

# Gender, Language and New Literacy

Edited by Eva-Maria Thüne, Simona Leonardi  
and Carla Bazzanella



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London SE1 2NX

11 York Road

The Tower Building

50 Bedford Lane

New York NY 10022

## Continuum

The Tower Building  
11 York Road  
London SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane  
Suite 704  
New York NY 10038

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## 8 The lexicographical representation of gender in the Microsoft *Word Thesaurus*: Polish

Johanna Miecznikowski

### 1. Introduction

Compared to other computer-mediated dictionaries, which form highly complex hypertextual structures,<sup>1</sup> the Microsoft *Word Thesaurus* is a simple lexicographical tool. Providing a list of synonyms, its primary aim is to help the user find adequate lexical items to express an intended concept, and avoid repetition. Simple as it is, the tool might be of use for producers of Polish texts in a domain of central interest in a gender linguistics perspective, i.e. the domain of personal reference. Finding an adequate nominal expression to refer to persons can be a difficult task in Polish, especially when it comes to reference to females. Polish is a language with a rich system of morphologically marked grammatical gender and a large set of nouns possessing lexical gender. The extent to which these morphological and semantic resources are used to make female gender explicit, however, does not only depend on the referent's sex, but also on the type of noun, the syntactic context, textual constraints (see Dalewska-Greń 1994) and the communicative importance of gender as a category. Moreover, as in all gender languages, nouns with lexical gender lexicalize dominant gender stereotypes, but are also subject to reinterpretation processes, depending on individual speakers' representations of gender roles and on on-going social change. Does the selection of forms and meanings proposed by the *Thesaurus* help the text producer make his or her choice when looking for an adequate noun to refer to an intended female referent? How does this tool represent gender-related semantic differences and connotations of personal nouns?

These questions will be addressed in the main section of this chapter (§4), after a short overview of the Polish gender system (§2) and some remarks on the social context in which gender-related phenomena have been discussed in Polish linguistics (§3).

## 2 Gender in Polish

### 2.1 Grammatical gender

Polish nouns belong to three main gender classes: masculine, feminine and neuter. Within the masculine gender, three subclasses must be distinguished. The resulting gender system consists of five classes, defined on syntactic grounds<sup>2</sup> and corresponding partly to morphological inflection classes:<sup>3</sup> feminine (e.g. *ręka* 'hand'), neuter (e.g. *słońce* 'sun'), masculine personal (e.g. *chłopiec* 'boy'), masculine animate (e.g. *kot* 'cat') and masculine inanimate (e.g. *dom* 'house'). In the singular, the forms of masculine personal and masculine animate nouns coincide. In the plural – more precisely, in the nominative and accusative plural, since in the remaining cases gender distinctions are not expressed at all – feminine, neuter, masculine animate and masculine inanimate nouns fall into one category, which thus enters into opposition with the category of masculine personal nouns.

Thanks to agreement relations with nouns, grammatical gender is marked on a large range of word classes in Polish: demonstrative, possessive and relative pronouns, adjectives, quantifiers, numerals, and the verb. The latter agrees with the subject in the past tense. In the singular, it takes a masculine, feminine or neuter form; in the plural, it shows the characteristic asymmetry of the Polish gender system: plural forms in all three persons are either [+masculine personal] or [-masculine personal]. Agreement is normally determined by the grammatical gender of the noun; conjoined feminine and masculine nouns require masculine agreement.

### 2.2 Lexical gender

Lexical gender, as a semantic category, is relevant for animate nouns. When analysing the *Thesaurus*, we will be interested above all in personal nouns. In Polish, most personal nouns are lexically either masculine or feminine. Lexical and grammatical gender usually coincide, with a few exceptions (e.g. augmentatives like *chłopisko* (nt.) 'big man', *babsztyl* (m.) '(terrible) woman'). A small number of personal nouns have double gender, with partially differing inflectional paradigms (e.g. *kaleka* (m./f.) 'cripple', 'handicapped person'). Another set of personal nouns, as well as indefinite pronouns, are not semantically marked for gender (e.g. *osoba*, (f.) 'person', *ktoś* (m.) 'someone', collectives such as *państwo*, (m.) 'Mr and Ms'/'ladies and gentlemen').

