

Anna Wierzbicka's life

Kevin Windle and Mary Besemeres

Anna Wierzbicka's early life, like that of most of her generation in Poland, was dominated by war and Nazi occupation, with all that that entailed. Born Anna Smoleńska in Warsaw in 1938, she was one year old when Poland was invaded, and the family would spend the next five years in the occupied city, which meant that her childhood vocabulary was enriched by terms such as *łapać* (to catch, round up) and the related noun *łapanka* (round-up, mass arrest). After the failure of the Warsaw Rising in the autumn of 1944, the Germans razed most of the remaining buildings and deported the surviving non-combatants to forced labour in Germany. Anna's father Tadeusz and mother Maria were separated, and Maria, Anna and her elder sister Marta taken to Hamelin, where the women were put to work sewing blankets for the Wehrmacht at a local factory. The children spent their time chasing the rats that abounded along the Weser and in the barrack huts in which they lived—this being the home town of the Pied Piper—and (in some cases) roasting their captives on bonfires. The labour camp food was turnip soup, which Anna liked.

On 14 March 1945 an allied daylight bombing raid destroyed much of the city and caused many casualties. As Anna recalled: 'Everything was on fire and the roofs were falling in.' She sought refuge under the doubtful protection of a bush, but was soon found unharmed by her very relieved mother. A few hours later, soldiers of the US Army reached Hamelin. 'They gave chewing gum and chocolate to us children,' Anna remembers.¹

The war over, the Smoleński family was reunited and returned to Poland, first to Bytom in Silesia, then to the ruined capital in 1947.

¹ Anna Goc, 'Przekładanie siebie' [Translating oneself], *Tygodnik powszechny*, 31 August, 2015. Available at: www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/przekladanie-siebie-29914.

From an early age, Anna was fascinated by dictionaries and the Polish language, encouraged by her father, an engineer by training, with a great interest in language. With her father's help she composed humorous poems about their family.

Poland was now firmly under Soviet control and Marxist ideology increasingly dominated every sphere of life. Popular resistance could only be of the passive and sullen variety.

In 1954, at the age of only 16, on the strength of an outstanding school record, Anna was admitted to Warsaw University to study Polish philology, although she had refused to join the regime-run League of Polish Youth—a requirement for university entry. Stalin had died in March 1953, but remained the object of compulsory posthumous reverence as 'the coryphaeus of all the sciences', in the words of a satirical song. Linguistics was not exempt: he had published his views on the subject in *Pravda* under the title 'Marxism and problems of linguistics' (*Pravda*, 2 August, 1950). However, Marxism had made only limited inroads into the field of Anna's interest at the time: historical linguistics, the history of Polish grammar, the Slavonic languages and Polish literature, in particular poetry. These were taught by distinguished scholars who managed to protect the integrity of their disciplines and resist ideological contamination. She recalls them with much affection and gratitude, in particular Maria Renata Mayenowa, a specialist in poetry, and Zofia Szymdtowa, who introduced her to classics of world literature, from Homer to Cervantes.

Anna was never one to fear speaking her mind. Friends recall that she took the part of students who were being harassed by the authorities, and openly opposed the anti-Semitic campaigns that characterised the period. Always uncompromising in matters of conviction, she did not hide her devotion to Catholicism, even at times when discretion made it advisable.

During her studies she met Piotr Wierzbicki, a budding writer and scholar, whom she would marry immediately after graduation.

Anna was in her third year of university when the country was shaken by something resembling a revolution, later to be known as the Polish October, in 1956. This was a direct consequence of Khrushchev's exposure of Stalin's crimes in the Soviet Union, and the onset of the ensuing cultural 'Thaw'. The result in Poland, to an even greater extent than in the USSR,

was a period of increased intellectual ferment and relative freedom. In the universities, the official ideology seemed to be in retreat, and scholars who had been banished from Academe were permitted to return.

After graduating from the university, Anna took up an offer of academic work in the Institute of Literary Studies, in the section headed by Professor Mayenowa, studying language and literary genres. Under Professor Mayenowa's supervision, she defended a doctoral thesis that drew together literary study and linguistics in a study of the syntactic and stylistic system of Polish Renaissance prose. She would go on to a higher doctorate, known in Poland as *habilitacja*, awarded on the basis of her book *Dociekania semantyczne* (*Semantic Investigations*), which laid out her new linguistic interest. Some of her colleagues and lifelong friends from this period were Lucylla Pszczołowska, Elżbieta Janus, Teresa Dobrzyńska, Jadwiga Wajszczuk and Zofia Zaron.

