



Epistolary texts in a comparative perspective: the case of readers' letters in Polish and English

Tatiana Szczygłowska (Bielsko-Biała)

ABSTRACT

The article presents the genre model of the letter to the press based on a comparative study of 140 Polish and English readers' letters. The analysis encompasses structural, pragmatic, semantic and stylistic matters. The discussed texts are assigned their place within the letter genre, grouped into different types depending on their propositional content and further characterized as marked by a repertoire of genre signals. Additionally, the controversy over their genre membership (editorials vs. letters) is resolved and they are recognized as genuine research material, notwithstanding some degree of editorial bias involved in the publication process.

KEYWORDS

English, epistolary texts, genre model, letter to the press, Polish

1. INTRODUCTION

Readers' letters, also known as letters to the press or letters to the editor, are "letters sent to publications by readers to express opinions about a wide range of issues" (Walkosz 2008: 403). They belong to the representatives of one of the earliest forms of people's literate activities that gave rise to the development of many other genres. Yet, as Barton and Hall (2000: 1-2) argue, although "most people have an intuitive idea of what counts as letter writing", "there has been little study of letters as a genre, compared, for example, with poetry and the novel". The scarcity of research materials on letters to the press suggests that they have also been marginalized. Studied mainly as a means of readers' participation in public discourse and listed in letter writing guides, letters to the press seem to have been somewhat neglected by genre researchers, even though they can certainly "be considered a genre" which "has evolved since its origin" (Magnet and Garnet 2006: 179).

Indeed, "there is no great doubt that 'letters' in general", and those written to the press in particular, "form a special and distinct 'genre' or 'text type', contrasting in both intra- and extralinguistic features with other 'genres' or 'text types' such as 'recipe', 'testament', 'sermon' etc." (Bergs 2007: 27). Marked by dialogic features, intended to communicate to others, through the newspaper's editor, a personal opinion on matters either previously reported in the paper or mentioned by other writers, letters to the press reveal their semantic potential through a repertoire of pragmatic, structural and stylistic components. Irrespective of the criticism sometimes expressed at these texts' value as analytic material, they seem to have a long-standing tradition as a means of readers' participation in public debates as well as indirectly in journalism, which simply needs to be attentive to what newspaper audience think, say or like about the surrounding reality. As Stanley and Jolly (2017: 229) claim, "epistolary is alive and flourishing in text, email, and social media of different kinds",

but unfortunately “the letter, (...) is in rapid decline almost everywhere”, seemingly also as an object of study. To address this gap, the paper aims to characterize the letter to the press as a distinct genre in terms of form, function, writer-receiver relations, specific contents and linguistic devices, all of which mingle and intertwine with one another, constituting the realm of this form of communication. Additionally, the set of generic conventions is explored cross-linguistically to establish which of them are utilized differently in Polish and English letters to the press.



2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 CONTROVERSIES SURROUNDING THE GENRE OF THE LETTER TO THE PRESS

One of the major controversies surrounding letters to the press is their genre membership. Some scholars classify these texts as a sub-genre of editorials (e.g. Biber 1988; Lee 2001), while others (e.g. Bex 1996; Wojtak 2002) argue that they actually meet the conditions behind the rationale for the letter genre. What editorials and letters to the press have in common is the place of publication, that is the opinion section of a newspaper, the potential to inspire the writing of one another and the fact that they both offer people an opportunity to voice their opinion. Additionally, Bazerman (2003: 463) claims that letters to the press are recognizable forms, which are nevertheless “tied up with many other forms, such as newspaper editorials (...) and many other elements of the journalistic and public spheres”.

Still, editorials are written by the editorial staff as a “message from the editor” intended to express the official opinion of the newspaper or “the policies of the journal” (Vázquez y del Árbol 2005: 145). In contrast, letters to the press are written by ordinary people who want to present personal views to the public. Gove (1993: 723) also suggests that editorials should be seen as articles aimed at expressing the “views of those in control of the publication on a matter of current interest”. They may sometimes adopt the format of a letter, but unlike readers’ correspondence, they neither arrive through the letter box nor are sent via the Internet.

By comparison, Bex (1996: 156) postulates that there are good grounds for assuming that in the act of composing letters to the press, writers actually follow the rules associated with the rationale behind the genre of letters. Additionally, in the case of readers’ correspondence, it is equally probable that those who want to have their letters published follow the editor’s guidelines, which regulate how such texts should be organized. Yet, as Biber and Conrad (2009: 17) maintain, the conventions constituting “part of what defines a letter” can actually “be identified only by considering complete letters”, access to which is typically restricted for the outsiders. Therefore, the fact that certain elements are not included in the printed versions does not necessarily imply that they were omitted in the original texts.

