


YES MEANS YES AND NO MEANS NO? A CRITICAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL AS- SUMPTIONS AND TRANSNATIONALISM IN POLISH ONLINE SEXUAL EDUCATION DISCOURSES ON SEXUAL CONSENT

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Abstract

The subject of sexual consent has received increasing media and academic attention in recent years and the question of its sociolinguistic significance has been investigated in the context of the English language in Canadian, American, and British settings (sources). There seems to be a lack of cross-cultural analyses; however, little research has investigated the complexities of consent as far as attitudes and discourses. This paper presents an analysis of sexual education discourse taken from Polish grassroots sexual education initiatives and looks at the phenomenon of changes in discourse on consent, as well as signs of linguistic imperialism in sexual consent education practices. The project takes a qualitative approach to integrating critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist post-structural discourse analysis (FPDA), in which five sources of sexual consent materials found online are analyzed for the linguistic remnants of cultural assumptions about sexuality. This is done to investigate the implied understandings of roles in giving and asking for sexual consent, which at the same time work towards a more progressive discourse on sexuality.

Keywords: *sexual consent, critical discourse analysis, feminist post-structural discourse analysis, computer-mediated discourse*

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Introduction

Sexual consent is a subject that has been discussed from a range of perspectives, including the reach of its complexities in sociology and psychology, its legal definitions, linguistic aspects, as well as where spontaneity may be considered an infringement upon a person's right to agree to sexual interaction (Ehrlich, 1998; Ostler, 2003; Beres, 2007; Humphreys, Brousseau, 2010; Humphreys, 2007). One point of importance in understanding consent and its relation to culture lies in how intimate and personal boundaries can be crossed. This is intrinsically linked to how people understand and define sexual violence, including rape. The issue of sexual consent is a complex one, since it is often taken for granted, and is used without the provision of explicit definitions, highlighting the covert assumption of it being a shared concept across cultures and social groups (Beres, 2007: p. 93). This, however, is not the case, as with most sexual practices, which are impacted by people's habits, culture and societal norms that influence their construction.

Searching for the meaning of sexual consent

As a topic in education and a separate legal issue, sexual consent has wrought controversy in many respects and has been the subject of public debate regarding what does and does not constitute an act of consent (Beres, 2014; Popova, 2019). Since some cultures are deemed more conservative in their ways of thinking about and construing ideas surrounding human sexuality, it is crucial to see the intertextual nature of these ideas, as they both penetrate and wind their ways through the ideologies and the discourses that represent and combat harmful belief systems. Consent has been described as having a vital role in how the problematic sphere of rape culture is defined and understood, especially where its being expressed verbally or nonverbally is concerned.

Ones that have been described as predominantly gendered, sexual consent discourses have tended to reproduce stereotypical and ideological ideas surrounding gender roles during sex, with scripts taking mostly from heterosexual interaction in describing the nature of communication in intimate settings. Whether or not gendered norms or gendered habitus impacts how consent as a communicative event is carried out.¹

Sexual script theory and consent

One of the key aspects of understanding the way that sexual consent is iterated in communication is the relationship of consent to sexual script theory. Sexual scripts are “a set of cultural guidelines for appropriate sexual behavior and how to progress in a sexual encounter” (Simon, Gagnon, 2002, p. 29), which include practices of how to ask for and interpret consent. Traditional sexual scripts are those that are used to describe the progression of the way that heterosexual interaction goes about in a stereotypical way. This means that men and women are viewed as playing specific roles in a sexual dynamic, where men are the more dominant sexual initiators and women gatekeepers of their sexual availability (i.e., they do not make the first move and are not as driven by sex as men). What is important to note about sexual scripts is that the “verbalization of consent: is absent” (Jozkowski et al., 2014, p. 905; Beres, 2007).

The gendered nature of these roles lies in the fact that sexual scripts on the progression of sexual intercourse are based on heterosexual interaction (and thus tend towards heteronormativity). The male aggression that is associated with male sexuality is derived from Western scripts on the subject (Simon, Gagnon, 1986;; Fritz, Kitzinger, 2001).

¹ See Green (2013) for more on the sociological perspective of sexual practices and social life.

And it is because scripts have been described as “a metaphor for conceptualizing the production of behavior within social life,” one can see how human-produced notions help to file away certain behavior types and, as such, categorize these actions for an ease of explanation.

The interactional feminist perspective of communication presents a framework that explains how gender differences impact sexual consent negotiation and emphasizes the role that power has in such social interactions (Cannon, Lauve-Moon, Buttell, 2015). In this framework, masculinity and femininity ideologies tend to be reinforced (*Ibidem*). Hence, gender is constructed through the application of power dynamics between partners (*Ibidem*).

Some of the research on sexual consent in Western settings reinforces these gendered notions. Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) discovered that there are gender differences in the indication of consent where verbal and nonverbal indicators are concerned. In the study, women were discovered to use more indirect verbal signals of consent, whereas men were discovered to use more indirect nonverbal indicators of consent, which reflects a perceived need by women to be more overt in consent expression.

Since sexual scripts serve as a behavior scheme, it is important to note that heterosexual scripts differ from homosexual and queer sexual scripts (Magruder, 1993). Heterosexual sexual scripts are based heavily on the stereotypical sexual behavior of cis-men and cis-women in relation to one another, meaning that such women are expected to be more passive actors in sexual interaction, and men more dominant. This can also be seen in the context of early sex education textbooks in Poland, as described by Kościańska (2017). Jozkowski et al. (2014) describe the heterosexual nature of *consent scripts* as particularly heteronormative, because women's role is to, traditionally, resist sex, and therefore bear the responsibility of giving consent, and men's role is to try as hard as they can to get consent from a woman (including by turning a no into a yes or the concept of *token no*, also referred to in the literature as *token resistance*).

