

## The emotional dimension of language propaganda in Polish children's songs

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Małgorzata Pilecka

Ateneum Academy in Gdańsk, Poland; [m.pilecka@ateneum.edu.pl](mailto:m.pilecka@ateneum.edu.pl)

### Abstract

*The aim of this article is to show the results of the pedagogical qualitative research on the emotional dimension of language propaganda in Polish children's songs. As a text of culture, children's songs are both carriers and transmitters of the linguistic image of the world, and for this reason they can possibly serve as a tool for linguistic and ideological manipulation. By applying the method of a qualitative discourse analysis, the author has studied 136 contemporary music pieces, paying attention both on their text and melodic layers. The gathered data revealed that many of the analysed songs contain words, phrases and other linguistic means typical for propaganda text. The characteristic of such texts developed by various researchers was used to distinguish the features of language and melody that could indicate the manipulative nature of the message transmitted by the songs.*

**Keywords:** children's songs, linguistic worldview, language propaganda

### Introduction

The value of the children's songs in the education of the youngest children is undebatable, as such pieces are a universal didactic and therapeutic tool (Przychodzińska 1989, Suświłło 2001, Campbell, Wiggins 2013, Walton 2014). They are used, among others, as the basis of early music education, as a form of integration and activation of a group or as a means of supporting the linguistic development of a child, also while teaching the foreign language.

The offer of children's songs available in various sources is very rich. On the market one may obtain numerous thematic songbooks for children, CDs and digital collections of the children's music. The children often sing the songs in nursery schools, in kindergartens and at school, during the summer camps and at the scout gatherings. Such pieces are also an important element of movie and theatrical soundtracks for children. It can therefore be said that a children's song is a relatively constant element of childhood.

However, it should be noted that a children's song, like any other text of culture, is also a carrier of specific meanings and, as such, of **the linguistic worldview**, meant as "a set of judgments recorded in language" (Bartmiński 1999: 103). Created and selected for children by the adult intermediaries, children's songs reflect and, at the same time, propagate certain ways of thinking about the world. It can even be said that by teaching children the lyrics of a song by heart, adults literally "put in the children's mouth" specific words, sentences, statements and assessments. In this sense, a children's song can become a tool of ideological or/and political manipulation, or even propaganda. Some researchers even pay attention to the fact that children's songs were actually used to support the totalitarian regimes of the XX century, such as the Nazi Germany (Meyer 1993, Peterson 2014), the Soviet Union (Kelly 2004), Japan (Manabe 2013) or North Korea (Myers 2011). Therefore, it is worth remarking, what type of content reaches young audiences through such pieces.

### Theoretical background

In order to state, whether a particular children's song belongs to the category of propaganda, one should firstly recognise the definitions of this term and the scientific attitudes towards it. *Propaganda* as a scientific concept occurs in various disciplines, such as: sociology, social psychology, political studies, marketing, history or linguistics. It is generally meant as *spreading some ideas*, however many researchers maintain that propaganda itself is never a neutral action – they associate it with such terms as: *manipulation, brainwash or falsification of the facts* (Ellul 1972, Pratkanis & Aronson 2003, Patrick 2015). It is also worth mentioning that the negative connotations of *propaganda* are rather common in a public discourse, which may be explained by the fact that propaganda actions played a crucial role in justifying the terror of the European totalitarian regimes in the XX century, such as the Soviet Union, the Nazi Germany or the Fascist Italy (Thomson 2001, Żyromski 2015). For the Polish nation the painful experiences surrounding propaganda refer not only to the distant past events of Holocaust, Nazi concentration camps or the ghettos, but also to the newer history of the Polish People's Republic, the so called PRL (1945-1989), when almost every aspect of life used to be influenced by political propaganda and censorship.

Taking all these arguments into account, a Polish author Irena Kamińska-Szmaj offers the dual meaning of the term *propaganda*: a wider and a narrower one. The wider definition identifies propaganda with **propagating** the ideas, which is directed to shape someone's opinions, attitudes and behaviours. However, in its narrower sense propaganda should be understood as **an intentional (political or ideological) manipulation** (Kamińska-Szmaj 2004: 17-18).