Another controversy surrounding letters to the press arises from the conception that “within the group of letters, a further distinction can be made between ‘private’ and ‘non-private’ writings” (Bergs 2007: 27). This seems to be a functional division, which is largely due to practical reasons for composing different types of letters. It



thus does not result directly from the internal features of language but is rather reflected in its phenomena, “often along the informal-formal, oral-literate, proximity-distance dimensions” (Bergs 2007: 27). Such considerations undoubtedly influence researchers’ attempts at assigning letters to the press to one or the other class.

Magnet and Carnet (2006: 175) stress that since letters to the press are intended to reach the general public, they “should be considered as deriving from ‘the open letter’ genre”. By comparison, Bex (1996: 154) mentions letters to the press alongside such letter types as the problem page letter or various instances of business correspondence. In his classification, letters to the press are investigated in a section devoted to public, that is, non-private genres, which actually makes them instances of official correspondence. This view is shared by Goggin and Long (2009: 8), who label the letters “as a public genre”. Similarly, Wojtak (2002: 197–198) lists letters to the press among other representatives of official (public) letters, such as different variants of business letters, pastoral letters, open letters or letters of application. Yet, she further explains that letters to the press should be in fact seen as combining the characteristics of both private and public correspondence, both of which are sub-types of functional letters. The typological confusion surrounding the place that readers’ letters occupy within the letter genre has been aptly resolved by Ananny (2014: 940), according to whom a letter to the press is:

both personal (written to a particular editor or editorial board) and public (addressing a broad enough concern that it is meant to be relevant to a news audience). It represents a personal point of view (letting readers consider whether they agree or not with one of their own), but it is also evidence of editorial decision-making (signalling that this letter writer is the kind of participant editors are willing to engage with).

Yet another controversy surrounding letters to the press centres on the issue whether they are authentic and hence constitute reliable research material. One of the problems with readers’ correspondence is related to the conviction that notwithstanding the importance of these texts to public deliberation on vital matters in a democracy, still “caution should be taken in surmising that letters to the editor are a true reflection of public opinion on a topic”, as not everyone wants to express private views through this public medium (Walkosz 2008: 403). The doubts in this respect are reinforced, on the one hand, by the editorial team’s right to edit readers’ letters if necessary or even to reject some of them, and on the other, by research findings of scholars examining the nature of this public forum.

Grey and Brown (1970), for instance, maintain that letters to the press reflect not really audience diversity but rather the editors’ gatekeeping function, whereas da Silva (2012) claims they simply show what senior editors consider to be important topics. Wahl-Jorgensen (2007, 2002a), in turn, argues that letters to the press are not among an editor’s main duties, and adds that the editorial staff tend to question the value of the letters column as a platform for democratic communication due to the non-representativeness of the writers and a general unwillingness to participate in public debate. Wahl-Jorgensen (2002b) also mentions four criteria of ‘newsworthi-

ness' used by editors to select or reject letters to be published, such as relevance — preference for topics that are truly interesting to the general public; entertainment — the entertaining nature of the issues touched upon in letters; brevity — preference for brief and punchy letters; authority — preference for letter writers who have something to say and know how to say it in terms of textual competence and personal character. Nielsen (2010), by comparison, is convinced that editors print those letters which they find novel, timely, publicly resonant, personally evocative, written by individuals, fair and objective, as well as likely to stimulate further public debate.

However, there also exists convincing evidence that letters to the press actually provide genuine research material, notwithstanding a degree of selection on the editor's part. For example, Singletary and Cowling (1979) discovered that more than two-thirds of writers to the non-daily press in Pennsylvania said everything they penned was published, sometimes after minor changes. Almost the same results were reported by Renfro (1979) on a daily newspaper in Texas, who however observed slight cuts in length of the letters caused by space limitations but no interference in the writer's main line of reasoning. Similarly, in her analysis of letter opinion about the Equal Rights Amendment in the US, Pawlata (2004) noticed no editorial bias in the choice of letters for publication. Sigelman and Walkosz (1992), by comparison, discovered that published letters actually reflected the major aspects of public opinion on establishing a Martin Luther King Holiday in Arizona. Added to that is Perrin and Vaisey's (2008) study of letters sent to a large-circulation metropolitan newspaper, which revealed that despite the editorial policy to select mainly letters concerned with items previously discussed in the paper, as many as 71 percent of the analysed sample did not focus on such issues and were printed anyway.

Additionally, it should be remembered that “a letter originates from an ‘I’ (or a number of them) who signs the letter and in doing so guarantees its authenticity” (Stanley 2004: 207). This seems to be an apt remark also with regard to the letters analysed in the present study, all of which were appended with the signatures of their authors, or even addresses in the case of English texts. It thus seems that letter writers, whose identity can be verified owing to the presence of the above details, are generally successful in getting their letters published as long as they comply with the editor's guidelines provided on the letters' pages.

