

# **Preference for one member of a pair of synonyms or lexical variants as an indicator of their different semantic potential (the case of words differing on the foreign – native scale)**

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## **Objective**

The survey reported here was a follow-up study to our earlier research on the form – meaning relationship in the process of loanword adaptation (Rączaszek-Leonardi, Bańko, Kucińska 2014, Bańko, Rączaszek-Leonardi, Kucińska 2014). The results of our earlier investigations indicated that while distinctions in perception between a lexical loan and its native synonym, or between an unassimilated and an assimilated variant of a loan, do influence the connotations these words suggest to subjects, this influence is nevertheless too weak to affect their responses when their attention has not been directed specifically to the words in question. In this study, therefore, we tried a more straightforward method of checking whether the meaning potential of lexical loans differs from that of their native synonyms, and whether the meaning potential of unassimilated variants of loanwords differs from that of their assimilated counterparts. To this end a questionnaire was designed in which subjects were expected to choose which member of such word pairs they found more appropriate in the given set of circumstances.

## **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consisted of ten items, each one describing a certain situation, then asking the subjects to choose which member of a pair of words or sentences they considered more suitable in the context of the situation described. Two versions of the questionnaire were prepared in order to neutralize any possible influence of the order in which the alternatives were presented on the subjects' choices. Whenever the words X and Y were offered as two possible answers in this order in one version of the questionnaire, the same words appeared in the reverse order, as Y and X, in the other version. Otherwise, the versions were identical.

Six out of ten items of the questionnaire were meant to test differences between synonyms, while four were concerned with variant forms. The items were arranged in such a way as not to exhibit any visible pattern with respect to the synonym – variant distinction.

The questionnaire began with the following instructions:

<p>W ankiecie tej prosimy Cię o wyobrażenie sobie pewnych sytuacji i wybór jednej (tylko jednej) z dwóch możliwości.</p> <p>Ankieta jest anonimowa i służy tylko celom naukowym. Odpowiadaj zgodnie ze swoimi przekonaniami lub intuicją.</p>	<p>In this questionnaire we ask you to imagine certain situations and choose one (only one) of two alternatives. The survey is anonymous and serves research purposes only. Please answer according to your convictions or intuitions.</p>
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An example situation described in the first version of the questionnaire was:

<p>W pewnym sklepie są dwa rodzaje chrupiących płatków ziemniaczanych, jedno z napisem <i>chipsy</i> na torebkach, drugi z napisem <i>czipsy</i>. Jak myślisz, które są smaczniejsze?</p> <p>a. Chipsy. b. Czipsy.</p>	<p>A shop has two brands of crunchy potato crisps, one with the name <i>chipsy</i> written on the bags, the other one with the name <i>czipsy</i>. Which of these crisps do you think taste better?</p> <p>a. Chipsy. b. Czipsy.</p>
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The second version of the questionnaire contained an identical item, with the exception that the answers were presented in the reverse order: first *Czipsy*, then *Chipsy*. The situations described in the other items of the questionnaire were similar in nature (see the appendix for details). The questionnaire ended with an invitation to make comments:

<p>Jeśli chcesz przekazać nam swój komentarz, możesz to zrobić w wolnym miejscu arkusza.</p>	<p>If you would like to make any comments, you can do so on any blank space on this sheet.</p>
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## Subjects and forms

The subjects were first-year students of Polish Studies at the University of Warsaw, most of them at the age of 18, about 85 percent of them female. They were asked to fill in the questionnaires at a lecture on lexicography in October 2014, but were not informed about the goal of the experiment. It took them less than ten minutes to do the task.

Over 200 questionnaires were obtained, more for the first version than for the second. After several incomplete forms were excluded, the same number of 90 questionnaires were chosen from each version (making 180 in total) to neutralize the influence of the order of options on the subjects' decisions.

## Results

The results of the questionnaire are available in the appendix. Based on our previous research carried out in the same project, we expected some responses to be more favoured than others. The appendix sets the expected results against the actual results, so that they were easier to compare. Each time the results for the first version of the questionnaire are given first, followed by the results for the second version. Then overall data are presented, including both versions of the questionnaire. It is only the overall data that were subjected to statistical tests.

The results turned out to accord with expectations 90 percent of the time: only in the case of one of ten items on the questionnaire were the subjects' answers contrary to what was expected. A chi-square test was used to check whether the distribution of the subjects' responses was significantly different from the random 1 : 1 distribution. The test was positive in eight cases out of ten, the *p*-values being far below 0.001. In the remaining two cases, the *p*-value was 0.101 and 0.053: the former was obtained for observational data according with expectations, the latter for data incongruent with expectations.

In eight cases out of ten, a primacy effect was indeed observed: the prevailing answer was chosen more often when it was presented as the first option than when it was given as the

second option. The differences are not large, but confirm that preparing two versions of the questionnaire and including the same number of each of them was a good solution, neutralizing the influence of the order of presentation on the subjects' decisions.

## Discussion

Judging from the subjects' responses, the form of a word is not irrelevant: close synonyms and even variant spellings of a word may be perceived differently and used differently, according to the speakers' needs. The experiment reported here supports our hypothesis that there are no fully equivalent words in a language. Even when the referential meaning of a pair of words is identical, they will still differ in other respects, e.g. in their connotative meaning, stylistic distribution, and/or frequency. In short, they have different semantic potential.

