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Formative utterances in the family in the light of Janusz Korczak's pedagogical articles and contemporary dialogues between parents and children

Wypowiedzi formujące w rodzinie w świetle artykułów pedagogicznych Janusza Korczaka i współczesnych dialogów rodziców z dziećmi

KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

linguistic communication, formative statements, family, upbringing in the family, Janusz Korczak The article presents selected formative statements in the family excerpted from Janusz Korczak's texts and from contemporary dialogues between parents and children, in order to sensitize them to the importance of the language they use in communicating with their daughters and sons and to encourage researchers dealing with linguistic pragmatics to undertake broader analyses on this issue. The research question is: What is the structure and semantics of formative statements in the family as seen from a historical and contemporary perspective? The method used is a semantic and a pragmatic analysis of an old scientific text and contemporary statements of users of our language, conducted from the angle of family sciences as a scientific discipline. Negative formative statements that predominate in the analyzed material are an expression of parental control over the actions of their son or daughter, their children's feelings or their negative assessment, because the deep structure of these linguistic constructions hides violence due to their strong manipulation potential. Positive formative statements give children the strength to act and are a source of encouragement and support.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

komunikacja językowa, wypowiedzi formujące, rodzina, wychowanie w rodzinie, Janusz Korczak

W artykule zostały zaprezentowane wybrane wypowiedzi formujące w rodzinie wyekscerpowane z tekstów Janusza Korczaka oraz ze współczesnych dialogów rodziców z dziećmi. Artykuł ma na celu uwrażliwienie rodziców na wagę języka, jakiego używają w procesie komunikowania się ze swoimi córkami i synami oraz zachęcić badaczy zajmujących się pragmatyką językową do podjęcia szerszych analiz dotyczących tego zagadnienia. Problem badawczy artykułu mieści się w obrębie pytania: Jaka jest struktura i semantyka wypowiedzi formujących w rodzinie z perspektywy historycznej i współczesnej? Metoda wykorzystana w pracy to analiza semantyczna i pragmatyczna wypowiedzi użytkowników języka zawartych w tekście naukowym z pierwszej połowy XX wieku oraz współczesnych wypowiedzi prowadzona z perspektywy nauk o rodzinie jako dyscypliny naukowej. Wypowiedzi formujące o charakterze negatywnym, które przeważają w analizowanym materiale, są wyrazem kontroli rodzicielskiej odnoszącej się do działania syna lub córki. Dowodzą negatywnej oceny zachowań dzieci, ponieważ w głębokiej strukturze tych konstrukcji językowych kryje się przemoc, na co wskazuje tkwiący w nich silny potencjał manipulacyjny. Wypowiedzi formujące o charakterze pozytywnym dają dzieciom siłę do działania, są źródłem otuchy i wsparcia.

Introduction

The oeuvre of Henryk Goldszmit (known under the pseudonym Janusz Korczak) (1878?–1942), an outstanding Jewish-Polish theoretician and practitioner of pedagogy, includes more than 20 children's books written in Polish, dozens of acclaimed treatises and articles on education, more than 1,000 journalistic texts, many letters, as well as the *Diary*, which was written in the ghetto¹ This body of work has been studied by educators, psychologists, sociologists and members of other sciences.² Korczak's writings abound in rich content, which is also interesting from the viewpoint of linguistics. An analysis of Korczak's pedagogical works shows that he carried out a methodical study of language, as can be evidenced by the many statements in his writings that were borrowed from the everyday speech of his contemporaries, as well

¹ The last of the 15 volumes of J. Korczak's *Works* has been published. The editorial team of the *Works* consists of Hanna Kirchner, Marta Ciesielska, the late Aleksander Lewin and Stefan Woloszyn. Volumes 1 through 10 and 12 were published by Oficyna Wydawnicza Latona, the others by the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. A final volume containing indexes is in preparation.

² The collection of studies devoted to the life and achievements of the great educator is very extensive. The main part of the data is contained in the bibliographic compilations, cf. Bronikowska, 1978; Falkowska, 1989; Lewin, 1985.

as by descriptions of non-verbal behavior of children and adults (cf. Sieradzka-Baziur, 2022). In this essay, I will discuss an issue that has never become the subject of broader scientific inquiry, namely, the semantics of selected statements of parents addressed to children found in the journalistic texts of the great pedagogue, and compare these linguistic constructions with contemporary expressions of parents.