2.2 MAIN GENRE SIGNALS OF THE LETTER TO THE PRESS

The main genre indicators of the letter to the press are generally consistent with those distinguished for other epistolary texts, many of which can be found in letter-writing handbooks that derive from the *ars dictaminis* or “the medieval art of composing letters and other prose documents” (Camargo 2011: 36). In particular, letters are written to communicate with someone who is absent and far away. Therefore, as Violi (1985: 149) suggests, what “identifies the letter as a specific genre is the way in which this function is inscribed within the text”. Stanley (2015: 242) refers to this as “epistolary intent”, claiming it “involves the intention to communicate, in writing or a cognate representational medium, to another person who is ‘not there’ because removed in time/space from the writer, and doing so with the hope or expectation of a response”.





What seems to be an equally important genre signal is the letter's illocutionary force. As Barton and Hall (2000: 6–7) claim, “the existence of the letter itself has meaning in addition to the content and, in a reflexive way, reference is often made within the letter to the existence of the letter itself”. In other words, the letter signifies its own being through both propositional content and the fact it enables communication which otherwise would be impossible “because of the absence of the writer and the distance (literal or figurative) between them and the addressee” (Stanley 2004: 209). Actually, the very fact of drafting and posting a letter to the press signals in advance the author's intention to share their opinion. Thus, the editorial staff, when they receive the letter, know why it has been sent.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the genre is its dialogic nature, since each letter resembles to some extent a form of exchange which is unique to a written dialogue. This view is pursued by Stanley (2004: 202), for whom letters include phrases indicating that they “are dialogical (...) a communication or exchange between one person and another or others”. By comparison, Jolly and Stanley (2005: 94) describe letters as “relational and ‘conversation-like’”, whereas Darling (2014: 485) sees them as “dialogical ‘documents of life’, which offer an insight into the relations between letter writers and their addressees”.

Similarly, Wojtak (2002: 197) considers letters as a substitute for conversation, which simultaneously constitutes a type of written monologic utterance addressed to an absent recipient. Their main function is to convey information, or more generally, to fulfil certain practical aims. Indeed, letters always “have purposeful intent”, which in turn makes it possible to classify them as instances of functional texts (Jolly and Stanley 2005: 95). Epistolary texts are in fact textual realizations of a specific genre pattern characterized by a set of long-established conventions. Yet, as Stanley (2004: 217) suggests, “these conventions provide a shape, rather than hard and fast requirements, and adherence to the rhetorical conventions can be combined with features typical of the writer (...) specific and characteristic usages, and with significant differences in content and practice evolving over time”. Therefore, letters cannot be described as a homogeneous genre category since, apart from some prototypical model represented by texts following most of the genre conventions, they also encompass a number of less exemplary variants, such as the letter to the press.

2.3 GENRE MODEL OF THE LETTER TO THE PRESS

The recommended structure of readers' letters stems directly from the compositional scheme of the letter to the press fixed by tradition, that is its genre pattern, understood as the conventional staging structures and linguistic features accompanying these components. As Witosz (2004: 43) suggests, genre is generally perceived as an abstract construct, a model defined by a set of conventions which serve to identify and differentiate between texts. This view is shared by Wojtak (2004a: 16, 2004b: 30), who adds that genre is characterized by specific rules determining the most important levels of its organization, relations between these levels as well as the ways in which these levels function. Still, each genre pattern has a variety of specific linguistic realizations which are generated by the following aspects: structural, relating to text structure; pragmatic, referring to the communicative entanglement of interloc-

utors; semantic, pertaining to specific topics and the way of presenting them; as well as stylistic, concerned with the use of specific linguistic features, devices or patterns (Wojtak 2014: 63–64).

In her study of readers' correspondence, Wojtak (2002) reconstructed the genre model of the letter to the press and discussed its basic variants. In particular, in the canonical model the structural aspect is realized in terms of three components: the initial stage including some form of address as well as a short introduction to the main theme of the letter. Newspaper editors actually suggest starting each letter with a heading indicating the name and address of the newspaper as well as the date of writing, which should be followed by a salutation: *Dear Editor* or *To the Editor*. Then, there is the main stage or the body of the letter, divided into short and clear paragraphs and devoted to presenting the essence of the writer's intention. This is followed by the final stage encompassing some form of goodbye and a phrase identifying the author, especially the author's hand-written signature, real name, address and phone number, which are required for verification purposes but are not printed to protect the person's anonymity. By comparison, the alternative variants usually take the form of a more or less reduced version of the canonical model. Sometimes, however, the phrase addressing the recipient may be substituted for the letter's title.

