Languages, gender and trends. Structural obstacles in anthropological career – Interview with Agnieszka Halemba

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AK: Let's start with discussing language. We are both Poles, we work in Poland, and we are meeting in Poland to have this conversation. But our discussing is to appear in a journal published in English. In theory we could switch to English, thus making it easier to prepare this interview for publication, and yet we have decided to speak in Polish. Why?

AH: This question can be answered in different ways. Through the very use of a given language we exhibit in front of each other the notion that Herzfeld called "cultural intimacy". Moreover, there is the issue of using a given language in a specific context. Many people who are fluent in English, who read and write about anthropology in English and who work in English-speaking countries, do not want to discuss things related to their work in a language other than English. It used to my case too. However, my situation has changed and became ever more complex as English is the language of my professional life but I live in Germany, where I also work as a scholar. Nonetheless, I currently tend to use rather English than German. We also think differently in different languages. It may not yet be due to the Whorfian existence of different worlds in different languages, but anthropology is a discipline which allows the coinage of new notions, and this process needs to follow certain grammatical rules. When Tim Ingold refers to reindeering or humaning, it is clear that he coined those terms based on his theoretical and field experience. But he also produced them because English gave him this possibility. In Polish, these words could not come into existence as it is more difficult to create new words due to grammatical constraints – it is much more complex than simply adding the suffix "-ing" to an existing English word. Therefore, a person's own language, in which this person feels at home, allows for a better and more in-depth description of reality.

AK: Still, you publish mainly in English.

AH: Yes, mainly. Maybe it is more about what language one should publish in?

AK: Well, now this turns into a political question.

AH: Indeed, this is a matter of choice, but the answer changes with time. For instance, ten or twenty years ago I would say that I need to publish in English because I want my books to be discussed more widely. However, since then I have changed my mind; not only because I spend more time in non-English speaking environments, which makes it harder for me to write in English. It is rather because I have come to believe that we should also care about the development of anthropology in one's home environment, where we are involved, and to attain this objective publishing in Polish is crucial. Completely different discussions will arise from a publication in Polish. Publications in national languages are needed.

AK: After all, specialistic terminology must be coined in some way, don't you think?

AH: Exactly. After I first returned to Poland and had classes with student, I would often stumble upon an English term without knowing it had been already translated in a certain way into Polish.

AK: This is yet another issue - translations. In recent years, numerous translations of important anthropological books have come onto the Polish market. As far back as 15-20 years ago, students needed to read texts in English, as none were to be found in Polish. It was as simple as that. Now, the majority can be found in Polish.

AH: In our field, English is definitely dominant. In my opinion, it is vital to understand how important translations are in Eastern European countries and to facilitate them. I think that the anthropology that is created in our region of the world would have a much more profound impact on what is happening in anthropological theory if those texts had been well-written in English but only after having been well thought through in a local language.

AK: So, you would support translating in the opposite direction, into English?

AH: Yes. As for myself, I wrote my books in English. The first one was written in an English-speaking environment, so it was easier to write, but I had a better language editor for my second

book. A text edited by a professional and gifted native speaker will make a far deeper impression on the readers. It is not about grammar mistakes, as I tend not to make any in English, but rather about a professional linguistic proofreading. Bruno Latour's books did not become mainstream until they were translated into English. Latour is reluctant to write in English, though he would easily be able to do so.

AK: As you have said, we tend to think differently in different languages bwasut we also build our texts differently depending on the language. There are different rules for constructing our message, am I right? It is actually about the sheer structure of an article which varies across languages and here the task of "translating" or "editing" a text becomes more tricky.

AH: It is certainly a special skill. I have recently been assessing the academic achievements of one colleague who writes in three languages: Polish, English, and German. And those articles were constructed differently, even the structure of the text varied from language to language. It is an amazing skill. I struggled with it when I first wrote texts in Polish, because I learned how to write academic texts during my stay in Great Britain. As a result, the texts came back to me from Polish reviewers with comments that they read overly like essays and contained far too much storytelling.

AK: Has it ever happened to you to fail to find a common understanding with an anthropologist from a different language tradition due to those subtle differences in notions?

