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The fact that this remarkable book is written in Polish might intimidate general readers, but for those who are seriously interested in Malinowski’s work, thought and life, it is very much worth reading—at least its quite substantial 26-page summary in English.

The work is divided into two volumes. While the second comprises the Polish translation of two Malinowski’s English-language publications, i.e., Classificatory Particles in the Language of Kiriwina (1920) and The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages (1923, 1930) with the addendum of Kiriwinian-Polish and Polish-Kiriwinian dictionary, the first volume consists of chapters as follows:

I. – 1. Phatic communion / 2. The duties and subject of linguistics
II. – The Cracovian biography of Bronislaw Malinowski, “British anthropologist”
III. – “Mainland and Islands”
IV. – The phenomenon of meaning
V. – The units of languages and their context
VI. – Malinowski’s linguistic creed and its reception
  1. The creator’s freedom / 2. Phatic communion and the restriction of freedom / 3. Civilisation and freedom / 4. The most important function of language / 5. Malinowski’s linguistic reception (5.1. The components of inspiration; 5.2. His reception, e.g. in the “schools”; 5.2.1. The depth of Malinowski’s impact; 5.2.2.
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The "old-fashioned" nature of the ethnolinguists; 5.2.3. The ethnographer’s duties with respect to the linguist?; 5.3. The ethnographer’s, linguists, and philosopher’s joint interests.

The author frankly admits that her book was written as "a tribute to Bronislaw Malinowski" with the aim of elucidating his still underestimated contribution to linguistics. What was eventually created by Pisarkowa is, however, something much more; it has very much surpassed that aim—to such an extent that the title could be claimed to be too modest. The work is at the same time the best biography of Malinowski, written with an attentive and penetrating attitude towards his person as well as his background, surroundings and experiences.

His father Lucjan Malinowski was a pioneer in Polish dialectology—ethnolinguistics in a broader sense—and a professor of Jagiellonian University in Cracow. The specific cultural milieu of the old Polish capital at the turn of the century, friendships with artists and scientists, etc., were all factors that formed Malinowski’s personality and intellect—factors and facts difficult for non-Polish readers to access. We could have hardly found a better writer to depict all of them with authentic knowledge and understanding than Krystyna Pisarkowa, who herself is a scholar brought up in the Cracow academic world and who has long been a professor of linguistics in Jagiellonian University. Beside the comprehensive information of Malinowski’s Polish background, we are given a quite insightful interpretation of his personal life—of that rich, creative conjugal life with Elsie Rosaline Masson.

Particularly, impressive is the chapter in which Pisarkowa analyzes Malinowski’s first linguistic paper written on the Kiriwinian language (1920). It “is still fairly unknown even among linguists,” but Pisarkowa is successful in showing that it already contained observations and considerations necessarily leading to the important revision of the European linguistics. The concept of the language as a function of community life is related—argues Pisarkowa—to the concept of functional anthropology itself. “The Kiriwinian formants were patent evidence for him of the dire need of an ethnolinguistic theory. His expectations of such a theory were that it should be useful in the study and presentation of all the facts pertaining to language. There is no incongruity in this between the sense of a science open to unimaginable prospects and the delineation of limits to the horizon of science. That horizon is marked out in terms of the interpretation of linguistic facts and the definition of semantic concepts,” she writes.

Pisarkowa’s emphasis on the crucial role played by linguistic thought in Malinowski’s work seems to be very convincing (I say “seems”, just because I am not a linguist or an anthropologist, but a teacher of Polish culture writing from time to time about Malinowski). She also claims that few scholars, including even Gellner, whose enlightening works on Malinowski are highly appreciated by both Pisarkowa and the reviewer are aware of the wide range of Malinowski’s involvement, which encompassed the observation, registration, collection, understanding, and exemplification of more than a thousand Kiriwinian lexemes as used in magic incantations or other texts. “No other anthropologist, linguist, or philosopher, either before or after him has accomplished so much,” concludes the author. Reading through this powerful piece of writing, which goes in chronological order and is somewhat like a thrilling novel, we get a vivid feeling, as though we were witnessing the
birth and evolution of a new anthropology, for which the linguistic thought and approach is indispensable—not a speculative one but one based on direct participant observation.


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