Promoting the ideas demands the effective communication between the sender and the receiver of the message. That is why the main tool of propaganda is undoubtedly the **language**, both in its verbal and textual aspect. The researchers dealing with the matter of propaganda noticed that the propaganda texts have a special structure and contain particular words and phrases. For this reason they may be easily distinguished among others texts. Jerzy Bralczyk underlines that the language of propaganda tends to be highly conventional or even "fossilized", which means that certain linguistic means repeat constantly in various propaganda texts (Bralczyk 2007: 30). In order to fulfil its persuasive function, the propaganda message has to be clear, unequivocal and excluding the possibility of any discussions or negotiations. This clarity of the text, however – as Piotr Dela emphasises – refers not only to using rather simple, uncomplicated words and phrases, but also to the common experience of the receivers and to the (socio-political-cultural-economic) context they live in (Dela 2019: 84).

What is more, the authors agreeably claim that the **emotional component** is crucial for the propaganda to succeed. It reveals itself above all in the used vocabulary and grammar structures, but also in the so called *propaganda tricks* – the linguistic techniques intended to manipulate the listeners.

For instance, J. Bralczyk names various linguistic means, which – if included into a propaganda text – may strongly influence the emotions of the receivers. Among them one may distinguish, e.g. (1) the generalisations and the universalisation (*everybody, always, never*), (2) the diminutives, (3) the euphemisms, and (4) the superlatives (*the best, the richest*) (Bralczyk 2007: 187). He also emphasises the major role of the constant connection between the sender and the receiver of the propaganda text, which may be either physical (such as eye-contact, close distance, physical touch), or verbal, signaled by introducing the speaking subject in the 1st person. Singular (I) or by a so called *inclusivus* – a specific form of a subject *we*, covering both the propagandist and the listeners of the message, e. g. *we all think, we are going to, our major plan is* etc. (Bralczyk 2007: 55).

Another linguistic means typical for the propaganda texts are slogans and clichés. Slogans might be defined as emphatic, short, stylistically expressive phrases that are intended to persuade someone to do something or to promote a specific opinion and attitude (Reboul 1980: 307). The German word for *slogan* is *Schlagwort*, which literally means: "a word that hits" (Reboul 1980: 310). The slogans are usually constructed by modal verbs: as imperatives (*you must, we have to*), or as calls (*let's go, let's do*

it). They also contain the words and phrases that are meant to evoke strong feelings in the receivers – the so called *key-words*, such as: *nation, family, freedom, solidarity* etc. (Bralczyk 2007: 158-159).

Another linguistic means typical for propaganda text is a **cliché**. As Josef P. Stern explains, it is a “masking simplification of the description features” (Stern 1980: 282). The major role of it is to present a selective (and, for this reason, to some extent falsified) image of someone or something. The clichés have their sources in the stereotypes functioning in the particular group of people, and therefore, they are emotionally charged. The clichés successfully help to present the world as simple, sensible and well-organised, and such a vision – as Hanna Arendt stresses – is very attractive for the audience, as the real world appears to be a complete opposite of it (Arendt 1986: 25).

The researchers of the propaganda text notice its tendency to infantilisation and/or to an exaggerated pathos, that reveal themselves in some **propaganda tricks**:

- *Glittering generality*: drawing the people’s attention to the similarities and simultaneously ignoring the differences between the presented items or ideas.
- *Plain folks*: using the vocabulary and the way of speaking typical for the group of the potential recipients in order to create a deep emotional bond between the propagandist and the audience.
- *Name-calling*: giving blunt nicknames to different people (or groups of people) in order to divide the society into opposing groups of the *fellows* and the *strangers*.
- *Transfer*: using authority or transferring prestige from one case to another, even if there is a marginal connection between them (Magnuson-Martinson 1998: 609-613).

To conclude, the propaganda text contains specific words, phrases and word combinations that are intended to influence the opinions, attitudes and/or behaviours of its receivers. The aspect that connects together all of the above-mentioned linguistic means is their **high emotional charge**. Combined together, they create **astory**: one-sided, black-and-white, yet internally consistent, believable and highly attractive narrative about world (Pisarek 2014: 22-25). It is also not free from pathos, which is intended to charm or even “seduce” the recipient (Arendt 1986: 25). Through such vision, the propagandist strives for evoking strong feelings in the audience, such as: rage, mobilisation, agitation or reflection.

