

Methodological reflections over the terms rzeka–szlak (river route) used in scientific discourse

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Abstract. This sketch provides a methodological discussion over two terms used in an ongoing project that is currently being undertaken by the group of archaeologists, historians, geographers seeking to (re)create the landscape of medieval trade, including the importance of rivers. The comments made in this paper are far from new, but seek to go beyond automatically, often unreflectively, used elements of researchers' vocabulary. Analyzed concepts such as rzeka/river and szlak/route seem to exemplify the inapplicability of 'reistic' definition in the process of determining the meanings of particular phenomena, including scientific ones. The same applies to all "beings" comprising a fusion of equally unpredictable natural and cultural elements. This paper reflects on methodological issues concerning how to set about investigating mechanisms of a linguistic expression which are seen not only as inspiration for further interpretations, but also create problems of understanding itself.

The aim of this short paper is to discuss the complexity of two Polish terms rzeka (Eng. river; Germ. Fluß; Fr. fleuve, rivière) and szlak (Eng. route, Germ. Weg, Route, Fr. voie, route, chemin).

As much as the idea of the word rzeka/river belongs to the category of primal concepts (and as such does not require explanation, provided that primal concepts are not defined via the language of theory but through providing only a semantic definition), the assignment of the concept of szlak/route to the same category is not so straightforward.

Assuming that the means of understanding (and categorization) are provided by interpretation and its interpersonal communication, the main emphasis is placed on the "living language material" which comprises meanings, contexts and structures all contributing to the message analyzed. The primary supposition is that the problems of a linguistic expression are in fact problems of understanding itself, as any form of understanding is indeed exposition, and exposition develops into a certain language's medium, allowing the "object to have its say" and constituting "its own interpretation" (Gadamer 1993:357).

Consequently, a reflection on the basic epistemological categories (such as: the conceptualization of the research object, the category of epistemological creation, the

category of historians' methodological awareness, the category of a discovery's context, the statistical category and the dynamic understanding of a source (Pomorski 1985:169–170) – becomes entangled in other problems (reflecting both the historic process itself as well as the medium of its representation).

Investigations of this sort may be treated as more than merely a narrow aspect of a detailed depiction portraying social research practices of historians, archaeologists, ethnographers, etc. involved in the project provisionally entitled “Szlaki/Routes”, but also as an incentive for in-depth studies that focus upon the etymology of concepts often used indiscriminately in descriptions of past realities, historiography, or the trajectories of category usage in literature.

Interpretational material

This particular analysis refers to specific interpretational material presented during the conference on “The Bug – Vistula Trade Route in Early Middle Ages”, which took place in Pultusk 2006.

The term rzeka/river is therein applied with the specific and permanent association close to the original meaning of *rei-ka*, from the Proto-Indo-European root (e)*rei-* ‘to flow, to stream’. The semantic consistency of the term is clearly observable between its usage in modern Polish (a river as a mass of water flowing along a clearly defined bed, vastness, a large amount of a liquid of some sort or a large quantity of something moving steadily in one direction (Dubisz 2006:1114), and the medieval Latin.

For example between the Polish words for river, *rzeka*, *woda*, *prad*, and *nurt*, and the Latin: *aqua* (*fluens*), *fluctus* (steam, creek). A comparison can also be made be-

tween the Polish word *Mnóstwo*, with the Latin *magna vis*, *abundantia* (affluence, plenty; Plezia 2001:265).

However, due to the relatively short and intricate derivational trace pertinent to the usage of the term *szlak*/route, the application of the category behind the term in the context of “producing” a conceptual image of medieval reality may be seen as problematic. Already in the early on in discussing this particular phenomena, for example concerning the basins of the rivers Bug and Vistula, as well as the “Bug–Vistula trade route”, a clear dissonance was observed arising from the doubt as to whether it even possible to recreate by modern means, that is to say, as an abstract intellectual concept, a medieval route whose parts were constituted by the actual rivers Bug and Vistula.