On the level of word-formation, lexical gender is either expressed by the stem (e.g. kinship terms such as *ciocia* (f.) 'aunt', *wuj* (m.) 'uncle') or marked by derivational suffixes. In the latter case, feminine forms are usually derived from masculine ones. Common derivational suffixes are, among others, *-ka* (e.g. *aktor* (m.) – *aktorka* (f.) 'actor'), *-ini/-yni* (e.g. *dozorca* (m.) – *dozorczyni* (f.), 'caretaker', 'guard'), *-ica* (e.g. *uczeń* (m.) – *uczennica* (f.) 'pupil'), *-a* (e.g. *robotnik* (m.) – *robotnica* (f.) 'worker') or *-owa* (e.g. *brat* (m.) 'brother' –

*bratowa* (f.) 'brother's wife'). Some masculine nouns do not allow derivation (e.g. *mecenas* (m.) 'lawyer'); the extension of this class is not clearly defined, however (see Miemietz 1993).

### 2.3 Different types of generic masculines and their relation to lexical gender

In the domain of personal reference, the masculine (personal) category is to be considered the unmarked term of the grammatical masculine – feminine opposition in Polish. As we have seen above, the unmarked status of the masculine appears in word formation ('"formal" (un)markedness', see Linke 2002: 124) or in the agreement patterns of conjoined nouns. Another important indicator of this masculine–feminine asymmetry in Polish is the possibility of using masculine nouns generically ('"distributed" (un)markedness', see *ibid.*). This possibility implies that a noun's semantic feature [+masculine] may weaken to such an extent that it may be applied, as a hypernym, to female referents. As in other languages, however, this does not prevent a male bias in the interpretation of generic masculines (see Jaworski 1986: 25–48, Linke 2002: 122–3), due to the systematic ambiguity of such expressions between a sex-indifferent and a male-only reading.

The contexts in which masculine nouns may be used are not equal for all types of nouns (see Dalewska-Greń 1994) and may be ordered according to a definiteness hierarchy. Most nouns with primary lexical gender, and a restricted set of nouns with derived feminine correspondents, cannot refer to females at all (e.g. *syn* (m.) 'son'). Another class of masculine nouns may be used in the plural with reference to mixed groups (e.g. *polacy*<sub>m.nom.pl.</sub> 'the Polish') or non-referentially in the singular (e.g. *Każdy polak ma prawo do opieki lekarza* 'every<sub>m.</sub> Pole<sub>m.</sub> has the right to medical care').

Finally, a subclass of masculine nouns can be used also to refer to female individuals and groups consisting only of females. These are nouns that have either no feminine counterpart (e.g. *mecenas* (m.) 'lawyer') or else have a derived feminine counterpart – mostly in *-ka* – that language users may want to avoid under certain circumstances because of negative connotations or meaning restrictions. With regard to these nouns, the possibility to partly neutralize the feature [+masculine (personal)] has been extended to predicative uses:

- (1a) *ona jest dobrym profesorem*  
she's a good<sub>m.sg.instr.</sub> professor<sub>m.sg.instr.</sub>
- (1b) \**ona jest dobrym polakiem*  
\*she's a good<sub>m.sg.instr.</sub> Pole<sub>m.sg.instr.</sub>

Furthermore, these nouns can even be used referentially for female referents, under the condition that they remain uninflected<sup>4</sup> – the deletion of specifically masculine endings mirrors the semantic reinterpretation of the noun. This referential use requires feminine agreement:

- (2) *nasza profesor przyszła*  
 our<sub>f.nom.sg.</sub> professor<sub>ø</sub> came<sub>s.sg.f.</sub>

This agreement compensates to a certain degree for the lack of gender marking on the noun (see e.g. Levin-Steinmann 2003: 156–7). Apart from agreeing elements, the referent's sex is often expressed explicitly by means of *pani* 'Ms', *kobieta* 'woman' or a proper name, elements with which the noun enters into a relationship of 'tight apposition' ('enge Apposition', see Wiese 1968: 99):

- (3) *rozmawiałam z panią profesor / z profesor Sawicką*  
 I talked to (Ms.) professor / to professor Sawicka.