2.4 THE SEMANTIC ASPECT OF THE GENRE MODEL

The semantic aspect of the genre pattern of letters to the press is related to their propositional content, which is generally concerned with providing comments related to issues that have been covered in a newspaper either in some article or in previous letters from readers. More specifically, Gregory and Hutchinson (2004: 194) claim that what matters in the case of local newspapers is the "localism or proximity" of the issue. Similar conclusions were reached by Clendening (2004: 2–3), who adds that national issues are given more attention by letter writers addressing large urban papers. Yet, because letters to the press serve the purpose of offering readers a public platform for discussion, they are primarily argumentative in their nature, that is, "designed to convince readers of the acceptability of a point of view and to provoke them into an immediate or future course of action" (Atkin and Richardson 2007: 2). Somewhat less popular but still finding their place on the letters pages are those letters that are rather concerned with jokes, apologies, anecdotes, requests or thanks.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study presented in this article focuses on letters to the press, attempting to identify in them a variety of conventional genre signals. The adopted perspective is also cross-linguistic, since attention is devoted to readers' letters written in Polish and English to see how the specific generic conventions are utilized in each language. The following research questions are addressed:



- (1) What structural, pragmatic, semantic and stylistic features are characteristic of the genre of the letter to the press?
- (2) Are these generic conventions utilized differently in Polish and English readers' letters?

4. CORPUS AND PROCEDURE

The analysis is based on a corpus of 140 letters to the press published in 2004 in the popular weekly newsmagazine *Newsweek* (70 in Polish and 70 in English), totalling 12,126 words. The letters in English come from *Newsweek International*, which is the European edition of *Newsweek*, an American news weekly published in New York City, whereas the letters in Polish come from *Newsweek Polska*, which is the Polish edition of the same American magazine. Both periodicals report on current political, national and international issues of interest, most of which are related to business, economic and cultural events. They also devote attention to technology, lifestyles, celebrities, the arts, trends in society and health matters.

The inclusion of the letters in the corpus was conditioned upon two criteria. First, the texts had to be argumentative in nature, that is, "designed to convince readers of the acceptability of a point of view and to provoke them into an immediate or future course of action" (Richardson 2007: 150). Second, whenever possible they were taken from the same letters page. As for the procedure, the individual letters were examined manually to ensure reliable identification of significant linguistic phenomena.

5. LETTER TO THE PRESS AS A DISTINCT GENRE: EVIDENCE FROM THE CORPUS

5.1 LENGTH OF THE LETTERS

As for the length of the analysed letters, Table 1 shows that the number of words used in Polish texts was 4629, giving an average of around 66 words, with the longest letter composed of 144 and the shortest of 32 words. In the English texts 7497 words were recorded, giving an average of around 107 words, with the longest letter consisting of 239 and the shortest of 46 words. The *t*-test value revealed that the difference in the mean length of Polish and English letters to the press was statistically extremely significant, $t(138) = 6.9962$, $p < 0.0001$.

	POLISH letters	ENGLISH letters	The whole corpus
Number of words	4629	7497	12126
Average length of a letter (<i>M</i>)	66.12	107.1	86.61
Standard deviation (<i>SD</i>)	22.99	43.28	40.18
Length of the longest letter	144	239	239
Length of the shortest letter	32	46	32

TABLE 1. Results obtained for the length of Polish and English letters to the press



The above data indicate that Polish writers, in contrast to those writing in English, tend to be concise in expressing their views in public, also in terms of the number of sentences in a single letter (only around 5 in Polish and 5.6 in English). This is most probably due to the typological difference between the two languages. As Lichtheim (1973: 12) argues, “analytic English grammar requires more words and builds longer sentences”, whereas synthetic Polish expresses many of its syntactic relations by inflectional endings.

5.2 MAIN GENRE SIGNALS

The generic conventions observed in letters to the press are in fact consistent with those of epistolary texts in general. Indeed, the maintenance of contact and the desire to diminish the distance between sender and receiver are manifested in the letters’ reflexivity, openness to suggestions, the wish to keep the conversation going, and the attempt to treat both parties as equal, recognizing at the same time their distinct social roles (Karwatowska and Nowak 2003: 60). For instance, in (1a) and (1b) some response is called for on the part of the addressee, in (2) the writer wants to thank the editor for raising some important issue, whereas in (3a) and (3b) the author is referring back to something previously published in the newspaper:

(1a) *C’mon. Give us a break*

(1b) *Przewodnik po światowych kurortach jest ciekawy (...) Ale może są jakieś nowe możliwości wypoczynku w Polsce? (...) Może warto to opisać?*

‘The guide to world health resorts is interesting (...) But maybe there are some new possibilities of going on holiday in Poland? (...) Maybe it is worth writing about?’

(2) *Thank you for Fareed Zakaria’s great cover story (...) and for Evan Thomas’s interesting Iraq-Vietnam comparison (...)*

(3a) *Your article on Vice President Dick Cheney gave me...*

(3b) *Tekst o uzdrawiaczach przypomniał mi historię mojej matki.*

‘The article on healers reminded me of my mother’s story.’

