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## **BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY AND LINGUISTICS: AN ANALYSIS OF ONLINE DISCOURSES ON APOSTASY**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to investigate online discourses on apostasy in Poland, focusing on the Facebook group Apostazja 2020, where users discuss the process of formally leaving the Catholic Church. This study integrates sociological and linguistic perspectives to analyse how apostasy is presented in public discourse.

We apply Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, incorporating the concepts of field, capital, symbolic domination, symbolic power, habitus and doxa to examine how apostasy challenges the dominant position of the Catholic Church in Poland. In the analysis, we employ two complementary approaches: Corpus Linguistics and the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), to analyse the approaches and strategies used by the apostates to construct counter-discourses that redefine their position in the religious field and field of power.

The analysis emphasises the approaches employed by the apostates to challenge the symbolic power of the Catholic Church. In the narratives of the apostates, the Church exercises its arbitrary power by taking advantage of its

ability to change the rules and generate formal difficulties for the apostates. The struggle to reclaim power is mainly verbalised through nomination and predication strategies in discourse, e.g., by naming the priests and themselves, the apostates attempt to impose their own rules. The orthodox, normalised view on the Church is challenged and the high symbolic capital of the priests is renegotiated in the struggle within and outside of the religious field. Finally, unless provoked by third parties, the apostates do not discuss the issues related to God and faith: their focus is solely on the Church as an institution.

**Keywords:** apostasy, symbolic power, Catholic Church, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the state is a controversial issue in Poland [Ramet 2017]; even though the citizens have been shown to be moving away from the Church, with a meaningful decrease in the number of Poles identifying with the Catholic faith and attending mass [Institute of Catholic Church Statistics 2023], the Polish state-Church alliance still holds strong. Its critics focus on the Church's privileged status, its entanglement with state politics, and its sustained influence over public life. The concordat between Poland and the Vatican further institutionalises this privileged status, ensuring that the Church retains influence despite the ongoing secularisation of Polish society. As a result, some individuals choose to formally depart from the institution and challenge the Catholic Church's symbolic power by committing apostasy. There are many reasons why apostates declare that they are leaving the Church in Poland; research by Grabowska [2023: 279–280] indicates that the majority of the cases are rooted in political events, disagreements with the influence of the Church on political affairs, and knowledge about the negligence displayed by the members of the Church hierarchy.

This study examines the linguistic strategies through which apostates challenge the Catholic Church's symbolic power and domination in the Facebook group "Apostazja 2020". The group serves as a digital space where users exchange practical advice on the formalities of leaving the Church, engage in symbolic struggles that redefine apostasy as an act of emancipation rather than defection, and challenge the Catholic Church's authority, and in so doing, reframe their departure from the institution. To this end, we examine the utterances generated by the group members by combining sociological and linguistic approaches. On the

linguistic end, we employ corpus-assisted discourse studies and a discourse-historical approach (DHA); on the sociological end, we draw on Bourdieu's [1977, 1984, 1991] concepts of field, capital, symbolic domination, habitus and doxa, to analyse how the apostates contest the Church's narrative and seek to challenge power within the religious field. By employing discourse strategies such as nomination, predication, perspectivization, argumentation, intensification, and mitigation, they construct a heterodox counter-discourse that destabilises the institution's authority and questions its naturalised legitimacy.

## BACKGROUND

The Catholic Church remains the most important and powerful non-governmental institution in Poland. It holds a position of symbolic power [Bourdieu 1991], which is defined as the capacity to impose a particular vision of the world and have it recognised as legitimate or natural; symbolic power is often exercised subtly through norms, language, and practices that shape perceptions. This position stems from centuries of engagement and influence that have created the concept of a nationalistic "Catholic Pole" identity [Porter-Szucs 2011]. Referring only to the most recent history, prior to the systemic transformation of 1989, the Church was marginalised by the socialist regime, but at the same time was symbolically influential among citizens, and as such, became an important component of support for anti-communist opposition. Because of that, the Church gained a prominent position after 1989, which enabled it to influence politics and social life in various ways, e.g., by securing its position on religious education, abortion and birth control to be a part of the policy of the new democratic state [Eberts 1998, Grzymała-Busse 2015, Gwiazda 2021]. This influence shows the high symbolic position of the Church in Polish society [Bourdieu 1977], but because of this alliance, the Church has become more dependent on the state [Zuba 2010]; the bond became even stronger during the Law and Justice rule in 2015–2023, during which Catholicism could be perceived as the official state ideology, with public money being committed to various religious initiatives.

This entanglement and co-dependence of the Church and the state show the complicated relations between the religious and political fields in Poland, in which social actors compete over various forms of symbolic capital [Bourdieu 1991]. In this context, the Catholic Church occupies a dominant position in the religious field in Poland, underpinned by its considerable symbolic capital – moral authority, cultural legitimacy, and historical prestige – which enables it to exert influence over other fields, such as politics. This is how the Church

reaches beyond the autonomous religious field. By being woven into collective identities, educational institutions, and daily practice, the Church's domination functions as doxa – the background of the field which is taken for granted [Bourdieu 1977]. Through these same sites of socialisation, habitus – an internalised set of dispositions shaping thought and action [Bourdieu 1977, 1984, 1991] – is formed and reproduced, making religious norms appear natural or inevitable and thus stabilising the Church's dominance.

Even though the Church's position in Polish society remains strong, its symbolic domination [Bourdieu 1977] has begun to crack. According to the national census carried out for the 2011–2021 period, the percentage of Poles openly identifying as Catholics dropped from approximately 87.6% to 71.3%, while those with no religious affiliation rose from about 2.4% to 6.9%, accompanied by a substantial increase in non-responses (from 7.1% to 20.5%), indicating notable shifts in religious identification. The Institute of Catholic Church Statistics [2023] also measures other indicators of religiosity in Polish society, e.g., the number of *dominicanos* (those attending mass), which was 46% in 2003, 39.1% in 2013 and 29% in 2023: a drop of 17% over the last 20 years. Religious education class attendance constitutes another meaningful factor. In the school year 2023/2024, 78.6% of all school pupils attended religious education classes, 1.8 percentage points less than in 2022/2023 and 9.4 percentage points less than in 2018/2019. Alongside Weber [1946], we might refer to this as disenchantment with the world, but the fact that Polish society is turning away from the Church means that it is either undergoing secularization or is shifting towards new, unexplored and more fitting forms of religion [Grabowska 2023] which are not organised around the Catholic Church; people seek spiritual satisfaction in new religious or parareligious movements [Luckmann 2023] or abandon religion completely, leaving the Church either way.

