

I. RESEARCH ARTICLES

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WHY ARE FLOWERS GOOD AND INNOCENT?
REFLECTIONS ON THE LINGUACULTURAL VIEW
OF FLOWERS*

Abstract. The article aims to discover why the image of flowers entrenched in the Polish language is positive and characterised by such features as ‘beauty’, ‘good’, ‘purity’, or ‘innocence’. Beginning with an analysis of the flower motifs in the poetry of Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, which counters the generally accepted wisdom, the question is asked why Polish conceals features of the flower related to its reproductive organ – the features that the poet considers crucial to the nature of flowers. An analysis of the structure of the category FLOWER (Polish KWIAT) and the motivation of its semantic features shows that speakers have positive associations with the plants’ aesthetic aspects and disregard the ambiguous sexual connotations. The aesthetic aspects additionally motivate numerous features relating to moral values. Amplification of positive connotations and de-emphasis on the ambiguous ones largely results from a cultural taboo that treats the reproductive process as indecent and embarrassing.

KEY WORDS: linguistic worldview; categorisation; semantic definition

Consider the poem *Namiętna ziemia/Passionate earth* by Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska:

*Namiętna ziemia!
Gdy wiosną miliony
Zalotnych kształtów*

Passionate earth!
When in the spring
You reveal in the sunlight

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<i>Rozrodczej tęsknoty</i>	Millions of coquettish shapes of
<i>W słońcu ujauniasz –</i>	Reproductive yearning –
<i>Świat, kłamstwem szalony,</i>	The world, mad with lying
<i>Zwie je „kwiatkami”</i>	Calls them “flowers”
<i>I stroi w nie trumny</i>	And dresses with them its coffins
<i>Lub wieńczy nimi</i>	Or crowns with them
<i>Swoje smętne cnoty. . .</i>	Its dreary virtues. . .
<i>Rozgrzeszająca zmysły symboliko</i>	Sense-absolving symbolism
<i>Kwietnych organów,</i>	Of floral organs,
<i>Stupków i pylników!</i>	Pistils and anthers!
<i>Najodważniejsza</i>	The bravest
<i>Płci apoteozo,</i>	Apotheosis of sex,
<i>W różach, storczykach,</i>	In roses, orchids,
<i>Liliach, tuberozach!</i>	Lilies, tuberoses!
<i>Bóg hołd z was składa</i>	With you God pays tribute
<i>Kochankom i matkom –</i>	To lovers and mothers –
<i>Człowiek – niewinnym</i>	People – marvel
<i>Dziwuje się „kwiatkom”</i>	At innocent “flowers”
<i>I czar poezji</i>	And having taken
<i>W skrzętne wziąwszy ręce,</i>	the charm of poetry in their busy hands
<i>– Umniejsza, święci,</i>	– Belittle, bless
<i>Ośmiesza, przekreśla. . .</i>	Ridicule, twist. . .
<i>– Namiętna ziemió. . .</i>	– Passionate earth. . .

(Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska 1974, vol. 1: 439)

Referring to scientific facts as well as to common-sense, rational experiences and observations, Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska points to the essence of flowers. She regards the image she constructs as true because it is objective. It concerns flowers as they really are, viewed without prejudice or seen through “cultural filters”. That image foregrounds the features related to what she considers the key functions of flowers – performed by their most important part, i.e. the flower*,¹ which is where the reproductive organs are located. In the poem, this is directly indicated by the scientific terms: *organ kwietny* ‘floral organ’, *stupek* ‘pistil; the female organ of a flower comprising the stigma, style and ovary’, *pylnik* ‘anther; a part of the stamen, i.e. the male fertilising organ’. According to the poet, the objects that these terms refer to and their role as implied in the poem determine the image of flowers, in which the dominant features relate, in a broad sense, to sexuality: ‘passion’, ‘coquetry’, or ‘reproductiveness’. The poet confronts that image with the one entertained by an average speaker of Polish. The latter is an

¹ In Polish, the term *kwiat* ‘flower’ is used in reference to both the whole plant and its reproductive part. Therefore, following the author’s typographical solution used in the original Polish article, *kwiat* or *flower* are followed by an asterisk (*) when they mean ‘the part of the plant with coloured petals, containing its reproductive organs’. [translator’s note]

image that is projected by the world “mad with lie”, as a result of “belittling”, “blessing”, and “twisting”. The poet does not merely distance herself from that image – she rejects it altogether, as based on false premises. Although Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska uses the term *świat* ‘world’, she tacitly narrows it down to members of a specific culture (European, and in particular, Polish) in which this image has emerged. This subjective, culture-bound, stereotypical image is rendered with the words indicating people’s actions with regard to flowers (*The world, [...] Calls them “flowers” / And dresses with them its coffins / Or crowns with them / Its dreary virtues*), and the features associated with them (e.g. ‘innocence’).