Equally important are “specific forms of deixis, that is, ways of referring to the writer, the intended reader and to space and time” (Barton and Hall 2000: 6). The writer is present in the letter at least in the signature but also in the 1st person pronouns (*I, me, mojego* ‘my’, *mi* ‘me’), and in Polish, in such 1st person verb forms as *przeczytałem* ‘I have read’. The addressee is made manifest in the second person pronouns (*you, your*) and in such identifying phrases as “*Newsweek*”, *are you assisting in (...)* or *Autor listu* *przejawia arogancję* ‘The author of the letter shows arrogance’, where reference is made to a particular reader, that is the author of earlier correspondence. Additionally, the recipient is signalled in the salutation which, unfortunately, is not available in the printed versions of the analysed letters. This can be accounted for by the fact that publishers typically reserve the right to edit the texts “for reasons of space and clarity”.



Moreover, every letter makes repeated references to “the there and then of writing” and “the here and now of reading”, intending to set up a spatio-temporal distance between the actual here and now of two parties: the writer and the reader (Stanley 2004: 208). Generally, the time and place of writing are signalled before the salutation and on the envelope, yet remain unknown to the readers, especially in the case of the Polish letters analysed here. In the English letters, at least the place where the letter was written is revealed under the writer’s name. As for the date of writing, a reliable indicator for this is the date of publication. Letter writers tend to devote their attention to current matters or previous articles published on a specific date, which allows to determine with considerable accuracy when the letter was written. The now of the writer is also signalled by sentences referring to particular newspaper texts, which in English are accompanied by their date of publication, as in (4); in Polish, relevant details are provided in brackets at the end of the letter, as in (5). Helpful are also more general temporal references illustrated in (6).

- (4) *the cover line of the March 22 issue, “Europe’s 9/11”*
- (5) *Fascynujący tekst o lekarzach złodziejach + (“Gabinety martwych dusz”, “Newsweek” 23/2004)*
 ‘The fascinating article about doctors-thieves’ + ‘(“Doctor’s surgeries for dead souls”, “Newsweek” 23/2004)’
- (6) *Właśnie wczoraj miałem wykład z etyki dla studentów (...)*
 ‘Just yesterday I gave a lecture to the students (...)’.

It should be also pointed out that “every letter or part of a letter is able to constitute specific illocutionary acts (...) as well as to generate communicative strategies” which are often found in conversation (Violi 1985: 162). In the analysed letters there can be found, for instance, expressives, thanking for previous articles, as in (7a) and (7b); commissives, by which the writer promises to act in response to something previously discussed in the newspaper, as in (8a) and (8b); directives, by which the writer attempts to provoke the reader to respond or react accordingly, as in (9a) and (9b):

- (7a) *Thank you for your cover story on “The lord of the Rings.”*
- (7b) *Gratulacje w związku z artykułem dotyczącym łamania praw pracowniczych w supermarketach.*
 ‘Congratulations on the article on violations of workers’ rights’
- (8a) *Thanks to your persuasive and timely article, you leave me no choice: I have already contacted my Apple Store to place my order for the new model.* (in response to an article on a new model of iPod)
- (8b) (...) *dopiero z państwa artykułu dowiedziałem się (...)* Gdy trafię w te rejony, może zawitam nad jezioro Titicaca
 ‘I would like to do something to help people who suffer so much’ (in response to an article about cities on water in South America)

- (9a) (...) but please show him and his followers that our way (...)
- (9b) *Moja przyjaciółka (...) nie mogła zajść w ciążę (...) Zaczęła praktykować ćwiczenia relaksujące (...) spróbowała zajść w ciążę — i udało się! Kobiety — idźcie jej śladem!*
 ‘My friend (...) couldn’t become pregnant (...) She started relaxing exercises (...) tried to become pregnant — and she made it! Women — follow her example!’



5.3 GENRE MODEL

As for the genre model of the letter to the press, it is important to note that “‘the letter’ as a genre type immediately dissolves into messy or hybridic forms once actual examples come under analytic scrutiny” (Jolly and Stanley 2005: 94). This seems to be the case with the letters analysed here, since at least their printed versions do not include any form of address, instead, in Polish there is some title, whereas in English the first line of the letter is capitalized and letters devoted to the same subject are grouped under one title. The other initial element, namely the introductory part, depends on the main communicative intention of the writer. In letters conveying favourable or negative criticism reference is made to a previously published article or to the issue under discussion: *I read “The New Face of Marriage” (March 1) with sadness, which is followed by the writer’s opinion.* In letters dealing with commentary and polemic first the topic is stated and then a stance is taken on it, as in (10). Often, no reference is made to a particular newspaper article; however, the text which previously discussed that topic is indicated in one way or another. In the Polish letters, some mention of relevant newspaper coverage is made in brackets at the end of the letter, as illustrated in (11). Moreover, every letter is given a title outlining its propositional content and thus giving potential readers a clue as to what aspect of news is discussed. As for the English letters, they are published in groups under the same heading, which indicates that their content is similar and hence gives an idea about the newspaper publication that provoked this debate. Yet, there are also letters with individual titles. Finally, letters that can be labelled as reactions start with details concerning the writer and topic to which the author wants to respond, as shown in (12).