AH: No, not with anthropologists. I think English is so dominant in our discipline that we can use it as a failsafe language. Sometimes, it is not due to the language but rather to the intellectual tradition. If I had an interlocutor from Russia speaking about ethnos and ethnogenesis, and if Bromley came up, I would quickly realize what they were talking about and I would adjust my way of thinking. It is not the issue of language but rather that we use specific notions. For instance, when I cooperate with cognitivists, language is of key importance. There are two words in Polish that can mean "cognitive" - poznawczy and kognitywny - and the latter connotes a specific approach, for example experiments in anthropology as a research tool, and the other not necessarily. In English, the word "cognitive" is relatively neutral. I am sometimes jealous of English-language anthropologists who can totally focus on understanding the material and interpreting it, not on language. It is an additional burden for us. Ethnography is about writing, and you are supposed to be writing in a language other than your mother tongue. My first foreign

language was Russian where I could juggle with words, make jokes and play with new notions. I finally learned to do the same in English but I have not so far achieved a similar level of fluency in German.

AK: What is your experience in cooperating with anthropologists from different linguistic or national traditions? Would their theoretical and linguistic background impact their areas of interests? Were they for instance more interested in different topics within one region?

AH: I don't think so. There are variations across generations but they are not necessarily related to language.

AK: All right, so tell me how has your anthropological path evolved in time.

AH: I started my research as a student at Warsaw University doing fieldwork study trips, like everyone. My group had been assigned to the Vilnius area in Lithuania, and I myself conducted my research closer to the Belorussian border. At that time research was done exclusively through interviews, which, after having been transcribed, were divided into particular issues and stored as separate "index cards".

AK: How come?

AH: We had to cut the interviews into fragments, there was no storytelling, interviews were broken down into different issues rather than classified by interviewees. We used a formal questionnaire and all questions had to be asked. This was not an ethnographic conversation where the fieldworker comes up with their own questions on the spot depending on how the talk goes. We simply had to go through all the questions of a questionnaire. This was the method I was taught at the time. We did not even learn about keeping a field diary. My first own research was done in Siberia, in Altay, and this was for my Master's thesis.

AK: Why did you decide to go just there?

AH: There were many reasons, some of them were personal, other financial. I did not need any grants as it was simply cheap to go there. And yes, when we travelled there, we carried on with making interviews because this was the only way we knew. Even when I started working on my PhD I followed the same methodology. But when you are in the field and follow the very same

patterns for 12 months, after four months you arrive more or less at a point where you only want to kill yourself. I simply could not go on like this any longer. I tried to do the things I had been taught: two interviews per day. But in Altay this method was completely useless: it did not work in this particular field. There was no point in doing this. I needed to learn to be in the field, to observe, to participate, to keep a diary and to write down my experiences.

AK: What was the subject of your first fieldwork, the one around Vilnius?

AH: At the beginning, we had an ethnic-national questionnaire to work with, but I quickly started to get interested in religion. It allowed me to escape from all those national stereotypes we would get in every single interview. I wanted to talk about something else. And my first article was a combination of both topics, I wrote about how the Lithuanians perceived Polish Catholicism.

AK: And your Master's research in Altay?

AH: I wrote my Master's thesis under the supervision of Professor Lech Mróz and Professor Jerzy S. Wasilewski. It was still about ethnicity, because at that time, in the early 1990s we were witnessing the onset of a national revival. Identities were building, people were searching for national symbols. So it was natural to write about all this. Afterwards, I worked for a year at the sociology department with Professor Ewa Nowicka. I learned a great deal there. The lectures about the history of sociology and anthropology were taught in a completely different way. The next step was a journey to Great Britain for a British Council scholarship. This was when I realized how deeply cut-off from global anthropology we had been. I had done some research in Siberia but I knew next to nothing about Western publications describing this region. I met Caroline Humphrey really by chance because I had asked Professor Wasilewski at the very last moment whom I should visit in Great Britain in his opinion. He recommended that I should see a certain Caroline Humphrey as he remembered having played tennis with her once and enjoyed it. I did not know who she was! I checked that she was in Cambridge so I wrote in my application that I wanted to go to Cambridge. And that's where I got my scholarship and spent half a year.