The poet uses the emotionally marked diminutive *kwiatek* (from *kwiat*), which she includes in inverted commas: this signals her distancing from or rejection of the popular image of the flower encoded in the Polish language. Constructing her own view, based on scientific knowledge, she contests the linguistic worldview, argues that it needs to be questioned, revised, and modified so that cultural patterns of thought do not obscure the reality.

This somewhat original poetic perspective raises certain questions. Why are the elements related to productivity “twisted” in the linguacultural view of flowers? Why have the features of ‘innocence’, ‘beauty’, ‘goodness’, ‘gentleness’, and ‘purity’ become semantically dominant? Undoubtedly, sexual connotations are present in Polish, yet Polish speakers know that they are not essential in the popular image of flowers; otherwise the diminutive *kwiatuszek* ‘tiny little flower’² could never be used affectionately in reference to a child.

In addressing these issues, I will analyse the internal structure of the category FLOWER (Polish KWIAT), its particular elements and relations between them.³ In other words, I intend to disclose the “logic” of this concept, reveal the patterns of human thinking about this portion of the world of plants. In order to do this, I would like to start from lexicographic definitions of *kwiat*.

² In Polish, diminution is gradable, with an increasing degree of implied affection: *kwiat* – *kwiatek* ‘a little flower’ – *kwiatuszek* ‘a tiny, lovely, beloved little flower’. [editor’s note]

³ In the analysis, I use the research methodology of the linguistic worldview enterprise, in particular the concept of semantic definition, proposed by Bartmiński (1988a) and developed in Lublin, Poland (see e.g. Bartmiński and Tokarski 1993; Pajdzińska and Tokarski 1996), as well as the principle of the internal motivation of features (Tokarski 1995a). However, the aim of my analysis is not to reveal the full inventory of the features of KWIAT (FLOWER), nor to provide a definition of the lexeme *kwiat*. Such aims go beyond the scope of a short article such as this one. However, the primary focus in this article is not only in the term *kwiat* but also the category KWIAT, which can only be carried out from an onomasiological perspective.

It appears that these definitions betray lexicographers' helplessness. *Kwiat* is most frequently defined with the features 'plant' and 'blooming' (or 'ornamental').⁴ The former feature relates *kwiat* to the subordinate category, the latter distinguishes it from other terms belonging to this category. Neither plays a differential function: the feature 'blooming' can also be assigned to the carrot or strawberry, while the feature 'ornamental' to grass.

Since FLOWER is a subjective and anthropocentric category impossible to define by clearly designating the conditions for category inclusion, it proves difficult to provide a final definition.

Undoubtedly, the most important feature for us is 'it has a flower* (it flowers)', yet this feature is also relevant in the case of other plants. Certainly, it makes no sense to postulate the existence of a broad category that encompasses strawberries or potatoes: intuition suggests that there is a difference between the flower* of a flower and the flower* of a strawberry.

Most speakers, when asked whether the strawberry is a flower, would answer in the negative without hesitation, adding, however, that it does flower. Nevertheless, the strawberry is visualised with a fruit, as its identifying feature, not with a flower*. The flower* of the strawberry is considered optional, while the flower* of the flower is essential: we actually recognise flowers by their flower*.

Consider some more evidence. The high position of the features 'it has a flower*', 'the flower* is its important part', together with their conceptual salience, also derives from the metaphorical uses of the lexemes: *kwiat** 'the best, the most valuable group of people or part of something', *przekwitnąć* (lit. 'shed blossom') 'lose one's beauty, grow old', and the expression *w kwiecie wieku* (lit. 'in the flower* of one's age') 'in the prime of life, in bloom'. The feature is crucial in the semantics of the Polish *kwiat**: the Proto-Slavonic lexeme *květz* meant something bright and shiny, and it gave rise to the meaning 'part of a plant', from which, in turn, the meaning 'a flowering plant' was derived through metonymy (ETSJPB I: 868–869; SETS I: 479).

