

IMAGE FROM WORDS.WHAT DO AUTHORS OF COLUMNS COMMUNICATE ABOUT THEMSELVES TO THEIR READERS?

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There are many studies placing image communication beside non-verbal communication. However, not many researches are focused on the language and its capability to communicate the particular appearance. This paper presents the results of the research which used quantitative methods and linguistic analysis in order to examine what image can be created when somebody is talking/writing about various subjects but not about him/herself, i.e. ascertain what attributes of a text author can be communicated. The important point was: the image of text author was (re)constructed by readers after reading a text, not by the researcher (as for instance typical rhetorical analysis does). The used texts represented a column – a genre which allows to express the personality of the text author very well. Research was conducted among journalism and social communication students at few Polish universities. The main task was to read a text. Respondents read the column and subsequently answered the question ‘What words would you use to describe the author of the text you read’. The results of the research suggest that it is possible to communicate through text such person’s traits like, for instance: intelligent, erudite, self-confident, critical, but text also enables to communicate such attributes like: liberal, feminist, Catholic. Usually not particular words but stylistics or a topic of a text determine the author image.

Keywords: Image, Column, Image research.

Introduction

So far, the researchers have explored the public image of particular people verified the influence of knowledge who the sender was on the assessment of the message. They have also focused on the rhetorical dimension of the image of the sender or on the self-presentation aspect. The image communicated on the verbal level in empirical studies involving respondents has not been explored. The content analysis regards many factors and is especially helpful in the case of recreating the image from media messages (Neundorf, 2002; Riff, Lacy, Fico 2005; Gackowski, Łączyński 2009). Specialized marketing researches serve typically commercial purposes such as planning and verifying the targets of brand images of products or services (Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, Oppenheim 2005; Wilson, Johns, Miller, Pentecost 2010). Particularly in the context of credibility, the relation between the author and evaluation of his/her message was subjected to empirical exploration (e.g. experiment of Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss: Hovland, Weiss 1954). In ethical dimension (ethos of a speaker) rhetoric deals with the trustworthiness aspect of the sender (Corbett, Connors 1998). The issue of self-presentation in situations of social interaction is taken into consideration by anthropology and social psychology (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996).

Some of the recent pilot researches focused on the relation between the text and image, on the one hand, and the author who writes columns in the magazine, on the other hand (Barańska 2011). It was also verified, how much the change of the nature of the columnist picture can affect his image, when this image is reconstructed by readers on the basis of the text supplemented by a photograph of the writer (Barańska 2012). It was also noted what linguistic expressions can be used to express the traits, which are ascribed to the text author (Barańska-Szmitko 2013). The following research is the part of the larger one. These results are an answer to the question, what image it is possible to communicate in general at the level of the text, using only words, without any additional information about the author of words.

Research Perspective

The base of the research is the Michael Fleischer's constructivist theory of communication (Fleischer 2003, 2005, 2006). The reasonable constructivism perspective assumes, among others, departure from the category of the sender intention, which means a special focus on the effect of verbal communication messages obtained among the recipients of the message. In other words, not the researcher but readers indicate, what image of the author of words emerges from the read text in their view. Verifying what image can be communicated on the verbal level may allow to determine the mechanisms of image creation and facilitate the use of words in order to obtain the communication aim.

The image is understood quite differently by various researches (compare e.g. Boorstin 1992, Wheeler 2012, Fleischer 2003b, 2010). Most, however, agree on the fact that the image is a kind of representation what a participant of communication has about the organization or person. This is the result of single or recurring perceptions occurring in the mind of such a participant of communication. The process of perception is subjective and active. Therefore the same features are connected with the image as the effect of this process. Thereby the image becomes actively constructed by the recipient of the message based on several types of messages (verbal, visual and auditory, tactile, spatial or the wider context) or on the basis of the one of these types.

In this text the research below refers to the image constructed by the recipient only on the basis of words. It is important that the texts submitted to respondents did not relate directly to the authors of these texts, that is, the authors wrote about various subjects but not about themselves. This procedure results directly from the constructivist distinction between speaking and communicating (Fleischer 2012). 'Speaking' is speaking out on a variety of topics, presenting facts or opinions. 'Communicating' is the result of the communication process, it is somewhat the interpretation of spoken words. When for example some person *says* that he is perfectly familiar with the literature and is very fond of one of the best nineteenth-century artists, author of *The Odyssey*, William Shakespeare, who exquisitely operates the grotesque in his novels, he *says* exactly these words. But this person through these words *communicates* profound ignorance in the area of the history of literature. Such a perspective research was used, because the author of the research wanted not to reconstruct the image from the self-presentation texts, but from the texts about various subjects where the image of their creator is communicated.

