

# Water: No Respect

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Water is an essential component of all living organisms. Without water there is no life, as climate change is beginning to demonstrate so forcefully. Experts are warning that water soon could be in short supply, one reason being because we have not learned to respect it. However, if we examine how water is depicted in colloquial Polish – which after all reflects the way “ordinary Poles” perceive the world – it seems we never really had much respect for it.

So what does Polish phraseology have to tell us about water? Above all, that it is devoid of any value or content. When a speaker or writer who really has nothing to say tries to make up for this by speaking vehemently and at length, in Polish this can be called *lanie wody* (lit. “pouring water”), and the resulting statement can be dismissed as nothing more than *wodolejstwo* (lit. “water-pouring,” which is to say: “spouting claptrap”). Similarly, the Polish phrase *robić komuś wodę z mózgu* (lit. “to turn someone’s brain to water”) is used to describe efforts to mislead someone on purpose (essentially: “messaging with someone’s head”). Here water is depicted as the opposite of the thinking brain, the seat of reason, which ceases to be so when it is turned to “water.” The Polish phrase *pic na wodę, fotomontaż* (“a load of malarkey”) again depicts water as worthless, something that only serves to mask a shortcoming or create a misleading impression.

Water is also associated with a lack of any properties at all – an ordinary person perceives it only as

a transparent, colorless liquid, and does not see what is perceivable though scientific investigation (which is what makes it so precious). A *wodnisty* (“watery”) color is one without intensity or expressiveness. The phrase *rew nie woda* (lit. “blood, not water”) is used to describe someone hot-blooded (insinuating that water is passionless). We say that two people are like *ogień i woda* (“fire and water”) when one is energetic and lively, the other tranquil, mild, and nondescript. Even in English, there is a kindred expression “blood is thicker than water” (implying that water is of little consequence).

We take the constant presence and motion of water for granted. When something sells well, in Polish we say it *idzie jak woda* (lit “goes like water”, in other words it is “selling like gangbusters”). The movement of water is also a way to measure the passage of time: *musi jeszcze upłynąć dużo wody w Wiśle, żeby coś się wydarzyło* (“a lot of water will have to flow down the Vistula before that will ever happen”). Water is always around, ceaselessly flowing. It is something basic: if someone lives *o chlebie i wodzie* (“on bread and water”) they limit their menu to just what is essential to survive. And a certain style of politics that focuses the priorities on ensuring citizens’ material stability is often described in Poland (somewhat scornfully) as the policy of *ciepła woda w kranie* (“warm water from the tap”). We should hope, however, that this is not something that will soon prove to be a luxury...