There are many definitions of apostasy in the literature [Enstedt et al. 2020], but in this text we define it as an act of formally leaving a religion [Mantsinen, Tervo-Niemelä 2020]. In the case of the Catholic Church, it is based on the act of will that is regulated by *Codex Iuris Canonici* (The Code of Canon Law) dated 25 January, 1983, where canon 751 defines apostasy as *fidei christianae ex toto repudiatio* (Latin. *apostasy, the total repudiation of the Christian faith*). More specific regulations require it to be a conscious, unsolicited and public act of renouncement from the Church [Wenz 2010]. The Polish context is also regulated by the Decree of the Polish Episcopal Conference, which was announced in 2016; its language aims to discourage individuals from committing apostasy. It specifies that to commit apostasy, one requires a baptism certificate; apostasy itself is based

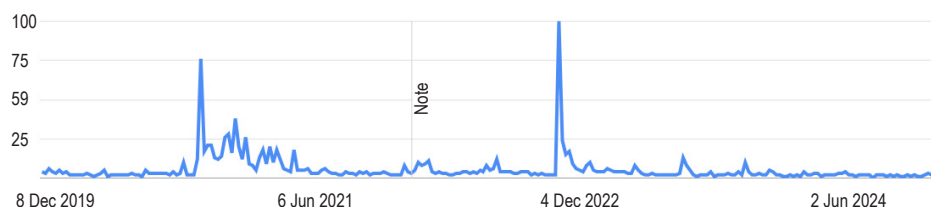
on an act of will, pronounced by an adult (in Poland 18 years old) who is capable of performing legal acts. The act has to be submitted in person and in writing, in the presence of the parish priest at one's place of residence. It is ineffective if sent via post, e-mail, or submitted to a civilian. The parish priest has to verify the identity of the apostate, conduct a compassionate pastoral conversation to learn the reasons behind the decision and make "prudent and pastoral efforts" to discourage the petitioner from apostasy and "awaken faith within them"; the priest should also inform the apostate about the consequences of the act. These requirements for a formal departure are exclusively a part of the religious field and reflect the institutional symbolic power to define and validate who is inside or outside the religious community.

Once all formalities have been fulfilled, the parish priest should note the following in the baptism book: "On [date] in their assigned Parish in [city], they made a formal declaration of will to leave the Catholic Church". Notably, apostasy does not lead to the erasure of any personal data from the Catholic Church books: only a note is made. This is one of the reasons for which the procedure is heavily criticised: to be baptised, a person does not even need to give consent, while to leave the Church, many formalities have to be met, and even after apostasy, the link of the apostate with the Church is not fully severed. Moreover, the individual going through the procedure might encounter many specific issues that can render the act ineffective (e.g., submitting it to an improper parish). There are also no practical consequences for an individual who performs the act of apostasy, apart from spiritual and ritual ones relevant in the Catholic Church, and potential social ostracism. This creates a paradox between rejecting the institution and negating its power by an apostate, and at the same time operating in line with the rules defined and valid only within this institution. The procedure itself might be time-consuming, stressful, and has to be done following the Canon Law, which discourages some potential apostates.

Apostasy remains a marginal phenomenon, but it has been gaining attention in Poland; it also remains a controversial topic to a portion of the Polish society as it disrupts the doxa by publicly challenging the Church's authority, thus exposing the constructed nature of its claims to moral or spiritual superiority. From this perspective, apostasy can be read as a heterodox position, seeking to challenge or replace the Church's orthodoxy with alternative narratives. Controversy is conceptually a part of apostasy, as it can be viewed negatively by the members of the religious community (as a rejection of salvation), and the word "apostasy" itself can be used as an invective [Enstedt et al. 2020]. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities study various aspects of apostasy; however, issues

addressed in the literature are mainly theological [Tofiluk 2004, Gręźlikowski 2012], philosophical [Szymonik 2022] and legal [see Wenz 2010, Dettlaff 2016, Trojanowski 2022]. It is difficult to determine how many people are leaving the Church, as official statistics are not maintained or publicly available. The Institute of Catholic Church Statistics estimated the number of apostates in Poland at 157 in 2006–2009 (in total); in 2010 alone it was 459. As mentioned on the Institute’s website, the phenomenon is too marginal to warrant tracking in any way [Institute of Church Statistics, N.D.].

FIGURE 1. Number of apostasy queries in Google Trends in the last five years (08.12.2019–08.12.2024).



Source: Google Trends. [trends.google.com](https://trends.google.com) [access: 08.12.2024].

No quantitative studies have been conducted regarding apostasy to date, so the frame of reference here is very scarce. An examination of the query “Apostasy” on Google Trends suggests that the searches on the topic were motivated by two major events, one being pop-cultural and the other, political; these are indicated by two peaks on the graph. The first peak (25–31 October 2020) occurred just after the decision of the Constitutional Tribunal of Poland on 22 October 2020 to further restrict abortion rights, which resulted in nationwide mass protests. The decision was a part of an alliance of throne and altar, so the Church was seen as responsible for this change [Chrostowski 2023], and social anger was directed towards the institution; in the research by Grabowska [2023: 44, 280] it is often given as a reason for apostasy. The second peak (23–29 October 2022) coincides with the apostasy announcement of the famous singer, Dawid Podsiadło made on 24 October 2022, which may have affected the search queries.

Due to the small scale of the phenomenon, conducting extensive research on apostasy is challenging, but grassroots initiatives offer some insights on the matter. For instance, the Apostasy Map [Mapa Apostazji 2020] enables individuals to mark where they apostatised and how it went. The site collects basic survey data and as of the last update (June 22, 2024), 3,339 people have completed the questionnaire: 52% women, 42.8% men and 5.1% non-binaries. Their educational levels were:

71.7% higher education, 25.8% secondary, 1.6% vocational, 0.6% middle school and 0.4% primary school. Regarding the ease of apostasy in their parish, 75.8% said it was easy, 16.6% said moderate and 7.6% said it was difficult. While conclusions are limited due to data collection methods, it is noteworthy that most respondents viewed the formal process as being easy.