Attitudes to sexuality in Poland

The academic attention that the topic of sexuality is receiving in Poland and regarding the Polish social context has been on the rise of late despite a socio-political climate that egregiously denies citizens access to comprehensive sex education (Iniewicz, Mijas, 2011; Kościańska, 2017). There exist numerous papers and books discussing the historical significance of sexuality in the country, in the pre- and post-war periods, including gay and lesbian movements of those historical periods (Graff, 2006; Chetaille, 2016;), which demonstrates that there is, in fact, an increasing necessity to raise the issues belonging to the category of sexuality.

What has been referred to in the literature on Poland as *negative sexuality*² is the usually passive stance that actors are known to have towards sexuality (Płonecka, 2017). To provide an example, in her work, Kościańska (2017, pp. 84-87) has written about the perceptions that there are threatening, negative effects of masturbation on young men and boys. This is just one example of the fact that such issues that have to do strictly with sex are “severely inhibited by strong taboos surrounding sex and sexuality in Poland” (*Ibidem*, p. 1146). This issue has also been conversed about in lieu of an introduction to the necessity for a more robust sexual education program in Poland (Graff, Korolczuk, 2017).

Sexual education in Poland

The current wars on the issue of abortion have produced a number of books from scholars and activists in the Polish Gender Studies and feminist communities (Kościańska, 2017; Korolczuk et al., 2019). The long history of backlash against having an organized, well-rounded, and obligatory sexual education program in Poland is a long and har-

² This means that sexuality is not considered part of national or personal identity.

rowing one (Kościańska, 2017). With the release of literature to the general public, by sexologists such as Imieliński (1986), who authored several books on the medical and psychological perspectives of sexology, and Wisłocka (1978), author of the book *Sztuka Kochania*. After this, Lew-Starowicz (1983) made it his goal to educate the Polish population on the subject of sexuality. Although at first, Lew-Starowicz sought to demonstrate that homosexuality was some kind of defect that could be or should be cured, he is known to have changed his stance on the subject (Kościańska, 2014). Sexology is a highly developed field in Poland, with many of its representatives currently present and active in social media outlets, as well as online blogs and websites.

To put it simply, the issue of sexual education in the country of Poland differs greatly from the sexual education reform that took place in the United States. The subject of sexual education in Poland is a touchy one, with questions on the subject over the years having to do with the threat of the incarceration of sexual educators and the question of teaching “gender” identity in preschools (Grabowska, 2014).

Just as the subject of sex in general might be considered taboo in Polish society, it has been discovered that much of the outcry against sexual education revolves around the possibility of discussing issues in the classroom, such as masturbation, as well as a greatly feared promotion of homosexuality and the fear of oversexualizing children by teaching them about sexuality (Danziger, 1994; Kościańska, 2017), all of which is related a cultural silencing (Handke, 2008: p. 25; Karwatowska, Tympiakin, 2019). There have been works published, however, on the subject of alternative sexual education schemes, which include access to sexual education through NGOs, online sources, such as websites specifically focused on such subjects, and social media platforms that promote comprehensive sexual health knowledge.

Materials

Because the study only focuses on Polish online discourses on the subject of sexual consent, it has been limited to an analysis of social campaigns initiated by NGOs and other Polish pro-sex education organizations and sites. The sources were chosen, as they are reputable sources that promote sex positive education and, aside from the online sites and blogs in which they present information, they can be found on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. All of the publications chosen were written between the years 2019 and 2022. A table of the eight sources of the educational discourse that is to be subject to the analysis is provided below.

Table 1. Articles analyzed and sources

Text type	Title	Source
Online article	Informed consent [<i>Świadoma zgoda</i>]	Yourkaya.pl
Online article	Consent, which means: consent to sex [<i>Consent: czyli zgoda na seks</i>]	ponton.org.pl
Online article	Informed consent [<i>Świadoma zgoda</i>]	Sexed.pl
Online article	Sexual consent – or what everyone should know about good sex [<i>Sexual consent – czyli to, co każdy powinien wiedzieć o dobrym seksie</i>]	Pomocnia-poznan.pl
Online campaign	YES that's love! [<i>TAK to miłość!</i>]	amnesty.org.pl/kampania-tak-to-milosc/
Online campaign	Consent – only yes means yes [<i>Zgoda – tylko tak znaczy tak</i>]	kampania16dni.pl/
Blog post	Informed consent to sex – a key element of intimacy [<i>Świadoma zgoda na seks – kluczowy element zbliżeń</i>]	seksuologbeztabu.pl/blog/
Blog post	Consent means conscious consent to sex [<i>Consent, czyli świadoma zgoda na seks</i>]	Intimovo.com

The material shown in the table above will be investigated in a framework that combines both critical discourse analysis (CDA) approaches with those of feminist post-structural discourse analysis (FPDA) to

demonstrate not only the educational role of the internet in formulating discourses about consent but also to look for patterns that reveal those assumptions that belong to cultural domains. The analysis itself was conducted within a qualitative frame for analysis, using the data analysis program MaxQDA (Verbi, 2019/2022) as a tool by which to organize and structure such an investigation.

Computer-mediated discourse and digital discourse

The scope of the analysis is that of online communication. I have limited myself to this specific type of discourse for the sake of space, looking at how sexual consent is addressed in online spaces. One could, of course, merge this with a multimodal analysis or the analysis of linguistic landscapes (Milani, Levon, 2016; Milani, 2017), however, that is beyond the scope of this work.

Computer-mediated discourse (CMD) is a field that has derived from computer-mediated communication (Herring, 2005), and, subsequently, digital discourse as a term has followed the aforementioned two. Herring and Androutsopoulos (2015, p. 27) define CMD as “the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked or mobile computers, where ‘computers’ are defined broadly to include any digital communication device,” emphasizing interactivity and language in use. Digital discourse is a term that has been derived from those such as computer-mediated discourse, new media sociolinguistics, and language and digital communication (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Bou-Franch, 2019: p. 4).