Because of the fact that a children song is both a textual, and a musical piece, one should notice that the melody may increase the propaganda potential of its contents (Velasco-Pufleau 2014: 3). According to Olivier Thomson, the most effective are these melodies that provoke the deepest emotions in the listeners, such as: mobilisation, agitation or reflection (Thomson 2001: 39). Among them, one may name, e.g. march, anthem or religious or patriotic canto, as they all base on pathos and, therefore, might have an immense impact on the receivers’ emotions.

## Methodology

The presented results are an extract from a broader pedagogical research project basing on the following subject matter: **What is the characteristics of the social world presented by the Polish children’s songs?** In order to receive an answer for the main research problem, the author formulated three supporting questions: (1) **What** people, places, behaviours, relationships and values are presented in the studied songs? (2) **How** are they presented? (By what linguistic and musical means?) (3) **What for** are they presented? (What is the aim of their authors? What emotions, attitudes and behaviours are they going to provoke in the receivers?). In this article the author focuses only on the second research question, which is: *How (by what means) are various parts of the social world presented in the children’s songs?* Above all, it has been studied, whether the gathered songs contain any means typical for the propaganda texts.

The author conducted a qualitative and interpretative study of 136 contemporary Polish songs for pre-schoolers and early education students, using the method of a **discourse analysis** (Miles & Huberman 2000, Silverman 2008). The selection of the sample was purposeful, taking into account the

following criteria: (1) the broadly understood social theme of the songs (the lyrics concerning various aspects of the social world, such as: people, places, behaviours, relationships and values), and (2) the time of their creation – from the so-called political breakthrough in Poland, to 2021, with the year 1985 as the demarcation line. Such a time range has been set because the concept of "propaganda" is often associated with a totalitarian or authoritarian political system, in Poland especially with the period of the Polish People's Republic (1945-1989). However, so far, there have been few studies on the manifestations of propaganda in recent cultural texts for children, created and distributed in systems constructed in accordance with the liberal-democratic values. For this reason, this issue seems to be worth being examined.

The analysis included primarily the textual layer of the pieces due to the main subject of the research, which was the linguistic worldview (of the social world). In order to gather and to organize the data, the author used some qualitative data analysis techniques, characterised by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman (Miles & Huberman 2000: 253–260), such as: (1) noticing patterns and schemes, (2) grouping the meanings and (3) creating metaphors. Subsequently, bearing in mind that the song is "a text and musical piece" (Lipiec 2017: 11), the author focused to some extent on the musical layer, treating this issue, however, as supplementary.

### Results and discussion

The research has shown that many of the contemporary Polish children's songs contain various means typical for a propaganda text. As Jolanta Sławek claims, "propaganda texts are characterized by both an emotional impact (impressive and expressive function) and an intellectual impact (communicative function), although the impressive function (aimed at influencing the recipient) dominates here" (Sławek 2007: 66). All of these aspects reflect in the linguistic means used in propaganda texts. Within the analysed songs, one may recognise the following means typical for the **propagandatexts**:

- **Introducing the speaking subject in the 1st person. singular (I):**  
In many examined pieces this grammar form determines the child's perspective, blurring the boundary between the sender and the recipient of the message. If the content of the song is consistent with the recipient's authentic experiences and feelings, then the first-person narrative creates conditions for the child's free expression. However, if certain emotions, attitudes or behaviours are imposed on the recipient (e.g. *I like school – P108<sup>4</sup>*), then it can be perceived as propaganda means.
- **Introducing the speaking subject in the 1st person. plural (we):**  
This verb form highlights the integrative and expressive function of the song, especially when it is used in a playful way, e.g. *we sing, jump, play*. The *we*-perspective often helps to build a positive atmosphere in the group and encourages the recipients to identify with it. However, just like the use of the speaking subject in the 1st person (singular), it may also have propaganda purposes, if it involves "putting words into the mouths" of children, e.g. *Miss, Miss [the teacher], we like you so much that when you're not with us, even a lollipop loses its taste (P104)*. The form of the speaking subject in the 1st pers. plural is also crucial in presenting the *us-them* opposition, which is discussed below.
- **Introducing a clear distinction between *us* and *them*:**

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<sup>4</sup>The designations of the individual songs and quotations coming from them (P1, P33, P104 etc.) correspond to the numbering used in the 136-element catalogue of the analyzed songs (research data). The list of the songs quoted in this article has been attached to the bibliography.