Apostasy is also tackled in social sciences and humanities, with the most detailed and in-depth study in the Polish context by Grabowska [2023]. She conducted narrative interviews with apostates and gave unique insights into the stories of leaving the Church. The key motives of apostates include internal reasons (such as atheism) and external reasons (such as the influence of the Church on the state and government and also on people's lives, especially in the worldview sphere). Almost all of Grabowska's [2023] interviewees mentioned restricting abortion rights, which was often the direct cause of apostasy. The negative attitude of the Church hierarchy towards the LGBTQ+ movement and sexual scandals with priests constituted another meaningful reason, as were the Church's teachings on attitudes towards nature and ecology. Other, less frequent reasons include: the ossification of Church structures; its non-modern and non-scientific attitude to the world; the hypocrisy of priests and Church hierarchy; the inhibition of people's development; and the discrimination of people on various grounds. These conclusions are consistent with broader social tendencies and changes present in the Western world, e.g., modernisation [Wilson, Bruce 2016], postmodernism and (moral) relativism [Bauman 1993, Lyotard 2002, Taylor 2007], the discrepancy between Church Teaching and society's style of life [Ramet, Borowik 2017], the media reports on hiding paedophilia acts amongst priests and the common belief that the Church conceals the truth on this matter, or (specifically to Poland) the alliance of the Church with the radical right, conservative and populist Law and Justice government [Mandes 2020, Gwiazda 2021] that ruled the country in 2015–2023.

Due to formal constraints, it is not easy for an individual to officially leave the Church. Yet, for apostates, formally leaving the Church is not just a bureaucratic undertaking, but a significant shift in *habitus*. It is a demanding process, usually connected to identity changes, of which apostasy is the last step, and is often preceded by a long period of distancing oneself from the religious community [Grabowska 2023: 279]. The apostates face the consequences and means of social control not only from the Church, but also from family, neighbours, and the broader community [Grabowska 2023: 241–244, 259–260], reinforcing dominant norms through stigmatising apostasy in everyday discursive practices. This might suggest that *habitus* operates as a mechanism of symbolic power that must be



actively renegotiated in the act of apostasy. In many cases, from the perspective of the apostates, it is an act of rebellion against the institution [Grabowska 2023: 273] and not against God. It is based on the metaphor of captivity [Pannofino, Cardano 2018, Grabowska 2023: 56], so the act of leaving is presented as liberation from oppressive, institutionally sanctioned narratives and consists of identity marks and information on the institution's functioning. It might be seen as a heterodox position against the orthodox dominant discourse of the Church. Grabowska [2023: 265] mentions the language of domination used when the priests talk to women and when they talk about apostasy; in this study, we would like to inspect this issue further by analysing the linguistic means apostates use in social media posts to challenge the Church's symbolic domination.

Seen through Bourdieu's lens, apostasy represents a symbolic struggle that questions the naturalised dominance of the Catholic Church. By challenging the Church's moral authority, apostates undermine its symbolic capital and reshape the religious field. The Church, in turn, defends its position by codifying formal procedures for leaving [Decree of the Polish Episcopal Conference 2016] and framing apostasy as a deviant act, which constitutes an effort to sustain doxa and discourage potential defectors. The formal hurdles can be seen as instances of symbolic violence [Bourdieu, Passeron 1977], maintaining the impression that membership is nearly irreversible and discouraging individuals from actualising their desire to leave. Our analysis is based upon Bourdieu's framework, but explores the research material through discursive-linguistic means: by looking at how apostates use language to contest the Church's authority, we reveal how symbolic domination is both reproduced and destabilised in the digital public sphere.

## METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to investigate how discursive practices in the Facebook group "Apostazja 2020" shape, reinforce, or contest the Catholic Church's dominant position in the religious field. We seek to understand how language is used to construct, negotiate, and potentially transform social identities and power relations, with a particular focus on how apostates frame the act of leaving the Church.

The study is based on a corpus of posts and comments collected from the group "Apostazja 2020" from Facebook. The corpus amounts to 25,362 words collected for the period from February until July 2023 (as during that time, the discourse was not affected or driven by any specific political or social factors), with the data encompassing the majority of the content posted on the website until that date, all of which were gathered manually and placed in the corpus



(the corpus contains 382 entries, 32 of which are posts, the rest being comments; however, some posts extend into comment sections, with original posters adding further remarks and details, as well as expanding their narratives by providing progress updates). The group is relatively large, boasting 22,400 members as of the submission date of this paper. We have received consent from the group's administrator to carry out the study. Although most discourse studies focus on dominant modes of representation, increasingly more attention is being paid to the points at which these are disrupted, and the established order is challenged [Macgilchrist 2020]. Online comments provide a promising field for such research because of their comparatively more egalitarian nature when compared to traditional media; in consequence, they are also more pluralistic [Coleman 2017].

The group is an important hub where those who seek or have gone through apostasy ask questions as well as share information and experiences of the process. The group is moderated and any post published there has to follow a set of rules: they assume that the group is for those interested in the idea of engaging with apostasy, but its purpose is not to offend religion; the members simply do not want to remain in the Catholic Church for various reasons. The rules also specify that unkindness, hate, posting off-topic announcements, agitation, fake news and memes are forbidden. Any findings reported in this paper are limited to the group and hence reflect the particular way of talking about apostasy shared amongst its members.

The initial part of the study analyses the data quantitatively to see the overall trends, examine the narrative tendencies and find additional angles for analysis. This approach employs Corpus Assisted Discourse Studies [Gillings 2023] to gain quantitative insights into the data and lead the study to the specific areas in the corpus that deserve particular attention. Our quantitative approach to the data employs Lancsbox and the specialised Polish tools for corpus analysis, such as Korpusomat.pl [Kieraś n.d.] and the tools from Clarin-PL suite [CLARIN Web-Services, n.d.]: Multiemo and LEM. The applicable corpus methods are limited by the extent of available data and therefore by corpus size; while our initial plan was to conduct topic modelling and/or more extensive collocation analysis for our key terms, the data were simply too scarce for these approaches to provide meaningful results.

Therefore, the quantitative component of the study investigates simple verb characteristics such as tense and person markers to examine the narrative patterns employed by the posters. Then, it inspects the particular sentiments visible throughout the data to assess the overall positivity and negativity of the corpus. Finally, it studies the most frequent nouns and mentions the strongest collocations

that can be found throughout the text to discover the most prevalent themes and entities present throughout the text. Based on these findings, through related concordance lines, specific passages that represent the discovered phenomena are selected for qualitative analysis. These are carefully translated into English so as to represent the original texts' meaning and connotations, with particular attention paid to marked lexical items.

