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The Corpus of Discourses on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Poland. Research Project Assumptions

Abstract

The article presents a research project on linguistically profiled (quantitative and qualitative) analyses of the (sub)space of pandemic-related discourses, as well as the corpus of Polish texts concerning the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic that broke out in 2020, prepared for analytical purposes. The authors describe the following: 1. the reasons for the interest in this issue, the subject and purpose of the research and the research theoretical and methodological background -- discourse linguistics (mainly from the perspective of Jürgen Spizmüller and Ingo Warnke); 2. source material of the project (mainly individual/non-institutional Internet statements that constitute the basis for the shaping of specific systems of meaning, i.e. comments posted under posts on Facebook or Twitter and the dialogical relations among them); 3. problems related to the development of the pandemic discourses corpus (criteria for the selection of texts, methods of the corpus balancing, categories of metadata that shall be used for the material description); 4. conclusions drawn from an exemplary analytical procedure where a section of the corpus was used; 5. the potential of the above-mentioned research and possible applications of the research results.

Keywords: pandemic, discourse, linguistic analysis of discourse, corpus linguistics, corpus of COVID-19 texts

"[...] assumptions shall be introduced in such a way as to provide theoretical foundations
for the facts observed." (Boczar 2000: 187)

Introduction

The topic of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus is viewed under many aspects, and not only is this issue gaining more and more interest among scientists dealing directly with health problems -- representatives of medical science -- but it is also more often and more readily being addressed by social sciences and humanities researchers, e.g. psychologists, sociologists and linguists in Poland and abroad (Heitzman 2020; Długosz 2020; Cierpich-Kozieł 2020; Gębka-Wolak 2020; Włoskowicz 2020; Ciesek--Ślizowska *et al.* 2022; Makowska 2021; Hess-Lüttich 2020; Kranert *et al.* 2020; Hangyan, Huiling, Jie 2021 *etc.*). This scientific boom is related to the fact that during the social crisis caused by the pandemic the discursive space has become a place where many ideological social and identity discourses clash. This "borderline" situation undoubtedly affects interpersonal communication and promotes the polarization of positions regarding various activities and phenomena related to the new reality. Consequently, discursive communities have been formed and their subjects present different, often extreme, attitudes towards such facts as, inter alia, limitations resulting from sanitary restrictions[1]. One may also notice many ways of profiling and valorising of specific subjects and objects that come to the fore in the pandemic-focused discourse (cf. discourses concerning medics, politicians, and celebrities, and discourses on e.g. masks). In view of the above circumstances, the "pandemic" logosphere can be considered as a promising area for humanistic reflection, including discursology reflection.

Pandemic related research work

This article describes an ongoing research project, and thus we would like to present the research that served as an important point of reference and as a source of inspiration for this project. However, this presentation must be brief due to the size limitations of this article. Therefore, we will only refer to selected (and the above-mentioned[2]) research focusing on the pandemic with a particular emphasis on Polish-language-linguistic and/or discursological[3] studies.

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1   Cf.: "The pandemic in Poland and the lockdown implemented in response to it has torn up the social reality, reducing and polarizing it dramatically. [...] several social forces have emerged, allowing society on the one hand to survive the pandemic and, on the other hand, to save the existing political and economic system. Public discourse was one of such forces [...]" (Brzeźniak 2020: 79–80). The impact of the health crisis on the shaping of discursive communities has also been confirmed by previous social studies carried out as part of observations of global crises of this type that took place in the past (see the plague or the Spanish flu epidemics; see e.g. Zachorski and Zendran 2018; Sznajderman 1994).

2   These works were published when the main framework of our project was being created, as well as, a later study which is especially close to us —for which we are the co-authors.

3   It should be added that discourse as a background of description, an object of research, or a method of analysis (see: Przyklenk 2016: 135) has appeared in numerous foreign-language studies on the pandemic. We have included examples of these studies: Hess-Lüttich 2020; Kranert *et al.* 2020; Hangyan, Huiling, Jie 2021.

The linguistic thoughts on the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland often rest on the lexical layer of pandemic communication and the current nomenclature needs of Polish language users (Cierpich-Kozieł 2020; Gębka-Wolak 2020; Włoskowicz 2020). By focusing on the description of the new reality, researchers offer insight into the selected grammatical mechanisms resulting in the modification of the properties/connectivity of known language units or the creation of new ones (e.g. nouns *korona*, *koronazakupy*, *koronaszkoła*, etc.). They illustrated the phenomena of borrowing adaptations, as well as, the dynamic flow of lexis within the Polish language (cf. e.g. *COVID-19*, *lockdown*, *koronawirus/koronowirus*). The literature search included contemporary written or spoken, official and/or unofficial texts obtained through available digital tools. Such descriptions can be embedded in the structural methodology (Gębka-Wolak 2020: 161), they can also contain elements of sociolinguistic and comparative approaches (Cierpich-Kozieł 2020: 104–105, 114–115) or have a normative/corrective inclination (Włoskowicz 2020).