The metaphor *głowa kwiatu* 'the head of the flower', being a peculiar poetic definition of *kwiat**, can be regarded as further evidence that the flower* is the "essence" of the plant, its most important part, as encoded in the Polish language:

⁴ I only refer to dictionaries of contemporary Polish, published in the last 50 years. A survey of them shows that lexicographers propose very short definitions, e.g. "a flowering plant" (SJPS I: 1101; MSJPS: 376), "an ornamental flowering plant" (SJPD III: 1350) or descriptions including additional features, e.g. "an ornamental plant, often having a scent, occurring in numerous varieties; since they come in a wide range of forms and colours, flowers are used in decorative bouquets, garlands, and ikebana arrangements; cultivated as cut or pot plants (floriculture)" (SWJPD: 451; cf. also PSWP: 405; USJP II: 383).

<i>głowa kwiatu toczy się</i>	the head of the flower is rolling
(Rymkiewicz 1984: 42)	
<i>tłumy kwiatów</i>	crowds of flowers
<i>którym zbiorowo ucinają głowy</i>	whose heads are cut off collectively
(Hartwig 1987: 112)	
<i>kwiaty nie dźwigną kamienia</i>	flowers won't lift a stone
<i>Na swych gwiaździstych głowach</i>	On their starry heads
(Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska 1974, 2: 52)	

The frequency of this metaphor implies that it has already been conventionalised. At its basis, lies the belief that, as in humans, the head is the organ that distinguishes humans from animals: the head is considered the seat of the brain, mind, and memory. This means we distinguish between thinking humans from instinctively responding animals. Similarly, the flower* is distinguished from other flowering plants because of the way they are used.

The mere fact that the Polish language emphasises the importance of the flower* does not allow us to explain the differences between the popular and the scientific view of the flower and the one proposed by Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska. The two views seem to have a common point of departure and eventually the two converge. The differences must lie, then, in more detailed ways in which the flower* is conceptualised. Scientific rationality and objective observation lead us to the image of the flower* as a reproductive organ consisting of stamens and pistils. In contrast, from the point of view of popular wisdom, other features turn out to be important.⁵ The expressions used in Polish, such as: *płatki kwiatu* 'flower petals', *płatki śniegu* 'snow flakes' (thin, delicate ice crystals in the form of little shreds), *kwiecisty* 'flowery' (decorated with a pattern of coloured flowers), imply that the flower* is above all conceptualised as something that consists of coloured, flat, thin, and delicate petals. That same notion is also implied in the proverb *Kobiety nie bij nawet kwiatkiem* 'Do not hit a woman even with a flower' (NKPP II: 88) and in the idiomatic expression *pasuje jak kwiatek do kozucha* 'They match like a flower matches a sheepskin coat' (i.e., 'a square peg in a round hole') (SFRAZ I: 371).

⁵ Point of view is an important category in the organisation of language-encoded knowledge and in the description of linguistic worldview. Adoption of a particular viewpoint determines which features of the object being observed will be highlighted or foregrounded, and, in effect, determines the semantic content of words and whole utterances (see e.g. Bartmiński, Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, and Nycz 2004a,b).

The elements of the linguistic view of flowers that we have just discussed account for the most culturally relevant connotations of *kwiat*.⁶ One of the most firmly entrenched features is the positive feature of ‘beauty’, motivated by the appearance of the flower*. It is responsible for the metaphorical meaning of the derivative *kwiatuszek* ‘a beautiful woman, girl, or child’ and the comparative expression (*piękny*) *jak kwiat* ‘(beautiful) like a flower’, which has now become something of a cliché. The term *kwiat* (*kwiatek*) is used to refer to a woman, typically unmarried, in idioms and proverbs, e.g.: *z kwiatka na kwiatek* (‘from one flower onto another’) ‘a womanizer’s habits’, *Tego kwiatu pół świata* (lit. ‘This flower is in the half of the world’) ‘There are a lot of beautiful women in the world’. The connotation of beauty is the basis of the common, albeit ironic meanings of such colloquial expressions as *kwiatek* ‘a gross mistake in a piece of writing’ (or in a more general sense: ‘a mistake or misunderstanding that is funny or embarrassing for the speaker’) or *ładne kwiatki* (lit. ‘nice flowers’) ‘about something surprising or shocking’. To this, one may add the derivatives of *kwiat* that activate the feature ‘ornamental’, e.g. *kwiecisty* ‘decorated with a floral pattern; ornamental, excessive’, or *kwiaton* ‘an ornamental motif; ornament in the shape of a stylised flower’.

