

RECOLLECTIONS ON THE BEGINNINGS OF
PSYCHOLINGUISTICS IN POLAND:
AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR IDA KURCZ



Ida Kurcz is a Professor Emeritus of psychology. She is known as the forerunner of psycholinguistics in Poland, the co-author of the Polish association norms, “Polskie normy skojarzeń swobodnych na 100 słów z listy Kent-Rosanoffa” [“Polish free association norms for 100 words from the Kent-Rosanoff list”], and the Polish frequency dictionary, as well as numerous monographs and experimental study reports that have laid the foundations for later work in the psychology of language.

Ida Kurcz and Barbara Bokus have shared a mutual passion for psycholinguistics and have worked together on numerous occasions, including co-editing one of the most important Polish books in developmental psycholinguistics, *Wiedza a Język* [Knowledge and Language], Vol. 2 “*Język dziecka*” [Child Language], and co-organizing international conferences in Poland that were attended by some of the world’s most prominent researchers in the field.

Natalia Banasik-Jemielniak: How did you get interested in psycholinguistics?

Ida Kurcz: Before I tell you about psycholinguistics, let me introduce you to the state of psychology in post-war Poland.

Right after the war, there were two departments at the University of Warsaw: the Department of General Psychology, chaired by Professor Władysław Witwicki and the Department of Developmental and Educational Psychology, chaired by Professor Stefan Baley. In 1949, a year after Professor Witwicki passed away, the Department of General Psychology was taken over by Professor Tadeusz Tomaszewski.

That year, I passed my secondary school-leaving exams and took the entrance exams to the psychology program at the University of Warsaw. However, other successful candidates and I found ourselves at the Study of Social Sciences (Studium Nauk Społecznych). In 1949, as part of the fight against bourgeois ideology at the university, studies of philosophy, sociology, psychology and even pedagogy were closed – all the students who wanted to study any of those subjects, and were admitted, ended up at the Study of Social Sciences. There were about one hundred of us and the program was planned for three years.

I must say that the only psychology professors, Professor Tomaszewski, who had just taken the chair of that faculty, and Professor Baley's associate, Professor Maria Żebrowska, decided to do something about that. Imagine, in one year, they managed to prepare a new plan for a five-year program of psychological studies. Pre-war and post-war programs lasted four years and ended with a master's degree in philosophy, regardless of whether you studied philosophy, psychology, or sociology.

Professors Tomaszewski and Professor Żebrowska developed courses containing a lot of material from natural sciences. The program of psychological studies included neurophysiology, psychiatry, and even physics. Apart from that, there were two compulsory foreign language courses—Russian and one of the Western European languages—and a course in Marxism-Leninism; but the latter was included in all study programs, regardless of the discipline. The program was less philosophical but more physiological; Pavlov's theory was popular at that time, and behaviorism was predominant.

It was decided that the program would last five years and will lead to a master's degree in psychology. Only after that, two or three years later, such programs were created within sociology, pedagogy, and philosophy. When the Ministry approved it and the enrolment for psychological studies was announced, it was already September – not June, like in the previous years. The students of the Study of Social Sciences were informed that they would be allowed to be in their second year, but also take some extra first year courses. In fact, there were only a few of us in the second year as only eight people

decided to study psychology and take extra courses from the first year, and four of us decided to continue studying social sciences at the same time.

At the time, Professor Tomaszewski was looking for assistants to work with him and as soon as spring of the second year, he offered a position of Deputy Assistant to Janusz Reykowski. After the examination session, he offered me the same position and after we graduated from the first year, we became assistants.

In 1956, the political thaw arrived (see Gomułka's thaw or Polish October – editorial note) and relationships with foreign countries became easier. Just before the war, Professor Tomaszewski had his internship in France and was in touch with French psychologists. As a child, before the war, I was bilingual, speaking Polish and French. Professor Tomaszewski received a handbook of exercises in experimental psychology from his friend, Professor Paul Fraisse. I translated it and it was then published. This was the beginning of our scientific collaboration with France. In 1958, I was already taking part in a summer course there.