Similarly to what Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch state in their work of discourse analysis as the study of construction, Jones, Chik, and Hafner (2015, p. 3) state that “the ways people build and manage their social world using various semiotic systems.” This construction of reality and social schemes is pertinent to understanding the cultural discourses of sexual consent that arise in online discus-

sions and settings that allow users to learn about consent and also locate themselves within the discourse.

Methodology

The analysis looks at the representations of sexual consent and their ideological implications, including where we are in terms of sexual education, the role of the online sphere in disseminating knowledge and transforming education potential, as well as attitudes to consent.

1. How is the idea of sexual consent education communicated in the online Polish sphere?
2. Is there any notion that sexual imperialism or transnationalism of sexual consent education might be present in the sexual consent discourse in Poland?
3. How are transformations in representations and attitudes to sexual consent portrayed in the analyzed discourses?

The discussion on the topic presented in this paper combines critical discourse analysis and feminist post-structural discourse analysis to describe the pertinence of intertextuality in sex educational discourses.

Although CDA and FPDA resemble each other in some regards, integrating the two frameworks of analysing discourse provides for a more well-rounded understanding of the intertextuality of sexual education texts. The main vein of the methodology used in the presented analysis is that of CDA, however as a supplementary model. As Baxter (2008) has asserted, FPDA fills in some gaps not defined by CDA or feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) perspectives.

Critical discourse analysis

Since CDA sees language as a form of social practice, social behaviors, and expressions may be understood through its critical inquiry. The main tenets of critical discourse analysis are rather well known and

they have been enumerated in the following list of principles which are the underpinning pillars of CDA:

- 1) CDA addresses social problems,
- 2) power relations are discursive,
- 3) discourse constitutes society and culture,
- 4) discourse does ideological work,
- 5) discourse is intertextual/historical,
- 6) the link between text and society is indirect or 'mediated',
- 7) discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory,
- 8) discourse is a form of social action or social practice (Fairclough, Wodak, 1997, pp. 271-280).

As mentioned in the previous section, texts, and discourses may be defined in a plethora of ways, including that texts serve the ideological function of categorizing "people, events, places, and actions" (Mayr, Machin, 2012, p. 2), which remains crucial to a critical analysis of texts belonging to a specific genre type. CDA has been used to analyze several aspects of sexuality and social life or social problems, including masculinity and sexuality (Conradie, 2011), LGBTQ+ sexuality in the gaming world (Pulos, 2013), sexual violence (Dalton, 2019).

Although sexual consent itself has been explored in several works from a sociological standpoint (as opposed to, for example, a psychological one) (Kitzinger, Frith, 1999), CDA literature has not revealed much about sexual consent more specifically, let alone regarding Polish attitudes to sexual consent. That is where I hope that this work will at least, in part, fill in gaps in the research.

There is no one way of doing CDA and that there is, in fact, a wide array of methodologies, among which one should choose based on the type of analysis he or she aims to conduct. The methodology for a CDA project should, hence, be set to fit the research questions and the frame of analysis that they present. For the sake of space, I will only focus on those frameworks of critical discourse analytical approaches

that suit the agenda of the presented project.³ The presented analysis takes from both CDA and FPDA to come to robust preliminary conclusions on the state of discourse and the transformations in discourse specifically on the subject of consent in Poland.

Feminist post-structural discourse analysis

When inquiring about the methods by which I would look at the material, it was rather difficult to find a place for the ever-shifting discourses on sexuality in the online sphere.

Such a *new* theoretical and methodological approach to language and gender is that of Feminist Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis has seen more exploration in the areas of linguistic inquiry in gender (Baxter, 2008). Baxter has defined FPDA in the following way:

[It may be defined as] an approach to analysing intertextualised discourses in spoken interaction and other types of text. It draws upon the poststructuralist principles of complexity, plurality, ambiguity, connection, recognition, diversity, textual playfulness, functionality, and transformation. The *feminist* perspective on post-structuralist discourse analysis considers *gender differentiation* to be a dominant discourse among the competing discourses when analysing all types of text. FPDA regards gender differentiation as one of the most pervasive discourses across many cultures in terms of its systematic power to discriminate between human beings according to their gender and sexuality (*Ibidem*).

Its definition, as provided in the quote above, has been developed from Bakhtinian ideas, as well as from works by Jacques Derrida (Culler 1982) and Michel Foucault (1980). This is because of how it relates to the interconnectedness between power, knowledge, and dis-

³ For more information on various approaches to this specific type of discourse studies, see Machin and Mayr (2012).

courses. Feminist Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis has not been investigated in-depth in terms of language and sexuality discourses, however, when one draws on its definition and its relation to what was described in the preceding section, it becomes evident that FPDA might be more adequate a framework for the investigation.

The reason that one of the above sections touches strictly on FCDA is that the two frameworks are seen as overlapping in multiple ways, including the fact that they share a key principle, namely *the discursive construction of subjectivity*. The two approaches are noted to share the following enumerated features associated with Butler's (1990) theory of performativity.

- Discourse is social practice (Caeron, 2001)
- There is a mainly performative dimension to speaker identities, meaning that people render their gender through enactment processes and that it is not something that they simply *are*.
- Speaker (or writer) identities are diverse and are characterized by a kind of multiplicity, hence gender is only one of many cultural variables that aids in the construction of speakers and their identities.
- Meaning is both localized and constructed in context-specific settings or communities of practice, including classrooms, online spaces, and institutions (including cultural ones)
- Interdiscursivity is an element vital to the approach, as it helps an analyst to recognize the ways that discourses can be inscribed and inflected by other existing discourses (i.e., familiar discourses) through processes of overt or covert reproduction.
- Both FPDA and CDA see the need for the analyst to constantly monitor herself in a manner of self-surveillance since her task is a politically and socially motivated one itself. This calls for continuous self-reflexivity and the constant questioning of one's aims, positioning, and values within the discourse analysis itself.