Methodological assumptions

Andrzej de Tchorzewski wrote that the family is "a special and unique social entity, whose essence is its humanistic character that is determined by the uniqueness of the subjects involved" (2015, p. 25). Over the centuries, it has undergone many transformations, influenced by socio-economic and cultural processes. The family is a structure, and the one thing that is invariable in it is the interaction of its members. One of its dimensions is the upbringing process, i.e. a series of actions that parents undertake for the comprehensive development of their son or daughter, enriching their personality, supporting them in finding the meaning of life, helping them in self-fulfillment, and preparing them for life in society. One of the means of educational influence is the language that parents use, which can be positively or negatively charged.

This article reports on selected formative statements used by parents in the early 20th century. They are compared with semantically corresponding linguistic constructions used at the beginning of the 21st century, in order to raise parents' awareness of the importance of the language they use in communicating with their daughters and sons, and to encourage researchers working in the field of linguistic pragmatics to take up a broader analysis of this issue. The research problem falls within the question: what is the structure and semantics of formative statements in the family as seen from a historical and contemporary perspective? The methodology is a semantic and pragmatic analysis of the statements of language users found in pedagogical texts from the first half of the 20th century and contemporary statements that is carried out from the angle of family sciences as an academic discipline.

The materials used in my study are based on pedagogical texts included in the thirteenth volume of Korczak's *Works* (2017) and formative statements used contemporaneously. The volume I have analyzed, which contains Korczak's publications from 1919–1939, includes writings from periodical publications, published in Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish, as well as several essays that were published as compact publications. Foreign-language texts have been provided in Polish translation (cf. Cichy, 2017, p. 378). The subject matter of the articles included in this collection revolves around issues that mainly relate to child care, parenting – and to a small extent also to child education. The collection includes 59 texts previously published in educational

journals and other periodical publications, such as *Głos Nauczycielski*, *Opieka nad Dzieckiem*, *Rocznik Pedagogiczny*, *Dziecko*, *Dziecko i Matka* and many others. The subject of my analysis is 36 pedagogical articles from the analyzed volume that Korczak wrote originally in Polish, as we examine linguistic constructions typical of the Polish language of the early 20th century.

The present-day research material is formative utterances taken from everyday speech, which I obtained during a survey conducted among students at Ignatianum University in Krakow in 2023. A complementary source of data is recent works relating, for example, to parent-child communication, which have included language statements that influence human behavior (Kozak and Wasilewski, 2022; Majewska, 2023).

Formative statements as a way of influencing human behavior

Language plays a key role in cognitive, emotional and spiritual development; it is a reflection of the speaker's way of seeing the world, as well as the speaker's self, being not only the most perfect tool for communication, but also a powerful tool for action. One of its functions is an imperative function (referred to as appellative, exhortative, or persuasive), which involves the use of commands, orders, prohibitions, appeals, calls, instructions, advice, requests, threats, and similar speech acts in order to induce the recipient to behave as desired by the sender. This issue, according to Irena Szczepankowska, falls within the study of linguistic pragmatics (pragmalinguistics), a branch of research in linguistics that has been developing since the 1970s in the wake of the shift of linguistic interest from intra-linguistic relations to relations between a language and its users. The focus of linguistic pragmatics is the linguistic intentions of speakers and the linguistic devices used to achieve them. Pragmalinguists dealing with this topic study such communicative goals of users as informing, expressing feelings, evaluating phenomena, creating reality, advertising things and activities, manipulating audiences, performing acts of politeness (i.e. thanking, apologizing, greeting and many others; cf. Szczepankowska, 2011, pp. 114–115, also cf. Levinson, 2010; Kalisz, 1993). Pragmalinguistic studies also cover statements made by parents and caregivers to children for the purpose of shaping their character by influencing their behavior. I refer to these as formative utterances³ and divide them into two groups:

(1) Positive formative statements, e.g. You're doing great! Family must stick together!

³ The basis for the creation of the term "formative statements" is the expression "formative years" (Li, 2024).

(2) Negative formative statements, e.g. Don't you dare! Boys don't cry! Damn these children!

