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VALUATION IN LANGUAGE AS A LEITMOTIF OF THE COMPETITION SHAPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND ETHICAL ATTITUDES

WARTOŚCIOWANIE W JĘZYKU JAKO MOTYW PRZEWODNI KONKURSU KSZTAŁTUJĄCEGO KOMPETENCJE KOMUNIKACYJNE I POSTAWY ETYCZNE

Streszczenie: Problematyka wartościowania w języku i świadomej komunikacji wzmacniającej relacje wydaje się być ważnym elementem edukacji i wychowania do pokoju. W niniejszym artykule zaprezentowano idee, cele i wyniki konkursu pt. „Słowa mają wielką moc”, organizowanego dla uczniów szkół podstawowych. Konkurs ten może być skutecznym narzędziem w pracy edukacyjnej i wychowawczej związanej z kształtowaniem nie tylko kompetencji językowych, ale również budowaniem relacji i kształtowaniem postaw etycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: wartościowanie w języku, komunikacja, pokój, wychowanie, rodzina

Abstract: The role of valuation in language and conscious communication that fosters relationships constitutes an important aspect of education and peace-oriented upbringing. This article presents the rationale, objectives, and outcomes of a competition entitled “Words Have Great Power”, organized for elementary school students. The competition serves as a valuable educational and formative tool aimed not only at developing linguistic competence, but also at nurturing relationships and fostering ethical attitudes among children.

Keywords: language valuation, communication, peace education, upbringing, family

Introduction

Just as peace is the foundation of humanity, the language of values can be seen as the foundation of peace and peace education. Language, as an essential element of social interaction, should not be excluded from the realm of reflection on peace

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education. This article presents the intentions, structure, and outcomes of a student competition, which is considered a useful tool for educational efforts related to peace education. The analysis draws on linguistic theory and the problem of valuation in language.

The words of Jadwiga Puzynina, a prominent researcher of value-laden language, serve as a guiding inspiration for the competition entitled “Words Have Great Power”:

The word is inflicted on man, and its essential shape depends on the human personality. But also, conversely, the formation of this personality depends on the quality of the word that man used to use. [...] Modern humanities and contemporary collective experience from various sides sustain seeing in the word (both in the sense of the linguistic code and its parts, as well as in the sense of speech, linguistic interaction) something that reaches deep into the sphere of human spirituality, which expresses and shapes this spirituality at the same time² (Puzynina 2017b, pp. 18-19).

Based on sociolinguistic assumptions, if language not only expresses thought but also shapes the way we think and perceive the world, then reflection on ethics of the word becomes essential in both education and upbringing. From the perspective of linguistic pragmatics, the following basic principles of language ethics can be identified; their observance contributes to both individual and collective well-being³.

Sender

- Should not use language that is hostile, demeaning, or hurtful.
- Should avoid lies and manipulation.
- Should speak in a way that makes the interlocutor feel safe and accepted.
- Should communicate what they believe to be true (unless silence or untruth is ethically justified).
- Should ensure clarity and accessibility, avoiding linguistic snobbery or excessive complexity.

Recipient

- Should not withdraw from dialogue or be prejudiced in reception.
- Should not be naive; must remain aware that communication partners may lie or manipulate.

² Translation mine.

³ We refer to individual well-being as a condition in which a person is not harmed or humiliated, but rather has the opportunity to live with a sense of acceptance, in favorable material circumstances and in conditions conducive to physical, intellectual, and moral development. The well-being of individuals translates into the well-being of the community as a whole (Puzynina, Pajdzinska 2017).

- Should listen in good faith, striving to understand the speaker's rationale (Puzynina, Pajdzińska 2017).

The issue of linguistic communication and word ethics is closely related to the matter of values in language. This area of reflection has developed along two theoretical lines:

1. Values function as an identifiable category of linguistic phenomena (structural theory);
2. Values permeate the entire language system (cognitive theory) (Bartmiński 2003).

In this discussion, I focus on the problem of valuation within linguistic and communicative practice. I understand linguistic action as a material manifestation of mental operations that involve valuation. The result is the acceptance or rejection of a person, object, or phenomenon based on shared criteria (Szczepaniak 2017). At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that values are ubiquitous in language:

Establishing or assigning values, introducing an axiological coefficient, is a constant component of our speaking, all speaking. I am not only speaking about facts, I am not only expressing my beliefs, I am also capturing them in certain value-laden schemes, and – how often – this value-laden factor does not have to be directly thematized, and many times I invoke it in an unintentional and unconscious way⁴ (Głowiński 1986, p. 180).

