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## *Bez sensu* as an act of communication

The results of verbal communication can be discussed at various levels, be they linguistic, mental or sociological. In traditional linguistic theories, they are related to lists of functions of utterances. In psychology, they constitute the starting point in a diagnosis of mental properties and the mental condition of the communicator, while in sociology, based on the study of verbal behaviours of communities, scholars develop interpretations, theories and postulates of mass communication. In analyses based on the communication theory<sup>1</sup>, two aspects must be addressed: the emotive aspect and the behavioural aspect. I shall treat the third information module identified in this methodology as a building block of the emotional sphere and a pillar of action or procrastination. Received communications trigger emotions, which in turn create the frame for the world of values and convictions, and impact the manner and mode of decisions being made – they are triggers of emotions or the reasons for suppressing them.

In communication acts, both in local contexts (private conversations) and social communication, there appear such verbal instances of behaviour which violate the interpersonal status quo and create a negative aura surrounding

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1 I am referring to Aleksy Awdiejew and Grażyna Habrajska's functional concept of the grammatical description of language (communicational grammar), the methodological apparatus used for discovering the mechanisms of verbal communication – particularly for analysing and interpreting communications within their semantic-pragmatic continuums at three levels of the language: the ideational, interactive, and metadiscursive levels. The levels were taken from Michael Halliday's theory (M.A.K. Halliday idem, *Explorations in the Functions of Language*, E. Arnold, London 1973). I included the major works that present the model of communicational grammar in the bibliography.

interpersonal contact. One such instance is the use of the phraseme ‘bez sensu’ [no point/ meaningless] in the conversational mode. My interest in the semantics and pragmatics of the expression developed on the basis of my various communicational experiences, both direct and indirect (observations). I became particularly intent on this discussion due to my experiences of face-to-face communication and my fulfilling the function of the recipient of the ‘bez sensu’ expression. It is in that role that one is hard pressed to avoid a conclusion which triggers some kind of disappointment in interpersonal contact. Usually, if this expression appears overtly in a conversation, one is induced to infer a clearly negative evaluative reference from it. Such communicational experiences result in a sense of discomfort caused by the manner of introducing hostility, which eventually creates interpersonal distance. All that is often amplified with reflection on why my interlocutor considers something I am doing/ I did/ I intend to do and what I am stating verbally to be ‘bez sensu’.

Based on my preliminary and purely intuitive consideration for now, I would refer to the manner of summing up an element of reality by using the expression ‘bez sensu’ as a pragmatic action which is not very polite, or even blunt and rude. This is the type of thesis which comes close to an *ad personam* evaluation, though it can also be an opinion which, as the conversation develops, becomes supported by facts. Nonetheless, the considerable persuasive load of the device is clear: the fact of using ‘bez sensu’ amplifies the discrediting of someone’s motivations and goals, and the modes and results of their actions. One more perspective should be considered: ‘bez sensu’ is a sign of one’s interlocutor disputing the logic in one’s utterance, which in some contexts may be considered as a kind of insult to the speaker’s intelligence.

As an example of how the ‘bez sensu’ expression amplifies the persuasive effect when it is included in a communication, consider the simple substitution test in communications with the same ideational contents:

[1.]

ja: *Kupiłem nową kamerę.*

I: *I bought a new camcorder.*

on: *Bez sensu – każdy smartfon ma kamerę!*

He: *Bez sensu – all smartphones have cameras!*

vs.

vs.

on': *Po co – każdy smartfon ma kamerę!*

He': *What for – all smartphones have cameras!*

on'': *Niepotrzebnie – każdy smartfon ma kamerę!*

He'': *That's unnecessary – all smartphones have cameras!*

on''': *No co ty – każdy smartfon ma kamerę!*

He''': *Be serious – all smartphones have cameras!*

itp.

etc.

In the presented alternate versions (He', He'', He'''), the emotive connotations of the information change the nature of the expression and, in turn, temper it by drawing attention to the pragmatic element of pointlessness (He', He''), or by expressing emotive disappointment (He''').

A somewhat broader perspective on the placement and functions of 'bez sensu' in a natural conversation is offered in a conversation between two women I once overheard:

[2.]

kobieta starsza:	[...] <i>a wiesz, co Ania mi powiedziała? Że ten Kowalski był bez sensu, a ja jej na to: swoje uwagi do mnie zachowaj dla siebie, załóż sobie zeszyt i tam zapisuj.</i>	Older woman:	[...] <i>do you know what Ania told me? That that Kowalski was useless, so I told her: keep your remarks about me to yourself, start a notebook and write them down there.</i>
kobieta młodsza:	<i>jaaa, bez sensu [...]</i>	younger woman:	<i>oooh, ridiculous [...]</i>

In that colloquial exchange the 'bez sensu' expression appeared twice: in reported speech and in the reaction of the other interlocutor. In order to recreate the ideational content of the first application (*Kowalski był bez sensu*), one must utilise the sources of meaning supplementation<sup>2</sup> – in this case use discursive knowledge which an outsider lacks. However, in reference to semantic standards, one might assume that *Kowalski* is a kind of a metonymic figure which could be substituted with content associated with Kowalski's unsuccessful or dysfunctional actions. The other utterance is quite intriguing from an interpretative perspective, as what is most distinct about it is its interactive character: it is an expression of emotive solidarity with the interlocutor, sharing her dismay and expressing support for the negative opinion of the verbal conduct of Ania. Yet once again there are major elements of discursive knowledge that are missing, and which are necessary for one to be able to decide whether Ania was criticised for what she had said about Kowalski or for voicing her opinion in the first place. Despite the fact that the interactive function of the utterance (as well as the entire exchange) was clear: the goal was to bring forward the negative emotion experienced as a result of the behaviour of a third party (conversational non-hostile mode), it remains unclear to which behavioural area Ania's opinion 'bez sensu' referred. First of all, it might be a reference to the pragmatic conditions signifying a denial of Ania's right to express a negative opinion on the matter (or on any matter in general). Secondly,

2 The concept of systemic and non-systemic sources of meaning was introduced to the communicational theory of text interpretation by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (idem, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, Blackwell, Oxford 1995), the creators of the relevance theory.

it might be associated with the semantics of redundancy and/or impudence, or the irrelevance of the opinion voiced by Ania (e.g. Kowalski cannot be blamed for anything).

