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A CONCEPT OF STAR IN THE LINGUISTIC PERCEPTION OF POLISH TEENAGERS

*And what do you benefit if you gain
the whole world but lose your own soul?*

Marilyn Monroe¹

[after St Matthew 16: 24–26]

Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to depict a linguistic picture of the concept of *star* as it exists in the perception of Polish teenagers, namely students of secondary school. However, it is not possible to analyse this concept without some reference to axiological aspects of contemporary culture, both Polish and global.

The article strives to link the linguistic form with culture specific semantics: thus, it is hoped to outline an image of star posited by Polish young people whose mind is stimulated by their native culture, that is a system of values typical of Polish character. This leads us to a particular meaning of the analysed notion, and therefore the paper could be seen as an attempt of ethnosemantic exploration of the issue in accordance with a cognitive model of semantics² as well as based on the Lublin school of semantic description³.

On the other hand, one should be aware of the fact that Polish teenagers live in the world of global culture, and first of all postmodern one, which undoubtedly has a huge impact on their mentality, system of values

¹ A famous American movie star of the 1950s and 1960s, universally recognized as an embodiment of female beauty and sex appeal, found herself trapped between her intellectual ambitions and public desire for her sensuality, died tragically aged 36.

² For more details, see Paduch [2003].

³ See Bartmiński [2008] or Anusiewicz [1995].

they acquire and possess, and the way they conceptualise and express linguistically the reality. Furthermore, in the case of the concept of star this influence must considerably come from American culture and trends and criteria imposed by American show business. Kazimierz Ożóg precisely discerns this phenomenon in Polish culture and language. According to him, globalisation, that is predominantly Americanisation, influences and provides political, economic, social and cultural models for other nations to follow [2008: 69]. Obviously, Poland as a young and inexperienced member of the capitalist and democratic society is easily exposed to both constructive and destructive effects of this subtle ethnic transformation.

The concept of star in the understanding of Polish teenagers will be studied on the basis of the data received from a survey⁴ made among a hundred students of some secondary schools in Kraków, Olsztyn, Tarnów and Mielec in January 2013. Such a group of respondents was chosen deliberately since the analysed issue is well-known to young people and they are supposed to show some linguistic creativity in this respect; consequently, their output might be an opulent source of knowledge with regard to the notion of star.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this paper has been inspired by a general tendency of neglecting universal truths and traditional values which were cultivated in Polish culture for many generations but which started to fade away with the appearance of postmodern culture. Naturally, being in a special biological and mental period of their life, teenagers undergo its influence very easily as they are at the age when postmodern traits affect and attract them to a large extent. Sadly, it often happens that obvious and traditional values of life are not commonly approved by young people who choose something which is easy to get, spiritually useless, but trendy, although not necessarily valuable. Needless to say, such a tendency must affect the understanding of the concept of star by Polish teenagers.

In addition, the semantics of the notion of star presented in this paper refers to a broad cognitive definition of linguistic description and includes both denotative and connotative perception of the concept [see Grzegorzczkova 2001; Tokarski 2008]. Also, it must be assured that although the subject of the analysis is definitely controversial and ambiguous at times, the objectivism of the present study is by no means doubtful.

A Dictionary Definition of the Concept of Star

In a number of English dictionaries, the entry *star* is given an explanation of its senses and they do not differ from one another too much: any sort of difference

⁴ The survey was made in Polish on purpose in order to avoid any language barriers and to elicit from the respondents as many answers as possible. The questionnaire used in the survey is available at the very end of the present paper.

refers rather to its lexical level and rarely to semantic one. For example, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English provides the following definitions of star:

1. any one of the distant bodies appearing as a point of light in the sky at night;
2. (astronomy) any large ball in outer space that is made up of gases and gives out light, such as the sun;
- 3a. figure, object, decoration, etc with radiating points, suggesting a star by its shape; asterisk;
- 3b. mark of this shape used to indicate a category of excellence;
- 3c. metal badge in the shape of a star, worn on certain uniforms to indicate rank;
4. famous or brilliant singer, performer, sportsman, etc;
5. (in astrology) planet or heavenly body believed to influence a person's life, luck, personality, etc [Hornby 1989: 1251].

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English extends the above description of the notion of star by adding its three other senses:

1. someone who acts the part of the main character in a film or play;
2. (informal) someone who is particularly successful at a job, course of study, etc.;
3. (informal) in the phrase: You're a *star!* – used to say that someone is very good at something or thank someone for helping you [1995: 1400].