The tendency to value elements of the surrounding world is intrinsic to human cognition (Puzynina 2017a, p. 149). In line with Jerzy Bartmiński's approach: "When I speak of values, I mean what, in the light of language and culture, people accept as valuable" (Bartmiński 2003, p. 65).

Peace education is inextricably linked with ethics – and more specifically, with the ethical dimensions of language use. The educational activity described in this article is one way of raising awareness about the ethical and valuative aspects of language and promoting competence in this area.

Assumptions and objectives of the competition

The competition entitled "Words Have Great Power" was organized twice, in 2023 and 2024, by the Płock Branch of the Society for the Culture of Language and the Mazovian University in Płock, Poland. The statutory objectives of the competition include developing a love for the native language (Polish), enhancing communicative competence (including vocabulary enrichment and linguistic accuracy), improving literary skills, encouraging alternative forms of learning and personal interests, and fostering imagination, creativity, as well as artistic and aesthetic sensitivity

⁴ Translation mine.

among children and young people. A key motivation behind the competition was to raise awareness of the emotional power of language and its impact not only on communication, but also on interpersonal relationships – particularly in the context of linguistic violence.

The competition is addressed to elementary school students. Each participant selects a word they believe “has power.” This word becomes the theme of their competition entry, which varies in form depending on the student’s age group:

- Grades I–III: a self-written poem or rhyme (5–15 lines) based on the chosen word;
- Grades IV–VI: a poem (7–15 lines) or a prose piece (minimum one page) based on the chosen word;
- Grades VII–VIII: a prose piece (e.g., short story, description, journal, diary) of at least two pages, based on the chosen word.

The selection of the word is entirely up to the student. The title of the competition is not further explained by the organizers so as not to constrain the intuition and sensitivity of children. However, before launching the first edition, a series of introductory sessions titled “Words Have Great Power” was conducted with younger students (grades I–III). These sessions, held by a linguist from the Society for the Culture of Language, took the form of playful discussions. Children were invited to reflect on how words can bring joy, offer comfort – but also hurt or upset. They were introduced to simple examples and activities to help them understand that words carry power, and that this power can be used either positively or negatively. During these sessions, students eagerly shared their favorite “powerful words”.

Feedback from instructors, teachers, and parents suggests that the children easily understood the abstract idea that “words have great power”. Observations and interviews indicate that many students, upon realizing their own linguistic agency, experienced a sense of empowerment – becoming more reflective, joyful, and responsible in their communication. There was no indication of a desire to explore the “negative” power of words. On the contrary, the activities led to more conscious and ethically sensitive language use.

The competition was thus launched under these assumptions, allowing students full freedom to interpret the phrase “*words have great power*” and to select their own keywords. In their entries, some students described the process of choosing their word. For example:

W całym naszym języku jest tyle pięknych słów. Jest ich o wiele więcej, niż w życiu miałam snów!
I choć jest ich tak dużo, i o każdą wypowiedź dbam, najbardziej wyjątkowe jest dla mnie słowo „kocham”.
(Lewandowska, 2023, p. 16).

In our whole language, there are so many lovely words. Far more than I have ever dreamed of in all my nights on Earth. And though there are so many, and I cherish every one I say, the most exceptional of all is the word “I love you” – for me⁵.

Others added metatextual comments in a sense, such as.

Pies – to słowo, które zdeterminowało moją młodość i dorosłe życie. Pomogło mi zrozumieć, co jest w życiu ważne, nauczyło odpowiedzialności, opiekuńczości, punktualności, solidnego wykonywania zadań (Sęczkowska 2023, p. 40).

Dog – this is the word that shaped both my youth and adult life. It helped me understand what truly matters in life. It taught me responsibility, care, punctuality, and how to carry out tasks reliably.

Some of the submitted works also revealed the involvement of parents and teachers. The competition was intended not only to encourage students' individual reflection, but also to inspire conversations about language, ethics, and communication in family and school environments. It was assumed that parents typically assist children with creative assignments — and interviews confirmed that this also held true in the case of this competition. Teachers supported students by introducing the competition, while parents or other family members contributed to idea development or text creation. This is exemplified in the following excerpt:

Mam na imię Oliwia i mam 10 lat.