More importantly, the connotative differences exhibited in the present study are consistent with earlier observations made in the APPROVAL project and reported already on its website (see [http://portal.uw.edu.pl/en\\_GB/web/approval/wybrane-ciagi](http://portal.uw.edu.pl/en_GB/web/approval/wybrane-ciagi)). The study has confirmed, among other things, that synchronic loans (i.e. those whose foreign origin is evident to non-specialists) and unassimilated variants of loans differ from native synonyms and assimilated variants, respectively, on at least two dimensions. First, the referents of words of the former types are judged by present-day users of Polish as having more value or more prestige, cf. the following examples from the questionnaire: *chipsy* vs. *czipsy* 'crisps', *komfort* vs. *wygoda* 'comfort', *camping* vs. *kemping* 'camping site', *dealer* vs. *diler* 'dealer'. Second, such words make the speaker's utterance more emphatic and may even suggest that the phenomenon referred to is stronger, cf. *absurdalny* vs. *niedorzeczny* 'absurd, nonsensical', *kuriozalny* vs. *osobliwy* 'absurd, curious', *torreador* vs. *toreador* 'bull fighter' (in *torreador*, the letter *r* was duplicated for expressive purposes, thus making the word look even more foreign than the etymologically justified *toreador*). Although our previously reported linguistic analyses indicated that there are also other distinctions between words which occupy different positions on the foreign – native scale (e.g., words which exhibit a more foreign origin are more often used with reference to foreign realities and are more frequent in specialist language or erudite style), there were no word pairs in the questionnaire used in the present study which might help to confirm or deny differences of this kind.

Other examples from the present questionnaire also proved to be consistent with the corpus-based linguistic studies which were previously performed as part of this project. In the *helikopter* – *śmigłowiec* 'helicopter' pair, the latter element was judged as referring to lighter and faster machines, probably because the latter word is related to Polish *śmigło* 'propeller', *śmigły* 'swift' and *śmigać* 'move swiftly'. In the *biznesmen* – *przedsiębiorca* 'businessman, entrepreneur' pair, the loan turned out to be more discrediting towards its referent, which might be explained in two ways at least: first, in the context of Polish history, especially the post-war communist propaganda oriented against private ownership; second, in the context of some psychological experiments which suggest a correlation between the familiarity of a word and the assessment of danger associated with its referent (Song, Schwarz 2009). The difference between *biznesmen* and *przedsiębiorca* is further reinforced by the positive associations of the related adjective *przedsiębiorczy* 'enterprising, resourceful'. Finally, the *triumf* – *zwycięstwo* 'triumph, victory' pair deserves attention, because it is the only one in which the participants' responses did not accord with what was expected. A free association study we performed before (Rączaszek-Leonardi, Bańko, Kucińska 2014) suggests that *triumf* is more often associated with sports than war, which could make it unsuitable in the context described in the questionnaire. However, more research is needed to find out whether this supposition explains the unexpected responses to the *triumf* – *zwycięstwo* pair.

The present study has some limitations. First, the number of word pairs investigated was small. Second, the subjects can by no means be thought of as representative for the Polish language community (in fact, they cannot be considered representative even for the community of Polish students). Third, though the goal of the study was not disclosed to the subjects, many of them must have realized that it had something to do with words, more exactly, with loanwords. This can be seen in the comments they made, e.g.

Przykre czasy nastały dla języka i naszej myśli. – ‘Unhappy times have set in for our language and our thought’

Niestety, użycie języka polskiego w wersji rodzimej podupada na rzecz wszelakich zapożyczeń z języków obcych. W końcu wyprze tradycyjne określenia wszechobecny j. angielski. – ‘Unfortunately, the use of Polish in its native form is falling into decline at the cost of all sorts of loans from foreign languages. Traditional terms will eventually be driven away by the ubiquitous English language’

Nie podoba mi się to, że bardziej atrakcyjne są słowa brzmiące obco. – ‘I do not like it that foreign-sounding words are more attractive’

Ciekawa ankieta, ale niektóre pytania, np. 1 i 6, trochę zbyt tendencyjne, np. opcja w pytaniu 6 „lepsze warunki” dla mnie absurdalna i trudna do zaklasyfikowania. – ‘An interesting survey, but some questions, e.g., 1 and 6, are somewhat too tendentious, e.g., the option in question 6 “better conditions” is absurd to me and difficult to classify’

Słowo „biznesmen” kojarzy się z aferami medialnymi mocniej niż „przedsiębiorca”. – ‘The word “biznesmen” is associated with media scandals more than “przedsiębiorca” is’

Interestingly, however, the subjects’ often expressed their distrust or even dislike of loanwords, which means that if their awareness of the goal of the study influenced their behaviour to some extent, it should have biased their decisions in the opposite direction than what was observed, i.e. Polish equivalents might have been chosen more often.

It would be more natural to study the reactions to loans vs. native words by not forcing the subjects to make a choice between them. However, our earlier attempts to elicit information in more ecological settings did not yield the expected results. The findings of our previous studies in conjunction with the present one demonstrate that distinctions in form – such as those studied in our project – may affect the speakers’ language behaviour, but their influence is usually too weak and must be first explicitly pointed out to be effective.

## References

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- Rączaszek-Leonardi, J., Bańko, M. & Kucińska, A. (2014): ‘A comparative study of free associations to loanword/native synonyms and variant pairs in Polish’. Online at [https://portal.uw.edu.pl/en\\_GB/web/approval/percepcja\\_wyniki](https://portal.uw.edu.pl/en_GB/web/approval/percepcja_wyniki), see Report 1, Appendix 3.
- Song, H. & Schwarz, N. (2009): ‘If It’s Difficult to Pronounce, It Must Be Risky’, *Psychological Science*, 20 (2), 135–138.

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