Similar descriptions of the notion are given by other dictionaries of English. However, Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners [2002: 1396] summarises and consolidates the semantics of the concept of star covering all the meanings of the concept described by the dictionaries mentioned above and adding two more specific senses:

1. a sign or small piece of paper shaped like a star that is given to someone, especially a child, as a reward for good work;
2. a sign like a star with a lot of points, used for example in computers, on a telephone or for marking something as important.

Besides, the dictionary provides a categorisation of star and depicts the concept on the basis of six categories, namely:

1. small light in night sky;
2. somebody famous and popular;
3. sign of quality;
4. object/shape with points;
5. the best in a group;
6. somebody who does something helpful.

Obviously, it will be quite interesting to know how Polish teenagers perceive the notion of star, how they understand the concept and how they conceptualise it on the grounds of Polish culture as well as global cultural trends mainly connected

with show business, a glorification of fame, money and eternal beauty, a world in which there is little space for fundamental truths and values cultivated by our civilisation for centuries.

A Linguistic Picture of Star in the View of Polish Teenagers

Unlike dictionary definitions, Polish teenagers provide a wide range of conceptual definitions of the concept of star connected with their personal experience and way of thinking; however, they mainly focus on the meaning of star as a famous or brilliant singer, performer or sportsman. Of course, such the status quo should not surprise anybody since young people are particularly interested in music, films, sport and their idols associated with the relevant occupations. Surely enough, the Polish teenage respondents depict the notion of star and give a linguistic picture of it by means of a conceptualisation of the notion typical of both Polish culture and global inclinations.

The respondents define the concept of star referring to its two denotative categories:

1. small light in night sky;
2. somebody famous and popular.

While depicting the notion of star according to the first category, Polish teenagers provide the following definitions of it: a heavenly body (18⁵); a heavenly body existing in space and shining with its own light; a heavenly body in the sky (4); a heavenly body which shines in the sky (6); a heavenly body consisting of hydrogen and helium (2); a gas sphere shining in the sky at night (2). In addition, some of them admit that they associate the notion of star with the universe (4), the shining moon (2), the sky or the moon.

However, 98 per cent of the Polish respondents understand the concept of star through the category of somebody famous and popular. They state that the star is: a very famous person; a famous person (28); a person who possesses a set of values, is well-known and liked by others; a public person who has a mental influence over others; a morally valuable person who affects others in a positive way; someone who has achieved success through hard work or had good luck; a person who has achieved something socially valuable; somebody who is appreciated across the globe for what they do; a good and worth attention person; a successful person on TV, a sportsman or somebody who appears in the media for other achievements; a valuable person worth following; a popular person who is known to a large number of people (3); somebody who is liked, admired

⁵ The number in brackets indicates how many times the given definition was supplied by the respondents.

and well-paid; a person who is easily recognized and famous for something (3); a well-known person of a high social position, rich, responsible and liked by others; somebody who is exceptionally gifted in some domain, especially in music; somebody who has an established position because of their achievements excluding occasional musical hits or soap opera appearances; somebody talented and well-known who is liked by others; a famous person who stands out from others (2); a famous and talented person; a very popular person who likes being in the public eye (2), gives interviews and autographs; a well-known person who amazes other people; a person who is famous in the whole country or all over the world; a public person (5); a popular person (8); a famous film actor; a celebrity (4); a famous person who is recognizable in a particular sphere of life; a famous and recognizable person who is adored and having fans (2); a person who is well-known and liked by the society (3); a person who is well-known and liked by the media (2); a person who is famous for something (2); a remarkable person with regard to intelligence; an artist; a famous person whose life is monitored by others and the media; a singer; a model; a person who earns a lot (2); a person who earns millions and attends public events; a fashion icon; a popular person who is attractive to others; a celebrity who appears in the media (4); a person who lives in the world of show business; somebody who is admired all over the world and appreciated for what and how they do something; someone who is famous by accident; an actor; a famous person who often appears on TV and newspaper covers (7); somebody who deserves being called in this way because of their achievements, deeds or other special reasons (2); somebody universally recognizable; a popular person in a given society; somebody who is well-known (3); a famous person who is conceited; a person who has a lot of money; a famous person having a lot of money (2); somebody who has many talents; someone who is self-confident and conceited; someone who has achieved something; somebody who is well-known, admired, liked by the society, gifted and has their own style; someone who is called in this way because of their fame and recognition; a famous and talented person (2); a famous person who is actually known by almost everyone; a talented person who can be regarded as an authority; a person who can be a model of personality to be followed by others; a public person who appears on the stage; a person about whom they write in newspapers and who is sometimes talented; a well-known person usually rich; a person who is gifted and has an outstanding personality in comparison with other people; a successful, famous and likeable person; a celebrity often known worldwide; a person who is successful in a particular sphere of life (2); a talented person who is successful in the field of film or music; a person who is treated, especially by the media, like a star despite the fact that he or she has nothing special to offer; a person who is famous all over the world; a famous person connected with show business;

