

Bożena Rejakowa

The Image of a Polish, Czech and Slovak Bookworm in the Internet Discourse on Books and Reading

Przegląd Wschodnioeuropejski 7/1, 121-131

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

BOŻENA REJAKOWA

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

THE IMAGE OF A POLISH, CZECH AND SLOVAK BOOKWORM IN THE INTERNET DISCOURSE ON BOOKS AND READING

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: internetowy dyskurs o książkach i czytaniu, interakcja, konwencja, stereotyp, standaryzacja zachowań, obraz mola książkowego.

KEYWORDS: Internet discourse on books and reading, interaction, convention, stereotype, behavioural standards, bookworm.

ABSTRACT: The study is concerned with the construal of a linguo-cultural image of a bookworm in the Internet discourse on books and reading: this is the Polish *mól książkowy*, the Czech *knihomol*, and the Slovak *knihomol*. The respective stereotypes are shaped through linguistic signs and structures, interpreted against the practices used in blogs and memes. In the messages projected by Internet bookstores the mental images are entrenched and modified in such a way as to respond to marketing needs, without the readers realizing they are being influenced. In interaction, an important role is played by interpretations of the behaviour of a typical bookworm, as well as the process of accommodating the behaviours of individuals to a specific set of “bookworm mental features”. One’s own features and preferences are compared with those of: the bookworm as a collector and a book owner, the bookworm as a compulsive buyer, the bookworm as a planner, and the bookworm as a loner. The users of Polish, Czech, and Slovak online bookstores identify themselves with these types, frequently without realizing how much they are influenced in their perception of the world by the bookstores’ marketing strategies, which attribute specific features to their customers. These features are to propagate, through imitation, to wider readership.

Popularity of websites and online forums is examined with reference to their quality and usability as well as the rhetoric accepted in electronic communication, which is characterised by the fact that it takes place in a reality detached from traditional geographical and cultural boundaries. Linguists note the tendency to brevity and economy of expression, expansion of colloquial Polish, use of English vocabulary, hybrids of speech, writing and visual messages, visualization implemented by using symbols of emotional states. Linguistic descriptions of stylistic and pragmalinguistic properties indicate dialogue, spontaneity, colloquialism, situational context, multimedia etc. (different aspects of Internet

communication, including references to the relevant literature can be found in such works as Krauz 2007, 111–125 or Żydek-Bednarczuk 2013, 439–463). If in a given website spontaneity and objectivity of expression are preferred, official conventions are changed for unofficial varieties of the language, entering the role and social position of interlocutors is accepted while using the verbal expression, users take the meaning of word “convention” intuitively, as a kind of an “agreement” (a custom, standard) regulating social relations that should be followed.¹

1. The rules for interaction in the Internet discourse on books and reading

The unit designation and arbitrariness of the name, its content and conceptual characteristics show that the Polish site *www.lubimyczytać.pl* (literally: we like reading) and Slovak *www.radicitame* (literally: we read eagerly) are characterized by a topic-oriented discourse where users express their positive attitude towards books and reading, they participate in the popularization of the reading culture. Part of Polish, Czech and Slovak community logs in the network to access the information about new publications, notifications of cultural institutions and advertisements. According to the custom, activity of others is about providing posts that are supposed to be considered their own. Comments are evaluated with points (based on a scale between 1 and 10). In Polish site *Lubimyczytać.pl* contact and user visibility is ensured by a nickname (the use of a so-called nick), e-mail address, signature, an added photo, a created profile, blog, a page “About me”, the “Like” function and so on.² Activity is also encouraged by graphically highlighted features, such as:

dodała na półkę
dodał cytaty z książki
22 osoby to polubiły
red bull ma nowego znajomego
chcę przeczytać
21 lat, kobieta, status: Czytelniczka, dodała 2 książki, ostatnio widziana 4 minuty temu itd.

¹ *Convention* perceived as an “agreement” is discussed in detail by (Sawicka 1999, 167–176). The author considers linguistic convention a type of an agreement including socially acceptable behaviours, used in descriptions and interpretations of phenomena discussed in relation to the language of the press.