AK: So, a lot happened by chance, didn't it?

AH: Yes, it did. So I went there to do my scholarship and then she suggested that I should stay for my PhD. This was in 1996, maybe 1997. At first, I was reluctant - I had had no plans to leave

Poland! But this was an excellent university and after a while I decided to give it a try. I got a scholarship and I completed my PhD. Right after getting my title I did not actually want to return to Poland. For many years, I had this feeling that it was not time to return yet, that I would fall back into a routine and was not confident enough to go my own way. Back then, my own ideas had not yet crystalized, so even after completing my PhD I remained in Cambridge and got another scholarship. I would later go on to work for the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology for three years. Afterwards I did my Ukrainian research at the University of Leipzig and, finally, came back to Poland.

AK: Why don't you tell me more about your experience in Siberia.

AH: Siberia was a wonderful place to start long term fieldwork. It is extremely interesting and yet there is relatively little written anthropological material, especially in English. I was pretty much able to read it all and it was quite manageable. Right now, on the other hand, I work partly on the history of Prussia. As you can imagine all the publications written about the area would not fit in a library.

AK: You said you needed to make a methodological U-turn and that you wanted to learn to conduct research in a different manner. And from the theoretical perspective, what did it look like?

AH: Indeed, switching to a different modus operandi takes a long time, it is a real paradigm shift. Writing my PhD dissertation was an uphill struggle. My education in anthropological theory in Poland ended with Clifford Geertz. It seemed so new to us as we were students, so modern! But in reality Geertz was from the 1970s – and I was actually born in the 1970s. We were told that there were no new major theories anymore. However, we were not shown what we could use instead of huge theories. For this reason my doctoral dissertation is incomplete. What I mean is that more conclusions could have been drawn from the material. That is why I want to go back to Altay. I am currently working on a project in the region. I would like to refresh my experience from this place, see what has happened since I was there, what has changed. Later, I could go back to my old materials, rewrite the whole piece anew, with more anthropological awareness. On the other hand, while staying in the United Kingdom I gained new and deep respect for good methodology and for well-performed ethnography. Thick description in itself, I mean. Apart from the inadequacy of interviews as the dominant method, it turns out those fieldwork study trips for

students called "fieldwork lab" taught us a lot. It is a great way of teaching students. My doctoral dissertation was good from a methodological viewpoint due to my research, but I still needed to learn a lot about anthropological analysis.

AK: Now, this is interesting! In my eyes you have always been very strong in the theory of anthropology. Speaking with you always made things fall into place in my head, things which did not fit together before hearing your point of view.

AH: This is true here, in Poland. Elsewhere I am rather seen as a methodologically agile ethnographer. Someone who can do good research – and this is indeed highly valued. It is not a negative assessment. Still, in terms of theory I have started feeling comfortable only recently.

AK: We have touched upon intellectual trends. In the 1990s, they were definitely related to ethnicity, because of the realities of that time. The whole region was basically in turmoil!

AH: And post-socialism! This term had to be used in every piece we would write, even though it had always annoyed me. At some point, Caroline Humphrey even suspected me of being anti-Russian and anti-Soviet because I had refused to write about post-socialism in this context. I know that it had been 70 years' worth of history, quite a lot, but there are also other aspects of reality, other influences, other phenomena… Why should this be the only framework for analyzing all things east of the Iron Curtain? In my opinion, if I want to understand the characteristics of mountain spirits in Altay, the notion of post-socialism might be not that helpful. What about the concept of person, the relationship to land? As a result, my doctoral dissertation does not follow the post-socialist path and has no section on it.

AK: How did you manage to avoid this concept while working at the Max Planck Institute?

AH: We had a "Siberian team" and we really did our own thing, as a kind of a separate entity, so there was no problem. It was a wonderful time, Siberian studies are awesome. The teamwork was great and we still keep in touch. They keep inviting me to their conferences, even though they know that I am into totally different things now. Nonetheless, I show up as a discussant. Ukrainian studies, on the other hand, is a giant research field where I am only a small particle - so many people work on the Ukraine and there are so many publications...

AK: Why did you change your research field to the Ukraine?