Some of these linguistic facts additionally suggest that the beauty of the flower corresponds to a woman’s beauty in generic sense (i.e., the beauty of the fairer sex). This is, in fact, characteristic not only of Polish culture: in many cultures, a flower symbolises female beauty and the woman in general (Kopaliński 1991: 184; HDS 1996; Krawczyk-Tyrpa 2001a). Aesthetic values related to flowers also play a role in the custom of giving flower names to girls (Puzynina 1992: 156). Female names derived from the names of flowers occur in many languages, e.g. in Polish: *Róża*, *Wioletta*, *Lilianna*, *Hortensja*, *Malwina*; in English: *Rose*, *Daisy*, *Lily*, *Iris*, *Heather*, *Violet*; in Spanish: *Rosario*, *Rosita*, *Azucena*, *Yazmin*, *Violeta* – this means that the general aesthetic category ‘beauty’ is characteristic of the concept of FLOWER not only in the Polish linguistic worldview.

The feature ‘beauty’ motivates other positive conventionalised connotations of *kwiat*: ‘brings joy’ and ‘brings happiness’, as in *życie ściele komuś drogę kwiatami*, lit. ‘life lays flowers on ones’ way’, *komuś na ustach zakwitł/rozkwitł uśmiech* ‘a smile bloomed (lit. “flowered”) on someone’s mouth’. Somewhat less entrenched are the features ‘admirable’, ‘perfect’, and ‘source of poetic inspiration’. However, they can easily be traced in texts, e.g. the peasant poet Jan Pócek compares the sky to a flower:

⁶ I have in mind here both conventionalised (lexical) connotations (cf. Bartmiński 1988b) and those that have not (yet) been conventionalised (i.e. textual connotations; see Puzynina 1990; Tokarski 1995b).

*dzień pełen pogody i majestatu
był jak piękne imię regina
niebo podobne było do kwiatu*
(Pocek 1984: 239)

the day full of good weather and majesty
was like the beautiful name regina
the sky was like a flower

Jan Brzechwa, in turn, compares an inspirational spark to a flower:

*Do napisania wiersza
Potrzebna iskra jedna, [...]]
Która jest naraz kwiatem,
I snem, i ciszą nieba*
(Brzechwa 1968: 132)

To write a poem
One spark is needed only, [...]]
Which is all at once a flower,
And a dream, and heaven's silence

However, it is the feature 'good' that is most frequently associated with *kwiat*, perceived as an ethical value:

*O sercu trudno coś rzec: rzadko nosi w nim
kwiaty, częściej różne chwasty*
(Iłakowiczówna 1971, II: 336)

It is hard is to say anything about his heart:
he seldom carries flowers in it, they are more
often weeds

*Wśród kwiatów, jak wśród dobrych i szczęśli-
wych myśli*
(Staff 1980, I: 693)

Amid flowers, like amid good and happy
thoughts

Undoubtedly, there is a relationship between the features 'good', 'perfect', 'admirable' and the conventionalised connotations 'beautiful', 'brings joy', 'brings happiness': the more firmly entrenched features open up the space for the less conventionalised judgements. It is in the relationship between them that one can observe a manifestation of a certain thought pattern with regard to the world of flowers. Of all plants, it is flowers that are conceptualised as those whose main function is to provide aesthetic pleasure, to evoke positive states and emotions. Consider a poetic perspective that expresses this belief:

*Ogrodnik Kropidło hoduje
kwiaty i ludzkie serca.
Kwiaty dla barwnych ogrodów,
serca na świata urodę,
kwiaty, by zerwać i ponieść,
serca, by nieść je na dłońi.
By świat był piękny, potrzebne
kwiaty i serca – tak samo.*
(Kubiak 1956: 27)

The gardener grows the Aspergillum
flowers and human hearts.
The flowers for colourful gardens,
the hearts for the world's beauty,
the flowers to pick and carry off,
the hearts to carry on your palm.
For the world to be beautiful, one needs
flowers and hearts – alike.