Considering these introductory reflections, one can see that the functional complexity of the 'bez sensu' phraseme opens a rich field of communicational discussions. In this article, I shall apply the methodology of communicational grammar, though I shall also draw on the theory of rhetorical argument and knowledge of inference.

Finally, reflections as an observer of social communication, and media communications in particular, will also prove useful.

### Meaning in communication

To properly consider the communicational value of the 'bez sensu' [without meaning/sense] expression, one must first refer to the original unit, i.e. 'sens' [meaning/sense]. From the pragmatic perspective, it seems important to indicate the discursive variability in the functions of the term, particularly in reference to its application in colloquial discourse and the modes in which it is understood in academic discourse. Colloquially, the application of the term 'sens' [meaning/sense] usually constitutes an evaluation of the rationality of the detrialisation of a (cause-and-effect/time-and-space) scenario to which the propositional content of communication refers, e.g.

[3.]

złodziej1: *Ja mam splanę, to wchodzę pierwszy, zastraszę ich, wtedy ty wejdiesz z torbą i będziesz pakował kasę, a ja będę ich miał cały czas na muszce*

robber1: *I've got the piece so I go in first, I'll intimidate them, then you come in with the bag and you'll pack the cash and I'll keep them in check*

złodziej2: *To ma sens, to się uda!*

robber2: *That makes sense, that's gonna work!*

The communication utilises the common script of a bank robbery [SC: (bank) ROBBERY], and the propositional content presented in the course of this exchange can lead to the desired effect, i.e. the indication in the second statement (robber2) that the plan of action makes sense is equal to accepting the proposition.

In another common example, the term 'sens' is a positive evaluation of the logic of an argument (entailment) presented in the communication, e.g.

- [4]
- |        |                                                                                                  |        |                                                                                                     |
|--------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Marek: | <i>Janek nie podniósł, Franek nie podniósł, ja jestem słabszy, to tym bardziej nie podniosę.</i> | Marek: | <i>Janek couldn't lift it, Franek couldn't lift it, I'm weaker so there's no way I can lift it.</i> |
| Arek:  | <i>Wreszcie gadasz z sensem.</i>                                                                 | Arek:  | <i>Now you're finally making sense.</i>                                                             |

Then, in academic discourse, there are various perspectives for discussing what 'sens' is.<sup>3</sup> Example 3, where the evaluation of detrivialised scripts of common activities is based on common sense, is a common type of a conversation based on socially developed elements of common sense.<sup>4</sup> In example 4, the mechanisms of natural logic form the basis for an inference of the *a fortiori* type.<sup>5</sup> Both speakers display appropriate logical competences. This enables Marek to argue convincingly, and it enables Arek to understand the internal relations of entailment.

In communicational theory, *meaning* is defined as "the reference area realised by a recipient which she/he acquires through the process of communication (text) interpretation".<sup>6</sup> The relation of the notion of *meaning* to reference area has its traditions, especially in semiotics, where the relations within the triad of referent-notion-sign were framed into the so-called semiotic triangle by Charles

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- 3 Michael Fleischer offered a rich overview of academic concepts which refer to the modes of understanding 'sens' [meaning] and its communicational functions in his book: *Sens, czyli – co to jest. Perspektywa konstruktywistyczna* (Wydawnictwo Primum Verbum, Łódź 2019). Those include philosophical, linguistic, psychological, and sociological concepts. In the second part of the book, he proposed his own solutions within the constructivist theory of communication.
  - 4 Michael Fleischer in the book *Sens, czyli – co to jest. Perspektywa konstruktywistyczna* discussed the sources and features of common sense in Chapter 1.2. entitled "Ujęcia syntetyczne" [Synthetic approaches].
  - 5 The arguments referenced in this article, their components and inference patterns were discussed in detail in the works by Jerzy Ziomek (*Retoryka opisowa*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław–Warsaw–Krakow 2000), Krzysztof Szymanek (*Sztuka argumentacji. Słownik terminologiczny*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2001), Chaim Perelman (*Imperium retoryki, Retoryka i argumentacja*, trans. M. Chomicz, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2002), Marek Tokarz (*Argumentacja, perswazja, manipulacja*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2006), Grzegorz Malinowski (*Logika ogólna*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2010), Barbara Stanosz (*Wprowadzenie do logiki formalnej. Podręcznik dla humanistów*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2012).
  - 6 A. Awdiejew, "Czym jest sens?" [in:] *Komunikowanie wartości – wartość komunikowania*, eds. I. Benenowska, A. Bączkowska, W. Czechowski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz 2019, pp. 65–66.

Ogden and Ivor Richards.<sup>7</sup> However, communicational grammar proposes a functional (not structural) approach to linguistic units and the recreation of a reference area of a communication by applying new methods of text analysis and interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Communication scholars can only access the material aspects of the communicational process. The discovery and specification of covert (since abstract) mental processes, responsible for the emergence of the reference area, occurs through the relation to semantic standards, which constitute links in the scripts of routine activities: actions and processes, positions, and states. They demonstrate repeatability because space-and-time and cause-and-effect relations are universal and natural.