² An issue of selective presentation of oneself, building one’s own identity, Internet acts of self-presentation in websites, blogs, forums and social media related to books, literature and reading are discussed, for example, by (Hojka 2014, 71–80).

Similar forms of communication can be found in Czech and Slovak sites. Selected verbal and non-verbal messages, collected between 2010 and 2015, are going to be discussed in detail in the following sections of the considerations below.³

In the linguistic discourse studies, the object of research are signs and their relations referring to the metalinguistic reality, the outside world (for interpersonal communication as an area of linguistic description see Labocha 2008; Kiklewicz 2012 etc.). In the topic-oriented discourse about books and reading the standardization of behaviour plays an important role as it makes communication transparent and predictable. This promotes closer ties and strengthens the values accepted by the community. The users demonstrate skills for selecting and decoding the information provided in the form of allusions, general conclusions, elaborated words etc. Some of them use such polite expressions as greeting, farewell or wish. Questions tend to be predictable, in particular due to their recurrence, e.g.:

*Dlaczego zaczęłeś czytać?
Ile książek masz w swoim domu?
Co aktualnie czytacie?
Czy czytasz kilka książek na raz?
Czy jesteś zwolennikiem nocnego czytania?*

Bookstore Martinus.sk asked Slovak users what a “fascinating” series they are going to spend the upcoming two weeks with and they implied the expected answer: we are going to spend these days with your fascinating series, see in Slovak:

Čo si myslíte, s akou úžasnou sériou strávime najbližšie 2 týždne?

Bookstore Martinus.cz asks Czech users what book they are reading at the moment:

Tak co, jakou knížku máte zrovna rozečtenou?

The answer is presupposed: the community always reads something; however, the next book should come from our offer. Internet publishers take into account

³ Apart from the considerations mentioned in the introduction and further parts, the following sources were helpful as well: www.swiatksiazki.pl; www.literatura.pl; www.biblionetka.pl; www.wachamksiazki.pl; www.parkliteracki.pl; www.blogabcknihy.sk/knizna-prehliadka-mesiaca-f; www.knihomol.sk; www.knihy.abz.cz; Knizne_forum_sk-diskuze/cz-sk; <http://www.facebook.com/knihozavislostnacelyzivot>; <http://cz.facebook.com/svetknihypraha>; <http://blog.martinus.cz>; www.biblioaty.sk/forum-Knihy.html; E-book forum-knihy na internetu.

the type of reader: a bookworm, and identify themselves with them using the collective form “us”. It makes their messages sound familiar, e.g.:

*My, mole książkowe nie mamy najmniejszego problemu z odpowiedzią na pytanie:
co kupić?*

Wiadomo, książki!

The term interaction is generally understood as a system of two adjacent processes: the process of giving meanings to human behaviour in specific situations and the process of adapting own behaviour of members of a particular social group (see Ziółkowski 1981, 21; Grabias 1997, 248 ff.). In shaping and organizing social relations, verbal messages, which are often supported with emoticons standing for emotions, play an important role. Language texts include images of the world which reflect individual and social experiences of the reading culture advocates. Standards and norms of behaviour are strengthened and modified depending on the needs. In order to be recognised and popular some users add to their nickname (a nick) a photo of their face, silhouette, favourite pet or any other object of their choice. The value system is assimilated and exposed through photos and pictures contained in memes and Internet advertising. In memes the visual image (a photo or picture) is generally combined with one- two-sentence explanatory text “adding” content which would be difficult to conclude on the basis of a visual image. The text is usually a generalized conclusion, punch line, comment, crafted text which refers to current events interesting to the Internet community. Memes are often anonymous, stereotyped, often irreverent. They present mental features of a bookworm, their closest living space and situational context of reading. The following statement can be considered a semi-definition:

Szczęście to [...] czytanie kolejny raz Harrego Pottera

introduced to the menu at Wąchamksiążki.pl. The statement is a reference to a picture of a girl at the top of a mountain who is holding an open book in her hands. We can be sure she chose the place deliberately to be able to indulge peacefully in pleasures resulting from reading the work recommended. The meme, and the like, interact with the statements of Polish, Czech and Slovak users who write in their blogs that they have read Harry Potter several times.