Każdego dnia, po powrocie ze szkoły, moja mama dopytuje mnie, co się działo ciekawego w szkole. Przyzwyczaiłam się do tego pytania tak bardzo, że dziś całą drogę powrotną rozmyślałam, o czym mam jej opowiedzieć. Nie pomyliłam się. Zdążyłam wejść do domu i zdjęć kurtkę i od razu usłyszałam pytanie:
– Jak tam było w szkole, córcia? – zapytała jak zwykle mama.
– Dobrze, nie ma o czym gadać – odburknęłam pod nosem i szybko próbowałam prześlizgnąć się niezauważona do swojego pokoju.
– Hola, hola, chodź tutaj i poopowiadaj mamie, jak ci minął dzień – nakazała mama i już wiedziałam, że nie odpuści, dopóki nie zacznę mówić.

5 All original student quotes are provided in Polish, followed by an English translation by the author of the article to preserve the original cultural and linguistic context.

– Co taka smutna jesteś? Co się stało? – w takich sytuacjach miałam wrażenie, że ona ma jakiś radar w oczach, bo zawsze wie, gdy coś się dzieje i jestem smutna.

– No, bo... na lekcji języka polskiego nasza pani opowiedziała nam o pewnym konkursie pt. „Słowa mają moc”. No i... – nie wiedziałam, jak mam jej wytłumaczyć, żeby zrozumiała, o co mi chodzi. – Ni bardzo rozumiem, co to znaczy, że „słowa mają moc” – dodałam.

– No i dlatego się smuczysz? – zapytała wesoło. Usiadłyśmy razem na kanapie.
– Kochanie, opowiem ci pewną historię i może wtedy zrozumiesz, jaką moc mają słowa” (Piwońska, 2023, p. 30).

My name is Olivia and I'm 10 years old. Every day when I come home, my mom asks what happened at school. I'm so used to that question that today I spent the whole way home thinking what to tell her. She asked, as always:

— So, how was school, sweetheart?

— Okay, nothing to talk about — I mumbled, trying to sneak away.

— Hey, hey! Come here and tell me about your day — Mom insisted.

— Why are you sad? What happened? [...]

— Our Polish teacher told us about a competition called Words Have Power. And [...] I don't really understand what it means that words have power.

— That's why you're sad? Come here, I'll tell you a story.

Maybe then you'll understand the power of words).

This illustrates that one of the central goals – encouraging intergenerational dialogue and reflection on language and values – was successfully achieved.

Students' vocabulary choices and educational objectives

In the first edition of the contest, 39 works were submitted. Students identified the following keywords: snowman, Christmas tree (4)⁶, good, soul, thank you, star, hippo, love, cat, hen, magic, love, night, window, gingerbread, dog (3), gifts, sorry, rose, treasure, violin, sun, dragon, Christmas (2), vacation, squirrel, winter (7).

In the 2nd edition, 46 works were submitted with the following keywords: chemistry, hamster, human, home, Kornelka, cat (2), forest, summer, magic, dreams (2), pug-dog, music, thought, dog (5), soccer, cry, waiting room, room, seasons, please, friend (2), friendship, mischief-maker, robot, family, neighbour, sun, words, respect, happiness, dad, spring (6), earth, zoo.

6 The number in parentheses indicates how many times the word occurred in a given edition of the competition as a keyword indicated by the author of the work (in cases where the same word was chosen by more than one child).

In both editions, the vast majority of the words are nouns; only a few verbs appeared. An analysis of the meanings and thematic areas reveals several regular patterns and allows us to draw the following conclusions:

1. The choice of the word has to do with the period in which the children prepared the competition works (1st edition – December, 2nd edition – March/April). Hence the numerous associations with winter, Christmas (1st edition) or spring (2nd edition). Words from these subject areas are valued positively by children, such as:

Dwa guziki ma za oczy.
Ach, mój **bałwan** jest uroczy!
(Wasilewski 2023, 49)

Two buttons are for his eyes.
Ah, my **snowman** is adorable!.

Mikołaj pamięta
Przyjdzie święty
Przyniesie **prezenty**.
(Czarnecki 2023, p. 63)

Santa remembers
The saint will come
He will bring **gifts**.

In addition, the children chose seasons, such as:

Hu, hu, ha, hu, hu, ha.
Zima wcale nie jest zła.
(Obrębska 2023, p. 56)

Hu, hu, ha, hu, hu, ha.
Winter is not bad at all.

Słońce świeci już od rana,
bądź z nami **wiosno** ukochana!
(Kacprzak 2024, p. 59)

The sun has been shining since morning,
be with us **springtime** beloved!