This linguistic trick involves attributing positive traits to representatives of one group (our own, native: *us*), and the negative ones – to another (*them*). In the collection of propaganda techniques, this trick is called "name calling" (Magnuson-Martinson 1998: 609-613). The result of such action is to identify the recipient of the message with the category *we*, as well as showing specific social groups as opposed to one another. This type of action refers to the well-known war strategy *divide et impera* (*divide and rule*), because the quarrelling, polarized groups are vulnerable to the outside influence. In several of the examined children's songs, one may find a number of examples of this means, e.g.: *The clear kids have no drawbacks, / they don't care for the dirty ones* (P123); *The cry-babies are not suitable for us!* (P20).

- **Using the means typical for the children's language or considered as such:**

The condition for the effective persuasion is the communication between the sender and the recipient of the message. Taking into account that the authors of the studied songs are adults, building understanding here is based on "sharing" the linguistic code between the adult sender and the young recipient. In the collected research material, one may notice two tendencies of the songs' authors: (1) to reproduce the original children's style of speaking and (2) to oversimplify (infantilize) the language used in the song.

Reproducing the original children's language includes using the funny nicknames, phrases typical for the common language, exclamations or onomatopoeias. In some pieces there are also some words and phrases coming from the teenagers' style of speaking. The use of such linguistic means may prove that the author understands the specificity of the children's language and shows deep acceptance of their way of communicating. However, there is a risk that phrases from children's or youth's colloquial language used in the lyrics will quickly become outdated and incomprehensible for the audience, or even cause a sense of embarrassment among the recipients.

Linguistic infantilisation does not mean using the real children's language, but a language considered by songwriters to be childish. The clearest manifestation of this is the accumulation of diminutives, sometimes even at the expense of linguistic correctness. Such a linguistic approach could be considered adequate in contact with the youngest recipients of songs, because, similarly to the so-called "baby talk", it is intended to express tenderness towards the child. However, the overuse of diminutives may result in the (not necessarily conscious) patronizing attitude of the authors towards the young recipient. In this sense, infantilizing the audience can be considered as a means of propaganda, as they are treated as a "plain folks" (Magnuson-Martinson 1998: 609-613).

- **Using the modal verbs:**

In the songs containing various types of rules, tips or instructions (concerning, for example, good manners or the principles of healthy eating), one can find many fragments in which the persuasive nature of modal verbs is used, both in the personal form (*you* – singular and plural), as well as impersonal, e.g. *When the red [light] turns on (...) / you have to wait, you can't rush here* (P59); *you must always listen to your mother* (P19); *You have to wash yourself!* (P63). The propaganda potential of this linguistic structure depends on the context in which it appears, as well as whether the suggestions (*you can*), orders (*you must, have to, should*) and prohibitions (*you mustn't*) occurring in the songs are justified in any way. If the song promotes health and safety of a child, and the author of the song refers to rational arguments, we can talk about the use of modal verbs to **propagate** (not: spreading propaganda) specific attitudes and behaviours, e.g.: *Who wants to enjoy a good health / and to have a lot of strength, / they must eat vegetables and fruits / apart from sweets* (P65).

- **Using the slogans:**

In the collected research material, several types of slogan expressions can be identified. Some of them resemble a moral, e.g. *You should always listen to your mother (P19); Be obliging and loving, / and you will always be liked (P13)*. The others bring to mind the advertisements, e.g. *We have such a beautiful smile / Because we take care of our teeth! (P62)*. There are also such phrases that use the persuasive power of the so-called "keywords", e.g. *Poland is our homeland (P128); kindergarten is the second home (P43)*. However, it is worth mentioning that the slogans used in the examined songs often transmit the clear propaganda message, but they can also become a tool of promoting positive attitudes and behaviours (e.g. songs motivating the children to take care of their health). In such cases, it is rather *propagating* than propaganda.