In pragmalinguistics, the purpose of communication is related to the functions of an utterance, which in turn are related to the process of influencing the knowledge, will and behaviour of an interlocutor – and appropriate techniques of persuasion are the tools. Communicational theory assumes a different perspective, i.e. the thesis is that “the basic purpose of natural communication is to convey meaning”.<sup>9</sup> The difference stems from the fact that in pragmalinguistics there is an ongoing struggle with the original unclear rule of the division of the purpose of a communication from the communicative tasks and tools. I shall clarify this by using two inter-related chains:

satisfaction of needs  $\leftrightarrow$  impact  $\leftrightarrow$  conveying of meaning  
 existence  $\leftrightarrow$  interaction  $\leftrightarrow$  communication

The need to **satisfy one's needs** is the driving force of human **existence**. Different people have different needs; everyone should become aware of their own ones. For that, it might be helpful to resort to the hierarchy of needs drawn up by Abraham Maslov<sup>10</sup>, well-established in humanistic psychology. For this discussion, it must be stated that we can satisfy some of these needs ourselves, while others require the participation of other entities (people) – this is the reason for entering into **interactions** and maintaining them. Marek Ziółkowski wrote:

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7 C. Ogden, I. Richards I., Charles Ogden and Ivor Richards *The Meaning of Meaning. A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1923.

8 The components and stages of text analysis and interpretation in the methodology of communicational grammar were presented by Grażyna Habrajska in the book *Komunikacyjna analiza i interpretacja tekstu* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2004). The book *Komponowanie sensu w procesie odbioru komunikatów* by Aleksy Awdiejew and Grażyna Habrajska (Primum Verbum, Łódź 2010) offers a major supplement to the theory.

9 A. Awdiejew, “Czym jest sens?”, pp. 65–66.

10 A.H. Maslov, *Motivation and Personality*, Harper, New York 1954.

*Man is an entity that realises that both he and his behaviour is being observed and interpreted. Therefore, he can manage some elements of his behaviour, which remain under his control, to [...] **appropriately influence** [emphasis – WC] how he is perceived and interpreted by his partners.<sup>11</sup>*

In other words, interactions are interpersonal relations in which bilateral influence exists, or it is a mode of operation focussed on influence. In a situation in which two individuals appear within the reach of their senses, an action begins with pre-defined parameters, i.e. one which is set in time and space; an interactive relationship forms which might have been planned or which is random.<sup>12</sup> In an interaction (a planned one, in particular) actors fulfil an **interactive task**: an **interpersonal impact**, i.e. such an influence on others which will lead to fulfilling one's need(s). When individuals notice each other, there opens a field for communicational activities. Thus, **communication** must be understood as a **tool of impact in interaction**. Planned verbal communication is the most effective mode of achieving interactive goals. It encompasses **meaning** (the reference area) and the interactive circumstances of its **transfer**: selected recipient, time and place of contact. That was confirmed in Marek Ziółkowski's theses<sup>13</sup>:

*The dynamics of human interactions, which consist of adjusting the mutual behaviours of partners, is largely based on the processes of **sending and receiving meaning** [emphasis – WC], which condition actual impact.*

In constructivism, the essence (purpose) of a communicational action is to negotiate meanings, confront the modes of understanding reality, matching visions of the world, and, systemically speaking, maintaining and shaping social and cultural movement.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> M. Ziółkowski, *Znaczenie – interakcja – rozumienie*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warsaw 1981, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> I could offer at this point the excellent example of the illusion of randomness of interaction shared by the characters in Giuseppe Tornatore's film *The Best Offer* (2014).

<sup>13</sup> M. Ziółkowski, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> The core of the concept is presented in the books of Michael Fleischer, the originator of the constructivist theory of communication. The appropriate sources are included in the bibliography of this article.

**'Bez sensu' in communicational grammar**

At the ideational level, 'bez sensu' specifies a primary predicate and changes the ideational image; within the pattern it is the constitutive element of **secondary metapredication** and it opens a place for a predicative-argument system:

MPSEC BEZ SENSU {P (a<sub>1</sub>, an)}

BEZ SENSU {GADAĆ (Janek)} ← *Janek gada bez sensu.*  
[Janek talks nonsense.]

BEZ SENSU {CHODZIĆ (Janek, to class)} ← *Janek bez sensu chodzi na te zajęcia.*  
[Janek's going to that class is pointless.]

BEZ SENSU {ZROBIĆ (Janek, it)} ← *Janek zrobił to bez sensu.*  
[Janek did it pointlessly.]

It must be added that the element 'bez' [without] fulfils the communicational function of negation, which is evident in the paraphrase of the following breakdown:

MPSEC BEZ SENSU {BYĆ [N]} = OPNEG NIE > MIEĆ [N, sense]

The original ideational image is altered, as the negation deprives the ideational image of the selected quality (axiology) – in the analysed case that **quality is meaning**.

The position of the phraseme in a text may cause a change of its function – from a metapredicate to a predicate specifying an argument, e.g.

*Bez sensu Janek pisze pracę.* [Janek's writing the work is pointless.] → BEZ SENSU > {PISAĆ (Janek, work)}

*Janek pisze pracę bez sensu.* [Janek is writing a meaningless work.] → PISAĆ (Janek, work) & BEZ SENSU {BYĆ (work)}

That is because the 'bez sensu' expression enables a two-directional interpretation:

BEZ SENSU → BEZSENSOWNIE [meaninglessly] (MPSEC)

BEZ SENSU → BEZSENSOWNY [meaningless] (MPSEC)

The maxim which I have known for many years: “You can’t say that something is meaningless. All you can say is that you don’t see meaning in it,” reflects the communicational assumption that every communication has meaning (a reference area), regardless of whether the recipient was/is able to grasp it. Since texts can indicate various scenarios, which are sometimes semantically distant from one another, the interpretative activities of a recipient may occur within different reference areas. That triggers various complications in the form of misunderstanding which lead to communication failures. It is also caused by the fact that sometimes in people there is triggered the syndrome of interpreting at any cost, well-known in the psychology of communication – a reaction to the emerging cognitive dissonance. Or the recipient can be overtaken by interpretative impotence. This inclines me to consider the relationship: nie rozumiem [I do not understand]  $\leftrightarrow$  bez sensu [meaningless].