At the same time the teenage respondents highlight certain characteristics which a typical star is expected to possess. Interestingly enough, and in accordance with expectations, the attributes of star, pointed out by Polish teenagers, can be divided into two groups and viewed within an axiological context: positive values and negative ones or alternatively – values and anti-values. The first group specifies an image of star developed by universally acknowledged criteria whereas the other one creates a picture of the notion being influenced by postmodern culture and its priorities.

Here is a list of ten most appreciated values which are preferred by those teenagers who depict and view the image of star according to traditional conventions:

1. talent (52⁶),
2. exceptionality (41),
3. glamour (32),
4. intelligence (31),
5. sincerity (29),
6. devotion (25),
7. competence (24),
8. originality (19),
9. modesty (18),
10. creativity (15).

However, some of the respondents appreciate a number of features that have negative connotations and display a postmodern image of the concept of star. Here they are:

1. cunning (26),
2. arrogance (24),
3. dishonesty (23),
4. immodesty (22),
5. vulgarity (20),
6. controversy (18),
7. scandal (17),
8. mendacity (15),
9. impudence (14),
10. vanity (12).

Surely enough, this discrepancy in the image of star depicted by young Poles substantiates the fact that there does not exist one model of star in Polish culture, and this is certainly caused by a visible ethical dualism represented by values and anti-values, both of which are conspicuous in Polish society nowadays.

While describing the notion of star Polish teenagers tend to embody their virtue preferences and refer to particular people who symbolise their perception of the

⁶ The number in brackets indicates how many respondents out of one hundred chose the given value.

concept including both positive and negative values. Here is a list of the top ten most admired Polish stars according to the teenage respondents:

1. Doda (10),
2. Kuba Wojewódzki (7),
3. Robert Lewandowski (6),
4. Mariusz Pudzianowski (5),
5. Jan Paweł II (4),
Piotr Adamczyk (4),
Artur Żmijewski (4),
Małgorzata Kozuchowska (4),
9. Violetta Villas (3),
10. Jerzy Owsiak (2).

In addition, the list below presents the top ten stars of international prestige.

Here they are:

1. Michael Jackson (14),
2. Johnny Depp (9),
3. Rihanna (8),
4. Angelina Jolie (6),
5. Marilyn Monroe (5),
Madonna (5),
7. Cristiano Ronaldo (3),
Lady Gaga (3),
9. Sylvester Stallone (2),
Leo Messi (2).

According to the survey, the Polish teenage respondents associate the concept of star with certain occupations or professions that facilitate and enable a given person to become a star. It does not come as a surprise that a majority of stars has a lot to do with show business, and consequently Polish teenagers relate the notion of star to actors, singers, artists as well as fashion models or sportspeople. The graph below illustrates nine major occupations connected with the notion of star.

It is also not astonishing that the concept of star is first of all associated with the category of show business according to Polish teenagers. In the era of easy access to all means of communication and their advanced technology, the young minds of teenagers are vulnerably exposed to pop culture, which has a tremendous effect on their way of thinking, behaviour and linguistic expression. Following Geert Hofstede's [1994] suggestion that culture is the software of the mind, it is easy to explain why the Polish respondents perceive and regard singers, actors, sportsmen or TV personalities as most suitable candidates of becoming a star. The graph below indicates the major domains directly considered to have a lot in common with the idea of star.