- **Using the clichés:**

The *clichés* base on the stereotypes, which means that the recipient receives only a fragmentary, and therefore false, description of reality. In the research material, one can observe the use of such phrases, especially in the portraits of particular characters, e.g. the mothers (*Mother has been busy in the kitchen since the morning - P29; [mother] cleans the kitchen and cooks dinner - P132*). Ignoring the individuality of the mothers, using attributes (e.g. *apron, kitchen*), as well as the strong emotional content of the message – all this contributes to the *cliché*. It should be emphasized, however, that not all elements of the social world presented in the research material are *cliché*. For example, the image of a grandmother shimmers with various shades of meaning: from the model of a traditional grandmother (*she cooks my pudding and (...) feeds me with a spoon - P1*) to the figure of a modern, "emancipated" grandmother (*She swims and roller skates, / better than many boys. / Our modern grandmother / exercises aerobics with us – P26*).

- **Using the hyperboles:**

In many of the examined songs one may find hyperboles (exaggerations), whose main purpose is to trigger strong – positive or negative emotions in the audience. Hyperbolization manifests itself in: (1) overusing the superlatives and (2) exaggerated combinations of words.

In various pieces some elements of the social world are characterised by the superlatives, e.g. *the nicest, the best, the most beautiful*. While they do not concern objective issues - facts (e.g. *The Great Wall is the longest structure in the world - P134*), they have a strong propaganda potential, because they express a clear value judgment that imposes a deep emotional attitude towards objects, characters, behaviours or phenomena. Statements of this type leave no room for discussion. At the same time, they harmonize with the *us-them* divisions, because if someone or something is the best, it means that the others must be worse than them, e.g. *My country is the best! (P124)*.

In many of the studied songs there are combinations of words that individually have a completely different meaning, but when put into one phrase they create a new quality. Sometimes this action even resembles a propaganda technique called "transfer", which involves identifying two completely different issues in order to manipulate the recipient's emotions (Magnuson-Martinson 1998: 609-613). Examples include the following quotations from songs: *Instead of mom, I have a teacher here (P43)* - identifying the teacher with the person closest to the child (parent); *Kindergarten is the second home (P43)* - identifying an educational institution with a child's family home.

- **Using the universalizing expressions (generalisations):**

In the collected research material, this linguistic means occurs very often, e.g. *And Sunday, you know, all children love / just like our teacher, they all love her (P14); My grandma is never bored at home (P1); Every child knows this (P123)*. According to the definition of a song as such, the lyrics may present a generalized vision of the world, which results primarily in the brief form of

these songs, as well as in the universality of the message. However, the accumulation of universalizing expressions in songs clearly resembles a propaganda technique called "glittering generality", which refers to groundlessly considering something as a universally applicable rule (Magnuson-Martinson 1998: 609-613).

Both groups of linguistic means – basing on impressive and expressive function of language – play a major role in constructing the propaganda sense of the studied songs. In the centre of the propaganda message there is content presenting **a selective, fragmentary, stereotypical and strongly emotionally charged image of the social world**. It does not mean, however, that every children's song counts among the propaganda texts. Many of them contain only the selected means typical for the propaganda texts, or such means are used in them in non-manipulative context.

### **Propaganda potential of melodic layer**

The melody of a song fulfils an important task: by influencing the emotions and musical sensitivity of the recipient, it creates the mood of the song, and thus can strengthen or weaken its verbal meaning. This role is particularly important in the case of songs belonging to the group of propaganda texts.

Among those songs, which are considered by the author as resembling propaganda texts, there are, above all, pieces basing on the aesthetics of **military and/or patriotic canto**. They are characterized by: (1) a marching rhythm, the aim of which is to evoke enthusiasm and motivate the singers to action, and (2) a relatively simple and repeatable, single-voice melody line, which allows to be quickly learned and sung by a group of people (children).

But not only marching melodies may increase the propaganda potential of the children's songs. **Musical pathos** is equally often used, manifesting itself in the solemnity of the melody. The tempo of these songs is much slower than that of marching pieces, which gives them a dignified character. Their musical aesthetics resemble religious songs or some slower patriotic songs (such as anthem).

In both cases – march-based melody and pathetic melody – the melodic layer undoubtedly **strengthens** the (propaganda) message contained in the songs. A melody aimed at evoking specific emotional states may facilitate the recipient's identification with the content of the song, which is crucial for propaganda to be successful.

