

A Poetess in the Light of Linguistics

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Elżbieta Tabakowska, *Językoznawstwo zastosowane [Linguistics applied]*, (Kraków – Budapeszt – Syrakuzy: Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2019)

The title proposed here is unsuccessful in more ways than one. First, because it suggests inattentiveness, carelessness or oversight [translator's note: Polish *poetka* 'poetess' is easily confusable with *poetyka* 'poetics']. The impulse to reconstruct 'poetess' as 'poetics' boasts, of course, the obviousness of Jakobsonian classics¹, not to mention the fact that the weakened pronoun 'you' (Pol. *ty*), so important for the reception of literary works, also demands its rights (admittedly, this interpretation is a case of linguistic oversensitivity; we shall return to this metaphor later). The second reason why the title does not work is that it establishes rules of relations between impersonal linguistics and the person of a poetess. Why this is a more serious flaw will become clear in the course of this review. Let us add that this flaw can be described in reference to a weak thought, because it implies relations based on opposition. Whether this simply means that the linguist can appear in the light of poetics, requires a separate and broader treatment.

¹ Cf. R. Jakobson, *Poetyka w świetle językoznawstwa [Poetics in the light of linguistics]*, "Pamiętnik Literacki" 51/2, 1960, pp. 431–473.

The projection aspect² – the source of light

The book *Językoznawstwo zastosowane* [*Linguistics applied*] by the distinguished linguist, Elżbieta Tabakowska, was published by Austeria in 2019 in the series “From manuscripts”. Following the editorial custom, the cover features a handwritten version of a poem which is an apt preview of the book’s contents. The book is divided into twelve parts, preceded by the Introduction (and “A few introductory analogies and dissimilarities”, illustrated by means of poems). Here the reader finds out that „the inspiration for this book was another book” - *Le Ton beau de Marot* by Douglas R. Hofstadter, an American scholar and specialist in AI and the author of an intriguing translation theory of analogy. Tabakowska, commenting on key elements of Hofstadter’s unusual work (the central one being a discussion of nearly ninety translations of a single poem), states the following:

Knowledge of cognitive processes in the mind, which create concepts subsequently expressed by means of language, helps with a better understanding of a poem. On the other hand, the knowledge of the poem’s matter (for the author of that poem, this knowledge is aided by familiarity with the poem’s genesis) aids the understanding of the nature and user’s manual for language.

This observation anticipates the most important perspective (a dominant?) of *Językoznawstwo zastosowane*, even though one must add that it is not so easy. On the one hand, the author (whose role in the development of Polish cognitive linguistics is unquestionable) announces a reflection on elements of grammar, with reference to the interpretation of poetic texts, on the other – from the very beginning (to which she also points in the fragment quoted above) she also utilises her own poems, which become research material in subsequent parts of the book.

One needs to be very careful with this order, however. This is not a preview of critical remarks to be levelled on the contents or the structure of the book. Let us emphasise immediately that Tabakowska’s book owes its coherence to a considerable number of factors; more than what is typical for most academic works. At the same time, this book is not your typical academic publication. Tabakowska’s academic style is not too dense (even though her reasoning is precise) and yet, one can discern elements of a story in it: sometimes it is a highly interpretative story, sometimes a digressive one. From the point of view of the linguist-reader the most valuable passages are those which additionally define linguistics by the way of interpreting a specific poem. For example, on p. 36 one reads:

² This is the term (proposed by Rudolf Arnheim) to which the author refers in part 5. This part addresses, among others, the necessary fragmentariness of each story and the idealisation derived from thinking about superimposing many descriptive perspectives onto one another (all perspectives). An obvious association from the perspective of the history of art would be cubism. On this occasion Tabakowska’s book features the author’s early poem (p. 62), which, also because of condensed form (to be addressed later) is worth quoting:

Im-i-nam-presja

Szczęk szczęk
Bez płaszczy
Zny styku
Bach – tin
Co(to)da:
Styka
Braque

But linguistics is looking also (often predominantly) not only for specificity of forms but also for explicit or implicit linguistic meanings of messages. It discovers (or confirms old intuitions, substituted by 20th century scientism) that the meaning of linguistic messages is crucially dependent on the context in which these messages are created and received in the communicative process.