The lexis describing how SARS-CoV-2 affected everyday life was also reviewed from a discursological perspective. Upon review of weekly collections of words and compound words registered in the "Słowa na czasie" project, Filip Brzeźniak distinguished several styles/varieties of public discourse that were used during the 1st wave of the pandemic (the language of war, the language of fear, the language of control, *etc*.). Consequently, he has combined quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse discourse (Brzeźniak 2020: 79).

Interesting results were published in a report evaluating the statements of people expressing negative opinions on COVID-19 vaccination (Ciesek-Ślizowska *et al*. 2022). The authors conducted a comprehensive analysis[4] of arguments found within 3,650 comments from Internet users published from September 1 to November 15, 2021, in posts regarding the COVID-19 pandemic on the official Facebook fanpage of the Ministry of Health. This distinguished 9 argumentative topoi such as distrust of medics/scientists, pharmaceutical companies, representatives of authorities, as well as, the media (approx. 77% of the entire analysed corpus). Additional topoi included conviction of the vaccine's ineffectiveness/poor effectiveness (approx. 19% of the analysed corpus), belief that the vaccine is dangerous to one's health (approx. 17% of the total material analysed), etc. Although the frequency and popularity of argumentative topoi in statements by vaccination sceptics can change over time, this research has shown them to be relatively persistent (Ciesek-Ślizowska *et al*. 2022: 13). Furthermore, the research made it possible to develop a responsible communication strategy about vaccinations (pp. 77–78).

The subject and purpose of the research and theoretical and methodological assumptions of the research project

The aim of the project presented herein is to attempt a linguistic analysis of the (sub)space of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic discourses, based on the corpus of texts generated under the influence of the pandemic. The starting point for the project's development was the selection of a specific research method. Due to the multifaceted nature of the subject of our reflection, i.e. various pandemic-related discourses, we

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4   The services offered as part of the CLARIN-PL infrastructure included basic text processing tools (morphosyntactic analysis, lemmatization, etc.) and a web application called Korpusomat for quantitative analyses. The argumentation analysis of topoi method was used for qualitative analyses (Wengeler 2003).

adopted an integrating research approach, i.e. discourse linguistics as understood by Jürgen Spizmüller and Ingo Warnke (Warnke and Spitzmüller (eds.) [2008]; Spitzmüller and Warnke 2011; see also: Czachur 2020: 188–201)[5]. We chose this approach, which is at the same time an attempt to combine various trends in discourse analysis, because we are interested in the relations of knowledge and power (including symbolic power) which are manifested in specific ways of language use in the statements of participants/subjects of discourses concerning epidemics, as well as in the discourse semantic aspects. Categories of knowledge and power (after Foucault 2000: 29) are particularly important from the perspective of building a representation of the world in different types of pandemic-related discourses. These representations are revealed at all levels of the language, especially at the lexical and textual levels that we are interested in. The assumptions of the discourse semantics used by the founders of discourse linguistics will, in turn, allow for identification of trends in the field of semantic and value struggles (see: Felder (ed.) 2006) carried out in the discursive (sub)space that we are involved in. The key "instrument and, at the same time, a means for materializing statements [of representatives of a given discourse B.D., E.F.] are texts, therefore, the discourse [...] can be perceived as a collection of texts linked by specific thematic and semantic relations" (Czachur 2020: 192). Thus, by incorporating the assumptions of corpus linguistics into its concept, linguistics focused on the above-cited theoretical-interpretative category allows for global, quantitative linguistic analyses based on large sets of textual data.

Motivation for the selection of sources and the source material characteristics

As the subject of our attention is the lexical and textual level of discourses formed around the issue of the COVID-19 epidemic, the source material will be texts showing the multitude of perspectives and points of view that go to make up the perceptions of the current social crisis. As a result of the pandemic, direct contacts have been reduced in favour of communication via digital media. As a consequence, the Internet, which has been regarded as the main platform for public discourse for a long time now (Lakomy 2018: 9), has become the dominant space of communication and various discourses' constitution. In this process a significant role has been played by social media and individual statements present in social media in the form of comments, tweets, and iconic or iconic-verbal texts (e.g. memes). These types of statements seem to be the basis for shaping specific systems of meaning; they can also become an impulse for specific, including grassroots, global social activities. An example of the opinion-forming power of social media and individual statements in Poland can be, among others, social actions/campaigns supporting medical services (sewing masks for hospital staff, fundraising to support medics, *etc.*).