It was Professor Mayenowa who introduced Anna to academic life and the intellectual and scholarly environment of Warsaw and other centres, and arranged for her to spend six months in Moscow in 1964–65. There she met some of the pioneers of a new school of Russian linguistics, in particular Igor Melčuk and Juri Apresjan, who were then becoming known for their work in the field of semantics. Their friendship and companionship in linguistic research she sees as one of the greatest gifts life has given her. A fluent speaker of Russian, she would later say of this period: 'My time in Moscow also awakened an interest in Russian culture and language, which has stayed with me all my life.'

The friendships from her time in Moscow also endured throughout her life. Igor Melčuk recalls her preparing to fly to Moscow in 1977, laden with gifts of food, books and presents for children:

The suitcases were already full, and she went on hanging all kinds of bags on her shoulders, round her neck, on her arms—that left only her teeth free—and she ran to the plane weighed down by an extra 15 kilograms.

A pivotal moment in Anna's development as a linguist came in 1964 when Andrzej Bogusławski, whom she described as 'the most original thinker I had ever met', delivered a lecture at Warsaw University with the title 'On the foundations of semantics'. His central idea came as a revelation, contained in the word 'indefinibilia', the hypothesis of the existence of a few dozen basic concepts, innate and universal, on which the meanings

of all words in all languages and all human thought are built. This idea was to become the principal focus of her subsequent scholarly work. As she related:

Bogusławski's hypothesis was in tune with an idea of Leibniz's, the idea of an 'alphabet of human thoughts' (*alphabetum cogitationum humanorum*). To Leibniz, however, this was a purely theoretical and speculative idea. Bogusławski, on the other hand, was proposing to make it the basis of modern semantics.

From these ideas sprang the current of thought that would define Anna's future research. As she has said: 'Everything I've done since has been based on the key idea of that lecture.' Her aim would be to reconstruct Leibniz's 'alphabet of human thought'. Her aim in doing so reached beyond philosophy and scholarship: the understanding to be obtained held potential benefits for human society as a whole. As she puts it:

Simple indefinable concepts form the basis of simple, broadly comprehensible explanations in every sphere of life, as well as a basis for improved communication among people from different cultures. In my view, an innate and universal alphabet of human thought also gives us a tool with which to understand, and above all to think in any field, be it ethics, discussion of values, law, psychology, cultural research, international relations etc.

In 1966, Anna secured a post-doctoral stipend to spend a year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), with the support of the Russian linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson. At MIT she familiarised herself with the work of Noam Chomsky, whose generative grammar was then causing much excitement in the world of linguistics. As she tells it, this gave her

a year in which to confirm to myself that I did not want to do what the Chomskyans proposed ... The generativists focused on linguistic form, whereas I was also interested in the people who use language, and the meanings they impart to the words they utter.

She was confirmed in her intention of engaging with semantics and seeking fundamental human concepts.

On her way home to Poland, she was able to spend a few weeks in Oxford, thanks to the support of the renowned philosopher and historian Isaiah Berlin, and there she met John Besemeres, an Australian postgraduate working in Slavonic studies, with whom she remained in touch, despite

obstacles imposed by censorship and what Anna would remember as 'the political events of the terrible year 1968'. That was the year of student demonstrations in Poland, a virulent anti-Semitic campaign in response, and the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. At the end of August, while 'fraternal assistance' was suppressing opposition in Prague, the International Semiotic Symposium was held in Warsaw. Anna delivered her paper wearing a red blouse, white skirt and blue stockings, the colours of the state flag of Czechoslovakia, and in her paper examined alternative terms that define a speaker's point of view, such as 'spy' vs 'intelligence agent', and 'fraternal assistance' vs 'invasion'.

In 1970, by which time Anna was divorced from Piotr Wierzbicki, she and John Besemeres were able to marry in a civil ceremony in Belgrade, where John was then working as a translator. They returned to Poland together, and a church wedding was held in the Franciscan chapel in Laski, a unique centre of Catholic intellectual and spiritual life known in communist times as a refuge for dissidents. Two years later, their daughter Mary was born in Warsaw, and in December 1972 all three moved to Canberra, where Anna and John's second daughter Clare was born in 1975.

As Anna herself puts it in a piece for the Polish Science Foundation that awarded her a prize in 2010, she identifies Warsaw with the first half of her life and Canberra with the second. In 1973 she was appointed lecturer at The Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, where she would soon become a pillar of the very strong linguistics team and remain until her retirement in 2016, maintaining a steady output of scholarly work throughout those years and not ceasing in retirement. The position opened up to her a whole new world of unfamiliar languages—Indigenous Australian languages through the work of her colleagues, such as Jane Simpson and Harold Koch, as well as Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Malay among others—the mother tongues of many of her international students. Some of those students, over the years, have included Rie Hasada, Yuko Asano, Ryo Stanwood, Kyung-Joo Yoon, Adrian Tien, Gian Marco Farese and Rui Shen.