If a recipient cannot grasp the reference area, they may focus on the three elements of a communication system in their verbal reaction: themselves, the message, and the sender. Focus on oneself is a sign of assuming responsibility for an interpretative failure. That can be expressed by the recipient verbally manifesting their incompetence, e.g. *jestem na to za głupi* [I’m too dumb for this]; *to już za wysoki poziom* [this level is too high for me]; *nie moja liga* [I’m out of my depth here], etc., or indicating their problems with interpretation, e.g. *trochę to dla mnie niejasne* [it’s somewhat unclear to me]; *nie do końca rozumiem* [I don’t quite understand it]; *ciężko mi uchwycić sens* [I’m having a hard time grasping the meaning], etc. Focus on other elements enables the sender to divert the responsibility away from them. In terms of the message, what is most common is an emphasis on the logical failings of the communication, e.g. *bezsensowna wypowiedź* [meaningless utterance]; *to jakiś bełkot* [that’s some gibberish]; *ni składu, ni ładu* [without form or structure], etc., while regarding the sender, there appear indirect or direct opinions about their lack of linguistic and communicational competences – that includes statements with the *bez sensu* expression, e.g. *to, co mówisz, jest bez sensu* [what you are saying is senseless]; *gadasz bez sensu* [you’re making no sense at all]; *puknij się w głowę – to jest bez sensu* [You need your head examined – there’s no sense to it], etc.

### ‘Bez sensu’ as a reference to the logic of a message

Utterances such as: *to, co mówisz, jest bez sensu* [what you are saying is meaningless] may be a reaction related to the sender’s inference deficits, as they are not able to grasp the **logic link** in the process of argumentation/explanation. The following is an example of an argument based on **deduction**:

- [5.] *Każdy polityk to karierowicz, a więc żaden społecznik nie jest politykiem.* [Every politician is a careerist so no social activist is a politician.]

To understand the conclusion, one must recreate the enthymematic premise: *No social activist is a careerist* (the *Camestres* syllogistic mode). That enables the recipient of such a communication to react properly, i.e. according to their convictions: *I agree /I do not agree*. Then, the fact of not comprehending the deductive argumentation can be indicated by applying the more tactful *nie rozumiem* [I do not understand] or the rude *bez sensu*. In the latter situation, an interlocutor gives themselves a negative evaluation.

The shortcomings in the logic competences of interlocutors can be used for manipulation, which may lead to the shaping of convictions which are aligned with the sender's interests. One example of a tool of manipulation in argumentation is **quasi-deduction** (deduction with a hidden logic error):

- [6.] *Każdy minister jest politykiem, a więc niektórzy ministrowie są skorumpowani.* [Every minister is a politician; therefore some ministers are corrupt.]

If a recipient's competences enable them to catch the error, they will resist the manipulation. They may then react with the communication *bez sensu*, which would be a justified statement on the lack of reliable entailment.

If the entailment in an argumentation is based on a probabilised deduction, the argument elements are bound by less expressive relations and in turn less susceptible to reactions in the form of the *bez sensu* phraseme. Consider the following example of a media statement by Ryszard Legutko, an MEP from the Law and Justice (PiS) party, the context of which is related to the teachers' strike in Poland of April 2019<sup>15</sup>:

- [7.] *To tak jakby lekarz powiedział, że odmówi przeprowadzenia operacji. (...) Są różne formy nacisku na władzę, ale pewnych rzeczy nie tylko robić, ale również mówić nie wolno. (...)* [That's like a doctor saying that he would refuse to perform an operation (...). There are various forms of exerting influence on the government, but there are some things that not only cannot be done, but they can't even be said (...)].

The applied mode of depiction entails the comparing of the professional obligations of a teacher with those of a medical doctor. Many people who rejected the statement pointed to this analogy. Lack of acceptance was usually expressed

<sup>15</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/438418-prof-legutko-oburzajaca-wypowiedz-broniarza-to-szantaz> [accessed on: 15.03.2019].

in verbal expressions of the kind: *to porównanie jest bez sensu* [this comparison is senseless]. To be able to assess the senselessness of the comparison, one must consider its axiological foundation related to professional ethics. Once applied, the standardised argument takes the form:

P1: For medical doctors to refuse to operate is unethical.

P2: The teachers' strike during examination sessions **is similar** to a doctor's refusal to operate.

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C: The teachers' strike during examination sessions is unethical.

The common qualities of the professions of a teacher and a medical doctor surely include: social service and care of social groups which are particularly protected (children, young people, the ill). The presumption of the creator of the analogy was that the harm caused by refusing to work was another common quality. And that was the point which constituted the comparison's weak spot, as the kind of harm and its consequences significantly differentiated the two professions, i.e. the intangible mental discomfort of students vs. the very tangible harm to people's health. In comparing the work of teachers with that of medical doctors, the author of the statement intended to elevate the scale of the harm, and thus the analogy became a tool of manipulation through the process of political persuasion – it created a negative emotional aura (*metum/ consequentiam*) by suggesting the kinds of harm which are unfounded. An attempt to counter this manipulation may consist of indicating the **error of shallow analogy**, which enables one to express their disagreement on the basis of facts, including in the form of the 'bez sensu' expression with further justification of the deficiency of the analogy.

Such questioning of the analogy with the use of the 'bez sensu' expression could be found in the practice of media-based political communication, e.g. in a statement by Leszek Miller, a Polish political scientist and politician<sup>16</sup>:

- [8.] *Porównywanie sprawy Rywina z aferą KNF z sugestią, że PiS upadnie tak jak upadł SLD jest bez sensu. Sojusz znalazł się na krawędzi bo został rozbity od wewnątrz przez ówczesnego marszałka Sejmu przy wsparciu prezydenta. Czy ktoś widzi w tych rolach Kuchcińskiego i Dudę.* [The comparison of the Rywin case and the KNF-gate suggesting that PiS will fall just as SLD did makes no sense. SLD found itself on the brink of collapse because it was shattered from the inside by the speaker of the Sejm at that time, with the support of the president. Can anyone see Kuchciński and Duda in those roles.]