2. Explication of mental features of a bookworm in the press and Internet discourse

The expression *bookworm*, Slovak *knihomol'* and Czech *knihomol* are equivalents used both in the press and Internet discourse about books and reading. Observations of Polish press discourse that I made based on the material collected within the last ten years (from popular magazines and reviews, bookstore catalogs and leaflets) revealed that in press statements a *bookworm* refers to someone who owns and reads more books than a “regular, average” reader. Bookworms are attributed a good reader’s taste and this is why the reviews in specialised magazines and opinions as well as book advertising texts have to emphasize that the editor knows the needs of a demanding reader and the books selected would be found enjoyable. Someone who made himself/herself dependent on reading and buying books, reads them wherever it is possible. Such a person is not just a *lover of books* but *mol książkowy*, *książkoholik*, *książkożerca*, *pożeracz książek*, *nałogowy czytający* (e.g. *crime stories*). Each of the terms mentioned here used in the journalistic text takes on positive connotations, urges the community to get more books recommended by the editors (see also Rejakowa 2013, 181–190).

The designations used in the Internet discourse, in comparative terms, are considered to be equivalent units, see:

Polish: *miłośnik książek*
Slovak: *milovník kníh; knihomil*
Czech: *milovník knih, knihomil*

Usually, every participant of the discourse can be referred to as a book lover, but not every *book lover* can be a *bookworm*. The mentality of the individual is revealed in self presentations, which also reflect the trend popular in media to confide, “sell” one’s own privacy and peep into someone’s else life⁴. We are going look at this phenomenon in detail in the following sections.

A stereotype of a bookworm has become established as a collector, owner of many books who declares devotion to the books owned. Even when the bookworm realizes that he/she has too many books at home, he/she acquires more works he/she desires to own. He/she is not going to resign from the books he/she already owns as they constitute his/her being. They are stored in bookcases, on shelves, in places where they are at hand (near bed, on the bedside

⁴ The expansiveness of privacy in public texts related not only to comments by public figures but also to comments by “ordinary people”, revealing the body and soul, and other phenomena included in the modern mass culture is discussed by (Kida 2006, 47–60).

table, in the kitchen, on the floor etc.). In his/her statements the mentality of a collector is revealed and it perpetuates the stereotype included in the Internet discourse about books and reading, for example:

Mam zbyt wiele książek w jednym miejscu; jeśli zaczynam tracić kontrolę przy 2 tysiącach tytułów w realnym księgozbiorniku, to czy ktokolwiek potrafi zapanować (nie posegregować a faktycznie zapanować :) nad wirtualnym księgozbiorem jeszcze oczekującym lektury 3–4 tysięcy? Mam ogromny problem... regał wypchany do granic możliwości, plus półki... a część na podłodze już leży :) lub: Nie mieszczą się na półkach... etc.

Interaction standards are built up based on sources being a result of automated reactions of persons declaring thinking, feeling and desiring the same as other users, enthusiasts of books and reading. Typical problems of bookworms can be listed. From the comments of Internet users it results that

Książek bywa więcej niż można zmieścić na półkach; więcej, niż można kupić; więcej, niż można przeczytać; nawet najsolidniejszy stos „zawsze się kiedyś przewróci”.

It happens that they buy the same book twice by mistake. Photos of rooms where they keep their collections make the others compare and assess their own collections. According to the custom, the discourse among the users of Lubimyczytać.pl/Facebook runs in a friendly and kind atmosphere. Here are a few statements:

Wow, ale tego masz!! Jestem pod wrażeniem i chyba już wiem, na kogo napadnę niedługo :) Uwielbiam oglądać cudze biblioteczki. Podkradłabym ci chętnie jakąś książkę – tak szczerze to nie jedną;>) masz w domu „tunele” – ale przecież masz prawdziwe skarby; Kiedyś mieściło się wszystko, ale przez pączkowanie rozniósł się po całym domu, ale książki nie skolonizowały jeszcze szaf ubraniowych; Prezentuję swoją składnicę papieru – zawiera tzw. mydło i powidło. To co stoi na półkach, ze względu na brak miejsca, to głównie książki nieprzeczytane; Mam ogromny problem... regał wypchany do granic możliwości, plus półki... a część na podłodze już leży;) Nie mieszczą się na półkach... U mnie w sumie książki leżą gdzie popadnie, bo na półkach już miejsca brak, choć nie zamawiam ich w ilościach hurtowych... spływają, doskakują, pojawiają się znikąd.