In Canberra, Anna and John made close friends among the local Polish community, including Ola and Jerzy Zubrzycki, Irena Żywczak, Nina and Krzysztof Zagórski, Grażyna Żurkowska, Maciej Ciołek and Irena Golc, Marysia and Krzysztof Tarłowski and Maria Sikorska. In 1982, with Peter Hill, John co-founded the department of Slavonic Studies at Macquarie

University, and taught Polish Studies there until 1985, commuting between Sydney and Canberra. In 1983, Anna, Mary and Clare joined him in Sydney for six months. In 1996, Anna was appointed a Humboldt Fellow at Cologne in Germany, and John, Mary and Clare accompanied her there for six months.

Perhaps the most significant element of Anna's professional life in Australia has been her collaborative work with Cliff Goddard, who, as she writes in her piece for the Polish Science Foundation, was her student and, initially, an 'opponent' in the 1970s but from the 1980s her frequent co-author and the co-founder of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) approach, which posits a core set of basic, indefinable and universal human concepts. Together with Cliff and other colleagues (many of them also former students) such as Deborah Hill, Felix Ameka, Jean Harkins, Carol Priestley, Bert Peeters, Jock Onn Wong, Anna Gladkova, Zhengdao Ye, Helen Bromhead, Zuzanna Bułat Silva and Sandy Habib, Anna has conducted research across a wide range of languages into the cross-translatability of NSM, continually updating and refining it accordingly.

In 2004, with her daughter Mary, Anna convened a symposium at Curtin University, which led to the publication of their co-edited volume *Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures* (University of Queensland Press, 2007), a collection of personal essays by bilingual Australian authors, including the writers Kim Scott and Eva Sallis, and the linguists Michael Clyne and Zhengdao Ye. Anna's own contribution, entitled 'Two languages, two cultures, one (?) self: Between Polish and English', reports on her experience of struggling to translate her Polish emotional world into English. She gives the example of being asked by Australian friends about her baby granddaughter Elżbietka (who at that time lived in Perth), and being lost for words: English terms like 'cute' and 'adorable' had no emotional resonance for her and felt fake, while the diminutives she would naturally use in Polish (e.g. 'loczki', little curls) were unavailable in English.

Two of Anna's particular passions over the past two decades have been the English language in cultural and historical perspective, and theology and biblical studies.

Her work on English probes the cultural assumptions that (she argues) underpin key concepts like ‘evidence’, and the dangers of ethnocentrism, given the global status of English. To date, she has published, in addition to numerous articles, three major works in this field: *English: Meaning and Culture* (2006); *Experience, Evidence, and Sense: The Hidden Cultural Legacy of English* (2010) and *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language* (2014).

Anna’s work in theology combines her love of semantics with her Christian faith. In 2001, she published *What did Jesus Mean? Explaining the Sermon on the Mount and the Parables in Simple and Universal Human Concepts* (Oxford University Press). Drawing on biblical studies, including the work of Jewish scholars, the book interprets Jesus’s sayings in the Sermon on the Mount and the parables, and translates them from the original Greek of the Gospels into NSM. Anna’s latest book is *What Christians Believe: A Story of God and People* (Oxford University Press, 2019; Polish edition: Znak, 2017). It consists of a retelling—using ‘Minimal English’—of key episodes in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, which together, Anna argues, convey the central meanings of Christianity.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Anna returned every couple of years to Poland to visit her mother Maria and sister Marta, and Marta’s family (husband Adam and children Ania, Michał, and Asia), in Miedzeszyn, outside Warsaw. On two occasions, Anna’s mother (‘Babcia Marysia’ to her grandchildren) came out to Australia to stay with her for several months. If home alone, Babcia Marysia would invariably answer the phone in French, as she spoke no English. She died in 1999, aged 100.

Anna is herself a loving and intensely devoted grandmother to six grandchildren: (in chronological order) Elizabeth (born in 2002, and named for Anna’s childhood friend Elżbieta Galewska), Nicholas (2005), Catherine (2008), Therese (2010) and twins John and Benedict (2015). While Mary was living with her husband Nigel in Perth, Anna visited frequently for weeks at a time to help look after their children Lizzie and Nick. She taught both of them to read, using the Bible, and has read countless books with them and Clare and Phil’s daughters Catherine and Therese, most recently, with Nick, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Drawing on sayings of Clare and Phil’s toddlers John and Ben, she has provisionally outlined five stages of how young children think, in NSM. For example: ‘I can be there, I want this’—would be John or Ben gazing purposefully through the baby-gate blocking their entrance to the kitchen.

Since 2016, Anna has been a Professor Emerita in the School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics at ANU. Although formally retired, she continues to research and publish, to supervise graduate students and give guest lectures in undergraduate linguistics courses, and leads a weekly open seminar in semantics and theology.

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