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/leszekmiller/status/1063159714694029312> [accessed on: 15.03.2018].

The argumentative unreliability can also manifest itself in the modes of induction. It is particularly visible in theses which are not justified in the following examples, which are based on *argumentum ab exemplo* premises, e.g.

- [9.] *Mieszkańcy Rogowa nie znają pojęcia szacunku – Janek i Ania dotąd spóźnili się na wszystkie spotkania.* [The inhabitants of Rogów are not familiar with the notion of respect – Janek and Ania have been late to all the meetings so far.]

The fact of someone's being late only entitled the author of the thesis to conclude that some inhabitants of Rogów had trouble with arriving on time.

The 'bez sensu' comment can also be a reaction to a violation of the natural cause-and-effect relationship. It is used in building theses which utilise reductive reasoning. The error of reduction emerges when a statement refers to a heuristic rule:

- [10.] *W oknie pali się światło, Janka nie ma w domu.* [You can see a light through the window, Janek is not home.] RH: A light turned on is the sign of someone's presence.
- [11.] *Woda wrze, herbata na pewno się nie zaparzy.* [The water is boiling, the tea will certainly not brew.] RH: Tea brews in boiling water.
- [12.] *Pada jak z cebra, wycieczka będzie udana.* [It is raining cats and dogs, the trip will surely be a success.] RH: Trips are not a success when it is raining.

The fact of uttering such communications usually entails the existence of special rules for their interpretation; without those the authors of such statements could be accused of a lack of logic competences. In such cases, the 'bez sensu' response must be treated not as an *ad personam* attack, but rather as an encouragement to clarify the pragmatic-interpretative background.

### 'Bez sensu' at the interactive level

At the interactive level, 'bez sensu' fulfils two pragmatic functions. It is the thesis behind negative opinions in axiological-emotive strategies, and a thesis which amplifies the persuasive force of verbal communications in behavioural strategies. In using the 'bez sensu' phraseme in a reaction to a received communication and a reproduced (interpreted) area of reference, an interlocutor shifts communication to the **emotive plane** and, more broadly speaking, challenges the sender within the perspective of the antagonising axiological strategy. The emotive nature of 'bez sensu' is revealed regardless of the starting strategy being fulfilled. Consider the following exchange in which the starting communication was produced in the assertive mode:

- [13.] *Zmieniili nam termin wyjazdu.* [They changed our departure date.]  
informative strategy (assertion)

*Bez sensu, już wszystko kupione, spakowane.* [That's senseless, everything is already bought, packed.] axiological-emotive strategy

The analysed phraseme in this case is an expression of the emotion of **disappointment**, amplified by a sense of **wastefulness**. Similar motivation is visible in communications in which, apart from the verbalisation of the sense of loss, a script commonly known as **mądry po szkodzie** [hindsight is 20/20] is triggered. It is fulfilled in the form of a conclusion which suggests the application of a strategy which enables the avoidance of wastefulness in the future, e.g.

- [14.] *Nie zgodziła się, a na samą kolację poszły dwie stówy, bez sensu, na drugi raz, pomyślę dwa razy, zanim z nią się spotkam.* [She didn't agree and the dinner itself cost 2 hundred, no sense at all, next time I'll think twice before I go out with her again.]

The demonstration of disappointment by using 'bez sensu' can also be noticed in other scripts, where the **sense of lack or incomplete benefit** is the pragmatic foundation. In reference to one's own actions (usually past ones), it would build an air of complaining about one's fate/ frustration/ impotence (importance of prosody), e.g.

- [15.] *Pojechałem tam bez sensu.* [I went there and it was pointless.]  
[16.] *Bez sensu – nic nie wskórałem.* [Totally pointless – I did not manage to do anything.]

In reference to the actions of others, 'bez sensu' amplifies **grievances** – when a lack of benefit is also experienced by the sender of a communication:

- [17.] *Bez sensu, akurat to musiałeś pominąć.* [That's stupid, you had to skip that particular thing.]  
[18.] *No i mamy koniec dobrego, bez sensu, że odmówiłeś.* [So all the good just ended, it's so stupid that you refused.]

The fact of not using an opportunity to achieve some benefit triggers the scenario of **lost opportunity**. This may include grievances towards oneself, e.g.

- [19.] *Było w zasięgu ręki, bez sensu, że się zawahałem.* [It was within reach, it's so stupid that I hesitated.]

or an expression of someone's lack of pragmatism, e.g.

- [20.] *Nie uwierzysz, Czesław Lang tu był.* [You'll never believe it. Czesław Lang was here.]  
*Super, a zrobiłeś selfie?* [Great, did you get a selfie?]  
*Nie.* [No.]

*Jaaa, bez sensu, co za głupek!* [Wow, that was silly, what an idiot!]

In all of the presented examples, the application of the 'bez sensu' phraseme as an expression of negative emotions being experienced was motivated by the **discrepancy principle** between the **assumptions** (plans/ scripts/ imagination) which were supposed to lead to the desired specific benefits/ goals/ results, and the **actual** undesired **course** and/or eventual unsatisfactory outcome of said actions.

In the applications of antagonistic axiological-emotive strategies, 'bez sensu' amplifies the interpersonal distance being built; it is a sign of emotive rejection, e.g.

- [21.] *Jestem taka szczęśliwa, tak się cieszę, że tam pojedziemy.* [I am so happy, I'm so glad we're going there.]  
*Bez sensu, ja jakoś nie.* [But why? It doesn't make me happy.]

or disregard for someone's emotive communications (an expression of a lack of empathy):

- [22.] *Niestety, tyle ofert im przedstawiłam i nic, przykro mi, naprawdę się starałam.* [Sadly, I presented them with so many proposals and nothing worked, I'm sorry, I really did my best.]  
*Bez sensu, będziesz musiała spróbować gdzie indziej.* [That was pointless, you'll just have to try somewhere else.]