Considering the reasons why flowers play such an important cultural role, Tomasz Pindel writes:

A hypothesis may be put forward that flowers embody the notion of beauty, they are a symbol of some superordinate aesthetics – the symbol popular in nearly all cultures [...], which renders them worthy of being given to others. In fact, a bouquet of flowers is an immaterial present, which in itself has no significance. By giving flowers, one does not give anything concrete – they merely express thoughts and emotions. That is why flowers are such a universal means of social communication. (Pindel 2001: 14)

This hypothesis is certainly in line with the judgements and texts mentioned in this study. It seems that it is because of this way of thinking that the concept of KWIAT has been distinguished in the Polish language as a natural category. This is not because flowers can function as ornaments (as is suggested in some dictionaries) but because they do not bring any material benefits to people (unlike strawberries or potatoes). Flowers are conceptualised as an embodiment of pure beauty free from any pragmatic properties, as plants that exist for the sake of blooming alone.⁷ The ornamental function (and the feature ‘ornamental’) derive from this basic conceptualisation of the flower.

Now it becomes apparent that the view of KWIAT entrenched in the Polish language is based on real but selected properties of flowers. The selection is governed by the anthropocentric, cultural point of view: we observe the flower* as the most important organ of the plant, we also notice its features, structure and reproductive functions (the fact that the scientific view influences the popular imagery plays a significant role here). However, as flowers strongly appeal to our aesthetic feelings and we do not find any practical applications for them (they bear no fruit, like other plants do), we attribute to them, above all, aesthetic and ethical functions: we tend to link beauty and goodness as values. Consider in this context the meaning of many Polish lexical items, collocations, and sayings: *piękno duchowe/wewnętrzne* ‘spiritual/inner beauty’, *złość piękności szkodzi* ‘anger is harmful to beauty’, *piękny jak anioł* ‘beautiful as an angel’, *piękny charakter* ‘beautiful psyche/character’, *piękny gest* ‘a beautiful (good, noble) gesture’, *piękny film/obraz* ‘a beautiful (valuable) film/picture’. Likewise, we link ugliness with evil, as in e.g. *zgnilizna moralna* ‘moral rot’, *brzydkie wyrazy* ‘ugly (bad, obscene, vulgar) words’, *brzydkie czyn/postępek* ‘ugly (morally wrong) deed’.

⁷ Because of the aesthetic values of flowers, which lack any functional properties, they were chosen in the US in the 1960s as a symbol of the so-called *flower children*, a youth culture that propagated freedom and liberty and protested against the utilitarian and consumption-oriented society (see Kopaliński 1991: 568). As a loan translation, the found its way into many languages, including Polish (*dzieci-kwiaty*, lit. ‘children-flowers’). Undoubtedly, the latter returns to the fashion of the hippie culture were conducive to actualisations of the meaning of that term.

Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasised that a cultural taboo on direct mention of embarrassing content related to “sexuality” had an important influence on the image of flowers, in particular on the fact that the sphere of reproduction has been “removed” from the focus of viewing. Anthropologists point out that sexuality is a hedged about with taboo in almost all cultures (Burszta 1998: 15). The force of the taboo is so strong that – as the example of plants shows – sexual connotations are removed even from the areas that do not concern people directly.

Numerous extended and specific connotations have formed around the general categories of beauty and goodness associated with the category *KWIAT*. Among the most frequent extensions are such connotations as: ‘pure’, ‘innocent’, ‘sinless’, ‘nice’, ‘friendly’, ‘gives hope’, ‘earns one’s trust’. The poets Józef Czechowicz and Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna display the connotation of ‘innocence’ directly:

<i>niewysłowione czyste kwiaty u ziemi świe- tlistej</i>	inexpressible pure flowers at the luminous earth
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(Czechowicz 1963: 281)

<i>Zuzia [...] czysta jak kwiat</i>	Zuzia [...] pure like a flower
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(Iłakowiczówna 1971, II: 380)

The connotations ‘innocent’ and ‘nice’ are evoked especially in the contexts in which a flower is juxtaposed with a child:

<i>Z duszą dobrą jak zboże, dziecinną jak kwiaty Żył poeta</i>	With the soul good like corn, childish like flowers The poet lived
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(Staff 1980, I: 434)

<i>kwiaty chłopskie jasne i miłe jak dzieci</i>	peasant flowers bright and nice like children
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(Pocek 1984: 186)

The poet Halina Poświatowska defines *nadzieja* ‘hope’ by referring to the meaning of *kwiat*:

<i>Pomiędzy kartki włóż nadzieję, kwiat cienki i czekaj</i>	Put hope, a thin flower, between pages and wait
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(Poświatowska 1998, II: 235)

The connotation friendliness is the foundation of the metaphor FLOWER IS A BROTHER in a poem by Tadeusz Gajcy:

smell of the flower is perceived as having a positive influence on a person's psychological state, emotions or behaviour, which is why the general belief in scents and smells having a positive effect on people can be considered as motivated by the collectively-shared connotation. As such, it can be treated as a typical, highly conventionalised feature of the flower.

Intuitively speaking, the season most strongly associated with flowers is spring. The linguistically entrenched view of flowers and trees, which begin to bloom in spring, gave rise to the name of one of the spring months, *kwiecień* 'April', "a month of flowers in bloom" (SETS I: 486). The notion of spring bloom is also entrenched in the expression *kwietna niedziela*, lit. 'flowery Sunday', another name for the Palm Sunday (SFRAZ I: 371): its direct source was the folk custom, today forgotten, of carrying the figure of Christ on a donkey from church to church. During the procession, people gathered in the streets and threw flowers and catkin sprigs before the figure of Christ. Connotations of the flower are also visible in the meaning of *maj* 'May', related to the verb *maić* 'to dress, decorate something with green sprigs, leaves and flowers'. The flower is a culturally entrenched symbol of spring. Dorothea Forstner begins her description of the meanings of flower from explaining its symbolism:

In both ancient and Christian symbolism, spring was depicted through flowers. These children of light, opening their calyxes towards the sun, are the heralds of spring, they are the wedding dress of nature waking up to life again. (Forstner 1990: 184)

Flowers and spring regularly co-occur in texts, e.g.:

<i>Młode wiosny kochankom lazurem jaśnieją, Kwiaty buchają z ziemi, poezje się rodzą, Pary w gaje wiślańskie na słowiki chodzą,</i>	Young springs shine with azure to lovers Flowers burst from the earth, poetries are born Couples walk to hear nightingales to the Vistula groves
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(Miłosz 1984, I: 99)

In texts, the meaning 'it blooms in spring' rarely indicates a neutral characterisation of *kwiąt*. The image of a flower as an element of a spring scenery almost invariably triggers a series of positive associations:

<i>czasem napitęm się zorzy jak wiosna kwiatów i żyta</i>	sometimes I would drink the glow of the sky like the spring drinks flowers and rye
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(Pocek 1984: 248)

Spring, conceptualised as a beautiful and sunny season, awaited impatiently, largely owes its image to flowers, its most characteristic elements:

wiosna życia (lit. ‘the spring of life’) ‘youth’; *wiosenny dzień* ‘spring day’ (i.e., warm and sunny), *wiosna w duszy* (lit. ‘spring in one’s soul’) ‘cheerful mood’; *wcielenie wiosny* (lit. ‘the embodiment of spring’) ‘about a young and beautiful girl’; cf. also the collocations: *czekać/używać/wyglądać wiosny* ‘await, make use of, look forward to spring’; *pachnie wiosną* ‘it smells of spring’; *wiosna się budzi/rozkwita/powraca* ‘spring awakes, blooms, returns’ (SFRAZ II: 574–575). The connotations of *wiosna* ‘spring’ and *kwiat* ‘flower’ move in similar directions: both are associated with ‘beauty’, ‘joy’, ‘good’, ‘youth’, etc., and when used together, they positively influence people’s emotions, give them joy, energy, hope, and the will of life. Moreover, the associations of *kwiat* with spring and youth strengthen our positive evaluation of flowers.