Whereas CDA follows an outlook in the post-Marxist tradition, with an emphasis on emancipatory social theory, FPDA's theoretical roots lie firmly in a postmodernist approach rather than a post-Marxist one. Baxter (2008, p. 3) has stated that there are three implications which are key in understanding how it may be differentiated from CDA, that it "does not have an emancipatory agenda, but a transformative quest."

FPDA also places at the forefront of its analytical agenda, the complexity of subjects of study rather than their polarity. CDA, as such, presents a tendency to display a polarization of subjects, that of the more powerful and the marginalized, whoever they may be in the space of a given analysis. Baxter (*Ibidem*, p. 5) highlights that "CDA's critique is often [...] a binary one that is directed against those institutional discourses that tend to serve hegemonic interests, and it is working *for* the various social groups whose interests are peripheralized by such dominant discourses." FPDA, however, challenges the hierarchy that CDA creates but argues that the subject positioning of women in society is one that is complex and located in a multitude of physical and metaphorical spaces.

Linguistic analysis

The analysis will be conducted by investigating the linguistic strategies used to present the question of sexual consent, how it is understood, and its portrayal in terms of educational purposes. I will do so by investigating it within the following linguistic frames from a mostly socio-pragmatic perspective, however, it is important to note that the order in which the aspects are described is essential to the logical structure of the analysis itself.

Socio-semantic aspects of discourse

Words have meaning, but they can also mean different things in different contexts. The choice of a word is said to reveal much about so-

cial norms and ideologies (Halliday, Matthiessen, 2013). Investigating the socio-semantic aspects of the discourses about sexual consent means that paying attention to cultural reflections on word choice is also essential.

Structural aspects of discourse

The structural aspects of discourse indicate the sentence structure, and therefore what takes place on the level of the surface of the discourse. This oftentimes means that an analyst will look at the supposed meaning by inferring from the context (in this case, not only the physical context of where the discourse is located, but also the socio-political context).

Presuppositions, implicature, and culture

One point of the analysis will be to look at what is implied in the discourses about sexual consent in the Polish online sphere. This entails looking at two aspects of indirect communication from a pragmalinguistic lens. This can be investigated by looking at both socio-semantic constituents, as well as structural ones, and utilizing cultural knowledge to make inferences. Both presupposition and implicature have to do with making inferences based on outside knowledge regarding what has been said.

The term *presupposition* has been defined by Grundy (2020, p. 277) as “a meaning taken as given that can be accommodated or asserted.” *Implicature*, on the other hand, has been defined as “an inferred meaning, often with a different logical form from that of the original utterance” (*Ibidem*, p. 276).

The relation of the two notions to culture is that different things are taken as for-granted knowledge in various cultures. This means that external knowledge of the culture analyzed through the linguistic codes presented is necessary on the part of the analyst

Indirectness and evaluation

The aforementioned dimensions of analysis lead us to what Hunston (2010) has referred to as *evaluation* in discourse, or negatively, positively or (more rarely) neutrally appraising aspects of social life, people, and events. This is oftentimes, within the context of sexuality, done so rather indirectly, regardless of cultural communicative norms.

This will be done, of course, not only to bring light to the problematic aspects of the discourse but to highlight the work that they do given the burdensome social circumstances that surround sexual education subjects (Kościańska, 2017). This work will hopefully shed greater light on the role of online media in disseminating information to lung people (although not only) regarding sexual practices and sexualities. To my knowledge, no critical discourse analysis or feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis has yet been conducted on the subject of sexual consent in Poland, a fact that contributes to the novelty of the project.

A register perspective on sexual education discourse

Online register has been accounted for in the literature as belonging to the online sub-register of that of an informational and educational source (Biber, Egbert, 2018, p. 63). In their register categorization, present the category of *informational descriptions, explanations, and procedures*, to which they count text types such as *informational FAQs and informational blogs*, which are those which this analysis concerns. The category of the sexual consent education register, which has not previously been overtly described, does not only belong to this category but can be viewed as melding with the authors' other category of *opinion/advice/persuasion* texts. Such a group of texts also includes *opinion blogs and advice online* (*Ibidem*, p. 42).

The features of sexual consent education registers have been listed as follows, and also pertain to the register of sexual education dis-

course online. I will enumerate which ones I have added, providing some examples for these from the data in the sections that follow, in order to give a comprehensive list of features that specifically pertains to the register in question.

- a) The use of common nouns and process nouns.
- b) The use of long words or specialized vocabulary.
- c) The use of modals of possibility and likelihood.
- d) The use of modals of obligation.
- e) Conditional clauses.
- f) Direct reference to the reader (second-person pronouns and verb forms).
- g) Imperative forms.
- h) Non-past tense.
- i) Gender-neutral language [*my addition to the list*].
- j) Short sentences (with less complex structures) [*my addition to the list*].
- k) Euphemistic and positive expressions representing sexual interaction [*my addition to the list*].
- l) Direct naming of sexual acts and rape [*my addition to the list*].

The features enumerated above account for the register that is analyzed in this paper. Of course, it is worth noting that describing the register is not the only thing I am going to do. I will also demonstrate that cultural significance is present at the level of implicature in the texts read. This is where the critical perspective will come into play, for it is certain ideological assumptions that are taken for granted in the texts analyzed that are only readily available through inference and cultural knowledge.

Analysis of socio-semantic aspects of the discourse in question

The analysis of the socio-semantic aspects of the discourse is equally important to that of the structural aspects and, of course, highlights

different features and their ideological significance. Socio-semantic features of the discourse on consent are related to expressing inclusivity, including the presence or absence of gendered roles in sexual interaction, the various ways that the “yes means yes” and “no means no” campaigns are referred to, discussed or even indirectly used to promote sexual consent as a healthy practice, and euphemistic expressions for sexual interaction. This reflects how implied meanings revolve especially around sexual subjects that are always tinted with cultural ideologies about sex and exist in the form of assumptions about the readers’ knowledge of and assumptions about consent, as well as in the expressions that reveal cultural binding in the sphere of sexuality (i.e., the use of euphemistic expressions).