What distinguishes formative statements in the family setting is that they are repetitive. They are recalled from memory with phrases such as: Mom always said that... Dad always said that... or similar. These repeated statements shape a person's character and, as Agnieszka Kozak and Jacek Wasilewski write, "create for us patterns of thinking and acting which we then unconsciously carry through life" (2022, p. 8). The authors stated that this happens because:

The word creates and shapes us when we are at our most sensitive and vulnerable. Words give us identity, it is with words that we invest a person either with strength and self-esteem, or with social expectations that come from the fear of being judged. It is with words that we invest a person with either the armor to fight or the ease of action, or with the crippling fear. A fear that freezes the will to act, to grow, to discover new things. What we say to a child gives him or her an identity, which is a reservoir they will use in adulthood (Kozak and Wasilewski, 2022, p. 8).

Formative statements in Janusz Korczak's texts and contemporary formative statements

The analyzed pedagogical articles by Korczak from 1919–1939 contain authentic, original statements that he borrowed from live speech, which are testimony to the work of the researcher, who carefully observed the development of the child's language from birth and adulthood, took regular notes, and shared his observations with his readers or listeners of his lectures. Negative formative utterances of parents to children are by far the majority of the language constructions he noted, and, according to findings on the linguistic behavior of modern parents toward children, formative negative utterances also constitute the vast majority in modern parent-child dialogues.

I'll send you away to a boogie man.

Examples:

(1) Korczak writes:

This is also a punishment-threat. The child believes that the mother will throw them out of the house, that someone will take them away, not necessarily a boogie man, but an evil, malicious and sinister force. We should remember that home is an island of safety for the child amidst a sea of unknown forces and mysteries full of enigmas and dangers ... I will turn you over to a boogie man means: I will give you up, I will not defend you, you will live among those you are afraid of because they do harm (2017, p. 127).

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- (2) "Mother says: I'll send you away to a boogie man, or no: I'll leave you here in the garden. Or a joke from a jolly uncle: Mom sold you to me I'll throw you out the window" (Korczak, 2017, p. 229).
- (3) "Nanny says: I'll take you to the forest, and the wolves will eat you" (Korczak, 2017, p. 39).

As can be seen from the above examples, Korczak observed different variants of statements referring to the fact that if the child fails to do something, the parent or another adult caregiver will not defend the child and some strangers, who are to be feared, will take him or her away.

Noteworthy is Korczak's insightful reading of the communicative intent of a parent who hurts the child with such words. A century later, this formative statement is still present in the language of adults speaking to their child. It emerges in various guises: I'll send you away to a boogie man; If you behave like this, a stranger (peasant, wizard, Baba Yaga will come and take you away. Kozak and Wasilewski write that another communicative intention of this statement is the desire for the child to become submissive (cf. 2022, p. 213).

Explication of the formative statement: *I'll send you away to a boogie man* could take the form of: "I don't accept you like this, I'll get rid of you"; "I don't like your behavior, let the hobo in the street take care of you"; "give in, conform"; "if you don't obey, I won't defend you from strangers"; "strangers are evil."

Stop sniveling!

Korczak quoted the formative statement: *Stop sniveling!* and stated that adults resent children's tears (cf. Korczak, 2017, p. 130). He added: "What I can't understand at all, though, is the resentment that a caregiver feels over a child's tears. The mother hit the child – the child cries, this angers her; so she hits the child a second time to get him or her to stop crying" (Korczak, 2017, p. 130). Kozak and Wasilewski reported other variants of this statement, while noting that these are utterances addressed to boys, cf. Boys don't cry; You're crying like some girl; *Don't cry, you're not a wuss* (cf. 2022, pp. 35-51). Statements with this meaning are addressed to children of both sexes, cf. e.g. *Don't be a crybaby!*

The explication of these formative statements could take the form of: "you must not show sadness through excessive crying."

You have made me worried.

Korczak shows the communicative intention hidden in the phrase: *You have made me worried*, when he writes: "in a shabby room the miserable widow raises her

tender-hearted children, who, not wanting to worry their mother, consciously offer her in sacrifice all the joy of life, they fade away, wither in fear of her chastening gaze. "You have caused me worry – what a punishment – a severe punishment" (Korczak, 2017, pp. 38-39). Marshall B. Rosenberg states that a parent who utters such a sentence puts the responsibility for his or her own feelings on his or her daughter or son and instills them with guilt:

Taking responsibility for someone else's feelings may at first glance seem like a sign of commendable concern. One might think that a child cares about his or her parents and feels remorse when a father or mother suffers. However, when children who have taken on this kind of responsibility try to accommodate their parents, their actions do not come from the heart, but from a desire to relieve themselves of guilt (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 75).

