

In Memoriam

Professor Leszek Bednarczuk (1936–2025)

On 2 November 2025, Professor Leszek Bednarczuk, an eminent linguist and Indo-Europeanist, passed away in Kraków. He was one of the most important figures in Polish linguistics in the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries. His scholarly achievements have become a permanent part of the history of Polish humanities.

Leszek Bednarczuk was born on 30 May 1936, in Vilnius, into a Polish family. His mother was a schoolteacher in Kobylnik (in present-day Belarus). His father participated in the defence of Polish Lviv in 1918 and then served as an officer in the Polish army, a commander of the Strzelec Riflemen's Association. In retirement he was employed in the Narocz forest district. In 1938 the family moved to Hoża, near Grodno, which saved his father from execution during World War II and the remaining family members from deportation to Kazakhstan. The residents of Hoża expressed solidarity with the Polish family, and no one betrayed the Polish army officer.

During the war, Soviet partisans burned every town in their path, so the Bednarczuk family saved themselves by evacuating towards Vilnius. They settled down in Nowa Wilejka, near Vilnius, and then in Kolonia Górańska.

At the end of the war the Bednarczuk family made efforts to emigrate to Poland and left the Vilnius region in April 1945. Recalling that day, Professor Bednarczuk states: 'It was raining, as if Vilnius were crying for us' (Ingielewicz-Citak 2018). He saw Vilnius again only 20 years later, in 1966, when he travelled to Lithuania as part of a trip (during the communist era, foreign travel of any kind was significantly limited). Recalling his time in Lithuania, he notes that quite a few people spoke Polish on the streets of Vilnius, but Russian was the dominant language (Ingielewicz-Citak 2018).



From Kaunas they hitchhiked to Kėdainiai, searching for traces of the Radziwiłł family. It was during this trip that important contacts were established with Lithuanian professors, particularly Vytautas Juozapas Mažiulis (1926–2009), a Lithuanian Balticist and an expert in the Old Prussian language and Indo-European languages, and the famous Lithuanist Jonas Palionis (1924–2012). Professor Bednarczuk maintained good contacts with the Lithuanian academic community. In particular, he reviewed E. Vaitkevičiūtė's doctoral dissertation on Józef Albin Herbaczewski (1976–1944), a Lithuanian poet writing in Lithuanian and Polish, and the founder of Lithuanian expressionism, defended at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. At the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, as part of a campaign to support Poles in the Vilnius region, he participated in delivering parcels of gifts to Lithuania. He also actively participated in academic meetings and conferences, most recently in 2014 at a conference commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Battle of Vilnius.

After arriving in Poland in 1945, the family settled in his mother's hometown, Nowy Sącz. He completed primary school in Tęgoborze (1945–1949) and then attended Jan Długosz High School No. 1 in Nowy Sącz (1949–1953).

His dream of writing poetry led him to Polish philology. In 1953, he arrived in Kraków and began his studies at the Pedagogical University (now the University of the National Education Commission), majoring in Polish philology (1953–1957). His choice of university was dictated solely by financial considerations, as the Pedagogical University of Kraków offered scholarships, while at the time this was difficult at Jagiellonian University. The Marxism in that part of Europe at the time, prevalent in the humanities, including literature. This fueled reluctance to choose literature as a direction for a future academic career and influenced his desire to deepen his knowledge in linguistics. Upon arrival in Poland everyone mocked his so-called Vilnius dialect, which prompted him to work diligently on perfecting his Polish over the next few months. In later years, these memories returned frequently and, over time, sparked his academic fascination, particularly inspiring him to study Vilnius Polish (Ingielewicz-Citak 2018).

Nevertheless, Adam Mickiewicz remained close to him academically. When Professor Bednarczuk was in his third year of master's studies, the centenary of Adam Mickiewicz's death was being celebrated, and on this occasion, he wrote his first article on the language of 'Ballads and Romances'. A fascination with Mickiewicz's language was therefore present among his research interests from the beginning of his studies. In subsequent years, it resulted in, among other things, an article on the Belarusian language in the poet's work. Within this framework, Professor Bednarczuk researched, in particular, the etymology of the name Telimena, as well as the term *dziady*, introduced by the poet into the Polish language and literature. The themes of Mickiewicz and Vilnius were close to his heart from the start.

After earning his master's degree in Polish philology from the Pedagogical University (1957), he continued his linguistics studies at Jagiellonian University, where he majored in Slavic philology (1957–1960). In 1960 he defended his master's thesis, written under the supervision of Professor Tadeusz Milewski (1906–1966). In 1964, after returning to the Pedagogical University, he defended his doctoral thesis, 'Polish Paratactic Conjunctions', also written under the supervision of Tadeusz Milewski. It was published in 1967. He focused his further research and habilitation on Indo-European languages. In 1971 he obtained the degree of doctor habilitated, based on his habilitation thesis 'Indo-European Parataxis', and on 1 April 1987, he was awarded the title of full professor.¹

As a linguist, Professor Bednarczuk was a student and follower of Professor Tadeusz Milewski's linguistic school. Another well-known student of Tadeusz Milewski was Karol Wojtyła, who knew, respected, and befriended Professor Bednarczuk, and later Pope John Paul II gave him a private audience at the Vatican.

