



EUROPA-UNIVERSITÄT
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COLLEGIUM POLONICUM

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How subjective can word meaning be? Research on Ukrainian and Polish words in use.

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The PhD project

Title: „*On objective and subjective aspects of word meaning – differences as well as similarities in German, Polish and Ukrainian*“

Main focus – differences and similarities between the subjective and objective meaning:

- > of specific words
- > between the three languages in focus
- > across languages/cultures

Objective & subjective meaning

Objective meaning: → dictionary meaning

- collective representation of culturally shaped meaning
- represented in dictionaries

Subjective meaning: → associative meaning

- representation of individually shaped meaning
- communicated by individual native speakers
- based on individual experience & perception
- emotionally charged

Pilot studies

- 8 Ukrainian and 6 Polish native speakers (students aged 18-23)
- 2 experimental conversations:
 - 1st – based on questions within the context of participants' expectations
 - 2nd – based on free associating to 10 words selected from the 1st conversations
- Comparative analysis of these 10 words' meanings provided in dictionaries & participants' associations

The 10 words

Ukrainian	Polish
пощастило	decyzja
цікаво	czuć się dobrze
важко	wybierać
тиснути	radzić sobie
потрібно	rozumieć
сумніватися	pewny/pewna
бути корисним	zmienić się
спільнота	ciężko
надії	presja
бути засмученим	inaczej

Heavy

Ukrainian *важко [važko]*

Polish *ciężko*

“Worry, hopelessness, fatality”

“Stress, difficulties, uncertainty”

“As when a mountain lies on your shoulders”

“Negative sound in my head”

“Work at a construction site. I have worked there”

“Life itself and to find time for everything”

“Heaviness in the body”

“To handle everything alone”

To press / pressure

Ukrainian *muchymu [tysnuty]*

Polish *presja*

“Something is hovering over you”

“Stress”

“Stiffness in the body”

“Dealing with life”

“Pressure from society or others, on your self-esteem, your freedom”

“Pressure from the outside, from parents, from society”

“Force yourself to take action”

“The pressure we put on ourselves”

The quotations are translated from Ukrainian and Polish

Types of associations

- Words, collocations
- Definitions, descriptions
- Body sensations
- Colors
- Examples of personal life experience
- Judgments (good/bad/stressful etc.)
- Cause and/or effect (examples of verbal or non-verbal reactions)
- Visual images
- Metaphors and idiomatic expressions

Further examples of the empirical data (Ukrainian)

- Get (got) lucky – *пощастило [poščastylo]*

“A pleasant explosion in the head, in the body.
Fireworks. Colorful sparkles: green, yellow, pink.”

- To doubt – *сумніватися [sumnivatysja]*

“And ‘doubt’ is viscous, it is green and unpleasant”

- To be upset – *бути засмученим [buty zasmučeny]*

“[Something] present in everyone and it is normal”

“A person with such a face [grimace] is sitting on a bed”

The Ukrainian pilot study: a few observations

- Dictionary definitions:

- partly identical in 1970 & 2007, 2009 incl. literary examples
- overuse of synonyms and tautological explanations

- Dictionary definitions compared to participants' associations

- пощастити [poščastyty] – “to get lucky”:
successful fulfillment of an intention vs. coincidence

- надія [nadija] – “hope”:
belief that fulfillment is quite possible vs. low probability of accomplishment

Further development of the research

- **Terminology:**
objective -> dictionary meaning
subjective -> associative meaning
+ contextual meaning
- **Analysis of contextual meaning:**
usage of the words in focus by the participants during the first interviews
- Conduct interviews for the **main study 2025**

Suggestions for discussion

- Reasons for differences in the types of associations: cultural, group specific... Your ideas?
- Form of the words for association test:
 - Verbs as used by participants while speaking (e.g. past tense “got lucky”, plural form “hopes”) or infinitives?
 - It is not possible to gender neutralize adjectives in Ukrainian and Polish – how to deal with that?
- How many words/participants to take into the main study?
 - UA pilot study: 1 language/8 participants/10 words → 200 associations.



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Thank you for your attention!

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