AH: For personal reasons. I started a family at that time. This is yet another important issue in anthropology. Many of my peers have "mobile" husbands who are photographers, movie directors, IT people, or they are single. It is hard to reconcile an academic career with family, especially when your husband has regular working hours.

AK: We have already tackled the role of chance in anthropological careers. But family has perhaps an even deeper impact…

AH: Yes, this is often the key factor in decision-making. Looking back, I see sexism and gender bias but back then I did not see those things. However, I remember I was shocked by something Caroline Humphrey said to me and which influenced my later life. After Cambridge, I applied for tenure at one of the European universities. One of Caroline's male students also applied and he got the position. For me, it was obvious– he was a national of this particular country I had applied to and he was, and still is, an excellent anthropologist. Therefore, I was surprised when during our next meeting Caroline Humphrey took me aside and said: Agnieszka, do not worry, a woman needs to do ten times more than a man. She had played the gender card. I looked at her, astonished… How come? A professor at King's College is telling me that a woman must perform better. And she is at the top of her own career, isn't she? I was shocked she had interpreted this situation in gendered terms. Only then did I really believe it. She could have comforted me in another way, for example she could have referred to my lack of knowledge of the national language but she had knowingly chosen to go down the gender path. The second experience of this kind, was more of a visual one. When I worked in Leipzig, during project evaluation, one side of the room was taken up by people who would work on the project, the other side by the evaluation committee. I was in the "working" group. Our group was composed mainly of people in their 30s, and about half of them were women. The table of the committee was manned by one woman out of the total of 15 people. The decision-makers were male. In Germany it is even more visible than here in Poland. When I gave classes at the Free University in Berlin, the student proportions were similar to those in Poland – more girls, but the professors were mainly men. The proportions are completely skewed. Even in anthropology.

AK: Could you share your experience of different a organization of academic life in Poland and Germany?

AH: In Germany, the academic structure is built on the assumption that there are extraordinary individuals who excel in some fields. Research institutes are not created as research units for teams of equals, but rather money is invested in leaders who are supposed to build such units in a hierarchical way. The teams depend on those leaders. In practice, the only permanent position is the one of a leading professor.

AK: It used to be the same here, being the assistant of a professor.

AH: Exactly. So, when this professor leaves, retires for instance, you most likely lose your job. And when they move to another university, they can take you with them, although nothing can force them to. For instance, in institutions such as Max Planck Institute, only directors have permanent work contracts, and other people do not. But salaries are much higher than in Poland: you do not get anxious about having to pay for a book from your own pocket, you can afford it. In Great Britain things are different: mid-level employees have certain rights. For instance, they can apply for grants independently, which is not always possible in Germany.

AK: An extraordinarily hierarchical system.

AH: What is more, in Germany the system is designed in such a way that you cannot work in the same research institute for longer than 12 years if you are not a professor. And again – how do you reconcile this with family life? There are increasingly more contractual lecturers. The same in Great Britain.

AK: Tell us something about your current research.

AH: I am starting a project in Potsdam. I am interested in the presence of religion in an environment where 85% of the community members do not belong to a church but still there is a church under reconstruction. I wondered why and by whom the church is reconstructed? The areas close to the borders show the lowest religious affiliation. This aspect of life is non-existent in this area. But every village has a beautifully renovated church with a well-kept lawn. People got the money for reconstruction from somewhere, they probably needed to apply for the funds, they

would often volunteer their own time to work on the reconstruction but still they do not attend mass. There is a special category of churches in Germany that function as so-called places of reconciliation. In anthropology, the notion of reconciliation exists but in other contexts, such as that of Hutu and Tutsi tribes when a time of reconciliation came after their bloody wars. Or the Polish-German reconciliation following the Second World War. We do not know who is supposed to be reconciled with whom in these churches. But reconciliation is an activity which is sponsored and promoted in Germany, and there is a lot going on in these churches. One of them, close to the Polish-German border, was rebuilt by a secular organization. They had to declare that this would be a kind of "church-but-not-a-church" to get the funds with numerous secular activities planned. There are indeed many fascinating phenomena going on around this church. It is fascinating how the notion of reconciliation is filled here with meaning.