As a researcher and teacher, he worked at the Pedagogical University of Kraków (1960–2004), then at the Jan Grodek State University in Sanok (until 2010), and simultaneously at the Polonia Academy in Częstochowa. He was a member of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences from 1991 (Committees: Slavic culture, media studies, Slavic studies), the Polish Academy of Sciences (Committees: Oriental studies, communication ethics, linguistics, Slavic studies), and a member of the scientific councils of several linguistic journals, including *Acta Baltico-Slavica*, *Studia Linguistica (Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis)*, *Lingua Posnaniensis*, *Studia Indogermanica Lodziensia*, *Studia Albanica*, and others. He was also a member of the international scholarly society *Fides et Ratio*.

Professor Bednarczuk was the author of over ten books and nearly 250 articles and reviews, published in Poland and abroad, in approximately ten languages. These works covered the fields of Indo-European linguistics, Polish, Slovak, Celtic (Welsh, Irish), Balkan and other languages. Many of them are now considered classic positions in Polish linguistics. He was one of the few researchers in the world, and the only one in Poland, to know and study the extinct Celtic Gaulish language. Since the 1990s he co-organized and co-created the scientific and research community of Celtologists in Częstochowa.

In addition to the above-mentioned fields, such as Indo-European linguistics, especially Slavic, Baltic and Celtic, he also published works in such areas as: Finno-Ugric, Tocharian, Albanian and Iranian linguistics, and Proto-Indo-European languages (Proto-Celtic and Italic), the so-called Old European languages (Mediterranean substrate—Etruscan, Iberian, Pelasgian—in Indo-European), the Nostratic language, Balto-Slavic, Balto-Slavic-Finno-Ugric, Slavic-Albanian, Slavic-Germanic, Slavic-Romance, Italo-Celtic, Celto-British-Romance and other lan-

¹ 'prof. dr hab. Leszek Bednarczuk'. Nauka Polska. Accessed 11.02.2026. <https://archiwum.nauka-polska.pl/#/profile/scientist?id=6948&k=jodk81>.

guage contacts, Polish dialects (in Lithuania, the *Sądecczyzna* and Sanok regions), professional dialects (including the language of raftsmen), issues of the so-called Newspeak (*Nowomowa*), the language of transcendence (the Word of God and the language of angels), the ethnogenesis of the Slavs and Balts (especially Poles, Lithuanians and Belarusians), toponymy, anthroponymy and ethnonymy (Slavic, Baltic and Celtic), etymology (including several articles on the origin of the word *pan* in Polish and its borrowings in other languages), syntax in Indo-European languages (especially Slavic, Baltic, Germanic and Celtic), phonology, morphology and morphosyntax (both in a comparative approach and in language theory), the methodology of linguistic research, the history of linguistics in Poland and in individual centres (including Kraków, Vilnius, Lviv and *Częstochowa*).

A special place in his work was occupied by research on the linguistic contacts and ethnogenesis of the peoples of central and northern Europe. His publications contributed to a better understanding of the processes shaping contemporary Slavic languages.

Speaking on the most important function of language, Professor Bednarczuk referred to the perception of language as a community, distinguishing between genetic (blood), labour, culture, scientific communication and political communities—understood as state and nation. He further noted that the role of language can be both positive, when it serves to communicate or express feelings, and negative, when it becomes an instrument used not only for combat but also for propaganda and humiliation.

Professor Bednarczuk recalled his memories of starting school in Belarus, in the territories then under German occupation, and hearing from both Germans and Belarusian nationalists: ‘Stop barking in Polish’. These words clearly illustrate how language can be used to destroy, humiliate, and discredit a person. Nevertheless, it’s worth remembering that language can be used to express the deepest feelings and thoughts, and sometimes ‘a word can be the seed of action’. In summary, then, among the functions of language are communication, the expression of feelings and influencing others. The phatic function, which involves establishing and maintaining contacts between interlocutors, or ending a conversation, should also be mentioned.

When asked about the role of language as an element of human identity, especially in terms of its importance for members of national minorities, Professor Bednarczuk spoke of familial, ethnic and national identification. In his opinion, the native language is essential for maintaining national identity, because without language there is no nation, community or dialect. Ireland is perhaps the exception, where only a small group of people speak Irish daily. Sometimes, despite language loss, national identity can be preserved; here, my interlocutor points to multilingual countries such as Belgium or Switzerland. Nevertheless, as he notes, such situations can be a source of various linguistic conflicts. At the end of our fascinating conversation, Professor Bednarczuk emphasized that ‘language is an

indispensable component of national and ethnic identity’, a point particularly evident in the case of Poles from the Vilnius region.

Childhood memories influenced Professor Bednarczuk’s research interests, which led him to later research the history of the Home Army in the Vilnius region. In particular, he compiled a timeline of events and accounts of resistance members, later published in the article ‘From Narocz to the Neman: The Accounts of the Partisans of Kmicic, Łupaszka, and Ronin of the Home Army in the Vilnius Region, March 1943 – July 1944’. He further developed this topic in a book under the same title, co-written with Monika Tomkiewicz. He appeared as an expert in the 2000 documentary *Łupaszka* by the Film Agency for Polish Television, depicting the activities of Major Zygmunt Szendzielarz.

His scientific achievements were recognized both in Poland and abroad. Many young researchers continued the lines of research he had begun on the languages and cultures of Europe.

Professor Bednarczuk’s passion for research, erudition and commitment to the advancement of science will remain a lasting legacy for future generations of linguists.

Works of Leszek Bednarczuk

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² The timing of the publication necessitated the inclusion of the disclaimer: 'published without the authors' knowledge or consent'. This disclaimer was intended to protect the authors from repression by the Security Service.

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Kinga Paraskiewicz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2661-031X>
Jagiellonian University, Poland | kinga.paraskiewicz@uj.edu.pl