2. Positive associations and feelings often have to do with nature, primarily animals. In more than a dozen works, the theme was an animal, most often a dog or cat, but also a hamster, a hippo, a chicken, a squirrel, as well as a zoo full of animals.
3. In some works, positive emotion was expressed through the use of diminutives and hypocoristics, such as “Kornelka” (name), “piesek” (doggie), “skarbenku” (treasure – emotional address to a person).
4. In the groups of words presented, there were both names of values (e.g., good, happiness) and (far more often) names of value carriers – both culturally embedded and context-dependent⁷. In these cases, it was the students who performed their own valuation processes. As a result of them, positive

7 I adopt the classification after Jadwiga Puzynina (Puzynina 2017).

valuation was gained, for example, the names of seasons, the names of animals, or objects (e.g., violin, soccer).

5. Some students pointed out the ambiguity of the expression linked to the issue of valuation. The author of the work entitled „Chemistry” pointed out the problem of unhealthy food (containing „chemistry”) and the negative impact of „chemistry” on the environment (no doubt due to the refinery operating nearby):

W mieście **chemia** się unosi,
z kominów gęstą parę puszczą,
dziwne choroby do domu przynosi
i tabletki w wodzie rozpuszcza.
(Borkowska 2024, p. 5)

In the city, **chemistry** fills the air,
From the chimneys thick steam is letting
off,
strange diseases are brought home
and tablets in water dissolves.

Later, she also invoked another meaning of the word (chemistry as love between people) to end the poem with a conclusion: „Różne oblicza tej **chemii**/ w codziennym życiu nas otaczają” (Borkowska 2024, p. 5) (“Different faces of this chemistry/ in everyday life surround us”).

Another student considered “crying” to be a word that “has great power”. In her poem, the author wrote about crying resulting from a dramatic situation, sadness and loneliness, but which transforms into crying as an expression of positive feelings:

Dotyk ciepły wzruszył ją wielce,
więc znów zapłakała
tym razem
w podzięce.
(Szumska 2024, p. 29)

The warm touch touched her greatly,
so she wept again
this time
in gratitude.

It is worth noting that in cases where the word chosen by the student could carry both positive and negative valuation, the punch line of the work was affirmative, the authors emphasized the positive element.

6. The texts show that the contest was an impulse to think about ethical issues, about what is right and what is wrong and about the necessity to choose between one and the other, for example.

Uczucie wielkie, niezrozumiałe,
może zbyt duże, a może zbyt małe.
Ale w głębi **duszy** czujesz właśnie to,
że wiesz, które to dobro, a które zło.
(Sowa 2023, p. 24)

A feeling great, incomprehensible,
Maybe too big, or maybe too small.
But deep **down** you feel just that,
That you know which is good and which
is evil.

Some students wrote about a kind of daze, seeing the importance of certain positive behaviors or phenomena, drawing attention to a positive value that they had previously overlooked or took for granted, making it unworthy of attention.

7. Both editions of the competition took place during the ongoing war in Ukraine since 2022. Among the topics of reflection there was also the issue of peace. The word “peace” became a key word in one of the works. It is worth noting that the author of the text drew attention to the ambiguity of the lexeme⁸. There is no direct reference to war in the poem, but there is a very clear emphasis on how great a value peace is:

Pokój na świecie jest pragnieniem w sercach wielu ludzi,
by świat panował nad nienawiścią i gniewem.
Bez względu na to, kim jesteśmy, pokój powinien być naszym celem.

[...]

Każdy pokój to dar, nieważne, jakie ma znaczenie.

Pokój to wartość, której nie przecenisz.

Pokój istnieje, gdy każdy człowiek na Ziemi pielęgnuje go i chroni”.

(Piechna 2024, p. 41).

“World peace is a desire in the hearts of many people,

For the world to reign over hatred and anger.

No matter who we are, peace should be our goal.

[...]

Every kind of peace is a gift, no matter its meaning.

Peace is a value that you will not overestimate.

Peace exists when every person on Earth cherishes and protects it”.

Formation of ethical attitudes in the family environment

As noted above, the venture was an impulse to think about what is important and valuable not only for children, but also for the adults accompanying them. The competition was also intended to engage families – environments that have a significant impact on a child’s development. It is primarily family members, especially parents, who create behavioral and moral patterns through their reactions, attitudes, and expressions (Wiśniewska 2024). The children’s texts clearly show that the family and its members form an emotional foundation for their development. Among the key words (carrying “great good power”) were “family”,

8 According to the dictionary definition, the following meanings can be distinguished: peace – 1. between nations; 2. a room; 3. a truce; 4. spiritual; downloaded from: https://wsjp.pl/haslo/do_druku/3347/pokoj (7.01.2025).