At the same time, the United States offered one-year assistant scholarships for young Polish scholars. Almost all of us, assistants in psychology, benefited from this opportunity. I gained my doctorate in the summer of 1962 and in the fall, I left for a year to Minneapolis. The Chair of the Department where I won the scholarship was Professor James Jenkins. I received an extremely kind welcome there. When I was leaving, I was given a book, *Psycholinguistics: A book of readings*, and we decided to stay in touch.

What's more, I had the English version of my doctoral dissertation, entitled *Słowo jako bodziec* [*Word as a Stimulus*], with me. Professor Jenkins arranged to have it published in *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*. The journal was still in the spirit of behaviorism, but it clearly leaned towards cognitive science. In my opinion, it was Noam Chomsky who inspired psychologists with the idea of cognitive science.

I was really excited to be involved in psycholinguistic research. Upon my return to Poland, I started a master's seminar in psycholinguistics. Students who attended it later became assistants, like Jerzy Bobryk, for instance. I then wrote a book, *Psycholinguistics: Review of Research Problems* [*Psycholingwistyka: Przegląd problemów badawczych*].

With time, new departments in the Faculty of Psychology sprang up, such as the Department of Personality Psychology, the Department of Social Psychology, the Department of Individual Differences, the Department of Cognitive Psychology and so on. Psycholinguistics was considered to be too small to be a department, so it was only a unit.

My first research, which I conducted with my students and research assistants, concerned language use and text comprehension. I was not involved in children's language development, so I got in touch with Professor Maria Przetacznikowa from Cracow, who had been working in that field, and we went to conferences together. But as luck would have it, Professor Grace Wales Shugar came to our university. We became close friends and came to the conclusion that the language of an adult interconnects with the language of a child, and we started working together.

NBJ: Is this when you've met Professor Barbara Bokus?

IK: Yes, I met Professor Barbara Bokus when she was doing her master's degree under the supervision of Professor Tomaszewski. She later pursued her doctorate under the supervision of Professor Shugar.

We started working together after the international conference in Jachranka in 1984, which I organized with Professor Grace Wales Shugar and which was one of our biggest undertaking at that time. Professor Joseph Danks also helped us with it.

We had established a close relationship with Professor Danks back in the 70s, when the Rector Zbigniew Rybicki signed an agreement between the University of Warsaw and the Kent State University. University of Warsaw was opening a visiting professorship position for a researcher from Kent State University to foster collaboration with someone from UW. As luck would have it, it was Professor Joseph Danks who was the only candidate from Kent State, and he came with his wife and two preschool-aged sons. He also specialized in psycholinguistics. As a matter of fact, his wife had wanted to come to Poland very much because she was interested in the recent history, including the Holocaust. They visited Auschwitz and Treblinka, and she later prepared an English manuscript about the Holocaust.

Professor Danks and I worked mainly on text comprehension issues: We compared texts translated from English to Polish with those translated from Polish to English.

A lot of people attended the conference in Jachranka, including my friends from Minneapolis along with Professor Jenkins. We later had our text, *Knowledge and language* [*Wiedza a Język*], published in English in the Netherlands, and in Polish by the Ossolineum Publishing House.

Professor Bokus worked with me during this conference. We have also collaborated on various national conferences. Once a year, we organized the Warsaw-Cracow meetings with Professor Przetacznikowa on the topic of child language. I think Professor Barbara Bokus is a very hard working and extremely kind person. She has always taken care of somebody: For many years, she took care of Professor Shugar and then of her husband for the rest of his life. I feel that she is a person of extraordinary goodness and has an uncommon ability to put others' interests first.

NBJ: The basis of your doctoral thesis (1962) was the research on the semantic generalization of free movements. If you were to start your research now, what would it be?