The *indeclinabilitas* of the noun and its agreement patterns in this type of referential use indicates that the 'feminine' form is lexicalized to a certain degree. However, the frequent explicit expression of feminine gender by other elements as well as masculine agreement in predicative uses point to the fact that lexicalization is not complete, and that reference to females in the case of these nouns is still strongly related to the other types of generic masculines mentioned earlier.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Gender linguistics and the women's movement in Poland

In their state-of-the-art of feminist linguistics in Poland, Koniuszaniec & Błaszowska (2003: 276) observe that '[t]he issue of language and gender has so far failed to attract attention among Polish linguists', showing that the statement made by A. Jaworski as early as 1986, according to which 'in Polish, this subject [the study of sexism in language] has so far received almost no attention' (p. 2), is still valid.<sup>6</sup> The complex grammatical gender system in Polish and its relation to sex have been studied for a long time, but not necessarily in a critical perspective. Systematic studies of gender stereotyping in contemporary language use are lacking, and analyses comparing the communicative behaviour of women and men are rare.<sup>7</sup> What is particularly significant in the context of the present article, finally, is that scholars of Polish have rarely adopted a gender-related reflexive perspective on linguistic scientific practice itself, observable in its written form in academic publications, lexicography, or grammar and textbook writing (but see Jaworski 1986, Chapters 4 and 5).

This situation is partly due to the fact that the feminist movement – which in other countries has contributed to promote studies on gender-related phenomena – has been comparatively weak in Poland in the past four decades (in this period, equality of women and men was officially declared to have been realized). Since 1989, various feminist organizations have developed, and have sought to establish a dialogue with the American and European women's rights movement. Nevertheless, feminist ideas continue to play only a minor role in the way most Polish women construe their identity.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the Polish women's movement has, of course, not confined its attention to purely linguistic matters. Apart from its engagement in a theoretical discussion of women's identity and their role in society, it has participated actively in the debate about abortion legislation in the 1990s and has tackled political and practical issues such as domestic violence, the election of women to the Polish and to the European parliaments, or legal assistance for women. In contrast, sexist language use and its prevention have not been given any special attention (Handke 1994c). Similar priorities have been established by the Polish government with respect to the initiatives in favour of gender mainstreaming that it undertook when preparing Poland's accession to the European Union.<sup>9</sup> In its recent report on the situation of women in Poland, the Polish government states that gender-targeted measures primarily concern legislation and the labour market.<sup>10</sup>

### 4 The *Thesaurus* in Microsoft Word 2000

In the broader context sketched above, we would expect neither well-established dictionaries published in a traditional format, nor the Polish *Word Thesaurus*, to be significantly influenced by considerations of political correctness with respect to the lexicographical representation of gender. But this does not mean that there is no point in asking whether innovative lexicographical solutions are to be found in the *Thesaurus*, something that is far from implausible given its recency, its technical make-up and its intended uses. Is the category of grammatical and lexical gender dealt with in a transparent way? Does the *Thesaurus* accurately represent the differentiated referential properties of various types of personal nouns in Polish?

I will look for answers to these questions in three steps. First, I will describe structural features of the *Thesaurus* that influence the lexicographical representation of gender (§4.1). In the next section, I will discuss in detail one crucial pair of personal nouns: *kobieta* (f.) 'woman' and *mężczyzna* (m.) 'man' (§4.2). The last section is dedicated to the way professional titles are represented in the *Thesaurus* (§4.3).

#### 4.1 Personal nouns: four types of lexical entries

A lexical entry in the Polish *Thesaurus* of *Word 2000* contains a list of 'meanings', each specified as to part of speech (noun, verb, adjective or other), further meaning-specific 'synonyms' as well as eventual 'similar terms', mostly hypernyms, which are associated with the entry as a whole rather than with specific meanings.