Nevertheless, the musical layer might also **weaken** its propaganda verbal sense, if it bases on popular and/or dance music, because the rhythmic and dynamic melody effectively distracts the recipients' attention from the lyrics. It may be said that if the melody lowers the pathos of the verbal content and awakes in the receivers the emotions like joy, fun or relaxation, it may even "knock the gun out of propaganda's hand". This comparison appears justified, as O. Reboul identifies applying the propaganda techniques with using a weapon (Reboul 1980).

In the catalogue of the studied songs the author found both the pieces that represent exemplary propaganda texts, in which both layers – verbal and melodic – are intended to have a strong effect on the recipients, as well as the songs that contain only selected propaganda means or even do not contain them at all.

### **Conclusions**

The collected research material included numerous children's songs that contain the means typical for a propaganda text, both in their linguistic and musical layers. The majority of them stimulate the **emotions** of the receivers, as they provoke particular feelings and attitudes towards the presented people, places, behaviours, relationships and values.

However, the mere fact of the appearance of the propaganda means and tricks in the studied pieces does not determine the propaganda nature of these songs. To describe a given song as propaganda text, one should look at the content it contains: at the linguistic and musical means, by which the message is constructed, but also – or perhaps above all – whether the certain vision of the world repeats in various

songs. The propaganda nature of the linguistic image of the social world will be expressed through the repetition of the same (or similar): biased, selective and unified – and for this reason **falsified** (Stern 1980) – vision of the world in a larger number of pieces.

Taking into account, that the studied songs are directed mostly to children – to young, immature people, who do not yet have the tools to defend themselves from propaganda, imposing such a vision may be perceived as ethically questionable.

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### The quoted children's songs

- P1 – *Budyń [The Pudding]*, lyrics and music by D. & K. Jagiełło (2019)
- P13 – *Czarodziejskie słowa [The magical words]*, lyrics and music by T. Wywrocki (2006)
- P14 – *Dzień Nauczyciela [The Teacher's Day]*, lyrics and music by T. Wywrocki (2006)
- P19 – *Była sobie żabka mała [There was once a little frog]*, lyrics by A. Grabowski, music by K. Kwiatkowska (2019)
- P20 – *Jestem sobie przedszkolaczek [I'm a little preschooler]*, lyrics and music by M. Terlikowska (2015)
- P26 – *Naszanowoczesna babcia [Our modern grandma]*, lyrics by A. Grabowski, music by K. Marzec (2000)
- P29 – *Mama zadumana [The thoughtful mother]*, lyrics by E. Zawistowska, music by S. Marciniak (2020)
- P43 – *Przedszkole – drugi dom [Preschool – the second home]*, the song belongs to the collection entitled “Hity Maluszka” (2011)
- P59 – *Światła drogowe [Traffic lights]*, lyrics by J. Delwo, music by S. Szudrowicz (2021)
- P62 – *Łazienkowa gimnastyka [The bathroom gymnastics]*, the song belongs to the collection entitled “Czyściochowe Piosenki” (2021)
- P63 – *Piosenka kąpielowa [The bathing song]*, the song belongs to the collection entitled “Dziecięce przeboje” (2013)
- P65 – *Cukierki, cukierki [Candy, Candy]*, lyrics and music by K. Klich (2016)
- P104 – *Nasza Pani jest kochana [Our dear teacher]*, lyrics by B. Lewandowska, music by F. Leszczyńska (2008)
- P108 – *Piosenka o szkole [The school song]*, lyrics and music by J. Kobyliński (2014)
- P123 – *Świnki trzy [The three pigs]*, the song belongs to the collection entitled “Hity Przedszkolaka 1” (2010)
- P124 – *Mój kraj jest naj! [My country is the best!]*, lyrics and music by A. Kopacz (2019)
- P128 – *Piosenka o Unii Europejskiej [The UE song]*, lyrics and music by J. Kucharczyk (2020)
- P132 – *Kocham moją mamę [I love my mum]*, the song belongs to the collection entitled “Hity Przedszkolaka 1” (2010)
- P134 – *W wielkich Chinach [In the great China]*, the song belongs to the collection entitled “Bawimy, Uczymy, Śpiewamy – Poznajemy Świat” (2013)