

Essay by Prof. Michał Głowiński

...of Unsightly Corpulence and Structure?

Words, too, have their histories. They tell us a lot about the words themselves, but also about many other things, including of course the people who use them. Words have a habit of drifting, although their outward form may remain unaltered for centuries. Their meanings and range of use evolve, they take on different axiological (and emotional) connotations. One might say that words are, or at least can be, in constant motion. Nothing illustrates that better than the lexicon of a given language.

So this issue has focused our attention on the word “structure”? Then let’s have a glance at what the thick tomes produced by Polish lexicographers through the ages have to tell us about its Polish counterpart, *struktura*. Obviously, in both Polish and English, the term is Latin-derived. Linde’s dictionary of Polish (1807-1814) indicates that the main meaning is related to building-construction, but cites the example *Zastanówmy się nad strukturą, nad ułożeniem powszechnym całego świata* (“Let us consider the structure, the general arrangement of the whole world”) from an 18th-century popular magazine, suggesting that a different sense was apparently already then in use. Next, Orgelbrand’s dictionary, coming half a century later (1861), defined the term as “a construction, means of constructing, arrangement of parts of a building.” Here a certain duality is already clearly evident: a “structure” is a certain object or building, but also a certain way of existing, of being arranged. Here, too, the main reference is to buildings, but one of the examples, marked as a “figurative” use, applies the term metaphorically, indeed in a way that seems somewhat strange today: *położenie fundamentów pod wszelkich cnót strukturę* (“laying the foundations for the structure of all virtues”).

Another half-century later, we can find a somewhat similar ring, for instance, in the subtitle of Stanisław Brzozowski’s book *Legenda Młodej Polski: struktura duszy kulturalnej* (1910) (“The Legend of the Young Poland Movement: The Structure of the Cultural Spirit”). These days we would not likely think of using the word “structure” in reference to either the ethical or spiritual domain. But this is certainly all part and parcel of the natural process whereby words can gain much, but also lose much in their histories: certain once-common types of uses frequently become impossible or strange-sounding.

The entry in Karłowicz and Kryński’s dictionary (1900), for instance, cites an example taken from one of Poland’s great poets, Słowacki: *Tatarzy nie bardzo pięknej tuszy i struktury* (“Tatars of unsightly corpulence and structure”). This surely has an odd ring today: in modern usage we might describe the term to talk about the “structure of the human body” in general, in the abstract, but hardly the “structure” of a particular person’s body or the bodies of a particular ethnic group. Yet it is here in this same dictionary that modern history of the Polish word truly begins. The authors cite a variety of uses, including – it seems for the first time so clearly – ones of a type so characteristic of today’s natural sciences (e.g. “chemical structure”), offering the definition that a “structure” may denote “a certain stable, proper arrangement of component parts, characteristic for a given object.”

After that, the variety of uses and derivative words then only continued to increase. All of the more recent lexicons, such as Zgótkowa’s *Praktyczny słownik współczesnej polszczyzny*, Dunaj’s one-volume and popular *Słownik współczesnego języka polskiego* and – I’ll admit, my personal favorite – Bańko’s *Inny słownik języka polskiego* PWN (all of these are, of course, collective works) cite a multitude of meanings and derived terms. “Structuralism,” for instance, has since emerged as an important headword in its own right, as a major current of thought in humanities and social sciences.

A glance at these dictionaries suffices to make it clear, therefore, that “structure” has become so much more than just a loanword from Latin.

The labels that get applied to scientific schools of thought are partly the work of chance, but generally do reflect some important underlying trait. Structuralism has had an impact on many fields of social sciences and humanities, but I myself am naturally most interested in its influence in literary theory. Here the notion of “structure” gets applied not only to individual texts, but also to even larger units such as styles, genres, and literary trends. Structuralism began in this field of study in Poland in the 1930s, and held a very broad sway over the discipline in the latter half of the century. I could go on to discuss the Warsaw-Poznań Structural School which developed during that time – but that is already a story for another time.

Prof. Michał Głowiński
PAS Institute of Literary Studies



Words have a habit of drifting, although their outward form may remain unaltered for centuries.