In memes directed to Polish, Czech and Slovak community the problem associated with excess books is deliberately exaggerated and mocked, especially in order to entertain Internet users. For example, Czech bookworm was said not to have a mess on the bedside table as it is impossible due to the fact that his/her table is covered with books, see the statement:

Knihomol nemá na nočním stolku nikdy nepořádek. Nemá na něj totiž místo.

An image of a Czech *bookworm* living among books and with books is consistent with Internet posts in Polish and Slovak. It can be noted that photos of family bookcases, “reaching the ceiling” (Czech *stropu*) may give information about home where the paper book was and still is appreciated, it showed the taste of the members of the household, their need to commune with higher culture, see a statement in Czech:

V naší rodině se nachází knihomolové s knihovnou až ke stropu.

Admitting to *bookaholism* does not deprecate a user as the addiction is not treated. The user is rather included in the group of avowed *książkoholicy*, *czytöholicy*, *literaturoholicy*, *nałogowi czytelnicy*, who express similar commitment when they write about their passion, e.g.:

Czytam książki zawsze i wszędzie, a do tego wszystkiego jestem mocno uzależniona od ich kolekcjonowania – moja biblioteczka obecnie liczy ponad 2000 egzemplarzy. A co najważniejsze, i co piszę z niekłamaną przyjemnością, świadcząc o książkoholizmie – stale się powiększa, książka uzależnia i to mocno.

A Czech user of an e-book forum – *knihy na internetu* – referred to himself as *a gopher* (cf. Polish *chomik chomikujący książki*). His opinion was justified with the fact that there was not enough space for his new books, see the statement:

V oblasti knih jsem takovej sysel a nemám už je kam dávat.

The context which includes the attitude of the communication partners, sharing similar passions, requires completion – a bookworm will be understood by the community but not necessarily by the family, see the statement:

Mój mąż kategorycznie zabronił mi dokupowanie czegokolwiek, bo podobno półka może się zerwać, więc poza kolekcję kulinariów przerzuciłam się na wypożyczenie:))”.

Internet bookshops which wish to acquire as many readers as possible, perpetuate the stereotype which they use in order to ensure a return on sales. In the Internet discourse the reader is perceived as characterized by: *mania czytania*, Slovak: *knihománia*, Czech: (*sběratelská*) *knižní mánie*. The situational context of reading is presented with reference to the place of reading – bookworms read at home (in bed, in the kitchen, in the bathtub, in the toilet),

in a bookstore, on a tram, bus, plane, in a park, in the open (similar forms of distinguishing situational contexts of reading are included in the press announcements about new books, see Rejakowa 2012, 435–444). Belonging to the group of *bookworms* gives one a reason to be proud, see the statement:

Mole książkowe mogłyby używać słów, które są zbędne osobom nieczytającym książek.

Czech *knihomol* is proud to be one thanks to his/her parents, grandma, librarian or a teacher, see

Můžu děkovat pěti osobám za to, že se ze mne stal knihomol.

In the Internet discourse the community builds up their self-esteem:

W powszechnym wyobrażeniu ludzie książki kojarzeni są ze swobodnym sposobem bycia, z chaosem, improwizacją, artystycznym nieładem i spontanicznością – to artyści.

The companies producing gadgets want to “label” a bookworm, make him/her a “walking advertisement” of online bookstores and campaigns promoting reading. For example, a Slovak *knihomol'* is urged to purchase a phone cover by asking him/her if he/she has already got a *knihomolský obal*, see

Už máte knihomolský obal na telefón?