The network of associations with “a trade route in the early Middle Ages” was narrowed down to the concept of a route as a limitation, or the factors delimiting a route. The same seems justified by the original usage of the word *szlak*, *slak* (from German *Schlagen* – today understood as cutting, fending or to beat down, to level) but historically treated as synonymous to a trap (*Schlage*), a snare, a cage, paralysis, apoplexy (Linde 1895:594). The meaning of delimitation included in the term *szlak* was presented during the conference as the result of various, overlapping phenomena, both natural and cultural.

To sum up, *szlak* as a relatively young term derived from German may be viewed in at least three (naturally interconnected) semantic dimensions. The most persistent meanings of Polish term *szlak* would be: 1. a route, a path or road leading to a particular destination; but in Polish it is also 2. a

way of life, thinking, conduct chosen by someone; or, 3. a decorative element in the form of a strip standing out from the background. The third meaning does not include the term “route” but the term “strip”, which among other meanings is translated into Polish as szlak (szlaczek).

During the conference, the “being” of the rivers and the route, for which the descriptions and interpretations tended to be embroiled in epistemological issues, constituted the starting point for the discussions. Experts in various fields (archaeologists, historians, geographers and architects) presented arguments in support of defining the route with river, and the river with the route. The knowledge of the processes currently taking place in various sections of the river basins was treated as “indispensable” while characterizing the concept of the route in the Middle Ages. The discussion concerning Pultusk, focused on the embroilment of the route in spatial analysis, was also marked by the “presence” of various fords, shallows, crossings, marshes, and dunes, etc. The “moderately realistic depiction of space” was dominant, that is to say, in ontic categories the rzeka/river or szlak/route were seen as intellectual creations which were, however, based on an actual object, anchored in physical reality. By calling the szlak/route into “being” (or negating its existence), researchers recalled both their own in-field observations and literature quotations. For instance, the material remnants of “an actual situation” were exemplified by “the mass occurrence of objects made of Volhynian slate” as well as “classic West Slavic fine objects” (e.g. temple rings) in the Baltic countries after 1060 in Sigtuna, i.e. at the “Swedish end of the Bug–Vistula route” (Duczko). The path of the trade

routes were determined on the basis of the dissemination of “early medieval treasures along the Bug–Vistula route” (Bogucki) as well as a functional analysis of the early medieval settlement in Drohiczyn against other settlements of the central Bug basin via analogies to other settlement hubs and by relating the central hub to the local resource base (Skrzynska).

The comments made during the conference confirm the participants’ preference of the moderately realistic understanding of the category rzeka/river and szlak/route. I assume that this approach favours the interest in the meaning of terms from the perspective of “objectified semantics” whose priority lies not in determining the actual process through which people hearing the word “river” see what they see and think what they think, but rather in realizing the richness of potential meanings and associations arising in confrontation with the given problem.

Concepts such as rzeka/river and szlak/route seem to perfectly exemplify the inapplicability of ‘reistic’ definition in the process of determining the meanings of particular phenomena and concepts, including scientific ones. The same apparently applies to all “beings” comprising a fusion of equally unpredictable natural and cultural issues.

It seems unjustified to attempt a definition of rzeka/a river without reference to the category of cultural space, and of szlak/route without the category of natural space, even though the profile of a river is usually based on the natural context (e.g. the specification of morphological conditions, etc.), while the description of a route will be determined by our knowledge of a given culture. The two paths of thinking are inseparably related. The issue of the rele-

vance of these relationships may be discussed on various levels. The main problem, however, stems from the fact that both “space” and “culture” i.e. the base references for *rzeka/river* or *szlak/route*, can be understood in various ways.

A sort of conceptual aid (certainly one of many) in applying sense and meanings to concepts such as “a route” is provided by the so called objectified semantics attributed to Gottlob Frege (1848–1925). Its underlying assumption is the existence of a language allowing the creation of an infinite number of compound phrases, called clauses, with the use of a denumerable set of words. Clauses and words are called linguistic (syntactic) elements. In order to use them one must have the understanding of their reference. They can be seen as kinds of symbols, carrying specific meaning and stimulating certain (often surprising) associations. It seems that the treatment of the “Bug–Vistula route” as a symbol of a historic process (referring to the early Middle Ages in an area spatially indefinable) inspired the speakers at the conference to create their multi-plot narratives.