Inclusive language

The online sexual consent education discourse has a tendency to demonstrate the use of gender-inclusive language, not necessarily presenting gender as a binary construction, and highlighting that consent concerns people of all genders (as well as sexualities, as shown in the first example here).

- 1) Consent is a situation in which interactions between **two people (sometimes a group of people)**, including physical contact, the publishing of one’s personal data, an image of their persons, and other interactions, are achieved when **all** parties “say” – without raising any doubt – “YES”. Consent is mutual understanding, bereft of manipulation, threat and mind games. [*Zgoda, to sytuacja, w której do kontaktu fizycznego, upublicznienia danych wrażliwych, wizerunku i innych interakcji między **dwie-ma osobami (czasem grupą)** dochodzi, kiedy **wszystkie** strony będące podmiotami „powiedzq” – nie budzące wątpliwości – „TAK”. Zgoda to wzajemne porozumienie – bez manipulacji, groźby lub gier psychologicznych*]. (kampania16dni.pl/)

- 2) Consent may be revoked at any point, which means that if we are, for example, engaging in heavy petting with **someone**, **each person** has the right to stop. We always have the right to say “no” when we don’t want to engage in sexual activity! Respecting the word “no” is respecting **another person** and the rights that they have. [*Zgoda może zostać cofnięta w każdym momencie, to znaczy, że jeśli przykładowo pieścimy się z kimś, każda osoba może to zatrzymać. Zawsze mamy prawo mówić „nie”, gdy nie chcemy angażować się w aktywność o charakterze seksualnym! Szacunek dla “nie” to szacunek do drugiego człowieka i praw jakie przysługują każdej osobie*]. (sexed.pl)

- 2) According to many people, asking for consent to sex is strange and is viewed as something that completely ruins the mood, because it leaves no room for spontaneous and fiery intimacy. But there is nothing hotter than a **responsible** (inflected for gender(s)) and **caring** (inflected for gender(s)) **partner** (inflected for gender(s)) **who takes care** that we have a healthy sexual relationship based on trust, mutual interest and respect for boundaries. [*Według wielu osób pytanie o zgodę jest śmieszne i całkowicie rujnuje atmosferę, nie pozostawiając miejsca na spontaniczne, gorące zbliżenia. A przecież nie ma nic bardziej hot od odpowiedzialnego-j i troskliwego-j partnera-rki, który-a dba o zdrową relację seksualną opartą na zaufaniu, wzajemnym zainteresowaniu i szacunku do granic każdej ze stron*]. (yourkaya.pl)

- 3) Oftentimes, **people who have been socialized as girls and women** use various strategies to communicate sexual refusal – silence, turning away or looking away, changing the subject, saying that they are feeling unwell, nervous laughter, joking, and others. The words “I don’t know” mean I don’t know and not “yes”. [*Często osoby wychowywane na dziewczynki i kobiety stosują zróżnicowane strategie wyrażania niezgody – milczenie, odwracanie lub opuszczanie głowy/ wzroku, zmienianie tematu, sygnalizowanie złego samopoczucia, (nerwowy) śmiech, żarty, „droczenie się” i inne. „Nie wiem” – znaczy „nie wiem”, a nie „tak”*]. (kampania16dni.pl/)

The use of gender-inclusive language is a feature of certain sexual education discourses online, ones that associate more with Polish liberal values, as being more progressive and as being reflective of acceptance and tolerance of difference. This surely undermines the original overarching assumption that sexual consent education discourses might contain heterosexual sexual scripts, hence raising the question of what kind of discourses would be more oppressive in their representations of sexual scripts. In light of this, it is important to note that the gendered perspective of sexual consent discourse reveals much about the change in attitude towards sexuality and sexual practices overall.

“Yes means yes” and “no means no”

Two of the major sexual consent campaigns that have their roots in Western culture are the “yes means yes” campaign and the “no means no” campaign, both of which have had a hold on consent culture and consent education practices. These ideologies (albeit positive ones) are both present in the discourses analyzed and are seen more directly stated, as well as embedded in indirect strategies, thus contributing to the analysis of implicature here.

- 4) In earlier educational and informational endeavors, the slogan “no means no” was used to illustrate consent. And of course that is still relevant, but oftentimes “no” does not mean consent. [*We wcześniejszych działaniach edukacyjnych i informacyjnych posługiwano się często sloganem „Nie znaczy NIE”. I oczywiście pozostaje ono aktualne. Ale bardzo często brak „nie”, nie oznacza zgody*]. (kampania16dni.pl/

This does not mean that the only type of consent that is propagated in the discourse is the word yes. Other forms of affirmative consent and verbal refusal are also promoted, such as in the following example:

- 5) You can also use verbal communication, i.e. words. When you say things like “This is nice” or “I like that,” you make it clear to the other person that

what you are doing together is a positive experience. Remember that it is ok not to desire sexual interaction. You can always refuse by saying "I don't want to do that, I don't feel ok." [*Możesz też użyć komunikacji werbalnej, czyli słownej. Mówiąc: „To jest przyjemne” lub „Podoba mi się to”, dajesz drugiej osobie jasny komunikat, że to, co robicie, jest pozytywnym doświadczeniem. Pamiętaj, że brak ochoty na kontakt seksualny jest w porządku. Zawsze możesz odmówić, na przykład mówiąc: „Nie chcę tego robić, nie jest mi dobrze”*]. (grupaponton.pl)

The types of affirmative consent that are propagated in the majority of the discourse are those which are verbally expressed, including expressing that one likes a certain sexual act or behavior. The criticism of this is rather obvious: the "yes means yes" campaign of affirmative consent does not necessarily reflect actual sexual behavior. Nonverbal expressions of consent also make up for sexual consent expression, yet it is largely left out of the sex educational discourse.