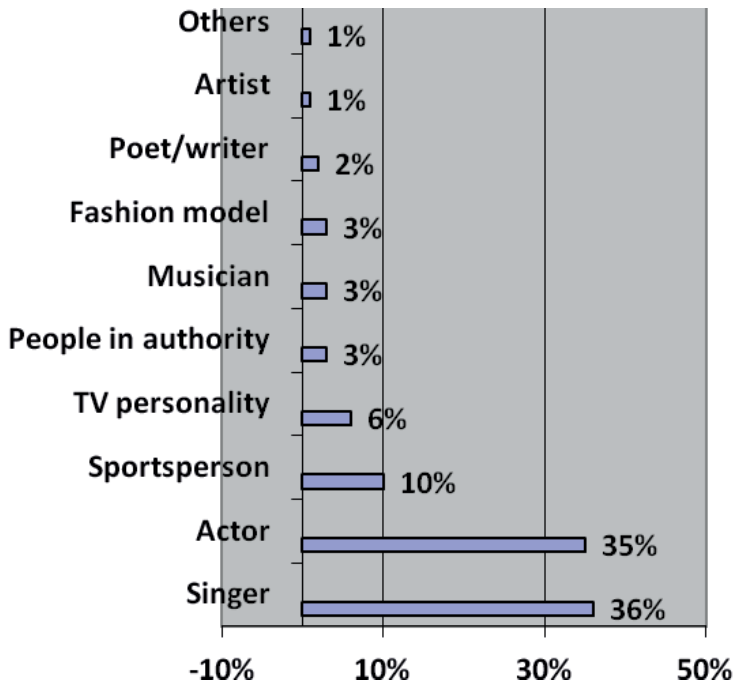


Fig. 1. A relation between the notion of star and people's occupations

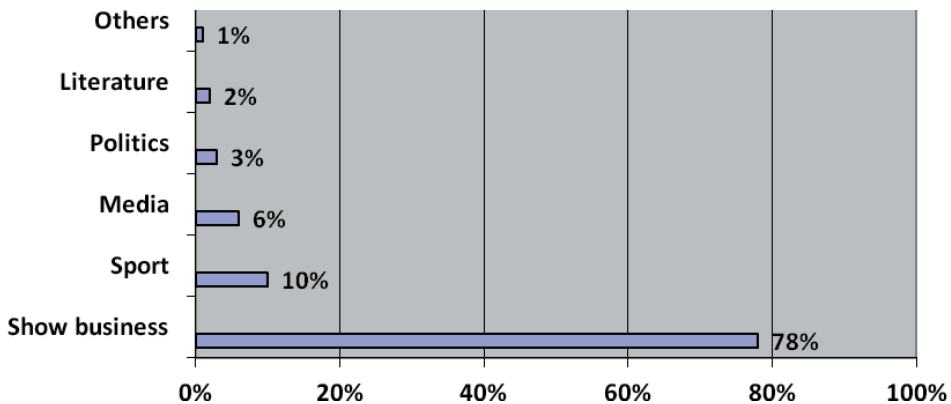


Fig. 2. A relation between the concept of star and spheres of people's professional life

As a matter of fact, it is by no means surprising that people connected with show business, fame and money, are regarded as stars: such the status quo has existed for long. However, what is not only astonishing but above all alarmingly

disturbing and annoying is the fact that, unfortunately, the present picture of star has very little in common with the understanding of the concept in terms of the so-called 'real star' whose attributes used to undergo certain formal criteria like talent, quality of performance, original style in accordance with established rules, charisma or moral and ethical credo. Also, a real star is supposed to provide others with a sort of model or 'pattern' worth imitating. Many current stars or rather pseudo-stars possess very few features which can entitle them to be called stars at all.

Unluckily, postmodern culture which governs and spreads worldwide influences Polish teenagers in a negative way. The survey on the concept of star confirms the above suggestions and conclusions concerning the notion and criteria of being a star in Poland. While describing a linguistic picture of star, the teenage respondents refer to some characteristics that should not be displayed by someone considered to be a star. To tell the truth, many of them are simply axiologically neutral or even negative, and cannot be part of star personality. Here are some examples of how Polish teenagers justify their choice of star:

He has taken part in a TV programme called Mam talent.

She wants to be in the public eye at all costs.

He is self-confident and in the centre of attention despite his immoral behaviour.

She knows how to get promoted.

She is rich and knows how to get popularity without having a real talent.

He has nothing special to offer but is cunning.

She knows how to make other people get interested in her.

He has a controversial personality and is talked about in all media.

She attends social events where there are many journalists.

She is involved in lots of scandals.

She draws people's attention although artistically is not very good.

She is insolent, pert and ignores others.