Personal nouns are represented in the *Thesaurus* by four main types of entries:

- 1 Masculine and feminine forms are both listed and have distinct entries,

meanings and synonyms matching the headword's lexical gender. An example is the pair *matka* (f.) 'mother' – *ojciec* (m.) 'father':<sup>11</sup>

- (4a) *matka*: **rodzicielka** (f.) '(female) parent' (*mama* (f.) 'mom', *mamusia* (f.) 'mummy' (diminutive of *mama*)).
- (4b) *ojciec*: **rodzic** (m.) '(male) parent' (*rodziciel* (m.) '(male) parent', *patriarcha* (m.) 'patriarch', *protoplasta* (m.) 'ancestor'); **wynalazca** (m.) 'inventor'.
- 2 Masculine and feminine forms are both listed in the *Thesaurus* and share some or all of their meanings; the shared meanings and corresponding synonyms consist of both masculine and feminine forms. An example is *wnuczka* (f.) 'granddaughter' – *wnuk* (m.) 'grandson', which as their first meaning refer to each other and to the common synonym *prawnuk* (m.) 'great grandson', and have a second meaning, *syn* (m.) 'son', associated with a mixed set of masculine and feminine synonyms.
- 3 Masculine and feminine forms are both listed and share a common entry containing only masculine forms.<sup>12</sup> As we will see below (§4.3), typical examples are terms denoting professions such as *jubilerka* (f.) – *jubiler* (m.) 'jeweller':
- (5a) *jubilerka* f.: **złotnik** (m.) 'goldsmith' (*grawer* (m.) 'engraver', *rytownik* (m.) 'wood/copperplate engraver').
- (5b) *jubiler* m.: **złotnik** (m.) 'goldsmith' (*grawer* (m.) 'engraver', *rytownik* (m.) 'wood/copperplate engraver').
- 4 The *Thesaurus* lists a masculine or – less often – a feminine form, but no counterpart of the opposite gender, e.g. *mecenas* (m.) 'lawyer' or *szwaczka* (f.) 'seamstress'.

Entries of type 1 have been chosen by the authors of the *Thesaurus* for personal nouns whose lexical gender is expressed by the stem. As to pairs related by derivation, we find this type in the domain of interpersonal relations and for nouns referring to traits of character (e.g. *przyjaciel* (m.) – *przyjaciółka* (f.) 'friend', *kapryśnik* (m.) – *kapryśnica* (f.) 'capricious person', see §4.2), in the case of noble titles such as *król* (m.) 'king' – *królowa* (f.) 'queen', in the case of fairytale characters and the like (e.g. *czarownik* (m.) 'sorcerer' – *czarownica* (f.) 'witch') and for some professions (e.g. *sprzedawca* (m.) – *sprzedawczyni* (f.) 'shop assistant').

Entries of type 1 treat feminine and masculine terms of personal noun pairs as semantically distinct and as clearly marked for gender. They accurately reflect the fact that the masculine terms of the pairs in question cannot be used generically to refer to females and directly provide feminine synonyms for feminine headwords.

Feminine synonyms are also provided in the second type of entry, which in the Microsoft *Word Thesaurus* is adopted occasionally in the field of kinship terms. In contrast to type 1 entries, however, type 2 entries treat masculine and feminine terms as semantically equivalent and only weakly marked for lexical gender, providing also synonyms of a headword's opposite lexical

gender. The result is clearly odd, though admittedly the risk of confusion for the user is small, since the synonyms' lexical gender is usually marked morphologically.

Type 3 entries, an economical lexicographical representation applied to personal nouns related by productive derivational procedures, treat feminine and masculine terms as otherwise semantically equivalent. This may seem advantageous in some cases, since in this kind of entry unwanted gender stereotypes are likely to appear. However, the fact that feminine synonyms have to be retrieved indirectly from the masculine forms provided is a serious shortcoming. The *Thesaurus* does not indicate whether a feminine equivalent of a given masculine synonym exists or not. In cases where one does exist, the form is not in fact provided, though it may not be fully predictable on the basis of general rules of word formation. For example, the *Thesaurus* proposes *szef* (m.) 'boss' as a synonym for *dyrektorka* (f.) '(female) director', but only a competent speaker of Polish will retrieve the existing feminine form *szefowa* (f.), which is derived in an atypical way. In cases where a given masculine synonym simply has no direct feminine equivalent in the Polish language, no information is given as to whether the masculine form can be used generically for feminine referents or not. So if *stomatolog* (m.) fairly obviously is an adequate synonym for *dentystka* (f.) '(female) dentist', the user is left to decide for herself/himself whether *golibroda* (m.) 'barber' (lit. 'shaves-beard') can be used as a synonym for *fryzjerka* (f.) '(female) hairdresser' (it can't).