Discourses on nonverbal expressions of consent

Pineau's (1996) notion of consent, which does not necessarily require that actors verbally ask for or express that they have consented to a sexual act. Beres (2010) has enumerated people's descriptions of sexual consent communication in the following categorization: tacit knowledge, in which a person "just knows" what is being communicated, refusing sex verbally or nonverbally, and, finally, actively participating in sexual activity as a way to communicate consent. Beres (*Ibidem*) notes that the sexual communication described by her participants was both nonverbal and indirect.

Although research has shown that much of sexual consent communication takes place non-verbally, the discourse analyzed does present alternatives to verbal consent and refusal, but only from one of the sources.

- 6) How can you tell that someone is enthusiastic about having sex with you?

- Smiling,
- Kissing,
- Active touching and petting,
- Pulling your body to theirs,
- Cuddling,
- Spread, relaxed legs,
- Example words or phrases such as yes, I want more, I feel good, still, I love it, continue, don't stop, I like it, keep going,
- Moaning as a sign of pleasure.

[Jak rozpoznać, że ktoś jest nastawiony entuzjastycznie do seksu z tobą?

- *Uśmiech,*
- *Całowanie,*
- *Aktywne dotykanie, głaskanie twojego ciała,*
- *Przyciąganie twojego ciała do swojego,*
- *Przytulanie,*
- *Otwarte, luźne uda,*
- *Przykładowe słowa, wyrażenia tj. tak, chcę więcej, dobrze mi, jeszcze, uwielbiam to, kontynuuj, nie przestawaj, podoba mi się, rób tak dalej,*
- *Wydawanie odgłosów wskazujących na przyjemność itd.].* (pomocnia-poznan.pl)

The discourse on nonverbal consent is no different, as Jozkowski et al. (2014) noted. Nonverbal expressions of consent may also reflect gendered sexual scripts, and even though the gender of participants is not overtly stated in the example given above, those scripts are still visible.

The gendered dimension to the analysis of the discourse on nonverbals that are indicative of giving consent in an intimate setting, but still balances on the script of the woman (or more feminine actor) as the recipient of a sexual act. Since people who have vulvas are stereotypically on the receiving end of penetration, the spreading of relaxed

thighs would also indicate that the recipient is in a more feminine role, if not a woman.

Euphemism: A linguistic analysis of ideology

Whether or not the aim of an utterance or text, culture has the power to instill in its inhabitants certain ideas, values, and attitudes. This includes ideas of what is inappropriate or taboo, and often also affects the language that is used to discuss or describe certain phenomena. *Euphemism*, being one such strategy by which to talk about taboo things in public spheres, is “the semantic or formal process by which taboo is stripped of its most explicit or obscene overtones” (Fernandez, 2008, p. 96). This is one way that sexuality is discussed (Alan, Burridge, 1991). The discourse discussed is no exception, as the following examples show, however, the goal of such communication is different from the usual covering up of a taboo subject.

- 7) Asking about sex doesn't have to ruin **that special “moment”** [*Pytanie o seks nie musi zepsuć tego wyjątkowego »momentu«*]. (amnesty.org.pl/kampania-tak-to-milosc/)
- 8) You should ask if your partner wants **what you want** if you want to be sure that they consent. [*Dlatego żeby mieć pewność, że druga osoba chce tego co Ty, zapytaj o seks*]. (amnesty.org.pl/kampania-tak-to-milosc/)

The use of euphemism, in this case, can be seen to work in two ways:

- a) that the linguistic process of the euphemization of terms for sex is reflective of sex as a taboo in Polish culture, and
- b) that such processes are also used to paradoxically detract from the tabooization of sex by using language that has positive connotations.

It is important to highlight here that there is more to this than what has been described above. This subject will be expanded on in the section on implicature that follows to demonstrate how culturally seated

ideologies might be expressed indirectly in discourse, meaning that such strategies also employ socio-semantic features.

Analysis of indirect evaluation and culture

In discourse, implied meaning can occur in various forms, as I hope to have shown in the analysis. The significance of this in the face of dealing with consent is that while sexual consent discourses online aim to be educational, they also address cultural assumptions. The aspects of the discourse which carry evaluative stances that are negative⁴ and are related to cultural assumptions and/or values are the questions forms and modal verbs on the level of structure and the euphemistic expressions on the level of socio-semantics.

The socio-semantic aspects of the analysis have shown that, for one, euphemism is still present in the discourse on sexual consent. While there are, of course, direct reference to sexual intercourse as “sex,” euphemistic expressions might both highlight and reflect the assumption that sexuality is a taboo social subject. As mentioned in the section on the topic, by referring to sex as something like “a special moment,” ideologies that sex is something that many are embarrassed to discuss are reinforced. On the other hand, such expressions in the discourse are positively evaluative and also represent progression.

The above aspects are illustrations of evaluation and implicatures that reflect cultural assumptions and ideologies, including what actors have what kinds of roles in the setting of a sexual encounter and what beliefs people might have based on stereotypes that are viewed as harmful.

⁴ What is meant here is that they are negatively geared to the political climate which demonstrates negative stances on sexual education and a culture which views sex as bad.

Discussing sexual consent and sexual assault

Of course hand-in-hand with consent goes the notion of sexual assault and rape, because one of the conditions under which sexual assault occurs is the lack of sexual consent. The discourses on sexual consent analyzed not only refer to the necessity of expressing consent to sexual acts but also highlight that without it, a sexual act becomes assault or even rape.