However, from the point of view of discourse linguistics, both individual statements that can be compiled in the form of a database into extensive text corpora and the relationships between these statements are cognitively attractive. Interactions between the authors of comments published in

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5   Regardless of this, the following conceptualizations of discourse, well-established in Polish science/linguistics, are close to us: "a certain thought pattern that shapes the perspective from which people of a particular community perceive a phenomenal and symbolic reality" (Fairclough 1995: 14); "a system of meanings which form the identities of subjects and objects" (Howarth 2008: 24); "abstract and intersubjective category, an intellectual construct that shapes communication practice, i.e. texts" (Witosz 2014: 27).

social media, e.g. under Facebook or Twitter posts, constitute a valuable source of knowledge about discursive strategies used by the subjects of individual discourses. That is why not only individual acts of communication, but also textual elements that indicate their connection with other acts/statements will be the subject of our interest. Research on discursive space profiled in such a way makes it possible to capture more processes of negotiating meanings that appear during the interactions between representatives of often opposing social or ideological discourses.

The corpus of discourses on the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland

On the basis of the assumptions we have presented regarding the subject and purpose of the analyses, a project has been developed which consists in creating a browsable corpus of Polish dialogue texts which are an update of discourses focused on the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of corpus sources will make it possible to conduct mainly discursological research, including, in particular, investigations with the use of discourse linguistics instruments. Thanks to the large material base and appropriately selected search criteria, the corpus may also be used for extensive quantitative and qualitative analyses. In order to show the research potential of the corpus, below we have presented the criteria that form the basis for the texts' selection.

Table 1. The criterion for the selection of texts for the corpus of discourses on the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland.

criterion for the texts' selection	text samples
1. chronology	texts from the beginning of the pandemic in Poland (i.e. from March 2020) to now
2. topic	discourse thematic bundles concerning the pandemic
3. context	texts linked by means of semantic references and/or common utterance, communication and intentional context with an overriding pandemic theme/topic
4. interactivity/dialogicality	texts indicating explicit or implicit references to other texts referring to epidemics (intertextuality, interdiscursivity)
5. medium	originally online texts, created on the Internet, and more precisely in social media
6. genre	Internet genres with a dialogue potential: comments, retweets, etc.
7. sociolinguistic parameters	texts differentiated in terms of gender based on the criterion of a username (cf. female and male names) or grammatical forms used by the writer

Let us recall: the above-mentioned criteria have been developed in accordance with the assumptions of the research project being prepared by us, which focuses on the characteristics of COVID-19-related discourses (*cf*. criteria 2 and 3). In order to balance the corpus, we have selected texts from different periods of the pandemic development (criterion 1) – from its outbreak in Poland, through individual events significant from the point of view of the pandemic discourses' development (*cf*. inter alia, successive

stages of sanitary restrictions' introduction or lifting). Thus, we assume the possibility of creating smaller sub-corpora. Each of them will contain texts from a given period. We should also mention other criteria enabling us to determine the types of discursive strategies present in the analysed discourses. We will be interested in originally online texts which represent specific genres with discursological potential -- Internet comments and a particular type of them: retweets (criteria 5 and 6). An important element of the analyses will be to show the (sub)space of pandemic discourses and the patterns of interactions inside and outside a given discourse community based on the observation of direct relations between participants of online/distant/digital communication (criteria 6 and 7). This criterion distinguishes the designed corpus from other, already existing Polish corpora which do not consider the network of connections between individual texts constituting a part of a specific base. Using the potential of new ways to create text corpora, we intend to focus our attention on these issues. The tools used for the development of dialogue systems, developed by the Polish branch of the CLARIN (Common Language Resources & Technology Infrastructure) consortium, may be helpful in the above-described tasks' implementation.
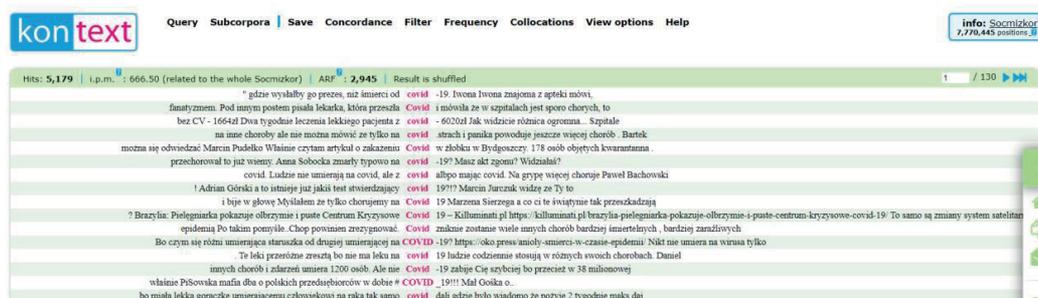

Fig. 1. View of the corpus with an example of the search result. KonText – https://clarin-pl.eu/index.php/kontext/ (date of access: 23.04.2021).