He attends social events and reveals his private life.

He often appears on TV, radio or in newspapers.

Her controversial personality and conduct influence people.

She knows influential people and likes publicity.

She often attends conferences, balls and is surrounded by people from show business.

She considers herself to be a star though she is not.

He was born to a rich and famous family.

She is two-faced, mendacious and unscrupulous.

She is pretty, young and rich.

He has a lot of business connexions.

Her parents are extremely wealthy.

He pretends to be a clown.

She is self-confident and thinks herself she is a star.

He is surrounded by appropriate people.

As a matter of fact, a number of the respondents notice this negative phenomenon with regard to the concept of star and, to be more precise, twenty-two out of a hundred respondents state that in Poland there are no stars at all or rather there are no real stars. Moreover, twelve out of a hundred is convinced that real stars do not exist in the world at all. Let us have a look at their statements which justify the standpoint:

In my view, there is no real or honest star in Poland these days.

I think there is nobody in Poland who deserves to be called a star.

Nowadays stars do not exist in Poland: the media and money distort the meaning of star; there is no room for real talent.

Unfortunately, there are no stars in Poland today.

I do not know anybody who could be even similar to the image of star.

Polish stars are not worth attention, they are artificial and unskillful.

Of course, an immediate question may arise: why is the image of star in Poland given so much criticism? The question inevitably leads to the factors which decide whether or not someone can be a star in Polish culture. The key to understanding and diminishing of the prestige of star is the circumstances or conditions that according to the respondents make somebody a star. It turns out that quite a many respondents believe that there are certain factors which decide on becoming a star although they should not have anything or at least very little in common with this concept. Here are the justifications of such a hypothesis based on the respondents' statements:

To be a star, someone has to make himself a fool or an idiot.

If you want to be a star, you need to have show business connections.

To be a star, you must be promoted by the media.

To be a star, you must be a child of famous parents.

To be a star, you need a lot of publicity.

If you want to be a star, you need a good manager.

The main condition of becoming a star is being surrounded by influential people.

Becoming a star entails proper advertising.

If you want to become a star, you have to appear in the media.

To become a star, you have to be a member of a rich and famous family.

If you want to become a star, you have to take part in public events.

These days, only money and publicity can make you a star.

Today, if you want to be a star, you must lead a scandalous life.

To be a star, you need to be promoted by the media.

To be a star, you need to have a lot of money and promote yourself.

This negative image of Polish stars in the perception of the teenage respondents illustrates in what direction show business goes, what sort of values some Polish stars promote and how young people receive this destructive tendency in Polish culture. Luckily, this does not mean that there are no stars in Poland who deserve attention since they meet young people's expectations of being a valuable person and a real star that provides others with features worthy of following and constructively contributes to Polish culture. Moreover, and it is optimistic, Polish teenagers need a model to follow, they indicate the virtues a real star is expected to expose. What they stress as something desirable and indispensable while talking about the concept of star is embodied in the following statements:

A star must be talented, very good at what he or she does, honest and hard-working.

A star must be gifted, charismatic, honest and lead a decent life.

A real star should be creative, ambitious, passionate and love what he or she does.

A star should be good-hearted, generous, wise, natural and respect other people.

A star is someone who is sincere, intelligent and valuable.

A star is a gifted, hard-working, humble and moral person.

A star is supposed to have a simple but spiritually rich personality.

A star should attract people in a positive way and take care of others.

A star is supposed to be extremely talented, imaginative and exceptional.

A star must be an easy-going, open-minded, polite and intelligent person.

A star should be natural, worth attention and affect others positively.

A star must be gifted, beautiful and display an impeccable morality.

A star is expected to be a valuable and friendly person who inspires others positively.

A star must be ambitious, responsible and full of talents and ideas.

A star should kind-hearted, generous and help those who are in need.

A star must be sincere, truthful, modest, humble and warm to others.

A star should be someone who is worth following.

A star must follow both esthetic and moral values.

A star must be gifted and respect other people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one should realise that the concept of star is directly connected with culture in general and show business in particular. As a matter of fact, Polish culture and Polish show business are not exceptions to the rule. Due to the fact that postmodern culture and its trends are pervasive and affect national cultures, some

universally acknowledged values have been ignored and consequently they do not serve as an objective yardstick of the concept of star. The word star and its sense exist in the perception of Polish teenagers in a nebulous, ambiguous or even misleading way. Obviously, this has been caused by postmodernism whose essentials do not undergo traditional structures, assessment and criteria. Also, postmodern culture does not possess any criterion of the concepts of truth and good. There is no clear distinction between art and kitsch, truth and false, religion and sects, morality and immorality. Sadly, manipulation of facts and clever advertising turns out to be powerful and efficient tools to promote and win an advantage over more skillful competitors [see Harvey 1990].