The emotive nature of the studied phraseme may **indirectly** amplify the **activity functions** (behavioural strategies). The experienced and expressed sense of wastefulness becomes an **argument of wastefulness**<sup>17</sup>, which indirectly opens objectives specific to the **behavioural strategy**, e.g.

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<sup>17</sup> Chaim Perelman discussed the social power of influence of the argument of wastefulness in the book *Imperium retoryki. Retoryka i argumentacja* (pp. 103–104). Those pages also include a specification of the argument of redundancy, which I depict with example 36.

- [23.] *Być może zmienią termin wyjazdu.* [They might change the departure date.]  
 informative strategy  
 – *Bez sensu, już wszystko kupione, spakowane.* [That's senseless, everything is  
 already bought, packed.] emotive (direct)

*No tak, pogadam z nimi.* → behavioural (indirect) strategy  
 [Right, I'll talk to them.] undertaking to act (a promise)

Clearly, communicational modal modes which apply to the shape of the future do not enclose the field of influence at the extra-modal level. The effectiveness of such an influence depends on some pragmatic conditions, in particular on the roles of people who communicate and their actual ability to influence decisions.

The fact of displaying a negative emotion related to the lack of benefits from an action or a possible loss may fulfil the function of *argumentum ad misericordiam*:

- [24.] *Czuję, że ten wyjazd jest bez sensu.* [I can feel that the trip is pointless.] emotive  
 (direct)

→ behavioural (indirect) strategy  
*Jeśli nie chcesz jechać, to odwołam.* [If you don't want to go, I'll call it off.]  
 undertaking to act

It is a common persuasion technique to evoke **pity** as a measure for using someone's **empathy** to reach one's own goals. The hidden plane of communicational intentions makes it difficult to differentiate a primarily emotive communication from behavioural manipulation tactics, e.g.

- [25.] *Nie no, wszystko bez sensu, beznadziejnie...* [Come on, it's all pointless,  
 abysmal...]  
*Spokojnie, zaraz coś poradzimy, mmm... podaj mi numer swojego konta.*  
 [Calm down, we'll think of something soon, err... give me your account  
 number.]

The verbalisation of a detected **inconsistency** is yet another communicational circumstance in which 'bez sensu' appears. In conversational exchanges, it is the base for using an *argumentum ad personam*. The studied phraseme fulfils in it the function of amplifier of the *ad personam* reference – it usually amplifies the content of an uncovered inconsistency, e.g.

- [26.] *Całe dni pracuję nad dodatkowymi kodami.* [I spend my days working on additional codes] (assertion)  
*Bez sensu, mówiłeś, że nie będziesz, bo nie są potrzebne.* [That's pointless, you said you wouldn't because they weren't necessary] (E-)
- [27.] *Złożyłem papiery do liceum.* [I submitted my high school application.] (assertion)  
*Bez sensu, cały czas mówiłeś o technikum.* [That doesn't make any sense. You always talked about technical school.] (E-)

In both cases (26 and 27), 'bez sensu' refers to a violation of a heuristic principle, which is built on a relation chain: "thought → speech → action". Once standardised, the argument takes the form of a *tollendo tollens* logic mode:

- P1: A consistent man acts according to his assumptions. (P→Q)  
 P2: Action X was inconsistent with the assumptions. (~Q)  
 -----  
 C: X is not consistent. (~P) (E-)

The socially valued quality of being consistent usually refers to the consistency between verbal declarations and extra-linguistic conduct. Its value in interpersonal relations is high, as it influences the processes of building and maintaining trust. A lack of (complete) trust in inconsistent people triggers a limiting of the field of common interpersonal/team activities, in which success is guaranteed by the predictability of individuals' actions.

The act of **questioning** someone's competences is another field of applying *argumentum ad personam*, e.g.

- [28.] *Janek dyrektorem?! Nie no bez sensu.* [Janek a director?! That's utter nonsense.]

The *tu quoque* mode is also a typical *ad personam* mode, e.g.

- [29.] *Najpierw mi wyrzucasz, że to, że tamto, a później sam tak robisz?! Bez sensu!*  
 [First you reproach me saying that's not enough and now you're doing that yourself?! That's utter nonsense.]

Statements by politicians often contain scenarios illustrating the lack of efficiency or purpose in actions, which is used to discredit political opponents. It is sometimes the case that the 'bez sensu' expression is also used to stress the expressiveness of an argument. This is what a leading PSL (Polish People's Party)

politician said about Law and Justice party's post-election (2018 local elections) activities to form a coalition:<sup>18</sup>

- [30.] – *Wolne żarty. Już nie mogą czegoś bardziej inteligentnego zrobić, tylko takie bez sensu chwytły. No nie, żalodne – mówi nam jeden z ważnych działaczy PSL. Wczoraj Kosiniak-Kamysz spotykał się w stolicy z partyjnymi baronami, którzy odpowiadają za negocjacje w terenie. Dostał owację na stojąco. Atmosfera była znakomita, bo przed wyborami obawiano się klęski. A czy boją się losu przystawki? – Jestem ciężkostrawny jako przystawka – mówi lider PSL.*
- [– What a joke. Can't they do anything more intelligent than such nonsensical ploys. Come on, it's pathetic – says one of the key figures in Polish People's Party. Yesterday, in the capital Kosiniak-Kamysz met party barons. He got a standing ovation. The mood was excellent, because before elections they were afraid of failure. Aren't they afraid of becoming just an hors d'oeuvre? – I'm stodgy as an hors d'oeuvre – says the leader of Polish People's Party.]

