

The Earth in Fleeting Motion



Katarzyna Kłosińska

Department of Polish Studies, University of Warsaw

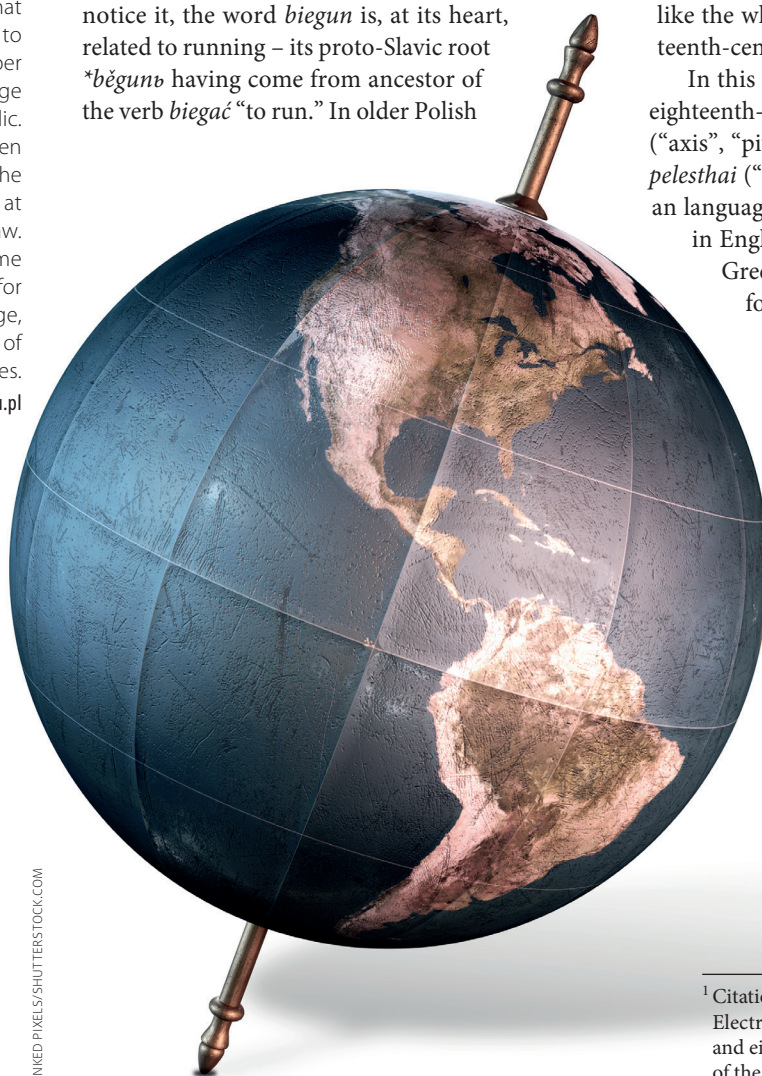
**Katarzyna Kłosińska,
PhD, DSc**

is a linguist and researcher at the University of Warsaw. For 16 years, she has broadcast sketches about Polish language usage on Polish Public Radio Three. Since 2014 she has headed *Poradnia Językowa PWN*, a “language clinic” that offers answers to questions about proper language usage submitted by the public. Since 2018 she has been the research editor of the Linguistic Observatory at the University of Warsaw. In 2019 she became chair of the Council for the Polish Language, Polish Academy of Sciences.
katarzyna.klosinska@uw.edu.pl

The body and soul are the poles of the human being – this is an example that a dictionary of the Polish language from the early twentieth century cites to illustrate the meaning of the word *biegun* “pole”. Here, *bieguny* “poles” are understood as two mutually opposed extremes, as the endpoints of something – like the distant ends of the Earth: the North and South Pole (*biegun północny i południowy*). Interestingly, however, this focus on extremeness has nowadays largely eclipsed what originally inspired the use of the word *biegun* to name the farthest-flung points of the Earth: the concept of motion. Although everyday speakers of Polish probably do not notice it, the word *biegun* is, at its heart, related to running – its proto-Slavic root **bĕgunъ* having come from ancestor of the verb *biegać* “to run.” In older Polish

(and other Slavic languages) *biegun* denoted a “runner” – in the sense of both someone who runs, and a device for imparting motion (a trace of this meaning is still evident in contemporary Polish in the term *konik na biegunach*, lit. “a pony on runners” – Polish for “rocking-horse”). And so, the two extreme points on the Earth, to the distant north and south, were in ancient times thought to be the pivot responsible for the Earth’s motion: “The Earth’s axis, or diameter, is the line drawn by the imagination through the center of the Earth and continued out to the Celestial poles [*bieguny*], it is the Celestial axle around which the whole starry Heavens perform a daily revolution, like the wheel of a cart around its axle” – an eighteenth-century textbook of geography explains.¹

In this meaning, the word *biegun* is actually an eighteenth-century calque from the Greek noun *pólos* (“axis”, “pivot of the Earth”) derived from the verb *pelesthai* (“to move, to become”). Different European languages calqued or borrowed the term (e.g. as in English *pole*) as equivalents to the Greek the Greek *pólos arktikós* and *pólos antartikós*. Before the eighteenth century, Polish speakers would have used the word *biegun* to refer to someone on the move: to a vagrant or vagabond, a nomad or someone fleeing. This also crops up in contemporary Polish: consider the title of Nobel Prize laureate Olga Tokarczyk’s novel *Beguni* (published in Jennifer Croft’s prize-winning translation, entitled “Flights”), a deep meditation on the sense of travel and motion. Ultimately, we might conclude that it was quite a distance that the word *biegun* had to travel in its wanderings before ultimately making it to the very ends of the Earth. ■



INKED PIXELS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

¹ Citation by Wojciech Bystrzonowski, found in the Electronic Corpus of Polish Texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (through 1772), PAS Institute of the Polish Language, www.korba.edu.pl.