In the qualitative component of the study, we employ the analytical categories from the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) [Wodak 2015], which integrates linguistics with other disciplines (such as sociology) to uncover the complexity of discursive practices and better understand their purpose. DHA focuses on identifying discourse subjects, investigating discursive strategies, and examining how linguistic means construct context-dependent meanings [Wodak 2015, Reisigl 2017]. Its critical purpose is to uncover how particular strategies shape biased constructions of social actors' identities. Although DHA is most commonly applied to the discourses of dominant groups striving to maintain power (or groups seeking to seize it), it can also shed light on resistance discourses, such as those found in "Apostazja 2020". In this community, users deliberately construct their own collective identity, but also that of their opponents (e.g., by juxtaposing "us" and "them"), thereby framing the nature of the conflict on their own terms.

Our analysis includes discursive strategies employed in DHA [Reisigl, Wodak 2009, Wodak 2015, Reisigl 2017]. (1) Nomination focuses on how social actors, objects (e.g., Church) and phenomena (e.g., apostasy) are named and categorised. We interpret naming strategies as positioning the entities within (or outside) the religious field and approach desacralising and labelling the Church and its representatives as potential challenges to symbolic capital and doxa. (2) Predication examines the attributes ascribed to these actors (e.g., the priest as a figure who manufactures difficulties) and phenomena (e.g., apostasy as liberation). To us it therefore constitutes the re-evaluation of symbolic capital and heterodox moves against the Church's doxic expectations. (3) Perspectivisation highlights the subjective positioning and viewpoints adopted within the discourse (e.g., apostates' voices vs. Church's or priests' reported viewpoints); we use stance to register habitus in motion (also potential hysteresis) and to show how speakers orient themselves against symbolic domination through the gradual distancing from religious practices and the social pressures exerted by family or local communities. (4) Argumentation focuses on the discursive justification or questioning of claims, especially via *topoi*. We define *topoi* as content-related warrants linking premises to conclusions, but we also draw on Boukala [2016], who links DHA *topoi* to Aristotelian *endoxa*: socially accepted beliefs that, in Bourdieu's terms,

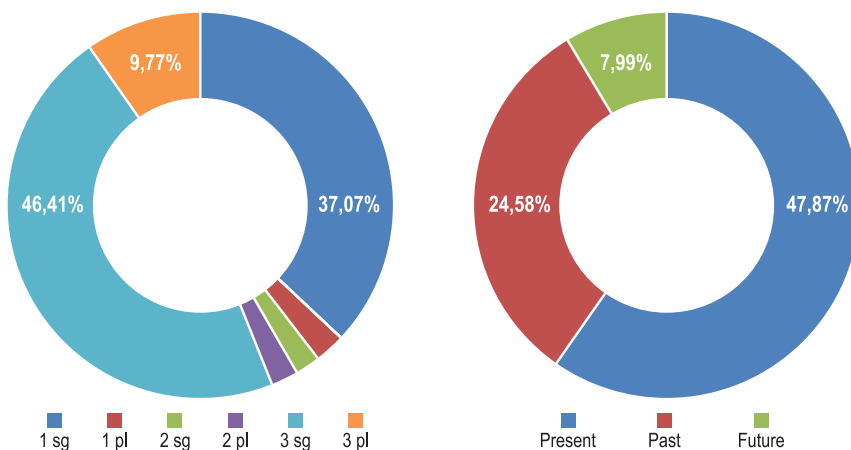
are embedded in the field as doxa. The orthodox position clashes with heterodoxy when these commonly accepted claims are challenged. Reisigl and Wodak [2009] mention the extent of topoi applicable to a given context is dynamic, which is why in our analysis we combine topoi, known from DHA (e.g., authority/discipline, tradition, usefulness/burden, justice/equality, definition), with study-specific types inductively derived from the data (e.g., bureaucratic burden, seriousness/irreversibility, taxpayer burden, reciprocity/equality, epistemic warrant/burden of proof), so where we introduce study-specific labels, we treat them as corpus-induced types of known topoi, not as a separate typology. Finally, (5) intensification/mitigation indicates how language is used to strengthen or weaken claims.

We adopt an interpretive orientation that foregrounds the participants' vantage points. As such, the perspectivisation strategy becomes crucial for highlighting how apostates conceptualise relations of power. This focus allows us to view discourse not merely as a product of linguistic structures, but also as a phenomenon deeply embedded in social relations, specifically, in how apostates perceive and reshape their world. In line with DHA [Reisigl, Wodak 2009, Wodak 2015, Reisigl 2017] and Bourdieu's [1977, 1984, 1991] conceptual framework, we look for discursive instances in the corpus that illustrate internalised norms, power imbalances, and attempts at subverting these norms, an approach that aligns with DHA's goal of revealing how language sustains or challenges existing social structures. Specifically, we consider how the Church's symbolic capital is contested, inspecting the linguistic resources that the apostates employ to undermine the legitimacy of Church authority (e.g., by reframing their narratives of exit as liberation rather than defiance). We also highlight how acts of apostasy might be interpreted as heterodox strategies within the religious field, exposing the contingent nature of doxa and dominant discourses. This combined perspective underscores the process through which apostates negotiate new positions in the social space, potentially transforming their habitus through collective reflection and resistance. Bourdieu [1977, 1990] emphasises that social practices (in our case, discussions on online forums) play a pivotal role in reproducing or challenging existing power structures. In our data, we therefore pay close attention to how everyday interactions in "Apostazja 2020" reflect, reinforce, or erode dominant narratives, demonstrating the capacity of digital platforms to either reproduce established norms or become sites of subversion. Empirically, this translates into identifying and coding elements in the data that signal attempts to reinterpret or reject the Church's authority, such as metaphors of captivity [see Grabowska 2023], as well as exploring how the resulting narratives reinforce or erode the Church's symbolic dominance.