One might point out that there is nothing new in these statements (that is, if one were to read them without their immediate context). Let us however, initiate here a more in-depth commentary on the book under review, for the poetess has a masterful command of the entirety of her text.

*Ad nauseam or ad illusio? Analogy applied*³

What is the context for the poems in Tabakowska's book? A careless reader might well browse through this short work with cognitive enthusiasm, thinking about poetic works instrumentally. First, because the author herself suggests this manner of thinking about them (after all, she includes them in subsequent parts of her theoretical considerations on grammar in relation to interpretative processes) and points to their illustrative nature. Secondly, the arrangement of such poems seems accidental in the sense that does not interfere with the structure of the argumentation. The latter is organised in the following manner: after reflections on the poetic form the author focuses on description and interpretation, the metaphor of conduction, observer, point of view and perspective, aspects of projection, imaging, narration, metaphoric straying, time and space, conceptual integration and – finally (just before a linguistic conclusion) – iconicity. We are then faced with a list of key issues in linguistics, even though they remain a commentary relating to poems. Questions concerning balance seem justified, insofar that we are clear on the question of genre. If it is impossible to determine the genre of *Językoznawstwo zastosowane* (i.e., linguistics applied), maybe we should remain silent about it a little bit longer.

It is, however, worth considering what changes in the structure of the book, especially from part four, entitled "Observer, point of view, perspective" (p. 51). Let us quote the author again, not so much to stubbornly remind the reader about the tenets of linguistic thought but in order to make relative what is obvious and to open the reading into slightly different issues:

Linguistic description is by definition a description of the material; simply put, its aim is to show what a given text is made of. As has already been stated, the ideal would be a totally objective description, i.e., one in which the shape of linguistic beings is determined by precise units, which

³ [Translator's note: Polish title of the section "Do złudzenia czy do znudzenia" plays on the similarity of lexical forms, which is not easily translatable into English]. Similarity at the level of phraseology is a good example of iconicity understood as analogy. If one accepts that Polish expressions: *do znudzenia* 'ad nauseam' and *do złudzenia* 'strikingly similar' differ in verbal forms only minimally (i.e. they are a so-called minimal pair), then in terms of semantics this difference evokes a significant confrontation. The presence of this juxtaposition in this essay has then two points of reference. The first one concerns the core of linguistic similarity of the two Polish forms, recalling stable phraseological meanings (*do znudzenia* 'ad nauseam', i.e. too often; *do złudzenia* 'strikingly similar', i.e. potentially confusing, allowing misattribution). The other one is directly connected to the book under consideration. Semantic similarity of the two expressions proves to be a contextual effect (by the way, this juxtaposition is also semantically meaningful at the metalinguistic level) – basic concepts of linguistics and poetics, repeated ad nauseam are the reason why *Językoznawstwo zastosowane* is strikingly similar to a linguistic book. This, however, is only an illusion.

do not allow any idiosyncratic interpretations, performed from the point of view of an individual – either a language user or the author of analysis. Contemporary studies on language show this ideal to be impossible to achieve. There is no linguistic image which does not conceal an observer. Just like there is no painting which does not reveal the traces and hand of its painter⁴.

What if the analysis and interpretation concern poetic texts written by the same person who then analyses and comments on them? Is this a case of a problematic tautology, whose cognitive effect oscillates between irony and cancellation? Irony, indeed, but never the latter. In order to prove this, however, two further analytical steps **need** to be taken.

The first one is related to a hypothesis which allows seeing the reviewed book in a completely different light (which means it accepts a somewhat different point of view, thus – a change of perspective). Perhaps one should read *Językoznawstwo zastosowane* as Elżbieta Tabakowska's book of poetry: a selection of poems by a renowned linguist, who provided her book with an extensive linguistic critical commentary. Before we develop this idea any further, let us announce the second step, which will be an analytical sample of one of Tabakowska's poems. In order to be really close to the heart of the matter, let us consider "The metaphor of conduction" (i.e., the poem whose handwritten version can be seen on the book's cover and which has been thoroughly, and yet synthetically, described by the author).