- (10) *Rocznik ’86 został postawiony w stresującej sytuacji.*
 ‘The people born in 1986 have been put in a stressing situation.’
- (11) (*„Po co nam nowa matura?”*, „Newsweek” 36/2004)
 (‘Why do we need a new school-leaving exam?, „Newsweek” 36/2004’)
- (12) *Dr Wiesław Czernikiewicz wyraził oburzącą opinię, że...*
 ‘Dr Wiesław Czernikiewicz expressed the outrageous opinion that...’

The main stage or the body of the letter is also largely dependent upon the topic, which should be addressed “in a manner that might inform or persuade readers to change their actions” and that is of interest to the masses rather than to individuals (Devitt 2004: 183). Generally, the letters are developed by giving evidence and arguments to support the main opinion; often personal reflections or explanations are



provided or even solutions to the discussed problem. With regard to the final stage, in the analysed letters there are no forms of saying goodbye nor phrases giving regards, at least in the printed versions of the letters. Yet, there is some indication of the writer's identity. In English, the letters end with the writer's full name, followed by the place of residence, as in (13). In Polish, there is usually only the writer's name, which is hardly ever followed by their city of residence. Occasionally, also the title a person holds is mentioned or the position they occupy at work or organization, as in (14). Sometimes, especially in Polish, people give their initials or write only their first name or they even wish to remain anonymous. Still, quite a common practice in Polish is to print at the end of each letter information about the article and issue of the newspaper that the writer is responding to in the letter, as in (15), which is most probably added by the editor rather than by the letter writer.

- (13) *Michelle Hollingsworth*
Parklans, Florida
- (14) *Ewa M. Hunca*
Kancelaria Prezydenta RP
'Ewa M. Hunca
Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland'
- (15) („*Bezczynność pod latarnią*”, „*Newsweek*” 40/2004)
'("Idleleness under a street lamp", "Newsweek" 40/2004)'

As for the pragmatic aspect of the genre model, what marks letters to the press as distinct from other types of letters is their unique communicative intention which, according to Evans (2013: 64), consists in the desire “to raise awareness of an issue, to influence people's opinions or actions, to let readers know about an organization or event they think is important, or to respond to something previously published in that venue”. The comments are addressed either to the editor, as in (16), or both to the editor and other readers, especially when some opinion is presented in general terms rather than directed at a particular addressee. Important is also the fact that the discussed texts constitute “mediated, written dialog communication between people unable to engage in direct oral dialog” (Toktagazin et al. 2016: 5834). To keep the process of correspondence exchange going, letter writers ask questions similar to the ones in (17a) and (17b). They also look for advice or explanation, as illustrated in (18), as well as respond to previously published texts, as in (19), attempting to manifest their interest in something their interlocutors have written about.

- (16) *Your cover asks why Dick Cheney “fell for bad intelligence” (...) To the contrary, he ably and successfully (...) Also, you did not mention his (...)*
- (17a) *I am puzzled by a comment in “Search for the Sacred” that “There is virtually no surviving physical evidence” for the Gospels. What would surviving physical evidence be?*



- (17b) *Po raz pierwszy podczas lektury “Newsweeka” zrobiło mi się wstyd (...) Po co informacje o życiu prywatnym?*
 ‘That was the first time I had felt ashamed when reading ‘Newsweek’ (...) Why include information about private life?’
- (18) *I wonder how Newsweek found so many candid shots of people smiling to each other with those iPod wires sticking out of their ears.*
- (19) *Z zainteresowaniem przeczytałem rozmowę między Donaldem Tuskiem i Andrzejem Lepperem. Chciałbym jednak sprostować, że nie było to — jak państwo piszą — (...)*
 ‘It was interesting for me to read the conversation between DT and AL. However, I would like to put it right that contrary to what you wrote — (...)

With reference to the stylistic aspect of the genre pattern, the main features are persuasiveness, expressiveness, the conventionality of some linguistic forms and the presence of elements that are “interactive and directed towards a specific individual” (Biber and Finegan 1989: 495). Additionally, letters are characterized by the stylistic means of expression that can often be found in written language, for instance, *According to Lee M. Silver, W odpowiedzi na ‘In response to’*. Indeed, because the writer and reader do not know one another, care is taken of maintaining the degree of social distance between the two, for instance, *Panie Redaktorze ‘[Mr] Editor’*. The writers are also aware that the expressed opinions “are actually addressed to ‘the public’, to a collectivity of addressees” and only formally to an editor, which is probably why grammatical, spelling and punctuation correctness is maintained (Stanley 2004: 207). They also try not to offend potential readers by writing *listem autorstwa pana Krzysztofa Regmunta* ‘the letter written by Mr Krzysztof Regmunt’, or by attacking issues or texts rather than people: *Your Aug. 30 cover story, “After Me, Democracy,” is biased against*. Moreover, mostly formal or official forms of address (e.g. *Vice President Dick Cheney*) as well as specialist vocabulary (e.g. *prokalcitonina* ‘procalcitonine’) and a matter-of-fact approach prevail (e.g. *our GDP grew by 6.8 percent in the first quarter*).