IK: I am not sure. I think that research on bilingualism is very important. I used to go to Canada every year and the leading research there was on bilingualism. I think we should speak more than one language; our neurons are more active then. For me, the ability to speak English, French, a little bit of German and Russian as well as Latin, which used to be mandatory at school and which I had been studying for six years, is a window to the world. Knowing Latin and French, one can understand Spanish and Italian.

Canadian research on comparing monolingual and bilingual people showed that bilinguals are more perceptive, and mentally active. It protects one from dementia in a way. So, I think that such research may be conducted within psycholinguistics. I must say that I didn't expect linguists would get interested in it, but I was received very warmly by Professor Jerzy Bralczyk and Professor Jan Miodek. At some point, we contacted each other very often and Professor Miodek asked me a few times to review some of the work done in Wrocław, so it was some kind of a bridge between the disciplines.

NBJ: Are there any surprising but also promising relationships between psycholinguistics and other fields of knowledge which may shed new light on what we know?

IK: Studies about the nervous system and how it works in physiological terms. Probably also sociology. I only had that kind of relationships with linguists, thanks to working with Professor Danuta Kądziaława on language usage disorders.

NBJ: What's your advice to young researchers who have just started to take their first steps in psycholinguistics?

IK: To read a lot, to try to take a critical stance on what's printed.

NBJ: You are the co-author of the frequency lists of the Polish language. Frequency indicators are the basis of modern corpora or programs for automatic text analysis (LIWC type).

IK: When I started my psycholinguistic research, the word which was used in this kind of research was characterized by what associations it triggers and the frequency of its use. Free association tests were very popular at that time. I needed a frequency dictionary—how often some word is used—but there wasn't anything like that in Poland.

I knew that there was Statistical Linguistics at the University of Warsaw. Professor Tomaszewski called Professor Witold Doroszewski and arranged a meeting which we all participated in. I told him which data I needed, and he gave me details about people engaged in statistical linguistics. They were Andrzej Lewicki and Jadwiga Sambor. And when we were saying goodbye—I will never forget that—he said, “How do you imagine this, that there is a word and a number next to it?”

After getting in touch with these two persons, we conducted frequency studies. I even went to Prague in the Czech Republic, because the Czech had published such a dictionary. And at last, such a dictionary was published [in Poland], but now you just press one key and have everything on the computer.

NBJ: Do you think the fact that the electronic devices are present everywhere will change communication in some way? A significant part of communication is now mediated. There's research showing that young people use non face-to-face communication more often than ever.

IK: Language is still a means of communication, regardless of whether it's face-to-face communication or searching data on the computer. Those are simply new issues at the moment to be examined: What impact do new technologies have on various processes and on communication? Also, what impact do they have on the processes in which language interacts with other psychological processes? And this may be done according to different rules than before. I think there will always be new issues.

NBJ: You've made huge contribution to the development of psycholinguistics...

IK: My contribution is merely the fact that I learned very soon that there is something like psycholinguistics when I came to the USA and quickly started working on it. In some Polish linguistic dictionary, I even found the entry *psycholinguistics*, in which it said it was introduced to Poland by Ida Kurcz. It's a coincidence. I became a member of the editorial board of a quarterly published by the International Association of Applied Psycholinguistics. Being

Polish helped. When the association started to develop, its seat was mainly in the Netherlands but many Spanish people collaborated, as well as researchers from Brazil, America, etc. and they clearly wanted someone from behind the Berlin Wall, and that's why they got me involved.

In France, something similar happened, although not with psycholinguistics. Professor Paul Fraisse became the editor-in-chief of one of the oldest psychology journals: *L'Année Psychologique*. Fraisse worked with Piaget from Switzerland and someone from Belgium, and he wrote a letter to me offering me to join the editorial board. The magazine is published once a year. Obviously, I agreed. The idea was to support the countries from behind the Iron Curtain. I personally benefited from that.

Now, I've already withdrawn completely from scientific issues. I read novels and current papers.

NBJ: Thank you so much for the conversation.