Let us first return to the hypothesis mentioned above. In the book, after the list of figures, there is a list of a few dozen poems. Among them one can find two versions of the same poem, whose differences and similarities are discussed (cf. "The metaphor of conduction", „Fear”, „Highschool Reunion”). Poems operate among commentaries, they are also the basis of addenda (there are as many as five of them after the ninth part: "There and then, i.e., here and now"). These addenda have their own titles, corresponding to the title of the commentary. Does this not undermine the assumptions enumerated in this list? Not really, as demonstrated by a careful consideration of second-degree iconicity, i.e., endophoric iconicity (discussed in part 11, which contains the statement that "this is not a linguistic book", p. 135). This type of iconicity depends on the imitation of form by form. In this case similarity is the foundation of opposition: a process whose intentionality is legitimised by the identity of the author of the poems and commentary. In this way the issue of metalanguage becomes particularly emphasised, and all of this happens within the framework of a discussion on linguistics, which – in the cognitive perspective – proves to be (one is tempted to say, yet again) a perfect ally of poetics.

The basics of linguistic thought, which seem to be reiterated ad nauseam, become, thanks to Tabakowska's book (of poetry?) and thanks to inner recontextualization, hardly distinguishable from analytical commentaries of poetic texts. This similarity implies a change of perspective, just like (albeit in a slightly different manner) in one of the author's poems (from the addendum *Pastiche à rebours*):

⁴ By the way, it is worth adding that *Językoznawstwo zastosowane* is an illustrated book – every part features a photography of a painting or a detail (Bosch, Mucha, Lucas Cranach the Elder), sculpture (Ernst), dedication or calligraphy.

Podziękowanie za tomik poezji

Dzięki za tomik – przyszedł smutną porą,
 gdy mi czas głuchy świat przemienia w ciszę.
 Dobrze jest wiedzieć, że się głos zapisze.
 Czytam i myślę: może zmieni imię
 ten strach, że dźwięki w całość się nie zbiorą,
 i że się życie zmieni w metonimie,
 i może będzie tylko metaforą...

Translated literally into English, the poem is as follows:

A thank-you for the book of poetry

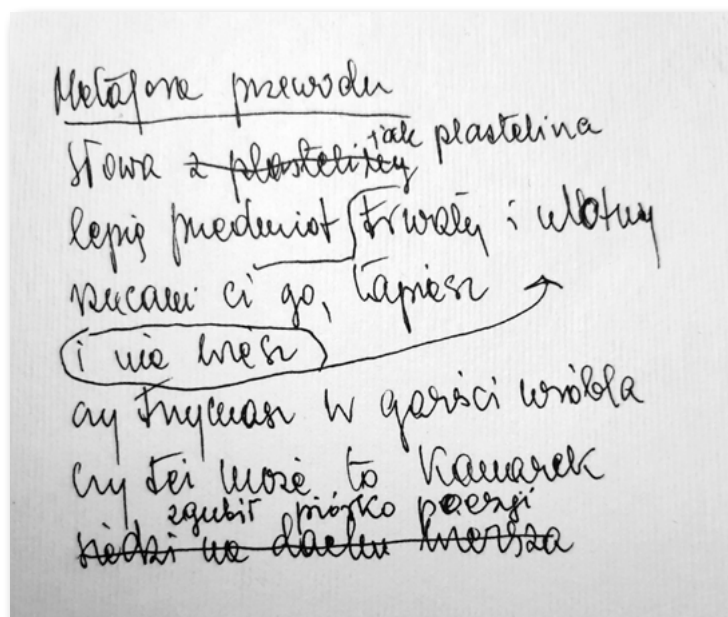
Thank you for the book of poetry – it arrived at a sad time,
 When the deaf time changes the world in silence for me
 I read and think: maybe this fear
 That sounds will not become a whole will change the name
 A fear that life will become metonymy
 Maybe it will only be a metaphor...