Time–space determinant

For instance, the problem of temporary variations in the water levels in the rivers, evoked among others by Dorota Cyngot in her paper entitled *Early Medieval Customs Houses between Drohiczyn and Plock*, lead to the specification of “time–space” as the determinant of the historic process. Based on an analysis of the locations of customs houses it was concluded that the time in which the particular sections of the route could be travelled varied depending on the topographical conditions. In the present, it is difficult to treat such phenomena as di-

rectly observable and measurable. Interpretations based on our current knowledge of past hydrographical conditions concerning how difficult it was in the Middle Ages to cross the wide and marshy stretches of the Notec River, the right-bank of the Narew River as well as the central course of the Bug and the lower Wieprz, can provide an (only approximate) overview of a number of processes and problems.

On the other hand, the treatment of the route as an identifier of various social groups and individuals whose existence was recorded in written sources allows us to step beyond the understanding of “route” as a spatial symbol. The knowledge of “being”, i.e. responsible for the route, profiting from it, maintaining it (or using it illegally) will not merely reflect the administrative or formal and legal order within the given space in the past, but also commemorate (for example in writing) and preserve (in the form of the material studied by archaeologists) many “side” elements related to the studied area. The choice of the method of study and presentation most appropriate in the given case is decided by the modern researcher. Symptomatically for the same, the term “Drohiczyn route” can be employed (Krasnodebski) where others would rather speak of the “Bug–Vistula route”.

Rzeka/river and *szlak/route*, treated as elements of a larger entirety are important constituents of the analyses pertaining to experiential and conceptual space, and their profiles are closely interconnected. The perception of space takes place through tactile, visual, and muscular sensations. The conference participants “brushed” against the surface of this type of experience as the event was initially planned to take place on-board a barge sailing down the Vistula. Al-

though the idea was eventually dropped, the experiential element of a physical body being in contact with water was present in the form of a gondola trip down the Narew. This undeniably interesting experience could help one realize that experiential approach derivatively broadens the perception of a space. ‘Inspectional’ concepts were also present in several presentations. For instance, the paper entitled *Through the Marshlands and Forests of Podlasie* – is there a northern branch of the Drohiczyń route emphasized the varied character of the rivers Bug, Narew, Narewka, Supraśl, and Biebrza, and particular stressed the “impossibility of crossing” the last one (Krasnodebski). Direct, in-field experiences of archaeologists visiting the places they later retrospectively describe, could be treated as particularly valuable. This sort of approach is widely advocated by representatives of the so called landscape archaeology (Tilley 1994). In his depiction of the Ports and Navigation on the Lower Vistula in the Middle Ages, Robert Domzal noted the repetitiveness of low water levels in the Vistula and described the “technical” and “physical” difficulties he had personally experienced while “struggling through” along the banks of the Vistula in his search for dugouts. The inspection of, among other things, the present topographical conditions also influenced Jarosław Oscilowiecki’s observations and discussions in his paper, *Crossing the Rivers of Eastern Mazovia in the Early Middle Ages*. The author sought relations not only between the types of soil and available fords but also between difficult crossing conditions and the potential existence of a “trans-regional route”. The controversial character of the latter, when confronted with the notion of the so called

“target local roads”, provoked a discussion concerning the definition of a “route”.

The dangers of excessive ‘empathisation’ with a past experience of space were also discussed. The paper on *Geoarchaeology of River Valleys – palaeographic research in archaeology*, appealed for researcher to refrain from translating one’s own (present) ‘inspectional’ experience into a depiction of reality, as “today’s reality does not in any way compare to that of the Middle Ages” (Kalicki). In the researcher’s opinion, attributes such as “warmer/colder climate” are also inadequate as they lack specification of the “reference to which the relation is made as well as its time (summer or winter)”. The author’s conclusions correlate with his earlier research (e.g. *Geological and Geoelectric Study of the Vistula Paleomeander Alluviums in Zabierzów Bocheński* (Kalicki and Moscicki 1997) and refer to a broader spatial context (Kalicki 1997: 227–228). It is already the sphere of conceptual space (Lisowski 2003) understood as the result of applying abstraction to material bodies. This space is prioritized, comprising, among other elements, existential, social and architectonic spaces.