Inscriptions on charms, key rings, bookmarks, stickers (cf. Czech *knihomolské jmenovky*), packagings for books are supposed to inform about the owner – who and why bought them. Printed designs on pillows, bed linen with inscriptions like I LOVE READING BOOKS are expected to decorate the home, but also provide information about the owner, who is distinguished by the specified passion.

The Internet services fixed an image of a bookworm – a shopaholic who cannot resist buying more new releases. A bookworm buys books often and in large numbers. He/she is well versed in reading trends and he/she knows which book to buy for himself/herself or recommend to close relatives. Usually, he/she has already read the books others learn about or plan to buy and read. A bookworm convinces the community he/she likes to hang out in bookstores, spend long hours there, enjoy the aesthetic values of the works collected, derive pleasure from the smell of new releases. He/she buys single books, whole series, books of the favourite genre, he/she is interested in electronic books,

audiobooks. Books are gifts for himself/herself and family members not only when there is a special occasion. Some users see in him/her characteristics close to their own nature, whilst bookstores see him/her as a prospective customer. In ironic memes *shopaholics* are warned of temptations and traps set by nearby bookstores which could lead them to bankruptcy, see in Czech:

Víme, jak se dá při čekání na metro zbankrotovat.

A photo of a beggar sitting on a street and holding a plate saying: NEED MONEY FOR BOOK is a caricature of a *bookaholic* or even a *shopaholic* who in order to get money for books is ready to do anything, even beg on the street. Memes which usually have a ludic character are used to relieve the tension and tighten relations in a community. They also induce the users who create and publish them online to show creativity. Slogans in English can apparently enhance globally intelligible communication.

Statements of the Internet users as well as messages by online bookstores prove that a *bookworm* is comfortable in places where he/she can spend much time with an interesting read. Highlighting the needs and preferences is shaping the image of a bookworm: a loner for whom both a weekday and the weekend are associated with a pleasant time spent with a book. Engaging the community to be active is in bookstores' best interest. They provide advice which book is worth reading at the weekend or how to prevent friends from interrupting the reading, see a statement in Czech:

Dejte vědět svým přátelům, co budete dělat v pátek! Tento pátek mě nevyrušujte. Čtu knihy! (Martinus.cz/ Facebook).

Reading at night is one of the favourite activities of Polish, Czech and Slovak communities. It is a peaceful and quiet time that can be spent just in the company of an interesting book, see statements:

Skoro noc za pasem, czas wybrać lekturę...; Jestem nocnym markiem, molem książkowym i człowiekiem słabej woli :); jako mol książkowy nieraz spędzam całe noce z nosem w książce i czytam, czytam, czytam. Aż nagle rozlega się znajomy dźwięk budzika mówiący mi, że jest 5:30 rano i pora wstawać na zajęcia.

Time spent in bed with a book and tea is supposed to be a pleasure worth describing, see statements in Czech:

Knihy, teplý čaj a postel, to je idylka každého knihomola; Peřinám a čaji zdar, podzimní počasí milují přece všichni knihomolové!

The action scenario, shaped mainly by Internet bookstores, also anticipates a bookworm – planner. He/she is presented as an organized person who can skillfully combine houseworks and job with time for reading. If he/she fails to realize the reading plan, he/she suffers. While reading one or even two books at the same time, he/she is planning to read another one and usually knows which one. Internet bookstores perpetuate the stereotype, help to plan readings, they convince customers of the need to keep an uninterrupted period of reading, they encourage to plan and provide a list of readings: for weekends, workdays and holidays, specific seasons or time of day (the same reasons to read are provided by newspaper reviewers and in advertisements, see examples of ways of expression in Rejakowa 2012, 434–444). An advert at Lubimyczytać.pl is suggestive in this regard:

My zdejmujemy ciepłe kurtki i szaliki, a książki i ebooki pozbywają się wysokich, okładkowych cen! Dlatego, jak przystało na książkowe mole, wiosną witamy z książką w ręku!

Czech bookstore Martinus.cz/Facebook reminds about the obligation of planning books to read in autumn, telling its bookworms no one else is going to do it for them. In fact, it provides them with with a list of books to choose from, see Czech:

Výzva pro všechny knihomoly. Je třeba připravit se na podzim! Nikdo iný to za nás neudělá!