Type 4 entries, finally, are an adequate lexicographical solution for the considerable number of personal nouns that have no generally accepted counterpart of the opposite gender. As we will see below when discussing profession titles (see §4.3), the cases in which the *Thesaurus* fails to include feminine forms that actually exist in the Polish language are relatively rare. In this respect, the *Thesaurus* is more complete than conventional Polish dictionaries such as Sobol (1993), in which the majority of existing feminine personal nouns are not mentioned at all, either as headwords or within a lexical entry.

#### 4.2 The crucial pair *kobieta* – *mężczyzna* and related problems

According to Sobol (1993), *kobieta* (f.) means: (1) *dorosły człowiek płci żeńskiej* 'adult human being of female gender'; and (2) *żona* 'wife'; *mężczyzna* (m.) means *dorosły człowiek płci męskiej* 'adult human being of male gender'. In contrast to this succinct description, the Microsoft *Word Thesaurus* provides 20 meanings for each term as well as 66 additional synonyms for *kobieta* and 62 additional synonyms for *mężczyzna*.<sup>13</sup>

In important respects the two entries are organized symmetrically. So both contain, in the same order:

- what one could term true synonyms, meaning roughly 'woman' or 'man' in different social classes and in different registers;

- terms meaning 'old woman'/'old man'.
- terms used to refer to a woman/man with a specific marital status;
- terms meaning 'mother'/'father' and 'godmother'/'godfather';
- terms used to refer to a young woman/man.

Aside from these sets of comparable synonyms, the entries of *kobieta* and *mężczyzna* each contain specific synonyms expressing different types of gender stereotypes.

*Kobieta* is linked, on the one hand, to 11 terms related to childcare and education of small children (*mamka, niania, niańka, piastunka, opiekunka, guwernantka, bona, przyzwoitka, wychowawczyni, przedszkolanka, świetliczanka*). On the other hand, *kobieta* has a bunch of emotively connotated synonyms. The positive ones, listed first, are related to the ideas of beauty, purity and innocence (*pleć piękna, białogłowa, gołąbeczka, anielica, hurysa, piękność, ślicznotka, miss, madonna*) or have a diminutive character (*kobiecina, babina*).<sup>14</sup> The negative ones are divided into two sets: *kumoszka* 'gossip', listed together with the term *przyjaciółka* '(girl)friend', and a set of 13 synonyms headed by the term *złośnica* 'cross-patch', 'irascible woman'.

The latter set, particularly visible because of its size, deserves some special attention. In contrast to the other synonyms specific to *kobieta* (rather than organized symmetrically within the pair *kobieta – mężczyzna*), only a minority of the synonyms in this set, denoting mythological female figures, lack a masculine counterpart in the Polish language (*hetera* 'Hetaera', 'shrew', *megiera* 'Megaera', *jedza* 'shrew', *wiedźma* 'witch', *ksantypa* 'Xanthippe'). The remaining eight synonyms, which the *Thesaurus* lists first, are derived from masculine forms, with which they form pairs: *złośnik* (m.) – *złośnica* (f.) 'cross-patch', 'irascible person', *kapryśnik* (m.) – *kapryśnica* (f.) 'capricious person', *grymasznik* (m.) – *grymasznica* (f.) 'moaner', 'fussy person', *sekutnik* (m.) – *sekutnica* (f.) 'unbearable/quarrelsome person', *kłótnik* (m.) – *kłótnica* (f.) 'wrangler', 'quarreller', *diabeł* (m.) – *diablica* (f.) 'devil', *piekielnik* (m.) – *piekielnica* (f.) lit. 'inhabitant of hell', *herod* (m.) 'Herod', 'cruel person' – *herod baba* (f.) 'female Herod', 'despotic woman'. That these terms appear as synonyms of *kobieta*, but not of *mężczyzna*, is in line with a further peculiarity, namely that they themselves have entries of type 1. Indeed, the entries of the feminine forms consist of the synonym set headed by *złośnica* exactly as it appears under the headword *kobieta*; they then indicate *kobieta* as a similar term.