Therefore the genre of column was used in the research. In the Polish tradition (the research was conducted in Poland) this journalist genre offers the biggest capacity of expression and exposure of the traits of the text author, as well as maximum subject selection flexibility and opinion expression. This is also a form of a text which is issued periodically, so it is possible to use many texts of the same author in the research. For clarity there is the definition of a column which is the basis of columns issued in Polish media: 'A column is a permanent position in the dailies, weeklies, monthlies and also in electronic media. It deals with the most current cultural, social, economic events. It should be written for the readers amusement, in a satirical, even scandalous tone. Language freedom of a column is connected with its subject freedom. An author of the column has the right to manifest his subjective point of view, underline his/her emotionality and commitment to the describing case. All his/her words are characterized by familiarity and emphasis on the intellectual freedom. Stylistically the column uses colloquial speech (including colloquialisms, even profanity) but also typically literary stylistic devices and the right to create fiction (Wolny- Zmorzyński, Kaliszewski 2006).

Research Methodology

The research methodology results from the constructivist theoretical approach, thus the image communicated on the verbal level is reconstructed in quantitative research with the participation of the respondents. The aim of the presenting part of research was to verify what image can be communicated only at the level of words, when the author of the text talks/writes about various subject but not about his/her own person. The journalistic genre of a column was used as the best suited for the purpose of the research.

Surveys were conducted three times: in spring 2012, spring 2013 and autumn 2013. The research was carried out in several Polish cities: Warsaw, Lodz, Wroclaw, Bialystok, Poznan. Only students of the first and second year in studies of journalism and social communication and Polish philology took part. Representatives of these two humanities subjects were invited because of the assumption that their communication and language skills are sufficient for the solid conduct of the research. The higher grades of these fields of studies were not involved due to the anticipated too high competences and awareness of language, communication and journalistic genres. Respondents among whom are only students of two humanities subjects also ensured the homogeneity of the study sample.

The whole study was fairly complex, counted several groups of respondents and a few variants of the research. This text describes the part of the research and the results corresponding to this part. Other tasks did not affect the results presented here.

Respondents received a document wallet, which contained materials needed for particular stages of the research. All sheets of paper had the printed surface upturned so that respondents could not see the following tasks. Respondents participated in the study voluntarily. Before distributing document wallets, they had been informed that they should not open it until the researcher clearly gave the signal. It was also noted that after opening a file they had to perform only the task on the top of materials in a document wallet. It was emphasized that reliability and validity of the research required not checking the content of next sheet of paper until the full completion of the current task. A researcher monitored compliance with these rules during the survey. This procedure was implemented in order to ensure the reliability of the study. It was also used to prevent the respondents from performing next tasks for easier fulfilment of earlier ones. The time allowed for tasks completion remained unlimited but usually did not last more than 15-20 minutes. Surveys of those who took longer than 20 minutes to complete a task were omitted in the process of results analysis.

On the signal given by the researcher respondents opened document wallets and read the text of the column located on the first sheet. After reading the text students reversed the next sheet of paper (A5 format) and followed the task: 'What words would you use to describe the author of the text you read'. When the column author was a woman, the question used a grammatical form of the word 'author' pointing to a woman (nouns in Polish language take the form of, among others, male and female). After completing this task next tasks followed. Their description and results will be published in another paper. The question was open-ended so that the respondents had complete freedom in giving responses.

The text of column was placed on a sheet of A4 format. The task was printed on a sheet of A5 format in order to limit the length of respondents answers. The printout included five numbered bullets to suggest that each of the respondents should list five attributes of the author. This solution was aimed to guarantee uniformity of responses and thereby greater comparability of results. The first question (connected with the terms used by the author) allows to define concrete traits of columnist which contribute to his/her image.