Then, when referring to the problem of the legal discrimination of women in Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński raised the issue of propagandist social postulates related to the issue of *gender* included in the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention:<sup>19</sup>

- [31.] „Wiem, że do ideału jest bardzo daleko, tylko nie wszystko da się załatwić przy pomocy prawa – prawo jest w porządku, praktyka się poprawia, natomiast w tej chwili wojna z tym genderem (...) jest w tym wymiarze prawa międzynarodowego w istocie bez sensu” – dodał. [“I know that the perfect situation is still far away, but not everything can be achieved by establishing new laws – the law is good, the practices are getting better, but now the war with that gender (...) in the sphere of international law is essentially pointless”, he added.]

In his statement about the Kukiz'15 party, Janusz Korwin-Mikke used the 'bez sensu' expression to support his argument which basically refused the movement the right to function in the Sejm [lower chamber of the Polish parliament]<sup>20</sup>:

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polityka/schetyna-zje-kosiniaka/ghnf8on?utm\\_source=viasg\\_fakt&utm\\_medium=direct&utm\\_campaign=leo\\_automatic&srcc=ucs&utm\\_v=2](https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polityka/schetyna-zje-kosiniaka/ghnf8on?utm_source=viasg_fakt&utm_medium=direct&utm_campaign=leo_automatic&srcc=ucs&utm_v=2) [accessed on: 15.03.2019].

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gosc.pl/doc/4643655.Kaczynski-Jestem-dosc-optimistyczny-ws-wycofania-procedury-z> [accessed on: 15.03.2019].

<sup>20</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/418370-korwin-mikke-atakuje-kukiz15-tego-typu-ruch-jest-bez-sensu> [accessed on: 15.03.2019].

- [32.] *Kiedy Kukiz'15 działa w Sejmie w ten sposób, że jak jest ważne głosowanie, to dziesięciu głosuje za, dziesięciu przeciw, a dziesięciu wstrzymuje się od głosu. Istnienie tej partii jest zupełnie zbędne, mogłoby jej równie dobrze nie być. Tego typu ruch jest bez sensu. Musi to być partia o jakimś programie* [When Kukiz'15 operates in the Sejm in such a way that when there is a major vote ten /deputies/ vote for, ten against, and ten withhold. The existence of that party is completely unnecessary, it might as well not exist. Such a movement is pointless. There must be a party with a manifesto].

The studied phraseme can also amplify the thesis on the pointlessness of spending time on matters devoid of any social value. The expression 'bez sensu' fulfilled such a function in a Facebook post by Jakub Żulczyk, a writer:<sup>21</sup>

- [33.] *Po internecie krąży "wypowiedź" Krystyny Pawłowicz nt. samobójstwa Kacpra z Gorczyzna k. Łodzi. Jeśli ktoś nie wie – chłopak był gejem, zabił się, bo go zaszczuto.*

*Wypowiedzi pani Pawłowicz nie będę cytował, bo bez sensu, moralnie i intelektualnie jest to warte mniej niż zawartość toi toia pod koniec festiwalu muzycznego.*

[On the internet, there is a "statement" by Krystyna Pawłowicz about the suicide of Kacpra from Gorczyn n. Łódź. If someone is not aware: the boy was gay, he killed himself because he was persecuted.

I will not quote Pawłowicz's statement because it would be pointless, it is morally and intellectually worth less than the contents of a portable toilet at the closing hours of a music festival.]

In Waldemar Kuczyński's tweet the application of the 'bez sensu' expression indicated the scenario of an irreparable and yet avoidable loss, while stressing the harmfulness of individual interests:<sup>22</sup>

- [34.] *Radek Sikorski napisał prawdę. 96 osób poszło bez sensu do ziemi, bo jedna z tych osób chciała być na czas w Katyniu.* [Radek Sikorski wrote the truth. 96 people pointlessly ended up six feet under because one of those people wanted to be in Katyn on time.]

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/jakub.zulczyk/posts/po-internecie-kr%C4%85%C5%BCy-wypowied%C5%BA-krystyny-paw%C5%82owicz-nt-samob%C3%B3jstwa-kacpra-z-gorczyzn/1468669583222633/> [accessed on: 15.03.2019].

<sup>22</sup> <https://twitter.com/panwaldemar/status/829790926507823109> [accessed on: 15.03.2019].

In behavioural strategies, 'bez sensu' is a thesis which amplifies the persuasive force of **advice** and **warnings**. Consider the following announcement of action – the reaction to it was an attempt to cause a change of the decision:

- [35.] *Pójdę do dentysty, ale dopiero w przyszłym tygodniu.* [I'll go to the dentist but next week] (act of undertaking)  
*Bez sensu, idź jutro rano, będziesz miał to z głowy.* [Nonsense, go tomorrow morning, get it over and done with] (argumentum ad quietem)  
*Bez sensu, jutro jest taniej, zaoszczędzisz sobie.* [Nonsense, tomorrow will be cheaper, you'll save money] (argumentum ad carotam)  
*Bez sensu, jak będziesz zwlekał, to będzie za późno.* [Nonsense, if you delay it will be too late] argumentum ad consequentiam)  
*Bez sensu, do tego czasu będzie bolało nie do zniesienia.* [Nonsense, by then you won't be able to stand the pain] (argumentum ad metum)

The different ideational variants of the premises indicated above constitute components or various arguments at the pragmatic level – the initial thesis 'bez sensu' of each statement makes the premises gain in their expressiveness, and the whole sounds more convincing than in the possible variants without any initial thesis.

'Bez sensu' can also amplify refusal as a reaction to an **act of proposition** and it then constitutes the persuasive element of the **argument of redundancy**:

- [36.] *Może razem popracujemy nad twoim zadaniem?* [Maybe we should work together on your task?]  
*Bez sensu, lepiej zrób swoje, ja sobie sam poradzę.* [Nonsense, you'd better do yours, I'll cope with mine]

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the 'bez sensu' phraseme can also fulfil the amplifying function for negotiations at the **meta-discursive level**. That occurs during the questioning the pragmatic conditions of directive acts of speech, which in the perception of a recipient, i.e. the assumed performer of an action, constitute unjustified demands and requests and unfounded proposals, e.g.