However, the analysed letters also contain colloquial forms typical of oral discourse, such as *he’s*, *Sorry about that*, as well as phrases indicating that some writers wanted to diminish the distance separating them from the readers. This was often achieved by combining elements of formal and informal language. For example, the colloquial expression *C’mon* was used in the same letter as the more sophisticated *Please consider your core readership*, or *Bagno w szkołach wyższych* ‘The morass in higher education institutions’ was combined with *byłem recenzentem pracy habilitacyjnej przedstawionej Radzie Naukowej Instytutu* ‘I was a reviewer of a habilitation thesis submitted to the Scientific Board of the Institute’. English letter writers sometimes incorporated in their writing contracted forms like *I’d* or *haven’t*. Additionally, some writers enlivened their texts with emotional overtones, writing *Cieszę się, że* ‘I’m happy that’ or *I screamed with glee*, or incorporating personal experience: *Przez 6 lat byłem proboszczem w Kołbacz pod Szczecinem* ‘For 6 years I was a parish priest in Kołbacz near Szczecin’. There are also instances of crude, unrefined vocabulary, as in



(20a) and (20b), though generally letter writers try to be polite, as in (21a) and (21b), as well as care about the aesthetics of linguistic form, as in (22a) and (22b), but cases of linguistic carelessness also occur, as in (23).

(20a) *How can a buffoon like George W. Bush*

(20b) *byśmy nie musieli czytać bełkotliwych ściniek*

'so that we wouldn't have to read pseudo-intellectual snips'

(21a) *Please consider*

(21b) *Chciałam zwrócić uwagę na*

'I would like to direct attention to'

(22a) *Christopher Dickey correctly underlined*

(22b) *Andrew Nagorski trafnie zauważył*

'Andrew Nagorski aptly remarked'

(23) *żeby pójść do fajnego kina, pogadać a chłopakiem w kinowym barku*

'to go to a cool cinema, chat to a boyfriend at the cinema dive'

Generally, the above features seem to indicate that letters to the press constitute instances of non-private personal correspondence.

5.4 THE SEMANTIC ASPECT OF THE GENRE MODEL

The semantic aspect of the genre model delineates the 'what' of the text, as it is concerned with its content. Considering the letters examined here, those derived from the Polish edition of *Newsweek*, which is a magazine of nation-wide circulation, convey readers' opinions related to national issues. By comparison, the content of letters taken from the international English edition is rather of worldwide character. More specifically, the analysed sample of letters seems to fall within the typology proposed by Pearson (1975: 257).

First, there are letters expressing adverse criticism, which are concerned with attacking the newspaper for failing to discuss some issue in the best possible way, as in (24). This group also comprises letters in which criticism is rather directed at something that is related to a specific situation which was described in a previous article. Among the analysed letters there are also those combining appreciation with criticism. Typically, letter writers comment upon a previously published article by complimenting it and continue by adopting a more negative tone.

(24) *Your Aug. 30 cover story, "After Me, Democracy," is biased against Hong Kong's Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa.*

The second category comprises letters expressing favourable criticism. Writers start by thanking the journalist for covering a particular topic or for tackling it in an interesting way. Then, they express their reflections related to that issue or sometimes even supplement it with additional information. Within this group, there are also let-

ters which simply express positive comments on a state of affairs that has been presented by the newspaper, as illustrated in (25a) and (25b):

- (25a) *Finally, a major publication has the courage to put the subject matter in correct terms: "Fighting Bush's War" (March 29)*
 (25b) *Poruszył mnie tekst „W ławkach wciąż siedzą duchy”
 ‘I was moved by the article “There are still ghosts sitting in the benches”’*

The third category encompasses letters presenting commentary and polemic, usually in the form of readers' reflections on various aspects of a state of affairs previously described in the newspaper, as shown in (26). The range of covered topics is really extensive, although the majority are centred around contemporary issues. What seems to be a somewhat more distinguishing characteristic of this group is the fact that such letters are devoid of direct attacks or criticism, as illustrated in (27).

- (26) *Marseille is "France's Port Of Pride" (tip sheet, July 19)? The city center has been converted over the years into a huge marketplace for smugglers and all kind of trafficking (...) Marseille? No, thanks!*
 (27) *Przed chwilą przeczytałem tekst o złodziejskiej giełdzie w Szczecinie Płoni.
 ‘I have just read the article about the thievish second-hand car sale in Szczecin Płonia’ (followed by reflections based on personal experience)*

The fourth category includes letters dealing with reactions to previous correspondence, which fall into three main types. First, writers express their outrage at something that was discussed in one of the previous letters, as in (28). Second, they correct various inaccuracies which crept into someone else's correspondence, as in (29). Third, they respond to the malignant comments and insinuations made about them either in previous letters or articles, as in (30). The writers try to refute the charges levelled against them and go on to explain all misconceptions about themselves.