- 9) We need your vote so that all women can feel safe and **protected from violence** and so that they can feel as if their consent was the most important thing! Show everyone that you ask for consent! [*Potrzebujemy Twojego głosu, aby każda kobieta czuła się bezpiecznie, była odpowiednio **chroniona przed przemocą**, a jej zgoda była najważniejsza! Pokaż, że pytasz o zgodę!*] (amnesty.org.pl/kampania-tak-to-milosc/)

The first examples discuss the fact that sexual consent education has in mind the raising of awareness on the subject of sexual assault and that consent allows actors to avoid being subjected to sexual violence.

- 10) Consent concerns all those who are engaged in sexual or erotic activities. It is an expression of self-care, emotional awareness, and one's needs. Where there is no consent and boundaries are crossed, we are talking about violence and rape. [*Świadoma zgoda dotyczy wszystkich zaangażowanych w aktywność seksualną albo erotyczną stron. Jest wyrazem dbania o siebie, kontaktu ze swoimi emocjami i potrzebami. Gdy jej nie ma – granice są naruszane - mówimy o **przemocy**, także o **gwałcie***]. (sexed.pl)
- 11) Giving and receiving consent is a key element in intimacy and without it, intimate contact turns into sexual assault or rape. [*Jej dawanie i otrzymanie jest bowiem kluczowym elementem zbliżenia, bez którego intymny kontakt staje się przemocą seksualną lub gwałtem*]. ([seksuolog bez tabu](http://seksuologbeztabu.pl))

Of course one of the main goals of sexual consent education is to raise awareness about sexual assault and also prevent it, however the discourse which places consent and assault in the same sentence simultaneously simplifies the concept. As mentioned before, consent is something that has been proven by scholars to be an extremely complex action, oftentimes riddled with emotions on the part of those actors expressing it. This means that consent might not be a simple “yes or no” ordeal and that the discourse in ways excludes those who express consent in different ways or have other contractual behavior established with their partner.

Transnational discourses of sexuality

Transnational perspectives in sociology also include looking at how discourses are cross-culturally and globally affected or influenced by one another. This means that even when considering a concept that looks seemingly neutral, the way that one might view sexual consent as a neutral subject, it is not difficult to identify the Anglo-Western influences had on Polish discourses. This perspective looks at how discourses revolving around the subject of sexual consent take part in the globalization of norms regarding sexuality to, in turn, lead to more progressive (hence changing) discourses on sexuality – ones that do not stigmatize actors or focus on stereotypes of sexual behavior in certain social groups.

The popular social campaigns, “yes means yes” and “no means no,” were formed in the Western sexual education context, therefore it is no surprise that some extent of the phenomenon is described in terms of its English counterparts. One must not ignore, however, the fact that the presence of the English term “consent” in the online literature makes itself known either throughout the texts or placed at the very beginning (in the first sentence or initial paragraph). The following examples demonstrate this usage.

- 12) **Consent (Eng.)** is conscious agreement to everything that concerns us and its function is to protect our boundaries. [**Consent (ang.)** *jest to świadoma zgoda na wszystko co nas dotyczy, a jej funkcją jest ochrona naszych granic*]. (pomocnia-poznan.pl)
- 13) We have been hearing more and more discussions on the subject of **sexual consent (from English)** recently. [*O świadomej zgodzie na seks (ang. sexual consent) mówi się w ostatnim czasie coraz więcej*]. (seksuolog bez tabu)
- 14) I will begin with a linguistic paradox. **Sex consent** [sic!] is sexual consent in English. The word „conscious” (in the Polish context) is silent and therefore obvious in that context. [*Zacznę od paradoksu językowego. Sex consent to po angielsku zgoda na seks. Słowo „świadoma” jest tu tak jakby nieme, ale oczywiste*]. (yourkaya.pl)

The phenomenon of lexical borrowing is nothing new in the context of linguistic discussion and it belongs to the more general category of linguistics known as *language contact*. It has been agreed upon that there is no consensus regarding the proper definition of *borrowing*, but that it is the “incorporation of foreign features into a group’s native language by speakers of that language” (Thomason, Kaufman, 1988, p. 37). The type of borrowing that is seen in the example of the word “consent” is *lexical borrowing*, which is the transfer of a lexical item from a source language into a recipient language. Lexical borrowing has been divided into *loan words* and *loan shifts* (Winford, 2005). This type of linguistic transfer, however, has also been argued to be a form of linguistic imperialism. Arguably, different cultures have differing approaches to sexuality, as classic studies on human sexuality have shown (Mead 1949).

This is not the only indicator of a globalized concept of sexual consent. The fact that sex educational discourses on consent reflect “yes means yes” ideologies and “no means no” ideologies is not only a sign that discourse is transferrable to other cultural contexts. This adapta-

tion to Polish online sources is demonstrative of the prevalence of a simplified model of consent that leans mostly on verbal communication.

Progressive discourses about sex

The examples that have been given in the previous sections point to an answer to one of the initial research questions regarding changes in the discourse of sexual education in Poland. One aspect of what has been named in the literature as a more progressive vision of sexual education is the acceptance of queerness (O'Quinn, Fields, 2020). My reference to inclusive forms of sexual education as "progressive" stems from the conservative approaches to sexual education that currently exist in Poland (Kościańska, 2017).

Grose, Grabe and Kohfeldt (2014, p. 744) highlight that progressive sexual education reforms revolve around a change in the curriculum of a sexual education program so that it includes the promotion of sexual empowerment and a veering away from traditional gender ideologies (including traditional gender roles in sexual interaction). The presence of gender-inclusive language and the subject of sexual consent itself in online discourses on sexuality contribute to a more progressive approach to educating about these topics.