### CORPUS ANALYSIS

The first concern of the corpus component of this study is the narration of the comments. Based on verb analysis performed with Clarin-PL's LEM (see Fig. 2, left side), the vast majority of the verbs in the corpus are inflected either with first person singular (37%, or 1021 verbs) or third person singular (46.5%, or 1278 verbs). This shows that the majority of the collected comments relate one of the following: the speaker's first-hand experience or a narrative about another individual<sup>1</sup>. The latter case is perhaps more interesting; concordances show that the other individual is the sentence subject (since the grammatical person is marked on the verb), meaning they have agency, power to make decisions and control over the conversation. A concordance search reveals that this person is indeed the priest in the vast majority of the cases. Sometimes, metonymies for priests are also used, e.g., the cases where "baptism certificate" is the sentence subject and is said to "generate difficulties" (rather than the priest who should be issuing it). Based on these and further results, the appearance of the priest as the protagonist (and antagonist) is discussed further in the qualitative part of the paper.

FIGURE 2. Verb characteristics in the corpus.

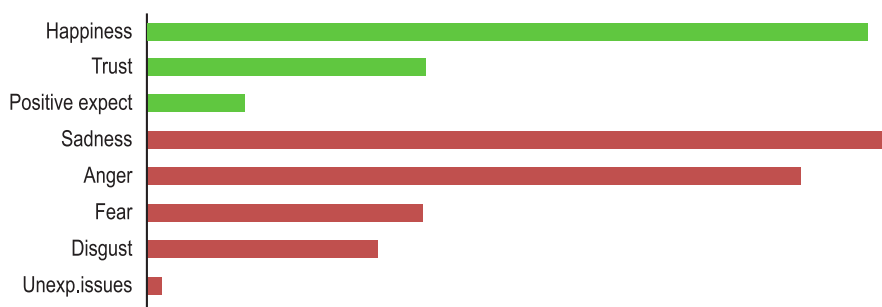


Note: On the left: person inflections of the verbs; the data do not include infinitives. On the right: tense inflections of the verbs. Source: Data obtained with LEM [Piasecki et al. 2017].

<sup>1</sup> We compared this frequency against comment/post-based Polish social media corpora collected in a similar fashion; the volume of 3rd person sg. verbs in the corpus of anti-Ukrainian discourse was 34.17%; in the general corpus about Ukraine, the volume was 40.17%. Both corpora also display significantly higher frequencies of verbs marked for 3rd person plural: 22.99% and 21.79%, accordingly, compared to 9.77% here. The data are visibly skewed towards 3rd person sg.

The narratives are built in either present (48%, 1671 verbs) or past tenses (25%, 858 verbs). Two main contexts are present in the concordances for these: questions and discussions about the ongoing apostasy progress (mainly present tense); and narratives about individual apostasy experiences (past and present, as quite a few stories use present narration: in Polish, this can make the described experience more relatable to others). The less-frequent future verbs (8%, 279 items) often refer to progress stories, where future steps are being discussed, as well as to offers to help anyone in need (e.g., “If anyone needs help, message me, I am experienced and **will** help you”).

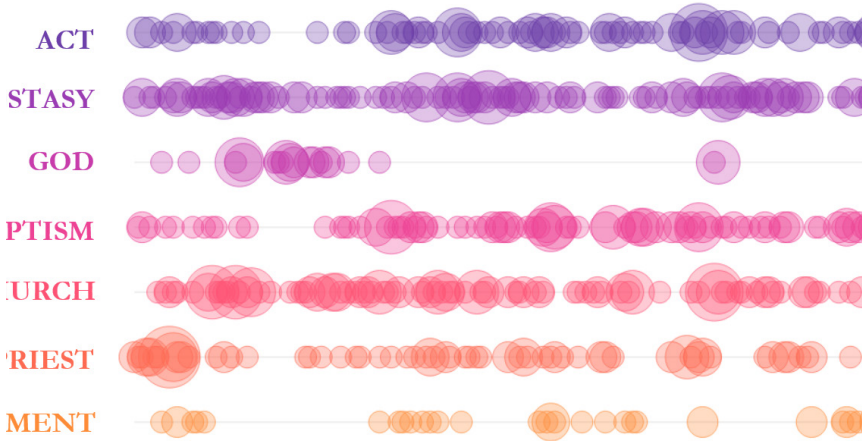
FIGURE 3. Sentiment analysis results



Source: Data obtained with Multiemo [Koptyra et al. 2017].

Sentence-based sentiment analysis conducted in Clarin-PL’s Multiemo indicates that 14% messages are positive and 11% are negative (with the majority of passages being recognised as neutral, which is common in sentiment analysis, especially because a large portion of the data consists of technical discussion); the most prevalent sentiments within these two categories are shown in Figure 2. This indicates that in the overall scope of the corpus, there is a relatively large number of negative experiences being discussed by the members (as the positive sentences do not outshine their negative counterparts). Several categories, reflected in our qualitative data, can be seen, namely anger and sadness (marking the collision between two fields, the apostates being at a disadvantageous position) and disgust (e.g., with the priest’s actions and behaviour). Fear is also very present, symptomatic of anticipated difficulties as the group members are aware that the priests hold arbitrary power which they often exercise at their own discretion. Positive sentiment is mainly marked by happiness: in the passages within the corpus, this is represented by relief related to successful apostasy. This does, however, highlight the challenges that the apostates had anticipated.

FIGURE 4. Most common nouns



Source: The graph generated in Korpuspomat.pl [Kieraś et al. n.d.] represents the chronological occurrence and co-occurrence of specific nouns throughout the corpus. The size of the bubbles matches the frequency of specific words. Raw frequencies are shown on the right. The words were translated to English. “Parish priest” is a one-word item in Polish (*proboszcz*).<sup>2</sup>

Figure 3 presents the occurrences of the most frequent nouns in the corpus. Many of the words are indeed related to the formal nature of apostasy, *i.a.*: “act” and “baptism” [Pl. *akt chrztu*, baptism certificate] and “statement”. The two items related to clergy in “priest” and “parish priest” are used almost interchangeably and consistently occur throughout the corpus: these represent the key character in the apostasy narratives. A follow-up collocation analysis reveals the word “nie” [no] as the third strongest collocation for “priest” and eighth for “parish priest” (after common grammatical words like “to be” and “from”); the concordances thereof show a strong trend for priests to generate challenges and difficulties for the faithful (e.g., “The priest was adamant to **not** accept my act of apostasy” and “He said he was **not** my priest because he did **not** even know me”).