- (28) *W swym liście do redakcji Ryszard Furtak (...) określił środowisko homoseksualistów jako „chore”.
 ‘In his letter to the editor, Ryszard Furtak (...) described homosexuals as ‘sick’, followed by the writer's expression of outrage.*
 (29) *In his Jan. 19 article about the planet Mars (“Another World”), Oliver Morton says:
 (...) I must correct him: this is not so.*
 (30) *W odpowiedzi na propozycję legalizacji związków homoseksualnych wystąpiłem do mediów stanowisko Akcji Katolickiej mojej diecezji. Redakcja „Newsweeka” wyrwała z kontekstu trzy cytaty i głos w dyskusji zmieniła w żenujące prześmiewisko
 ‘In response to the proposal to legalise homosexual relations I sent to the media the position of the Catholic Action in my diocese. The editorial team*



of “Newsweek” took three quotations out of context and made a laughing stock of this opinion’.

Finally, the fifth category, labelled as ‘others’, comprises texts which do not meet the criteria established for the remaining categories. Such letters deal with diverse topics and are usually written by the editorial staff or some journalist whose main purpose is to explain, correct or apologize for false information published in the newspaper, as illustrated in (31). In the Polish corpus, there are also editor’s letters thanking readers for their interest in a specific aspect of news coverage. In English, similar content is presented in the form of a short note marked as “mail call” which provides editor’s comments summing up a topic that especially attracted letter writers.

- (31) *Wyjaśnienie — W tabeli rankingu stu najcenniejszych firm pomyłkowo wpisano błędne dane dotyczące spółki Stomil Olsztyn SA.*
 ‘Explanation’ — ‘In the table presenting the ranking of the top 100 most valuable companies, the data concerning Stomil Olsztyn PLC were incorrect’
 (followed by correction and ended with apologies):
Za pomyłkę przepraszamy “
 ‘We apologize for this mistake’

6. CONCLUSION

The foregoing study has shown that letters to the press have a unique repertoire of generic conventions, some of which are utilized differently in Polish and English readers’ letters. As for the first research question posed in Section 3, the findings indicate that the main genre signals of the letter to the press are consistent with those generally associated with the letter genre. Among these, the seemingly most typical feature is the potential for a mutual exchange between two parties who are separated by a spatio-temporal distance. An important structural characteristic of letters to the press is their organization in terms of three components: the initial, main and final. Yet, in their printed version, the letters do not include any salutation or date of writing, although the latter can sometimes be inferred from the content of the text. Similarly, in the closing part there are no politeness or farewell expressions and the most common detail of the writer’s identity is their name, but not necessarily place of residence. An important pragmatic aspect of the genre is its unique communicative intention of sharing personal viewpoints with other people and possibly persuading them to accept the argued line of reasoning. The predominant stylistic devices used in letters to the press include those linguistic means of expression that are interactive, persuasive, expressive, and yet moderate, rather polite and formal, even though occasionally diversified with elements of *colloquial*, everyday language. Finally, the semantic aspect of the genre is reflected in the content of the letters, which should generally revolve around matters of topical interest. Typically, letters to the press present commentary and polemic, deal with reactions to earlier correspondence as well as express either diverse or favourable criticism, although there are also texts that fall outside these categories.



Regarding the second research question, the study reveals that most of the generic conventions of the letter to the press are utilized similarly in Polish and English. Yet, there are also certain differences, among which a major one has been noted in the length of the letters, as those written in Polish are generally shorter. With respect to the structure of the analysed texts, each Polish letter starts with a title indicating its content and ends with the writer's name, which is preceded by information in brackets about the newspaper coverage referred to in the letter. By comparison, the beginning of English letters is capitalized and individual titles are reserved for collections of texts dealing with the same issue. Moreover, the letters in Polish end simply with the writer's name, which in English is supplemented with the place of residence. Differences are also found with regard to the semantic aspect of Polish and English letters to the press. Basically, all of the examined letters fall into the categories mentioned above; however, those written in Polish are mostly concerned with domestic matters whereas those in English centre on more worldwide concerns. Generally, it seems that the above differences between Polish and English letters to the press result from the slightly differing profile of the two editions of *Newsweek* from which the analysed texts come, and partly also from the dissimilar inherent characteristics of the two language systems (e.g. length of the letters or contractions in English).

Overall, letters to the press provide an interesting material for analysis that should not be abandoned by researchers enthralled by the multitude of newly emerging genres of 21st century communication, especially that we may expect "the post-digital age, one where the very taken-for-grantedness of the digital returns us to the material, and where the personal pleasure of the letter continues in the obviously new" (Stanley and Jolly 2017: 231-232).

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Tatiana Szczygłowska

Institute of Neophilology
University of Bielsko-Biala
ul. Willowa 2, 43-309 Bielsko-Biała, Poland
tszczygłowska@ath.bielsko.pl