Garden paths of verses – what are raspberries?⁵

Considering the handwritten version of the poem “Metafora przewodu” [“Metaphor of conduction”] can lead the analytical linguist to at least a few questions. Perhaps they are a consequence of being led into temptation, but it is impossible not to ask them when faced with such a promising manuscript. The linearity of a communicative idealisation (derived from Shannon-Weaver’s⁶ well-known 1949 telegraphic diagram) is also criticised by the structure of the free verse poem. The final shape of the utterance, along with its assigned semantic value, is questioned also at the level of verse (line), whose temporary value can activate the space of meanings in relation to ensuing verses (lines). This is strictly correlated with the view expressed by Tabakowska in earlier parts of her work (cf. part 1 “Poem, para-poem, non-poem”, pp. 19-30), where the author acknowledges that the nonlinearity of her text is not coincidental. We are then led on [translator’s note: the Polish idiom is *wpuszczać w maliny*, lit. ‘to lead somebody into raspberries’] in two ways: due to imaginative and communicative conventions, caused by the metaphor of conduction (which is the cause of a mistaken belief in the existence of something like containers with portions of information, perfectly structured and ready to be transported to the recipient), but

⁵ In part 4 the author reminds the reader that ‘garden paths’ are one of metaphors important for cognitivists; they refer to structures “which lead the reader (listener) astray [translator’s note: they ‘lead the reader (listener) into raspberries, in the Polish idiom], only to bring them back onto the right path in the latter part of the sentence. Garden paths are established as a consequence of breaking the structural pattern, so then it is grammar that determines interpretation” (p. 45). In that case, following the path of the metaphor, one might want to learn more about those formal and semantic ‘raspberries’, which are closely related (this is authorial clarification) to the potentiality of the poetic form.

⁶ Cf. Y. Winkin, *Anthropology of communication. From theory to fieldwork*, trans. by A. Karpowicz, Introduction W. J. Burszta, Warsaw 2007.



also because of the linearity questioned in the poem (and the finality of grammatical roles, thus – of semantic arrangements). The latter ‘garden path’ is worth interpreting in relation to text⁷:

First, let us assume that the author of the book is much better at interpreting all the devices used in the poem. Let this statement be a gesture of ironic cooperation in building a linguistic reflection (but first and foremost, an expression of admiration for the author’s craftsmanship).

If the first verse of both versions of the text was to be considered as a manifestation of ellipsis (with the absent verbs “there are” – although this is only implied here), from which a bigger syntagmatic whole is revealed in the course of reading, we would then get a difference between two nominal constructions: the simile “Words like plasticine” (Pol. *Słowa jak plastelina*) and a (potential) metaphor: “Words made from plasticine” (Pol. *Słowa z plasteliny*).

The second example has more serious semantic consequences, because they may refer to characteristics of words in general (their properties, instability), not just to a specific (human) creation. In this sense the superimposed version (present in the second variant) is unequivocal. The exposition in the first verse is not grammatically continued in the second verse⁸ – it is the subject of the text who is speaking here and is the one that is creating an object (we already know that mediation has occurred – the object is made from words and words are made from plasticine/ they are like plasticine). The second verse is longer in its first variant form: the noun “thing” has acquired two contrasting modifiers (the correction in the second description is an interesting one – was it supposed to be something different?): ‘lasting’ and ‘fleeting’ (Pol. *trwały* and *ulotny*). The parallelism of the next part with the coordinating conjunction *i* ‘and’ has been disturbed: in both versions these words can be found in neighbouring verses. The ending of the poem (in both versions) is intriguing too: it occurs after a phraseological trace (“sparrow in the hand”, “canary on the roof”). In light of the entirety of the text one might assume that right until the very end both variants are equally possible: permanence coexisting with transience, as well as the act of catching which causes ignorance (although the order of activities is key here), be it a closed, ready message, or maybe just the beginning of adventures in interpretation (which may well end in a fiasco, getting lost). Object metaphors ‘the feather of poetry’

⁷ The photograph is of the handwritten version of the poem from the cover of Elżbieta Tabakowska’s book (the poem is discussed in chapter 3). Two variants of the text have been considered here: I and III (see pp. 43-50).

⁸ The author points to the possibility of a relational reading: *from plasticine/ I mold an object*; but this weakens reference to words from plasticine (which are like plasticine).

