. Authors use different titles for naming the periods of Oprah's life, but basically the text itself is about the mentioned periods. All periods are in chronological framework for the events of icon's life. Chronological order helps to understand the sequences of dates, experiences taking place in Oprah's life.

source of experiences, chances to become a part of alternative, different, happier, and a simpler world. It is the language that releases the icon of popular culture into the real world, and invites the icon into the Internet users' eyes. The global coming out of an icon is possible thanks to deliberate or sometimes accidental language use.

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Streszczenie

Jak stworzyć ikonę popkultury? – badanie oparte na podstawie internetowych biografii Oprah Winfrey

W powyższym artykule podjęto próbę zbadania zjawiska ikony popkultury na przykładzie internetowych biografii amerykańskiej gwiazdy Oprah Winfrey. Celem artykułu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie: za pomocą jakich środków językowych można wykreować ikonę popkultury? Określenie miejsca biografii w strukturze tekstu oraz przedstawienie pewnej hierarchii czynników składających się na jej wzorzec ukazują charakterystyczne cechy pozwalające na stworzenie ikony popkultury. Przeanalizowane biografie ujawniają wiele językowych sposobów na jej interesujące i efektowne wykreowanie.

Słowa kluczowe

biografia, kultura popularna, ikona popkultury