Another insight can be gained from the occurrence of the word “God” in the corpus. While the group is strictly moderated, our data capture two instances in which a more heated debate about faith took place among the members (represented by the clusters of occurrences of the word “God” in Figure 3). The discussion about the deity seems to be mutually exclusive with the typical discourse

<sup>2</sup> Relative frequencies per 10k tokens for these words are: ACT=140; APOSTASY=82; GOD=15; BAPTISM=57; CHURCH=67; PRIEST=41; STATEMENT=15; PARISH=43; PARISH PRIEST=34.

patterns followed by the group: as is shown in the graph, the occurrences of the word “God” create gaps in the use of any other frequent terms. The word “God” is also absent from any argumentative patterns and typical narratives created by group members. When discussing their reasons for leaving the Church, members disavow the institution of the Church and the priests themselves, while the notions of faith and God go unmentioned.

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The quantitative component of the study has highlighted a number of issues worthy of analysis. Firstly, we should like to analyse the concordances of “God”, which made a scarce and yet impactful appearance in our data. Secondly, the vast majority of the narratives in our corpus are centred around priests, who often take the agency and can (but not always do) generate difficulties for the apostates. To this end, the later steps of the analysis examine the areas in which priests are involved in the narratives from three analytical angles: a) apostates’ interactions with the priests; b) difficulties manufactured by the priests; and c) the abuse of formal components of the procedure by the priests.

### God and apostasy

In the corpus, the issues related to “God” appeared in two clusters, one large and one small. The former occurred when an organised group of ardent supporters of the Church joined the group and engaged in an open debate against apostasy, inevitably bringing the notions of deity and salvation into the discourse. The commenters were very quick to respond and while most of the apostates are indeed atheists, rebellion against the institution was still the most prominent notion in the apostates’ replies, as is visible throughout excerpts (1–2).

- (1) “Apostasy has nothing to do with God”.
- (2) “The Church is an institution which uses Jesus as an advertising slogan. It has nothing to do with God”.

Excerpts (1–2) represent resistance towards arbitrary power in the religious field. The speakers delegitimise the symbolic capital of the Church by dismissing the spiritual dimension of apostasy. Desacralisation in both quotes challenges the doxa of the religious field that equates belief with membership. In excerpt (1), the symbolic capital is negated by the use of the predicative structure “has nothing to do with God,” which functions as a topos of definition and dissociates apostasy from any intrinsic religious meaning. This reframing presents apostasy as



a non-theological (administrative/identity-based) act performed within the scope of struggles over boundaries of the religious field. Additionally, in excerpt (2), a nomination (the Church as an institution) is combined with predication through comparison (Jesus being presented as an advertising slogan), which employs the topoi of hypocrisy and commodification: the instrumentalisation of sacred symbols undermines the legitimacy of the Church, and reframes it from a religious community to a marketing institution.

(3) “We do not **reject the** afterlife and god. We simply do not acknowledge that something like this could even exist xD”

However, comments of atheist (or agnostic) origin are also present in the research material, produced in response to the more brazen comments from the newcomers. In Excerpt (3), perspectivisation by first person plural and stance indications (“We simply do not acknowledge”) is used to normalise non-acknowledgement as the default stance; the distance to religion is reinforced by the use of lower case “g” in “god” and the ironic emoticon “xD”. At the same time, in argumentation, the utterance uses the topos of burden of proof (absent evidence for existence) and implicitly employs the topos of definition (not rejecting does not equal not acknowledging). The existence of God is no longer a part of doxa in the autonomous field of the apostates; moreover, when engaging in discussions with the priests in the religious field (see analysis below), the apostates create heterodoxy (heresy), which opposes the orthodox (dogmatic) views of the priests.

### Priests and apostates

In the narratives about priests, commenters’ attitudes are often expressed through nomination, which is often accompanied by predication. The unique names assigned thereto are less frequent and extremely varied, so they are not prominent on word frequency lists: a more thorough close-reading was required to extract them from the research material. Our corpus contains more marked expressions, such as: *the blacks*, which in this context refers to the colour of the black robe used as a metonymy for the priest (and thus carries no reference to one’s skin colour); *men in dresses*, which is not only nomination but a mocking predication that presents the priests as crossdressers, perhaps to stir up the conservative receivers of the nomination or evoke humorous effect; and *black parasites*, which is a strongly dehumanising metaphor and employs the topos of economic/taxpayer burden due to the fact that all Polish taxpayers contribute towards the Church, which the group members seem not to appreciate. Less marked expressions were also found, namely: “men in cassocks” and “clerks in cassocks”, the latter making

reference to the secularisation of their role. The use of ridicule (“men in dresses”) and derogatory language challenges and undermines the social position of priests; on the other hand, the unmarked expressions secularise the priest, stripping them of their religious authority and placing them on equal grounds with the apostate.

Special names are also employed in reference to religion itself (though mainly in the aggravated discussions about God): “fairytale”, “abracadabra”, and a Marxist reference in “opium for the masses”. The believers receive a dehumanising epithet, being referred to as “wierzaki”: this is an untranslatable wordplay of “wierzący” (believers) with “zwierzaki” (diminutive of *animals*); sometimes they would also be predicated as a “statistically less intelligent group”. These are strong indicators that the community does not hold the believers in high regard, characterising them as backwards, gullible individuals.

- (4) “So I call the parish and **the dude** tells me that he has zero intention to help me”.
- (5) “After the phone call I knew there would be a big problem with honorifics because **the man** insisted that I should address him as <father>. I kindly proposed that he address me <**Mrs herbalist ethnologist**> in return”.
- (6) “As I was in the process of getting the baptism certificate I was instructed <**it’s not mister, it’s priest/father**>. I replied that if mister priest insists that we address each other with our current professional positions, I would like to be addressed as <**a specialist in planning the production of coal-derived raw materials**>. We remained silent till the end of the meeting”.

Examples (4)–(6) constitute strong examples of resistance against domination in an effort to contest relations of symbolic power and denaturalise doxa through rejecting official clerical honorifics. The priests hold asymmetrical authority grounded in institutionally sanctioned symbolic capital in the religious field, and they demand recognition of this power from the apostates, requesting them to refer to the priest as “father”. Since doing so would put the priest in the position of power, this demand is subverted here through the colloquial and depreciative nomination “dude”, and humorously introducing the topos of reciprocity/equality by the counter-demand to use one’s job description with regards to the use of forms of address in (5) and (6), which is done in an attempt to equalise the relation, employing the topos of reciprocity/equality: if a title indicates status, recognition should be mutual. In the Facebook group, narratives seem to employ this as a trope that re-occurs in various forms as an act of resistance against the expected behaviour. The group members do also make use of colloquial terms in relation to the priests, e.g., “the dude” in (4): this is perhaps another act of subverting the linguistic expectations.