When a Czech online bookstore asked what *bookworms* are going to do on Wednesday, in fact they asked about reading. In their offer was a recipe for a successful holiday relaxation, see Czech:

Co děláte ve středu dopoledne vy, naši drazí knihomolové? Vyberte si pro sebe spranou knihu na dovolenou a odpočíte si u dobrého čtení.

The users of website Lubimyczytać.pl are reminded about the custom of reading during holidays, see

W tym świątecznym okresie dobrze jest spędzać jak najwięcej czasu na rozmowach z bliskimi. Mole książkowe z pewnością znajdą trochę czasu na lekturę...

To sum up, in the Internet discourse on books and reading an important role is played by imaging the real world and the expected, postulated one. In each of these worlds there is a fixed linguistic and cultural image of a reader with specific mental characteristics who on Polish websites is referred to as *mol*

książkowy, whilst on Czech ones it becomes *knihomol*, and *knihomol'* on Slovak ones. The stereotype is formed through language and interpreted on the basis of practices of blog users as well as in memes. In messages of online bookstores a mental image is fixed and modified in a way that matches marketing objectives and the user is not able to notice he/she is being influenced. In *i n t e r a c t i o n* an important role is played by the process of giving specific meanings to behaviours of a typical *bookworm*, as well as a process of adopting behaviours of members of a given community to the specific characteristics. It is possible to compare one's own characteristics and preferences to the features of a bookworm – a collector, gatherer, owner of many books; bookworm – a shopaholic; bookworm – a planner and bookworm – a loner. The users of Polish, Czech and Slovak websites identify themselves with each of the types mentioned above. However, they are often unaware of how much pressure is put on their worldview by messages from online bookstores which propagate bookworms features to be shared by the community through imitation.

References

- GRABIAS, S. (1997), *Język w zachowaniach społecznych*. Lublin.
- HOJKA, B. (2014), *Książka i czytanie jako elementy tożsamości kulturowej – na przykładzie wirtualnych społeczności czytelniczych*. In: Has-Tokarz A. i Malesa R. (eds.), *Homo legens czy homo consumens? Czytelnik i książka w XXI wieku*. Lublin, 71–80.
- KITA, M. (2006), *Sprzedawanie” prywatności w mediach*. In: Ożóg, K./Oronowicz-Kida E. (eds.), *Przemiany języka na tle przemian współczesnej kultury*. Rzeszów, 47–60.
- KIKLEWICZ, A. (2012), *Czwarte królestwo. Język a kontekst w dyskursach współczesności*. Warszawa.
- KRAUZ, M. (2007), *Potoczność w recenzjach czytelniczych*. In: Boniecka, B./Grabias, S. (eds.), *Potoczność a zachowania językowe Polaków*. Lublin, 111–125.
- LABOCHA, J. (2008), *Tekst, wypowiedź, dyskurs w procesie komunikacji językowej*. Kraków.
- REJAKOWA, B. (2012), *Czasoprzestrzeń w prasowych komunikatach o nowych książkach*. In: Dymel, A./Rejakowa, B. (eds.), *Kultura. Historia. Książka. Zbiór studiów*. Lublin, 435–444.
- REJAKOWA, B. (2013), *O zagospodarowaniu przestrzeni dla człowieka i książki w prasowych omówieniach nowości wydawniczych*. In: Karwatowska, M./Siwiec, A. (eds.), *Tradycja i innowacja*. Chełm, 181–190.
- SAWICKA, G. (1999), *Konwencja a skuteczność słowa*. In: Lasocka, E. (eds.), *Skuteczność słowa w działaniach politycznych i społecznych*. Bydgoszcz, 167–176.
- ZIÓLKOWSKI, M. (1981), *Znaczenie, interakcja, rozumienie*. Warszawa.
- ŻYDEK-Bednarczuk, U. (2013), *Komunikacja internetowa*. In: Dubisz-Dukowska, A./Małycka, A. (eds.), *70 lat współczesnej polszczyzny. Zjawiska. Procesy. Tendencje*. Lublin, 439–462.