The explication of the sentence You have made me worried is: "feel guilty about the fact that I am suffering because of you, and do what I tell you to do."

Where am I going to get money for all this?

Parents used to frequently complain in the presence of their children (and invariably do so) about the high cost of their upkeep.

Korczak wrote:

- (1) "Books are expensive, notebooks are expensive; the school requires that the children be clean and neatly dressed, that they be well fed, that they drink fish liver oil and go for walks Where am I going to get money for all this? True, quite often there is no way of getting that money" (Korczak, 2017, p. 65).
- (2) "Don't lie, you little brat, and be careful; do you think father finds money on the street?" (Korczak, 2017, p. 62).
- (3) Come on, keep destroying your shoes, keep destroying them!" (Korczak, 2017, p. 124).

Such complaining is not specific only to low-income families, as well-to-do parents also often let their children know that their upkeep is expensive. The seemingly innocent phrase, *Where am I going to get money for all this?* carries the underlying message: "Feel guilty about the fact that it costs so much to support you, and be obedient, be grateful. It is me who earns this money, and you need to do better."

Just wait, I'll tell your father.

Korczak noted that the intention of the mother who says: *Just wait, I'll tell your* father, is to punish the child and to let him or her know that the father, who uses

harsher parenting methods, will find out about the child's misconduct of not being obedient enough (cf. Korczak, 2017, p. 126). She herself admits her parenting failure, puts herself in the position of a weaker person, capable, however, of revenge. Hearing such a threat, the child perceives the father as an adversary.

Devising a rescue is nothing more than a –sometimes – elaborate defense plan against an enemy. The child must carefully devise when and how to enter the apartment, what pose and facial expression to make, how to behave, what to say. The family home is like an enemy camp, where the child must sneak in cautiously, undetected, to elude their vigilance, to gain by deception what he or she cannot achieve by force (Korczak, 2017, p. 126).

In its deep structure, the formative statement, *Just wait, I'll tell your father* carries information "You have acted wrongly. I don't accept that. Someone else will punish you. You should be afraid!"

I've had it with these damn kids.

Korczak noted that the statement I've had it with these damn kids, when addressed to a child, has the character of "chiding, nagging, grumbling" (cf. Korczak, 2017, p. 128).

The mother's reason for muttering these words or complaining to neighbors is not that she believes in the educational value of speech, but that she wants to vent.... If this innocent whining were to fall on deaf ears, one could accept it, but I think it is not indifferent. It is the murmuring of surrender, the relinquishing of demands on children, the laying down of arms (Korczak, 2017, p. 128).

By uttering these words, the mother conveys the thought: "You are bad, worthless, I have no energy to raise you. God has punished me with you."

The above-mentioned examples of negative formative utterances from Janusz Korczak's pedagogical articles, such as: *I'll send you away to a boogie man*; *Stop sniveling!*; *You've made me worried*; *Where am I going to get the money for all this?*; *Just wait, I'll tell your father*; *I've had it with these damn kids* are still used today a hundred years after Korczak's publications.

According to linguistic observations, survey research on the subject and studies in the field of linguistic pragmatics, these formative utterances are a living component of contemporary dialogues between parents and caregivers and their children. As for other formative utterances, which were not mentioned above, but are in contemporary use, their corpus is very large and their semantics are complex.