### Apostates' narratives of negative experiences

Many narratives refer to difficulties in the interactions:

- (7) It was one of the worst conversations I have ever had. It was a deeply repulsive, horrible experience.

Example (7) shows the apostate's view of a conversation with a priest. The author uses intensifying predications, such as "deeply repulsive" and "horrible". In the excerpts (8–9), the apostates present a more detailed perspectivisation. The narrators contrast the roles and behaviour of the priest and apostate by referring to the interactional roles (teacher-student), and mark a turning point when apostasy is mentioned: the priest escalates the situation by evoking the topoi of tradition/martyrdom and seriousness/irreversibility (serious and permanent acts require reconsideration), while the apostate mitigates the situation in this narrative ("I kindly informed"). The priest in this story assumes a position of arbitrary power and symbolically disciplines the apostate ("sermon", "lambasted me as a little girl"), which also employs the topos of authority/discipline. Despite the apostate's efforts to undermine the power relation, their talk slips back into enacting those norms, which might be a signal of hysteresis – a reversion to a previously negated habitus. In excerpts (5–6), the opposite is the case, as these norms are expressly defied in an effort to renegotiate the power relation.

Apostates emphasise this through nomination and perspectivisation – framing the interaction as a school-like disciplinary situation, which highlights the asymmetrical, institutionally sanctioned authority in the religious field. These narratives employ suspense, e.g., in examples (7) and (8), where the mention of apostasy triggers a sudden behavioural change in the priests. Similarly to the confrontational use of forms of address, this suspense recurs across the corpus.

- (8) I was leaving when I heard a loud voice from behind the door that asked me to come in. – I have heard you seek apostasy? May I ask you to come in? – it sounded like a **teacher's reprimand**. (...) Then, the real **harangue** began. I heard it all: that it is a serious decision, that it is permanent, that first Christians gave their lives for the faith.
- (9) I immediately took up the role of a frightened student who had just been caught smoking in the restroom. I kindly informed the priest about my request and that it was about apostasy. And then it all started... First came a sermon about whatever the hell I was thinking, and whether I was even conscious as to what I wanted to do. He **lambasted** me like a little girl"

Marked, literary vocabulary and dehonoric nomination are heavily used throughout these narratives. Expressions in (8) and (9) such as "it sounded like

a teacher's reprimand" (Pl. *belferski ton*), "harangue" (Pl. *polajanka*), "lambaste" (Pl. *rugac*) are all loaded with negative connotations and in their context, they evoke an educational setting (*belferski*: "teacher's"; *mala dziewczynka*: "little girl"). Through predication, they serve to emphasise and intensify the unequal relationship that the priest imposes on the apostate, showcasing how one-sided these interactions can be. This constitutes a metaphor of captivity: the priest is shown to have full control over the situation, while the apostate remains a helpless prisoner of circumstances. When understood through Bourdieu's framework, this documents an arbitrary order sustained by symbolic capital and misrecognition. Intensification is used in the quotes through semantically loaded lexis ("harangue", "lambaste", "reprimand"). This triggered frame shift recurs across the dataset: in (7) and (8), the word *apostasy* reliably marks the turn from routine politeness to moral lecture.

### Priests manufacturing the difficulties

In our corpus, numerous mentions of manufactured technical difficulties can be found: a scarcity of information made available by the priests, as well as the avoidance of communication and the requirement to make multiple visits to the church building to complete the procedure. These difficulties surface especially in the context of obtaining a baptism certificate (as well as other documents) and are described as prolonging the procedure to no end. The cluster of quotes below shows nomination of institutional gatekeepers (nun, parish priest, diocese), predication of obstruction ("not available", "ignores"), and perspectivisation via first-person narrative ("I'm struggling").

Intensification is employed here through the great emphasis placed on concurrent, repeated actions and efforts (see highlighted phrases in (10) and (12) and hyperboles ("thousand procedures"): this is to show how hopeless the entire endeavour becomes should the priest produce difficulties along the way. Enumeration ("come in a month (...) not available right now (...) and so on") functions as an accumulation device that builds a sense of systemic obstruction. Co-present here are intensification ("bastards", "a thousand procedures") and mitigation ("I do not know if he disconnected").

- (10) I'm struggling to obtain my baptism certificate (...) Anyway, in the parish office there is always a nun: **one time** she will claim I should come in a month because she cannot arrange such things without notice; **another time** she will claim she can't give me such a certificate because a parish priest has to do it, and he is not available right now, **and so on, etc.**

- (11) He has no idea how to do it, he came up with a **thousand procedures**, sent me to the diocese and is supposed to ask someone again. Then he said he will not issue any copy that certifies the procedure because I will already be “signed out” by then. **Bastards**. Here goes nothing, I will keep calling him until he finds a way. Is there anything more I can do to make this happen?
- (12) The priest asked what I needed the baptism certificate for, so I said I need it for apostasy. And at that moment something cut the call... I do not know if he disconnected or if it was a technical issue, but I have never been able to reach this parish by phone again”
- (13) The parish priest ignores my requests, **he does not answer calls, he does not reply to e-mails** (...) I also wrote **four e-mails** to the bishop’s spokesman with a request for intervention. I did not receive a reply. This whole bizzare situation has been going on for two months already”

From a sociological point of view, the quotes (10–13) contain the constant theme of overcomplication of the formal procedures. The apostates operate in accordance with the secular, legal-rational understanding of procedures, expecting to achieve satisfactory outcomes once the legal requirements have been met, which might be interpreted as the topos of rights/entitlement. The religious field has its own logic; arbitrary power permits for rules to dynamically change based on a whim, as the high symbolic capital allows the priests to dictate and shape the rules as they see fit. As the act itself needs to be done in person and requires the parish priest’s direct cooperation, these difficulties are easy to manufacture and take advantage of, making it possible to postpone the procedure almost indefinitely. The pattern accumulates small delays, institutional silence (unanswered calls/e-mails), and upward referral (to the diocese), all of which comprise a gatekeeping script that employs the topos of bureaucratic burden: when the procedural load is unjustified, the legitimacy of gatekeeping is questioned. In these quotes, nomination of hierarchical levels (parish and diocese) is combined with the predication of incompetence or obstruction (“no idea”, “can’t”, “not available”), and argumentation via the topos of bureaucratic burden. The temporal deixis (“two months”) functions as an evidential that supports the claim of systemic delay. In Bourdieu’s terms, the process hinges on misrecognition of the arbitrary order as necessary, which legitimates symbolic domination in routine interactions.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We conceptualise apostasy as the struggle over symbolic power. The apostates create their own autonomous field, which has its language and where the norm is to challenge the symbolic domination of the Church. However, the struggle does also occur in the field of religion. The apostates partly follow its rules (accepting and following the formalities set by the Church in the apostasy process), but they also challenge the symbolic capital and symbolic power of the institution, creating heterodoxy within the field when they interact with the priests. This represents the boundary struggles between the religious field, which aims to preserve its domination, and the apostates who seek recognition within the general field of power. However, we treat the Facebook group as a nascent subfield of apostates or counter-public rather than a fully autonomous field; its doxa stabilises scepticism, yet remains partly merged with the religious field.