As a result of cooperation with CLARIN_PL and SentiOne (a company dealing with data collection) an electronic corpus has already been created in a test form. The corpus has been created using an online corpus querying application available under the LINDAT/CLARIAH-CZ project. Examples of the search results and the appearance of the interface have been presented in the above graphic (see: Fig. 1). The current content of the resource is 7,770,445 tokens (as of 11/04/2021). The corpus includes online comments posted on the Polish Ministry of Health official Facebook profile. This profile is an important/significant centre in the space of pandemic discourses. Daily posts are accompanied by numerous comments made by representatives of various discourses relating to the pandemic issues. Although the Facebook profile itself is institutional (it is run by the Ministry of Health[6]), the entries appearing under the posts it contains express the grassroots individual beliefs of participants in various discourse communities. They include, among others, opinions of both opponents and supporters of sanitary restrictions (related to the order for social distancing, the need to wear protective masks, *etc.*), voices expressing approval or disapproval of important subjects and objects located in the epidemic-

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6   See: https://www.facebook.com/MZGOVPL/ (date of access: 24.04.2021).

-related discourses' field of gravity (e.g. of those in power, medical staff, uniformed services). Thus the comments published on the Ministry of Health's profile constitute a diverse, representative collection of statements. The collected resource (excerpted from this collection) was pre-selected in terms of meeting the criteria for the selection of texts to be included in the corpus (see: Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of the test corpus.

criterion	test corpus - content
1. chronology	texts from March 4, 2020 to May 30, 2020: these are the dates of the following events, respectively: the first case of the disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus in Poland and the first, partial lifting of the order to cover one's mouth and nose in public spaces
2. topic and 3. context	topics related to sanitary restrictions and attitudes to the actions taken by the authorities, as well as topics indicating the attitude to the pandemic crisis situation
4. Interactivity/ dialogicality	Internet comment texts containing at least 1 link (through a question-answer relationship) with another comment
5. medium and 6. genre	Internet comments on Facebook
7. sociolinguistic parameters	online comments written by women and men

On the basis of the above-listed criteria for the selection of texts and based on the methods of linguistic discourse analysis, categories of metadata have also been established and will be used to describe the target source material. The following metadata may prove useful for discursological analyses:

- sociolinguistic metadata: gender;
- chronological metadata: message publication time;
- pragmalinguistic metadata, e.g. reaction, initiation, coda, replies;
- unique discursological metadata, among others: discourse bundles, topics, keywords.

Potential of the research with the use of the corpus

The main research question of the project featured herein is: How is the pandemic re/constructed in terms of entities representing various discourses? Let us indicate a few other specific questions, namely:

- How are various elements of the world profiled in the face of the pandemic?
- What themes/bundles of discourse are taken up by social actors?
- What strategies are used while struggling for symbolic power?

Due to the essence of the formulated problems, here one should recall the category of the discursive image of the world (DOŚ) which was proposed by Waldemar Czachur referring to Polish ethnolinguistics and German discourse linguistics. The DOŚ is a

discursively profiled interpretation of reality which can be captured in the form of a set of judgements about the world, people, things and events. [...] DOŚ -- as a representation of knowledge -- is

linguistically constructed, negotiated on the basis of emotional or rational arguments and medially distributed. (Czachur 2011: 87)

It is created as a result of a dynamic clash of various antagonisms, interests, interpretations (under the slogan of the fight for the truth, facts are agreed on, but the truth is not an ontological phenomenon here) and it enables researchers to:

(…) capture specific (dominant, marginalized, etc.) actors of the discourse, and thus their points of view; […] a wider cultural and social context having a direct impact on the process of linguistic knowledge profiling in the form of concepts, flagship words, collective symbols, metaphors, argumentation patterns, etc.; [...] a discursive moment as a segment of a certain cultural entirety and continuity, cognitive and axiological patterns typical of a given cultural community. (Czachur 2011: 87–88; see also: Czachur 2020: 167–169).