Table 1. Semantic groups of negative formative utterances

Selected contemporary negative formative statements	Explication of meaning
(1) What did I tell you; You've had it coming; Don't you dare!; If the goat hadn't jumped, it wouldn't have broken its leg; If you'd listened to me, this wouldn't have happened; He who jumps in the evening, cries in the morning; Don't run, or you'll fall!; Watch where you're going!; I hope I don't have to be ashamed of you!	(1) "don't act, don't do anything I don't allow you to do, because if you do, you will regret it." (ACTION)
(2) Never air your dirty laundry in public; It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest; Don't tell anyone what's going on at home!	(2) "do not talk about abuse" (ACTION)
(3) What are people going to say; Don't cause trouble; Don't act weird; Your behavior is not appropriate; Keep your head down!	(3) "behave like others, don't stand out" (ACTION)
(4) No pain, no gain.	(4) "you absolutely must make an effort" (ACTION)
(5) You're laughing like a fool; Get to work instead of daydreaming; Life is not all fun.	(5) "have no joy in life" (FEELING)
(6) Boys don't cry; Stop feeling sorry for yourself; Girls don't get angry; Anger hurts good looks.	(6) "don't show your feelings" (FEELING)
(7) What is permissible for voivode is not permissible for you, you little punk; Children and fish have no voice; Don't talk back!; Nothing will come of you.	(7) "you mean nothing" (JUDGEMENT)
(8) I was only joking.	(8) "you don't understand anything" (JUDGEMENT)
(9) You are capable of more; You could do better; Try harder!	(9) "I am not happy with you." (JUDGEMENT)
(10) Do what you like; Do as you please!	(10) "I don't care about you anymore, you are a nobody." (JUDGEMENT)

Selected negative formative statements that are a constitutive element of contemporary parent-child dialogues can be assigned to three groups of meanings:

A. Statements that are expressions of parental control relating to the actions of a son or daughter, cf. (1), (2), (3), (4).

B. Statements that are expressions of parental control relating to the son's or daughter's feelings, cf. (5), (6).

C. Statements containing in their structure a negative evaluation of the son or daughter: (7), (8), (9), (10).

Concluding remarks

In line with the diachronic approach, parents' utterances that Janusz Korczak gleaned from the everyday speech of his contemporaries have been contrasted with semantically equivalent formative utterances that parents use at the beginning of the 21st century. The formative utterances that come from the texts of the famous pedagogue and those occurring in the speech of parents today have the structure of single sentences, complex sentences or elliptical sentences. They occur in free speech, in the indicative, interrogative or exclamatory forms, in different tenses and modes. Most of these utterances are characteristically uttered by the parent who – often externalizing strong negative emotions in the process - is nevertheless guided by the good of the child and wants to mold him or her to cope with the challenges of life. When the parent uses these linguistic constructions, they usually do not realize that they are hurting their daughter or son, because their deep structure of meaning hides violence due to the strong manipulative potential inherent in these statements. Language has the power of formative influence, because "the way we speak to children becomes their inner voice," as Peggy O'Mara, freelance journalist and publisher of Mothering Magazine (1980–2011) put it. It is clear that the child finds the nurturing necessary for life in the family, but simultaneously the parents determine the conditions for the child's functioning in the family, and use language to this end in such a way as to influence the children. Malgorzata Majewska writes:

Our internal dialogues consist largely of sentences that we likely once heard as children and took as truth about ourselves. A young child, in order to survive, has to guess what conditions prevail in the community, that is, how to fit into normality. If that normality were only critical or preachy voices that compared them to other children, then this narrative of the community is all the child has (2023, p. 83).

Negative formative statements that are often repeated by parents in the best faith become their children's life beliefs and can prevent them from fulfilling some of their potential in life. Parents also make use of a set of positive formative statements, such as *You're doing great!*, *The family must stick together!*, which give children the strength to

 $^{4 \}quad https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/597503-the-way-we-talk-to-our-children-becomes-their-inner-voice$

act and are a source of encouragement and support. It should be noted, however, that positively-charged formative statements collected in surveys and from studies tend to occur at a much lower frequency than those that carry a negative message in their deep structure.⁵

Since formative utterances are one of the keys to understanding the family community, further research would call for creating a large corpus of such utterances drawing on survey research and source-material studies based on a thoughtfully selected set of texts, and then providing their full explications and popularizing knowledge of the positive and negative meanings inherent in their deep structure: all in order to support parents in better communicating with their children, in accordance with Korczak's indication that "We should tell children that (they are) ⁶ good, that they want to and can" (cf. Korczak, 2017, p. 129).

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⁵ M. Rosenberg (1934–2015), an American psychologist, mediator, writer and teacher, is the creator of the "Nonviolent Communication" program, in which language is used to trigger compassion by expressing insights, feelings, needs and requests. Sensitivity in relationships is seen as a strength, cf. Sieradzka-Baziur. 2018.

⁶ Addendum in brackets B.S.-B.

- to express your needs and feelings, protect your boundaries, and communicate effectively with others]. Dom Wydawniczy REBIS.
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