In total the research used four columns authors writing about different subject areas (socio-political, cultural) and representing different ideological attitudes: Magdalena Środa, Szymon Hołownia, Krzysztof Varga, Piotr Zaremba. This paper will describe the results of the research of the image of Magdalena Środa and Szymon Hołownia in the group of respondents who did not know the identity of the author, that means the students read the text but did not know who wrote it. The text of each of these columnists were published in weekly newspapers.

Each time (spring 2012, spring 2013, autumn 2013) seven recently published columns of the author were used. Thanks to it readers had a chance to know the possible context if the context was needed to understand the whole text. Because such a text is published every seven days and it must relate to this what is likely to be relevant for at least another week, it was assumed that the usage of issues from the last seven weeks should not interfere with the comprehensibility of the published content. Each time (spring 2012, spring 2013, autumn 2013) 21 texts of each author were used (each one column was read by 3 respondents). That means the results involves altogether 126 columns: 63 columns of Magdalena Środa and 63 columns of SzymonHołownia. The same is the number of respondents who participated in the research, that is a total number of 126 people. Thanks to the usage of a large number of texts written by the same authors it is possible to avoid the image determination by the subject area of the column.

Data Analysis

The results connected with the image of Magdalena Środa and SzymonHołownia will be presented here. Magdalena Środa is a woman who writes columns about equality between men and women as well as other socio-political themes. SzymonHołownia is a man who deals with the subject of religion. The comparison of two images of two different public personalities will therefore check how the topic of a text influences the author image constructed by the reader.

The tables below show various features of the authors, contributing to their image, information about the number of indications of terms, and their percentage share of all indications made by the respondents. The penultimate column includes data on the number of people who indicated a particular characteristic and the last column contains information on the percentage share of the total number in the number of people participating in this research (for this reason, the last column do not add up to 100 %).

63 respondents attributed 259 terms to Magdalena Środa which were categorized in 19 coherent traits making up her image. The author of the column is considered as a *courage* person above all. Many readers also ascribed to her such attributes like: *critical, intelligent, educated, ironic, committed*. Terms such as *feminist, humorous, well-versed in the subject, concrete, objective, anti-cleric, investigative, subjective, left -wing, creative, rational, percipient, sincere* occur less frequently but still seem to be important for fewer than 20 percent of respondents .

Table 1. Magdalena Środa's image.

	trait	Number of indications	%	Number of people	%
1	courage	45	17,37%	38	60,32%
2	critical	20	7,72%	18	28,57%
3	intelligent	18	6,95%	18	28,57%
4	educated	16	6,18%	16	25,40%
5	ironic	16	6,18%	15	23,81%
6	committed	13	5,02%	10	23,81%
7	feminist	12	4,63%	11	17,46%
8	humorous	10	3,86%	10	15,87%
9	well-versed in the subject	9	3,47%	9	15,87%
10	concrete	9	3,47%	9	14,29%

11	objective	8	3,09%	8	12,70%
12	anti - cleric	8	3,09%	8	12,70%
13	investigative	8	3,09%	8	12,70%
14	subjective	7	2,70%	7	11,11%
15	left-wing	7	2,70%	7	11,11%
16	creative	7	2,70%	7	11,11%
17	rational	6	2,32%	6	9,52%
18	percipient	6	2,32%	5	9,52%
19	sincere	5	1,93%	5	7,94%
20	other	29	11,20%	24	38,10%
		259	100,00%		

63 respondents attributed 281 terms to Szymon Hołownia which were categorized in 19 consistent traits composing his image. This journalist is considered as a *concrete* person but some of his other attributes seem to be important as well: *objective, well-versed in the subject of the catholic religion, intelligent, confident of his rights, believer, open-minded, well-read, observer, critical, ironic, empathetic*. Fewer than 20% of respondents attributed to the journalist the following features: *communicative, humorous, committed, modern, conservative, sincere, realist*.