Existential space

The issues related to the existential space were discussed by several speakers. Marek Dulnicz, in his paper, *Strongholds on the Bug–Vistula Route*, stressed the immense importance of rivers in human existence referring to medieval Poland as the “country ruled by rivers.” This paper posed a series of questions concerning the relationship between rivers and people, for example whether rivers made the lives of people in the Middle Ages easier or more difficult;

did they facilitate the foundation of settlements or were they an additional hindrance, and did the rivers pose a sanitary threat. Dulnicz stated that the answers to these questions depend on the “time, place and people living along the river banks” and are issues that may be resolved by comparative studies. In fact, discussing these issues seems indispensable given the holistic character of the Bug–Vistula route, particularly since malaria (common in medieval Poland, known then as *zimmica*) was a disease conditioned by ecology. It is noteworthy that in the light of certain studies, the focal points of the disease outbreaks were located along the left bank of the Vistula, the illness was caused by three species of protozoans living in the alimentary canals of the malaria mosquito whose native habitats included swamps and marshlands (Tyszkiewicz 1983). Despite the obvious discrepancies in terms of the sanitary and natural conditions nowadays and in the early Middle Ages, I believe that in proposing a conceptual space for the answers pertinent to the above questions, also materials dating from much later times (among others Dmowska 1962:421–436) can be treated as highly useful.

The social space seems to be the most “labile” both semantically and quantitatively. The hermeneutic character of the routes’ cognitive situation led to a discussion of “interpenetration” of modern and medieval social spaces. For instance Andrzej Buko in his *Early Medieval Centres on the Upper Bug in the Light of Archaeological Sources*, as well as researchers studying Plock: Andrzej Golembnik (*Early Plock Settlement in the Light of Recent Studies*) and Maciej Trzecicki (*Early Medieval Plock as a Trade Hub on the Bug–Vistula Route*) – all observed the lack of randomness in all spa-

tial concepts of social character (strongholds, walls, ports) basing their assumptions on timeless conditions and motivations.

From the methodological perspective another topic running through various discussions was particularly interesting, namely the confrontation of detailed deliberations on medieval material relics with comments on the modern contexts of their discovery and interpretation. One of the evoked arguments mentioned for example “alternative ways of correlating source documents with material discoveries” or “the problems of dating the stages of one of the river town’s development, not resulting from erroneous measurements but rather from ‘current social demands’” (Trzecicki).

Lost treasure?

The comment on the persistent (to avoid the word “stubborn”) dating of Plock to the 10th century, ignoring arguments in support of a 11th and 12th century chronology, was concluded with a suggestive appeal for an improvement in methodological quality (Golembnik). However, the most brutal blurring of the border between the social space of the past and present was exemplified by certain issues conveyed in *Early Medieval Nasielsk* (Blonski), particularly the rumour of a lost treasure of Nasielsk and the predatory behaviour of pseudo-researchers interfering with legitimate archaeological studies.

To sum up it can be claimed that in terms of the conveyed message, the term *rzeka/river* is fairly stable, clear and adequate. However, the term *szlak/route* (a result of an intellectual activity aimed at recognising the element of the medieval

space that provided the context for the trade in the Bug and Vistula basin) is highly conventional and as such relatively vague. It is up to the particular user to determine whether the term szlak/route encompasses the features of the described category/object or whether it may prove inadequate.

The presented analysis of the terms constitutes merely a methodological introduction to further discussion on the correlation between the ideas of dynamism, massive character and communication (typical of rzeka/river) with the ideas of delimitation, communication and repetitiveness (attributed to the notion of szlak/route). Semantic inspirations derived from the surrounding

world are no more predictable or reliable than the meanings attributed to the past. The problem of pragmatic dimension, that is to say the varied understanding of what is conveyed in a given term, is one of the crucial elements separating us from the early medieval reality. It is intriguing to analyse the extent to which our own physical, existential and cultural experiences of the rzeka–szlak (river–route), or lack thereof, can enrich, impoverish, systematise, limit or complete our network of associations. The issues indisputably require further and more detailed study.

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