

Ethnolinguistics

# WHEN MISERY COMES KNOCKING

Language interprets the world, shows us what's going on in people's minds, and it can affect how they behave – says **Dr. Monika Łaszkiewicz** from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University (UMCS) in Lublin.

**ACADEMIA: Your PhD thesis was entitled “Stereotypes of other ethnicities in Polish folk culture and colloquial language.” Who were these ‘other’ ethnicities in Poland?**

**MONIKA ŁASZKIEWICZ:** I narrowed the ‘otherness’ to the aspect of nationality. After analyzing my data, I identified 52 different non-Polish groups. I studied various sources: publications from the nineteenth to twentieth centuries, recordings from the 1960s in the UMCS “Ethnolinguistics Archives,” and I also conducted interviews in the Lubelskie, Łódzkie, and Podkarpackie regions. I divided the collected descriptions into five major categories, based on the criterion of the type of relation between Poles and the ‘others.’ These are: co-inhabitants, neighbors, historical invaders, foreigners, and savage inhabitants of faraway lands. The most thoroughly described in the material were Jews, Ukrainians, Russians and Germans. Less precisely were described those living far from us, such as Americans and Brazilians.

**I understand that you interviewed people from the older generation.**

That was the idea, to reach people who have had direct contact with the ‘others.’ Prof. Jerzy Bartmiński has always noted that spoken history and first-hand data are always the most important and valuable. Although, as far as stereotypes are concerned, I think that second-hand information may also be important, because it shows what is most perpetuated.

**So what is a stereotype?**

A picture in the mind. I distance myself from making a value judgement here: I do not assume that a stereotype has always a negative meaning, something hard to live with because it misrepresents reality and hampers contacts with other people. As Prof. Bartmiński says, a stereotype is a kind of colloquial concept where its primary function is a cognitive function, it is part of a language. Stereotypes can be neutral.

**Are there also different categories of ‘others’?**

Yes. Some may be assimilated, as neighbors, others may be frightening invaders or evil-doers. Sometimes they might be perceived as both. Ukrainians and Germans are co-inhabitants, neighbors, but – given historical events – also enemies. Swedes are obviously invaders from the distant past. But the stereotypes of the Tatar and the Lithuanian Tatar, historically invaders and co-inhabitants, proved to be distinct enough that I considered them separately.

**What did their ‘otherness’ consist in?**

The settled, ‘Lithuanian’ Tatars were evaluated positively; they were admired for their work ethic and for being good craftsmen. Tatar origin was source of pride. The story was completely different for Tatars as historical invaders, when, according to data from my sources, they murdered people in ruthless fashion.

An old Polish saying goes:  
 “When misery comes knocking,  
 even a Jew becomes a brother.”  
 So a Jew can be asked for help,  
 but only as a last resort.

**What is, for instance, the stereotype of a Ukrainian?**

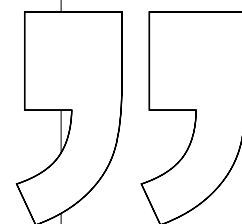
In the Lubelskie and Podkarpackie region, the relations were fraternal prior to WWII. Poles and Ukrainians invited each other to weddings, celebrated holidays together, sometimes with Catholic rituals, sometimes with Orthodox ones, and if the nearest Catholic church was far away, Poles sometimes attended a nearby Orthodox church. The stereotype changed to a negative meaning after what happened later. The Ukrainian started to be perceived as a murderer and a dangerous enemy, for instance.



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is a linguist, an Assistant Professor at the Department of Textology and Grammar of Contemporary Polish Language, UMCS. In her PhD thesis, written under Prof. Stanisława Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, she studied ethnic stereotypes in Polish folk culture and colloquial language. She has recently presented her results at the conference “Stereotypes and Linguistic Prejudices in Europe” of the European Federation of National Institutions for Language (EFNIL).

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Anti-Semitism came to the Polish countryside from the cities. In small towns where Poles and Jews traded and competed with one another, relations were worse than in the countryside. Pictured here: the town of Leżajsk, visited by Hasidic Jews each year on the anniversary of Tzaddik Elimelech's death.

**Did your interviewees include some who had witnessed wartime cruelty on the part of Ukrainians?**

Yes, however, sometimes that is hard to verify. In my research I only based myself on what people wanted to tell me. If I was told that Ukrainians raped a woman in a certain village, or that a husband murdered his Polish wife, I didn't check with their relatives or in the archives to verify the story. That is a job for a historian.

**What kind of stereotype emerged from your interviews concerning Jews: both Jewish neighbors remembered from the past, and those who now come to visit the places where their ancestors once lived?**

That is a very interesting question. Interviewers say: those Jews who lived with us, our Jews, they were good, hard-working, decent people, you could get along with them and do business with them – unlike Jews in general. Polish-Jewish contacts, of course, involved a certain distance, which is typical at the borderline of different cultures. Not everything was appropriate for them to do, not every issue could be discussed with them, but they were treated as fully-fledged members

of the society. And interestingly, it was desirable to have them present and express good wishes in the important moments of transition in life, when people got married, took their child to be christened, or celebrated Christmas Eve.