“home”, “dad”, among others. In the content of the works, students also often referred to other family members: mom, grandma, grandpa or siblings. Reflections on love, happiness, tenderness, security, joy found references in the texts to family members, but also (it is worth noting) to friends (other children) and animals (most often dogs).

Parents, assisting their children in considering the power of words, told them stories from their lives. And students sometimes wove these stories into their contest entries, such as:

Mama skończyła swą opowieść i wtedy wszystko zrozumiałem! Przecież moja mama ma na imię Małgorzata! Że też od razu nie wpadłem na to! Okazało się, że dziewczynki z jej opowieści są przyjaciółkami do dziś. Zrobiło mi się wstyd. Aż nie chcę myśleć, co czuła mała Gosia, kiedy koleżanki się z niej naśmiewały. Byłem bliski płaczu... (Podolski 2024, p. 8).

Mom finished her story and then I understood everything! After all, my mother's name is Margaret! I can't believe I didn't realize it right away! It turned out that the girls from her story are friends to this day. It made me feel ashamed. And I don't want to think what little Gosia felt when her friends made fun of her. I was close to tears...

The mother of the author of the competition paper, recalling her own negative childhood experiences (rejection by female classmates), evoked strong emotions in her son: sympathy towards little Gosia (now his mother) and a new student in the class who was negatively evaluated and rejected because of his cheap and damaged clothes. As a result of a conversation with his mother, the author of the work befriended the initially rejected classmate. Also worth noting is the boy's reflection on communication between children: “Because of this, two girls laughed at her. Basia and Kasia teased her, saying, for example: “Oh, Gosia poor thing is going” (Podolski 2024, p. 7).

In their works, students often referred to family experiences, quoted conversations, emphasized how important family is to them and how good people their parents or grandparents are, for example:

Kiedy zrobię coś głupiego lub kiedy wali mi się świat, pojawia się nie wiadomo skąd. Mój TATA. To osoba, na której zawsze mogę polegać, wiem, że zawsze mogę na niego liczyć i że w każdej sytuacji mi pomoże. Jest moim najlepszym przyjacielem. Jest niesamowitym i bardzo mądrym człowiekiem. Godzinami mogę słuchać opowiadanych przez niego historii. Opowiada mi o niesamowitych przygodach, zabiera na wycieczki. Pokazuje mi świat. To on nauczył mnie kochać i przekonał, że każdy człowiek zasługuje na szacunek (Sowińska 2024, p. 56).

When I do something stupid or when my world collapses, he appears out of nowhere. My **DAD**. He is a person I can always rely on, I know that I can always count on him and that he will help me in any situation. He is my best friend. He is an amazing and very wise man. I can listen for hours to the stories he tells. He tells me about amazing adventures, takes me on trips. He shows me the world. He is the one who taught me to love and convinced me that every person deserves respect.

Consequently, students – both younger children and teenagers – expressed a desire to emulate role models such as their father or grandfather. It is worth noting that this is the realization of a rather traditional model of authority, which today is increasingly being replaced by figures created by the media (Grudzień 2023).

Conclusions

Across the two editions of the competition “Words Have Great Power”, a total of 85 student entries were collected. This indicates that the initiative – aimed at fostering communicative competence and raising awareness about the ethical impact of language – engaged several hundred individuals, including both students and members of their immediate environment. The reflections stimulated by the competition clearly addressed not only linguistic skills but also moral and ethical sensitivity.

Notably, the contest inspired reflection not only among children but also among the adults accompanying them. On numerous occasions, it served as a catalyst for meaningful conversations and shared educational experiences, strengthening intergenerational relationships and promoting ethical attitudes.

Although the competition encouraged participants to explore words with either positive or negative emotional valence, students consistently selected words associated with “good power”. While choosing negatively connoted words could have led to valuable critical reflection, participants overwhelmingly gravitated toward positive values and emotions. Even in cases where the chosen words had ambivalent meanings, students emphasized affirmative dimensions in their final interpretations.

The contest also encouraged creative expression. Each edition concluded with the publication of a book compiling all submitted entries, which further extended the pedagogical impact of the initiative. This publication process – from the announcement of the competition to the collection and assessment of works, the award ceremony, and the presentation of the printed book – unfolds over the course of a full year. As a result, the engagement with the theme of the “power of words” is sustained and meaningful.

The third edition of the competition is planned for 2025. The award ceremony will be accompanied by the presentation of the latest student anthology and a series

of workshops for students, parents, and teachers. These events will continue to support the contest's overarching aim: to foster ethical communication, deepen linguistic awareness, and strengthen the educational partnership between children and adults.

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