In contrast, the masculine forms of the above words are either absent in the *Thesaurus* (*złośnik, kłótnik, piekielnik, herod*) or have entirely different entries of type 1, not containing *mężczyzna* as a similar term (*kapryśnik, grymasznik, sekutnik, diabeł*). With regard to these pairs, it seems fair to criticize the *Thesaurus* lexicographers for having introduced a gender asymmetry that has no systemic justification.

The gender-specific synonyms of *mężczyzna* form three sets. First, we find terms indicating an unknown individual (*indywiduum* (nt.), *osobnik* (m.) '(unknown) individual', *ktos* (m.) 'someone', *iks* (m.) 'X', *iksński* (m.) 'X-inski', 'mister X'). The association of these expressions with *mężczyzna*

reflects a male bias in their interpretation (see Jaworski 1986). This becomes all the more clear if one considers the fact that in the entries of each of these expressions the lexicographers indicate *mężczyzna*, but not *kobieta*, as a similar term – despite the fact that they can perfectly well be used to refer to females.<sup>15</sup> It would have been preferable to treat these expressions like the similar terms *osoba* (f.) 'person' or *postać* (f.) 'person', 'figure', 'character', for which the *Thesaurus* indicates only gender-neutral similar terms. As to *kobieta* and *mężczyzna*, since both nouns can be used to refer to an unknown individual, it would have been adequate to indicate in both entries a set of gender-unspecific words – including *osoba* and *postać*.

A second small set of synonyms specific to *mężczyzna* is composed of *chłop* 'peasant', 'man' and *stary koń* lit. 'old horse'. These terms, especially *chłop*, are frequently used in colloquial speech. They are listed after the lexemes denoting young men, which indicates perhaps that the lexicographers consider them typical of young people's language. The entry of *kobieta* does not contain the feminine correspondent of *chłop*, viz. the very frequent *baba* (f.) 'woman' – which has no entry of its own, either.<sup>16</sup> Might it be that this – inadequate – lexicographical decision has been driven by politeness concerns with regard to women, since *baba* and *chłop* as synonyms of *kobieta* and *mężczyzna* belong to a low stylistic register and *baba* can have negative connotations?

Let's conclude this section by considering the third set of synonyms given for *mężczyzna*. This entry gives as many as 23 synonyms, grouped around four meanings: *narzeczony* 'fiancé' (*kandydat na męża, kawaler, konkurent, starający, amant, wielbiciel, adorator, zalotnik*), *zakochany* 'lover' (lit. 'who has fallen in love') (*zadurzony, zabujany*), *sympatia* (m.) 'beloved one'<sup>17</sup> (*bliski sercu, luby, miły, najdroższy, miłość, ukochany, umiłowany*), and *wybranek* 'bridegroom' (lit. 'the chosen one') (*oblubieniec, pan młody*). These synonyms cover a large set of roles related to (courtly) love, from the man actively courting a woman (*narzeczony* etc.) to the man at the mercy of love (*zakochany* etc.), the man who is the object of a woman's love (*sympatia* etc.) and finally the man chosen by a woman as a husband-to-be (*wybranek* etc.). While according to the individual entries of these terms some of these roles, in particular the last two types, are also attributed to women, significantly the corresponding feminine terms do not appear as synonyms of *kobieta*. There is no straightforward interpretation of this lexicographical decision. On the one hand, it seems as if the authors of the *Thesaurus* judged men more likely to be lovers and beloved ones than women, and this positive evaluation of men in partnership relations contrasts sharply with the negative evaluation of women in interpersonal relationships in general, as expressed in the previously discussed synonyms of *kobieta* clustering around the ideas of quarrelsomeness (*złośnica* etc.) and passion for gossip (*kumoszka*). In comparison with the thesauri of other languages, on the other hand, it is noteworthy that the domain of love and partnership is given such importance in the entry of *mężczyzna* at all – unlike certain other features commonly associated with masculinity such as strength, not to mention features belonging to the conceptual field of