Table 2. Szymon Hołownia's image.

	trait	Number of indications	%	Number of people	%
1	concrete	28	9,96%	27	42,86%
2	objective	19	6,76%	19	30,16%
3	well-versed in the subject of the catholic religion	19	6,76%	18	28,57%
4	intelligent	19	6,76%	19	30,16%
5	confident of his rights	18	6,41%	16	25,40%
6	believer	18	6,41%	18	28,57%
7	open-minded	15	5,34%	15	23,81%
8	well-read	15	5,34%	14	22,22%
9	observer	14	4,98%	14	22,22%
10	critical	13	4,63%	13	20,63%
11	ironic	13	4,63%	13	20,63%

12	empathetic	13	4,63%	13	20,63%
13	communicative	9	3,20%	9	14,29%
14	humorous	9	3,20%	9	14,29%
15	committed	7	2,49%	7	11,11%
16	modern	5	1,78%	5	7,94%
17	conservative	5	1,78%	5	7,94%
18	sincere	5	1,78%	5	7,94%
19	realist	4	1,42%	5	7,94%
20	other	33	11,74%	25	39,68%
		281	100,00%		

The comparison of these two images allows to notice that some of the features appear in the case of both authors. These are terms such as: *intelligent, critical, ironic, committed, objective, concrete, humorous, sincere*. These attributes can thus be considered as independent ones from the gender of the person who speaks up. It should also be noted that the subject and the ideological attitude of Magdalena Środa and Szymon Hołownia's texts are completely different. Therefore it seems that all mentioned above traits are independent from the genre of the author, discussed subject area and represented ideology.

The most frequently traits cited by respondents are (these terms are indicated by more than one fifth of the respondents): courage, critical, intelligent, educated, ironic, committed, concrete, objective, well-versed in the subject of the catholic religion, confident of his rights, believer, open-minded. These features appeared very often in surveys so they seem to be particularly easy to communicate on the verbal level.

All the characteristics indicated by the respondents can be classified into several coherent groups. It seems that it is possible to communicate the following categories of image: creed/ orientation, knowledge, attitude, character traits, and other. Category creed/orientation refers to ideological attitude, political or e.g. religious orientation, view on a specific social issues etc. Here the following features can be qualified: *feminist, cleric, left-wing, believer, conservative, modern, well-versed in the subject of the catholic religion*. The second category - knowledge - refers to the level and scope of education. It is represented by such attributes as: *well-versed in the subject, educated, well-read*. The next category - attitude - reflects attitude towards word and people, and is expressed by traits like: *committed, critical, objective, courage, subjective, rational, realist, observer, confident of his rights*. The last category - character traits - is connected with attributes describing personality features: *humorous, intelligent, ironic, sincere, percipient, creative, open-minded, empathetic*. There is also one category - other - including such terms as: *concrete, investigative, communicative*.

The closer analysis of the categories of image communicated on the level of words allows to observe that different categories may be expressed at the level of language in different ways. Category creed/orientation is determined by the subject. In order to be considered a feminist or left-wing it is good to say/write about issues related to these topics. It is different in the case of other categories. They are independent from the raised subject. So for example it is possible to be *well-read* regardless of the fact that the *well-read* person reads fiction or literature on genetics, quantum physics or philosophy. Similarly, a particular person may be *confident of his/ her right* regardless of what exactly these rights are. Thus it seems that assigning attributes belonging to such categories as the image of knowledge, attitude and character traits will depend mainly on the stylistics. The further analysis of the rest parts of whole research will verify this statement.

Conclusions

According to the received results of the described research it is possible to communicate 30 different traits. Eight of them refers to two text authors, which may mean that such attributes as *intelligent, critical, ironic, committed, objective, concrete, humorous, sincere* are independent from the raised topic of the text, the gender and ideological attitude of its author. Other features possible to communicate at the level of the text are: *courage, educated, feminist, well-versed in the subject, anti-cleric, investigative, subjective, left-wing, creative, rational, percipient* (traits attributed only to Magdalena Środa), *concrete, well-versed in the subject of the catholic religion, confident of his rights, believer, open-minded, well-read, observer, empathetic, communicative, modern, conservative, realist* (features attributed to Szymon Hołownia).

All traits can be grouped into four coherent categories what means that it is possible to communicate through text: creed/orientation, knowledge, attitude, character traits. Communicating creed/orientation is dependent primarily on the subject while the other categories of the image are expressed by means of stylistic solutions.

Analyses of the other parts of the research will allow to deepen the foregoing conclusions and check, among others, how many and what are the traits attributing, regardless of the subject, what depends on the text and what on the picture in the process of creating the image, what are the impacts of the public image on the *text image* of the text author (in a situation when respondents know the identity of the text author).

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