The discursive image of the world, just like the discourse itself, makes it possible to finally extract the subjective perspective:

It is the specific discourses as forms of social debate that different speaking subjects participate in, representing similar or different interests and points of view, and thus ultimately value systems. It is nowhere else but in discourses that the polarization of points of view comes into play and it has a direct impact on the process of subjective profiling of reality (Czachur 2011: 83).

An example of research related to the project devoted to COVID-19 discourses and the search for answers to the above-mentioned questions was the analysis of selected flagship words of the epidemic – the Polish lexemes *maseczka* 'diminutive of mask' and *maska* 'mask', or more precisely the analysis of modelling and negotiating their meanings as they appeared in the statements of the opponents of sanitary restrictions imposed during the pandemic (Duda, Ficek 2021). These lexemes appeared in as many as 9,382 online comments included in the subcorpus, which permitted the assumption that these words were important for the recognized discourse. The next steps of the analysis included, among others, observation of selected collocations of *maseczka* 'diminutive of mask' and *maska* 'mask' (cf. *useless mask, dirty masks, cursed masks, anti-fine masks*, etc.), their text equivalents (such as: *rag, cloth, muzzle, gag* or *shit*) and semantic surpluses (associative, expressive meanings), persuasive definitions or quasi-definitions and pictorial comparisons (e.g. *masks constitute social taming; masks are a collection of bacteria; this rag on the face protects against the virus like a fence protects against mosquitoes*), as well as meaning profiles revealed in specific texts. On the basis of an in-depth analysis of the naming strategies, it was possible to distinguish three main profiles of the designation behind the aforementioned names: 1. a mask as a symbol of threat -- mainly a threat to health and life (this profile is also co-shaped by social, economic and ecological arguments, e.g. *people isolated and deprived of contact, being forced to wear a mask; masks ruin the economy; flooding the streets with masks*); 2. a mask as a symbol of a false pandemic (e.g. *a whopping lie/mask baloney*); 3. a mask as a symbol of a loss of freedom, oppression, or discrimination (e.g. *you only grab us by the short and curlies, by the masks*). It has been concluded that in the case of corona-regime opponents who emphasize the importance of values such as health, safety, truth, and freedom, masks have clearly pejorative connotations. Subjective conceptualization and negative evaluation/expression (Steciąg 2012: 138, 141; Kudra 2014) is achieved here, e.g., through (quite frequent) procedures of animation and personification or hyperbolization.

Recapitulation

Apart from the obvious medical, social and economic effects, the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out at the turn of the year 2020, also has linguistic, lexical and textual consequences -- which we tried to signal -- that make up an interesting research field (Włoskowicz 2020: 98). Because there is also an obvious need to observe the thought patterns that shape the perspective of perceiving the world in the face of a pandemic in order to learn about the mechanisms governing them and effectively counteract noise and/ or communication crises, as well as to prepare global solutions (on the level of media, social and image communication), discourse is an extremely useful construct in this research. Discourse allows for a broad, multifaceted observation of the phenomena that we are involved in and the observation also takes extra--linguistic factors into account.

The research project outlined herein fills a kind of gap (at least in Poland) and it is a response to pressing cognitive needs in this field. Discussion of the assumptions and methods used during the project's implementation, initial recognition of the pandemic discourses, justification of the choices leading to the collection, selection and observation of source material, indication of research problems that deserve consideration, and above all, presentation of the corpus as a product created within the project, and showing the possibilities of the corpus use, should be supplemented with a few more elements. First of all, these include specification of the planned inquiries' potential, and their practical implications. Therefore, among the expected results of the research, we can enumerate:

- direct effects:
    - » insight into the attitudes characteristic of times of social crisis, understanding of the mechanisms of generating/ negotiating collective systems of beliefs and meanings;
    - » identification and characteristics of the determinants of discourses thematising the theme of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic (these determinants will also be useful for analysing other discourses concerning social crises, including analyses conducted on large data sets);
- indirect effects:
    - » creation of constructive solutions for effective communication during the course of and after the pandemic;
    - » inspiration for observation of various communication spaces with the use of corpus tools and methods of discourse linguistics.

Second of all, let us mention some shortcomings of corpus methods which (in line with the idea of the digital turn) allow for the acceleration of analytical procedures, but have some limitations. None of corpora cover the entire area of linguistic activity (new texts will appear during a corpus creation, and some texts already saved in the corpus may become outdated; corpora are also sometimes insufficiently representative when it comes to low frequency facts). What is more, each corpus is also an empirical phenomenon, i.e. a set of units that need to be categorized and interpreted, whereas linguistic facts sometimes become facts only "in the context of human attitudes" (Kiklewicz 2018: 75–76, 94–95; see also: Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 2005). These reservations should certainly be taken into account.

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