**That's a different picture than the one from Prof. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's research.**

The picture of Jews is multifaceted. She gathered extensive data that I did cite in my PhD thesis as one of my sources. I tried to include various types of accounts: I have materials that confirm a belief in ritual murder, and also materials that refute it.

**You have also examined the picture of Jews that emerges from *Nowa księga przysłów polskich*, a collection of Polish proverbs.**

Yes. For instance, there is a saying: "When fortune smiles, courteous manners decline, but when misery comes knocking even a Jew becomes a brother." In other words a Jew is someone that can be asked for help, but only as a last resort, not normally. Or: "Don't go to the Jew, but to your neighbor." Perhaps this warning best describes the mutual relations back then,

## NATIONAL STEREOTYPES

but it also says quite a lot about the Poles. Colloquial Polish language describes Jews as having various traits: being cunning, becoming rich at the expense of Poles, but also resourcefulness and solidarity with respect to other Jews. It also shows that a Jew who converted to Catholicism did not become a fully-fledged member of the community, but he/she was treated as someone concealing his true intentions. National stereotypes are often ambivalent – they can encompass various traits that contradict one another.

### What terms are used in Polish for “Jews” in your materials?

The standard *Żydzi*, the less respectful *Żydy*, or just people’s first and last names.

### So the pejorative form *Żydki* does not appear in your interviews?

Not really. But I suppose that because the interlocutors were told what the purpose of the interview was, they may have been careful about what they said. On the other hand, one woman told me that when she was young, she and her siblings used to run to the local Jew and insult him using the pejorative word *Żydki*. He complained to her father, saying: “Mr Padjasek, you are a good man, but you’ve got foolish children.” She told me: “My father gave us a belting.” That shows that not everyone in the countryside accepted the teasing of Jews.

### Jewish society disappeared. In the accounts told by your informants, can one sense a fear of its return?

I would describe it more as sadness for a bye-gone world. Before the war, things were tough for Poles if they had to work for a Jew or borrow money from a Jew. Nevertheless, for my interlocutors that was a time of their youth, which they recall sentimentally. They probably do not imagine it is possible for Jews to return, I don’t know if they would want it, but a positive picture of life with Jewish society predominates. Especially when things were tough, they were equally tough for everyone.

### What about the lies concerning Jews, such as about ritual murder, as is indeed still reiterated today?

One of my interviewees told me that her mother, as a child, went to see a Jew, to sell something, and the Jewish woman invited her into one room, then further into another, saying “come in, come in...” But she backed out, because – as she herself said – who knows what might have happened if she had gone further in. Certainly, there are beliefs about how someone, perhaps a family member or someone personally, managed to escape from the danger posed by Jews at the last moment. It was believed that they wanted to use

the blood of a Polish child to make matzah: “They had to catch a Polish child, a baptized one, which they put into a barrel somewhere and spun it. Blood spurted out and they shared it, using a little bit in each of their matzahs.” But such things are expressed by people who had less contact with Jews. If someone went to school with Jewish children or lived among Jews, they had a chance to try matzahs and see that they were simply white wafer bread: “Matzahs were those wafers, cooked with water, which they ate on Saturdays.”

### In other words, closer contact means fewer prejudices and negative stereotypes?

Not quite. In small towns, like Frampol or Biłgoraj, or in cities where Poles and Jews traded and competed with each other, the relations were worse than in the countryside. In the countryside lived Jews who were generally poor. Nevertheless, anti-Semitism as Prof. Alina Cała wrote in her book “*Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej*,” came to the countryside from the city. This was also described by some of my informants: “When the war was coming, there was such hatred against the Jews, first in the cities, but later it came to the village...” “My dad wrote that everything was fine, but later the anti-Semitism came from the city and they started to tease the Jews.”

### Relations with other nationalities could be friendly, neutral, indifferent, or hostile and terrible at the same time.

In relations between Poles and other nationalities, despite the dominant disregard and sense of superiority, one can also frequently find admiration and respect for elements of foreign culture, religiousness, courage, or certain traits of character and mind, for instance. Different points of view may dominate, and the picture of other nationalities that emerges depends on the intention and objective, the genre of the statement being made. Certain value-judgements are also superimposed on these mental images, which is why certain ‘others’ can be both neighbors and enemies. They can be admired in view of certain traits, yet criticized in view of others.

This is also noticeable in the way of addressing Jews, for example. Statements from back the days of the January Uprising of 1863 spoke of them as “brother Poles of the Mosaic religion” or “brother Israelites,” stressing their fraternity in one aspect and distinctness in another. Sometimes pejorative terms like *Żydy*, *Żydki* were used, but also sometimes lofty ones, such as Cyprian Norwid writing about “*Żydowie polscy*”, using a hyper-respectful plural form that seems odd today.

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INTERVIEW BY ANNA ZAWADZKA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAKUB OSTAŁOWSKI