Moreover, the notion of star has excessively been overused with regard to persons who simply do not deserve to be named stars. This overuse has a lot to do with a tendency of disappearing of traditional values and virtues, standards of morality and clear criteria of having a status of star. No wonder nowadays negative or at least highly controversial features of personality facilitate and make a person who possess such characteristics a star among crowds of pop culture lovers and supporters. As Ożóg notices there is no evident opposition between *sacrum* and *profanum*, between usual and extraordinary; in fact, many cultural and consequently linguistic changes appear to be the direct effect of modern cultural tendencies of the West such as postmodernism, Americanisation, consumerism, the computer revolution and mediacy [2008].

However, according to the survey, some of the teenage respondents demand and expect a star to possess a set of qualities that are ascribed to a real star. The interviewees would like him or her to be talented, skilful, intelligent, creative, physically and spiritually beautiful, glamorous, sincere, delicate, helpful, modest, positively exceptional, wise, responsible, divine, and simply a model to follow in their life.

In addition, sociological factors like gender or place of living do not seem to play any considerable role in regard to the concept of star and its understanding except for one thing: teenage boys admire sportspersons more often than teenage girls who, on the other hand, tend to appreciate pop music stars on a larger scale than their male counterparts.

Interestingly enough, about sixty-five per cent of the respondents when asked whether or not they would like to become a star answer: no, I wouldn't. It turns out that they have negative connotations with the image of star which emerges in Polish social reality. A real star is expected to display something divine like a star in the sky. However, this is not the case of Polish postmodern stars. Even teenagers are aware of this status quo: they are disappointed and fed up with this 'modern version' of star and product of postmodern culture. Let us hope there is still some room for real art, professionalism, quality, skills and talent.

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Appendix

Ankieta

Pojęcie 'gwiazda' w świadomości językowej polskich nastolatków

Niniejsza ankieta jest całkowicie anonimowa. Proszę o udzielenie odpowiedzi własnymi słowami i zgodnie z własną wiedzą dotyczącą rozumienia pojęcia 'gwiazda'.

Wiek*: 16 / 17 / 18 / 19 Klasa*: I / II / III Płeć*: K / M

Miejsce zamieszkania*: miasto / wieś

*proszę zakreślić w kółko właściwą opcję

1. *Gwiazda to...*
2. *Utożsamiam gwiazdę z...*
3. *Jakie cechy musi posiadać osoba, aby być gwiazdą?*
4. *Kogo w Polsce uważasz za gwiazdę i dlaczego?*
5. *Kogo na świecie uważasz za gwiazdę i dlaczego?*
6. *Aby ktoś był gwiazdą, musi...*
7. *Co decyduje o tym, że ktoś jest gwiazdą?*
8. *Jakie wartości cenisz najbardziej u osoby, którą uważasz za gwiazdę?*
9. *Co sprawia, że ktoś jest dla Ciebie gwiazdą?*
10. *W jakim zawodzie najłatwiej można zostać gwiazdą?*
11. *Wymień przymiotniki, które łączą się ze słowem gwiazda:...*
12. *Czy chciałbyś/chciałabyś zostać gwiazdą i dlaczego?*

**POJĘCIE GWIAZDY W JĘZYKOWYM ODBIORZE
POLSKICH NASTOLATKÓW****Streszczenie**

Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przedstawienia językowego obrazu pojęcia 'gwiazda' w rozumieniu polskich nastolatków. Z racji faktu, że kultura wpływa na myślenie i język danej grupy etnicznej, wydaje się oczywiste, że kultura globalna, a ściślej mówiąc – trendy postmodernistyczne i amerykański show business, wywierają niebagatelne piętno na zachowania językowe młodych ludzi w Polsce, a przez to na ich postrzeganie i konceptualizację pojęcia 'gwiazda'. Konsekwencją tegoż zjawiska jest istnienie w nowoczesnej kulturze polskiej dwóch wizerunków analizowanego pojęcia: prawdziwej gwiazdy i pseudogwiazdy.