One might ask why then, if the discourses of sexual consent education are doing so much good to educate people on how to properly ask for and interpret consent and refusal during sexual interactions, would there be anything to criticize? Yes, the changing tides in the ways that consent is discussed are laudable, however, the approach is subject to criticism because it is simplistic. Much of the way that sexual consent is discussed addresses the most superficial aspects of consent politics. The fact that consent is a notion that is more complex than simply stating yes or no to a proposition is addressed by only two of the sources analyzed. This includes the application of yes means yes and no means no policies that have been reflected in the discourse, which

have, in sociolinguistic literature, been proven to be the opposite (Kitzinger, Frith, 1999).

Several of the blogs make simplistic statements about sexual consent, failing to acknowledge the complexity and nuances of how various social groups might express sexual consent verbally or nonverbally. This, in turn, pressurizes communities to view consent as an act limited to the verbalization of consent and might also engender harmful views that sexual consent constrains partners or people to behavior that subtracts from their intimate livelihood.

The two major sexual consent campaigns that have their roots in Western culture include the “yes means yes” and “no means no” campaigns, both of which have had their influential hold on understanding consent culture and consent education practices. These ideologies (albeit positive ones) are both present in the discourses analyzed and are seen more directly stated, as well as embedded in indirect strategies, thus contributing to the analysis of implicature, where cultural assumptions are concerned.

- 15) In earlier educational and informational endeavors, the slogan “no means no” was used to illustrate consent. And of course that is still relevant, but oftentimes “no” does not mean consent. [*We wcześniejszych działaniach edukacyjnych i informacyjnych posługiwano się często sloganem „Nie znaczy NIE”. I oczywiście pozostaje ono aktualne. Ale bardzo często brak „nie”, nie oznacza zgody (kampania16dni.pl/)*]

This does not mean that the only type of consent that is propagated in the discourse is the word yes. Other forms of affirmative consent and verbal refusal are also promoted, such as in the following example:

- 16) You can also use verbal communication, i.e. words. When you say things like “This is nice” or “I like that,” you make it clear to the other person that what you are doing together is a positive experience. Remember that it is ok not to desire sexual interaction. You can always refuse by saying “I don’t want to do that, I don’t feel ok.” [*Możesz też użyć komunikacji werbalnej,*

czyli słownej. Mówiąc: „To jest przyjemne” lub „Podoba mi się to”, dajesz drugiej osobie jasny komunikat, że to, co robicie, jest pozytywnym doświadczeniem. Pamiętaj, że brak ochoty na kontakt seksualny jest w porządku. Zawsze możesz odmówić, na przykład mówiąc: „Nie chcę tego robić, nie jest mi dobrze”]. (grupaponton.pl)

The types of affirmative consent that are propagated in the majority of the discourse are those that are verbally expressed, including expressing that one likes a certain sexual act or behavior. The criticism of this is rather obvious: the “yes means yes” campaign of affirmative consent does not necessarily reflect actual sexual behavior. Nonverbal expressions of consent also make up for sexual consent expression, yet it is largely left out of the sex educational discourse.

Despite all of the benefits of more progressive campaigns on understanding consent, there still exists a symbolic silence on relationships that do not present such obvious dynamics and might exemplify something else, less overt. Consent is sometimes given where it is not necessarily reflective of an interactant’s actual want, however the abusive nature of a relationship might require that a participant consent to sex for their own safety. This is an aspect that such campaigns do not necessarily speak about, again oversimplifying what it means to give or refuse consent.

Conclusion

Existing theories of sexual consent can be viewed as reflective of the nuances of agreeing to partake in sexual activity. These complexities, however, are largely absent from the sexual consent discursive schemes discussed. As mentioned above, the yes means yes and no means no approaches to sexual consent have been described by linguists (conversation analysts, to be more specific) as overly simplistic. Women do not tend to simply “say no” as a means of refusal, which Kitzinger and Frith’s (1999) study has shown. Instead, more nuanced,

indirect means of communicating sexual refusal are pervasive in sexual communication.

This does not say that Polish communication styles, although known to be more direct in how they are carried out, are any different (Grainger, Mills, 2016). English communication styles, on the other hand, are known as being more indirect (*Ibidem*). It might seem that the online discourses of sexual education adopt from anglicized communication styles, especially given the topics of discussion on such public forums. As such, there is more in the discourse that must be interpreted. The indirect evaluation, which can be seen in the implicature that is present in the discourse, demonstrates negative attitudes to the socio-political climate in Poland and additionally takes on a critical stance towards the assumed knowledge that Poles have about sexual consent.

Both critical discourse analysis (more specifically FCDA) and feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis look at the representations of gender and gendered representations of social life in discourse. CDA, on the one hand, investigates power structures and their reproduction (including the reproduction of inequality) in discourse, whereas FPDA focuses on changing discourses. The subject of sexuality and sexual education, and within it, sexual consent, is one that teeters between power and progression. Hence, in order to adequately analyze its social transformation, several frameworks should be applied.

Although the more binary gendered sexual scripts were not necessarily present in the discourse, as first assumed, it was demonstrated that, as part of the transnational scheme hypothesized for here, gender-inclusive language was present in most of the examples of the sex education discourse on consent.

The analysis showed that, as discourses on sexuality are still related to sex as a taboo subject or something that many are embarrassed to talk about (Kulick, Willson, 1995), addressing such subjects comes with certain linguistic means of description. This includes the euphe-

mization of expressions related to sex and indirectly addressing cultural assumptions about phenomena such as the act of sex itself. This makes for an interesting new register within the description of the genre of internet communication on blogs and in articles online that serve to educate readers.

The relation of such discourse to implicature in the pragmalinguistic sense, however, demonstrated that cultural assumptions regarding the knowledge of sexual actors in the Polish context are mostly indirectly communicated in the discourse. Interestingly, this type of indirectness which has been described as serving an educational purpose, is expressed in the form of questions, euphemistic expressions, the presence of modal verbs, and inclusive language. In turn, it works to inform its readers that popular (and oftentimes harmful) ideologies about sexuality do not work on par with the way that communication should take place in real life.

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