It should be added, however, that this view pertains to budding flowers, in full bloom. Flowers shedding their blossom are conceptualised in terms of a “fall” of the flower* or its petals and perceived as the flower’s “death”. No heed is paid here to the scientific fact that flowering is only a stage in the plant’s life and that the appearance of blooms means that the plant is ready to bear seeds. The focus on the moment of flowering is a consequence of attributing the essence of the flower to its flower*. Therefore, the lifespan of a flower is measured from the moment of sprouting to the moment of flower* shedding; hence, the awareness of propagation and the flower* as a fruit-producing organ remains, so to speak, alien to popular wisdom.

As already mentioned, the way humans normally use flowers also has a bearing on the way they are conceived. They are desirable and valued elements of reality; consider e.g. the various terms referring to: (i) their cultivation (e.g. *sadzić* ‘plant’, *pielegnować* ‘tend’, *podlewać* ‘water’, *siać* ‘sow’); (ii) “professional” flower cultivation (*kwiaciarnia* ‘floriculture’, *kwiaciarnia* ‘flower shop’, *kwieciarka* ‘florist’); (iii) uses of flowers (*kwietnik* ‘flower stand’, *rabata* ‘flower bed’, *bukiet* ‘bouquet’, *rozarium* ‘rose garden’, *perfumy kwiatowe* ‘flower perfume’). These lexical items show that flowers, considered the most beautiful of plants, are perceived above all as decorative elements.

Many cultural functions of the flower, related to its general feature ‘used for decoration’, derive from the custom of giving flowers to others as a manifestation of positive feelings. We give flowers to people we like, appreciate, respect, recognise and want to show our gratitude to. The feature ‘given as a sign of positive feelings’ may be made more specific depending on the actual kind of emotion, the most important of which is of course love:

*Więc to Ciebie szukają gdy kupują kwiaty
by na serio powtarzać romantyczne słowa*

(Twardowski 1995: 144)

So it is you they seek when they buy flowers
to repeat romantic words in a serious manner

Flowers are also believed to “speak”, to express meanings indirectly, as in the metaphor *mowa/język kwiatów* ‘the speech/language of flowers’. A manifestation of this belief are glossaries of “flower speech” in popular culture (Polish and others), printed in various popular magazines, calendars, etc. As a prime example, consider the slogan *Say it with flowers* that has functioned as the motto of American florists since 1917 (Kopaliński 1991: 185).⁸

By way of conclusion, even a short analysis such as this one (limited only to the most firmly entrenched features associated with flowers) clearly shows the dominant parameters of their linguistic image and their motivation. It also shows why the semantic components determined by the functions of the internal organs of the flower are not linguistically entrenched. In the poem by Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska quoted at the beginning, the poet suggests, with a shade of contrariness, that this false view results from people’s desire for absolution. To some extent this is true: a worldview is indeed a projection of our experience and system of values onto the world, in this case the world of plants. Relationships between the various components of that view reflect the way we mentally organise reality. Firstly, by seeking the essence of flowers in their most beautiful part, the flower*, we invoke positive associations with this part. Secondly, from a solely anthropocentric viewpoint, we ignore the fact that the role of flowers* is to propagate the species: we only treat them as decorative ornaments. Thirdly, we link the aesthetic values of flowers with moral values, effectively neutralising the ambiguity of flowers – the ambiguity which, if more clearly exposed, could eliminate their positive connotations or even effect a change in their cultural functions. Fourthly, a significant role in hiding or moderating the ambiguous connotations is played by the taboo, a culturally entrenched belief that reproduction is an embarrassing and indecent subject. Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska proposes her own “true” vision, based on the features of ‘reproductiveness’ and ‘passion’ that carry positive evaluation of flowers, *the bravest apotheosis of sex*. But here it becomes apparent that her own view also bears signs of subjectivity and that one cannot escape judgements from the specifically human perspective. As elements of nature, flowers are neither good nor bad, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither moral nor immoral. They simply are.

Translated by Anna Wyrwa

⁸ The origin and history of the “speech” of flowers is discussed, e.g., in Sikora (1987). In my other work (Piekarczyk 2004) I mention its contemporary aspects and the way it affects the semantics of flower names. I also analyse in detail the linguistic worldview of the Polish KWIAT and the meanings of specific flower names (e.g. *róża* ‘rose’, *lilia* ‘lily’, *fiolatek* ‘violet’, or *wrzos* ‘heather’).

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