- [37.] *Oddaj mi ten telefon.* [Give me the phone]  
*Bez sensu, przecież to nie ja go zabrałem.* [Nonsense, it wasn't me who took it]
- [38.] *Jak wrócisz, daj znać proszę.* [Let me know when you come back]  
*Bez sensu, nigdzie nie wychodziłem.* [Nonsense, I haven't gone anywhere]

## Conclusion

At the imaging level, the ‘bez sensu’ phraseme is related to depicting scenarios of failure, wastefulness, disloyalty, and expected or actual harm. In some cases, it is also a thesis which indicates the lack of merit in an action. At the logic-semantic level, it indicates firm rejection/ lack of acceptance of the proposed content. Usually, that reaction is triggered by the detected inconsistency of the argumentation, in reference to a standard interpretation based on heuristic principles. One should remember that the lack of logical entailment suggested by the ‘bez sensu’ expression is either the result of successful intellectual operations or, in contrast, lack of specific logic competences. A major function of the studied phraseme is its amplification of the argumentative force of a communication. It serves the function of a *persuasive springboard* – it usually precedes and amplifies the arguments used in conversations at various levels of communication. One negative outcome of using it is the introduction of distance to an interpersonal contact, and in some cases the sense of intellectually debasing the sender of a communication. In the article, I used several examples of media-based political statements to show that ‘bez sensu’ can support an act of discrediting a political opponent. In internet posts and comments, ‘bez sensu’ indicates shortcomings in politicians’ competences, the lack of merit in specific political actions and the resulting benefits, and it places emphasis on social harm. ‘Bez sensu’ can also be used as a way to undermine an argument – it emphasises the frailty of the premises functioning as the justifications of theses. At the interactive level, ‘bez sensu’ is a major component of emotive acts; in axiological-emotive strategies it is often the “emotive root”, the core component and the building block of the emotional tension between interlocutors. In this instance, it is mostly used to bring forward the experience of a negative emotion. In antagonistic strategies, it is a ruthless foundation of emotive rejection and distancing from an interlocutor, while in non-antagonistic strategies it emphasises emotional solidarity, e.g. it amplifies the negative image of a common “enemy”. The emotive potential of ‘bez sensu’ is also used in behavioural strategies, in which it amplifies the persuasive nature of advice and warnings, and it amplifies the reason of negotiations, at the meta-discursive level in reference to actions.

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Wiesław Czechowski

## **Bez sensu jako akt komunikowania**

### *Streszczenie*

Artykuł zawiera komunikacyjną analizę funkcji frazemu *bez sensu*. Autor rozważa konwersacyjne i dyskursywne możliwości użycia tej frazy. Stosuje w tym celu metodologię gramatyki komunikacyjnej, która pozwala na analizę komunikatów na poziomie ideacyjnym i interakcyjnym. W obszarze semantycznym *bez sensu* pozbawia wartości zdetrywializowany standard semantyczny. W konwersacjach jest reakcją na scenariusze sprzeczne z naturalną logiką i zdroworoządkowym przyczynowo-skutkowym biegiem rzeczy. Ważną funkcją jest eksponowanie scenariuszy nieskuteczności, marnotrawstwa, zbędności, braku korzyści, przewidywanych lub faktycznych szkód. Na poziomie interakcyjnym fraza *bez sensu* pełni funkcję wsparcia argumentacyjnej siły przekazu, jest też sposobem podważenia argumentacji – podkreśla słabość przesłanek. W strategiach aksjologicznych *bez sensu* jest ważną składową aktów emotywnych i budulcem napięcia emocjonalnego między rozmówcami. Tu przede wszystkim służy wyeksponowaniu przeżywanej negatywnej emocji. Ujemnym skutkiem użycia frazy *bez sensu* jest wprowadzanie do kontaktu interpersonalnego dystansu, a w niektórych przypadkach atmosfery intelektualnej degradacji nadawcy przekazu. W artykule znajduje się kilka przykładów medialnych wypowiedzi politycznych z frazą *bez sensu*, które służą dyskredytowaniu przeciwnika politycznego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sens, gramatyka komunikacyjna, ideacja, interakcja, konwersacja, logika, perswazja, manipulacja, dyskurs potoczny, dyskurs medialny, dyskurs polityczny.

## **Bez sensu as an act of communication**

### *Summary*

The article presents a communication-based analysis of the function of the 'bez sensu' [meaningless/ pointless/makes no sense etc.] phraseme. The author discusses the conversational and discursive opportunities for using it. He applies the methodology of communicational grammar, which enables the analysis of communications at the ideational and interactive levels. Within the semantic level, 'bez sensu' removes the value of the trivialised semantic standard. In conversations, it is the reaction to scripts which contradict natural logic and the common-sensical cause-and-effect course of things. An important function is the bringing forward of scripts of failure, wastefulness, redundancy, and lack of benefit or expected or actual harm. At the interactive level, the 'bez sensu' expression fulfils the function of support for the argumentative power of a communication; it is also a measure of undermining an argumentation – it emphasises the frailty of its premises. In axiological strategies, 'bez sensu' is a major component of emotive acts and the building block of the emotional tension between interlocutors. In this instance, it is mostly used to bring forward the experience of a negative emotion. One negative outcome of using the 'bez sensu' expression is the introduction distance to interpersonal contact, and in some cases the sense of intellectually debasing the sender of a communication. The article includes several examples of media-based political statements with the 'bez sensu' expression, which are used for discrediting political opponents.

**Keywords:** meaning, communicational grammar, ideation, interaction, conversation, logic, persuasion, manipulation, colloquial discourse, media discourse, political discourse.

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