In apostates' discourse, the "compassionate conversations", intended to dissuade them from apostasy, are perceived as long, difficult and traumatic. Some of the reported encounters show a frame shift when mentioning the apostasy. The interaction changes from administrative service to moral disciplining, activating topoi of seriousness/irreversibility and tradition/martyrdom. The priests in the stories are presented as holders of arbitrary power who try to preserve the symbolic capital and who take it for granted. They expect the apostates to recognise their symbolic domination, e.g., through expecting appreciative forms of address (e.g., "Father" instead of "Mister"), which the apostates deliberately reject, challenging the relation of power (e.g., by the introduction of their own professional titles), renegotiating the habitus (only with partial success) and de-sacralising the clerical status. They also try to redefine the situation and power dynamic presenting themselves as assertive, often employing humour and irony to challenge the social hierarchy. A recurrent pattern combines politeness mitigation on the apostates' side ("I kindly") with intensifying predication in priests' reported speech ("harangue", "lambasted"), strengthening the argument of asymmetry in this relation.

By drawing on the methodologies of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis, we show how apostates challenge the doxa of the religious field. They create heterodox discourse by undermining the "obviousness" of arbitrary power and employ discursive strategies to contest the Church's symbolic capital. This shows how language and symbolic power intertwine: while dominant discourses prescribe the Church's position and authority, apostates mobilise alternative discourses to reclaim agency. Nomination and predication strategies are used to

delegitimise and mock the priests, the Church and its members, undermining the symbolic power. The apostates in many cases play the roles of self-confident rebels, anticipating problems that might be generated by the priests (e.g., concealing information, overcomplicating or prolonging the procedure), so the apostates have to be prepared and know the Church procedures better than they do. Priests' argumentation in reported speech recurrently employs the topoi of authority/discipline, seriousness/irreversibility, and tradition/martyrdom; apostates counter with the topoi of rights/epistemic warrant, reciprocity/equality, and taxpayer burden. Perspectivisation indexes habitus-in-motion (including hysteresis) and helps enact heterodoxy against systemically imposed orthodox power relations. Finally, intensification is used to reinforce the narratives, making the texts more expressive and elevating the vocabulary. We read each DHA strategy through Bourdieu's lens: nomination and predication legitimise or delegitimise positions, perspectivisation shows how speakers position themselves and shift stances, while argumentation reveals conflicts between orthodox and heterodox views.

As the analysis illustrates, sociological issues are reflected in language (and can therefore be highlighted by corpus analysis and examined through the scope of discursive strategies). This study focused on the struggle over power in the religious field [Bourdieu 1991], but relied on linguistic methods for data analysis and sociological concepts for their interpretation. This has expanded a purely sociological understanding of the phenomenon (which lacks the tools to analyse language and linguistic expression) and provided insights that a purely linguistic analysis would have not attained. Working with a corpus of linguistic data containing hundreds of passages, rather than a fixed set of selected passages made it possible to refine the research material and allowed us to visualise the data and gain insights into the nature of the narratives present in the discourse. Moreover, the linguistic phenomena often marked discourse-related meanings, while focusing on specific lexical or grammatical components in the instances of language use yielded a more comprehensive image of the situation.

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## **MIĘDZY SOCJOLOGIĄ A JĘZYKOZNAWSTWEM: ANALIZA Dyskursów Internetowych na temat Apostazji**

### **Abstrakt**

Celem artykułu jest analiza internetowych dyskursów dotyczących apostazji w Polsce, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem grupy facebookowej „Apostazja 2020”, w której użytkownicy dyskutują o formalnym wyjściu z Kościoła Katolickiego. Badanie stanowi próbę integracji perspektyw socjologicznej i językoznawczej, aby odpowiedzieć na pytanie, w jaki sposób apostazja jest konstruowana w dyskursie publicznym.

Rama teoretyczna artykułu opiera się na kategoriach pola, kapitału, dominacji symbolicznej, władzy symbolicznej, habitusu oraz doksy, zaproponowanych przez Pierre’a Bourdieu. Kategorie te wykorzystano, by ukazać, jak poprzez apostazję kwestionowana jest dominująca pozycja Kościoła Katolickiego w Polsce. Do analizy materiału badawczego zastosowano dwa komplementarne podejścia: lingwistykę korpusową oraz historyczną analizę dyskursu (DHA), co pozwoliło na identyfikację strategii dyskursywnych stosowanych przez apostatów do budowania kontrdyskursów, redefiniujących ich pozycję w polu religijnym i polu władzy.

W analizie podkreślono sposoby, w jakie apostości podważają symboliczną władzę Kościoła Katolickiego. W ich narracjach Kościół sprawuje swoją arbitralną władzę, zmieniając zasady i generując formalne trudności dla tych, którzy próbują dokonać apostazji. Walka o przejęcie kontroli manifestuje się m.in. poprzez strategie nominacji i predykcji, np. poprzez sposoby nazywania duchownych i samych siebie, apostości usiłują narzucić własne reguły gry. W ten sposób kwestionowany jest ortodoksyjny, znormalizowany wizerunek Kościoła, a wysoki kapitał symboliczny duchownych podlega renegocjacji zarówno wewnątrz, jak i na zewnątrz pola religijnego. Apostości nie dyskutują kwestii dotyczących samej wiary (chyba, że są sprowokowani przez osoby z zewnątrz), krytyka dotyczy samej instytucji Kościoła.

**Słowa kluczowe:** apostazja, media społecznościowe, Kościół katolicki, analiza dyskursu, językoznawstwo korpusowe