(Pol. *piórko poezji*) and ‘the roof of the poem’ (Pol. *dach wiersza*) achieve imaging evoked by a phraseological structure (the more common bird – in the hand, the less common one – only within the reach of sight/ thought.) First and foremost, however (again, via some complex analogy) they juxtapose these images as equal, non-discordant, possible through the power of the poetic space of the text. This does not seem to interfere with thinking about linguistic communication (and poetry is a part of it) – multiple readings bear traces of typical receptions, standard motivated tests of the text’s reasonability, as well as receptions possible on the basis of individualised evaluations of potentiality, which are revealed from the space of poetic texts but also from a recontextualization of the poem.

Linguistic oversensitivity – she as you

The return to the weak thought, mentioned at the beginning of this short draft is supposed to be yet another clarifying example. Elżbieta Tabakowska has proposed a very original book, which, perhaps better than many monographic studies, demonstrates the relationship between poetics and (contemporary) linguistics. The category of *ty* ‘you’ on the one hand concerns the linguist, who reads literary texts as a recipient of poetry, but on the other – the poetess, who “knows what she wants to say”. In this perspective it seems reasonable to ask whether it makes any sense to try to determine which genre this work belongs to. Following the hypothesis put forward here, maybe this is a selection of poetry by a distinguished linguist, supported by an in-depth (but non-hermetic) commentary on the poetics of these texts. Maybe it is a form of a popular narrative (a very disciplined and condensed one, too), which describes (and interprets) poems with a linguistic finesse. The linguist in the light of poetics proves to be no less important. This is how she removes a simple way of thinking about boundaries. The latter, in the context of literary studies and linguistics (likewise discerned by Tabakowska⁹) is a classic example of a necessary resonance. Harmonising perspectives is, perhaps, much easier when different points of view converge, allowing for analogical perspectives. This is precisely what we see in *Językoznawstwo stosowane*, albeit on a much subtler level. Poems do not strive to expose a different language; rather, they patiently show linguistic events and phenomena. This makes a deep interpretation possible, and its foundation is born from linguistic thinking.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

⁹ In her „Introduction” the author writes:

„Let us take, for instance, poetry. A linguist can say something interesting about a poem, considering it from the perspective of a material scientist, whereas a literary scholar may enrich a linguistic analysis by familiarising the linguist with the tools of the literary trade. If they combine forces, it may turn out that the author of the poem, unaware of their own creative power, uses the language in a manner which the linguist would recommend. And perhaps it will be possible for the grammar of poetry to show itself to us” (pp. 11-12).

References

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KEYWORDS

POETICS

free verse poem

spatiality of the text

ABSTRACT:

The article is a review of sorts; it reflects on a poetry-based consideration of modern linguistics. The renowned linguist Elżbieta Tabakowska focuses in her book on some of the key problems of the grammar of poetry. Her poems become the basis for analyses, which allows one to consider here the difference between a poetic book equipped with linguistic commentary and a (popular) linguistic monograph, interspersed with perfectly harmonious poems. This differentiation proves to be too simple, however, which demonstrates the exceptionality of the book under review.

analogy

iconicity

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Krzysztof Skibski (1977) – linguist, scholar of Polish, D. Litt. employed at the Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań; he studies literary language (especially of modern poetry); and methodological problems of linguistics, colloquialisms, semantics and phraseology; he teaches modern linguistics and culture-based reading of literature; he publishes, among others, in journals such as “Język Polski”, „LingVaria”, „Przestrzenie Teorii”, „Forum Poetyki”; he wrote monographs *Antropologia wierszem. Język poetycki Ewy Lipskiej* [*Anthropology in poetic form. Poetic language of Ewa Lipska*] (2008); „Poezja jako literatura. Relacje między elementami języka poetyckiego w wierszu wolnym” [*Poetry as literature. Relations between elements of poetic language in a free verse poem*] (2017) and ” (with Jerzy Borowczyk) *Literackie gramatyki ciągłości i nadmiar. Próba filologiczna* [*Literary grammars of continuity and superfluity. A philological trial*] (2021). |