

FAMILY AS A STUDENT'S MICROCOSM. REFLECTIONS BASED ON THEMATIC VOCABULARY OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

1. Introduction

The scope of interests within applied linguistics includes studies of thematic vocabulary, along with its long tradition, since the examples of practical uses of thematic vocabulary can be found as far back as in antiquity. Vocabulary related to specific themes was the basis for creating dictionaries in subject arrangement, and it was used, among others, in teaching foreign languages or in text translation¹. Thematic vocabulary can also be viewed from another perspective. The lexemes connected to specific themes, and quoted in survey studies, can be a basis for creating a mental dictionary² of the study subjects. This will then be a basis for conclusions on the conceptual and notional resources of the respondents. Development of language and development of thinking are independent processes, but they are tightly interconnected. Indeed, words are signs of specific notions and form an arrangement, which puts all phenomena, surrounding human beings, in order³.

This article is an attempt at presenting thematic vocabulary of primary school and middle school students from Małopolskie and Podkarpackie voivodeships in Poland related to the theme of *human being and family*. The results of survey studies which are the material basis for this reflection were published by Krystyna Choińska and Małgorzata Pachowicz in *Słownik tematyczny uczniowskiej polszczyzny* in 2015⁴.

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¹ Z. Cygal-Krupa, *Wstęp*, in: K. Choińska, Z. Cygal-Krupa, M. Pachowicz, *Słownik uczniowskiej peryferyjnej polszczyzny tematycznej*, Tarnow 2016.

² Mental dictionary is a structure made of words or lexemes, i.e. entry word forms, quotation after I. Kurcz, *Pamięć – uczenie się – język*, Warsaw 1992, p. 233.

³ T. Milewski, *Językoznawstwo*, Warsaw 1965, p. 75-76.

⁴ K. Choińska, M. Pachowicz, *Słownik tematyczny uczniowskiej polszczyzny*, Tarnow 2015.

The survey studies conducted in 2004 included 1171 students of 21 primary schools and 21 middle schools from 10 towns and 19 villages of southern region of Lesser Poland.

The surveys gathered 573,731 quoted lexemes: including 343,850 nouns, 115,284 adjectives and 114,597 verbs related to twenty themes: *human body, health, sickness, health care; human being and family; home and house equipment, house chores; food, drinks; professional work and job posts; clothing; shopping, money, commerce; nature: plants, trees, flowers; animals; school and science; city; countryside, field works; travelling, means of transportation; relax, sport, entertainment; feelings, emotions, interpersonal relations; state, society and offices; means of communication; culture; time, time expressions (times of day, year, seasons); religious life.*

The studies focused on nouns (15 in each survey), verbs (5 in each survey) and adjectives (5 in each survey) related to selected themes. Proportions between various parts of speech were selected arbitrarily. Other parts of speech were omitted in the studies on purpose, selecting only those that have the most numerous representations in basic vocabulary.

The quantitative scope of basic vocabulary is set at 6-7 thousand units, among which 50% are nouns, 25% are verbs, 15% are adjectives and 10% are adverbs. Despite autosemanticity of adverbs, they were not included in the surveys, as in the great majority of cases they are regular adjective derivatives. The collected materials are dispositional words existing in the awareness of survey respondents, collected in groups of words related to specific themes. This is rare vocabulary, as opposed to frequent vocabulary, which W. Miodunka, after French linguists⁵, called thematic vocabulary⁶. In the conducted experiment, linguistic association was used: it is the verbal reaction of study subjects to word-stimulus. The stimulus in this case is the name of a thematic centre.

Directed associations are to be understood as associations in which reaction is in some way limited by the instructions given to the subjects as to how the survey should be completed. These associations can be of individual or general nature.

Individual associations are the ones that appeared only once for the studied centre, and they were given by only one person. General associations are considered the ones that appeared in at least 50% of the surveyed population.

⁵ In 1950 R. Michea defined thematic vocabulary by regarding these words as "related to specific subject or type of subjects, and their usage implicates introducing things, facts, ideas in a specific case, (...) they enter quite naturally in analogical groups, i.e. in associations of ideas resulting from the relations among things, and in part thanks to these associations they are strengthened in our memory" – quote cited in after Z. Cygal-Krupa, 1986:11.

⁶ W. Miodunka, *Teoria pól językowych. Społeczne i indywidualne ich uwarunkowania*, Warsaw-Krakow 1980.

In word groups related to specific themes it can be clearly seen that certain words are placed in the centre, while other words are peripheral. Analysing the general level of associations in various centres, the limit of general usage was considered to be at least 586 quotes of a given word (resulting from the fact of recording 1171 surveys). The words that exceeded the threshold of general associations can be considered social, i.e. used by many people using the language.

In the centre there were *human being and family* and only one infinitive verb - *to live*, exceeded the threshold of general association. The lexemes *to love* and *to help* attained a very high number of quotes: "to love" – was quoted by 561 students, and "to help" by 348 students.

In the space between social words and individual words, there are many more words that do not meet the listed criteria, and which build specific thematic fields. Analysing these words, one can attempt to draw the image of a family, which is portrayed through thematic vocabulary.

It also seemed interesting to compare the material excerpts from the surveys completed by the students from schools in the region of Lesser Poland with the thematic vocabulary recorded by Zofia Cygal-Krupa in 1979, i.e. twenty five years earlier.

The aim of the studies was also to attempt analysing a part of the lexical system of contemporary Polish language, and to observe the changes in the image of the world created by the lexicon after the political transformation of 1989. After the change from totalitarian system to democracy, the reality surrounding the surveyed subjects shifted significantly in political, social, cultural and moral aspects.

2. Characteristics of reality and dynamic changes taking place in the contemporary world

After 1989, the world moved closer to the Poles not only via mass-media, but also thanks to intensive official and private contacts with foreign countries. The pace of life accelerated significantly, and the amount of information acquired via media definitely increased. However, the linguistic level of such information also shifted – it deviated from the canons of proper language usage, colloquialisms took over, and the language started to be treated as goods, with all the consequences of this approach. In media, the dominance of image over words became clearly visible.

The increased contacts with countries from outside the Eastern block, the limit of teaching Russian at schools, the opening to the West, the influence of Western culture closely connected to the impact of foreign languages, especially English, certainly induced changes in mentality of the Poles, and in the image of the outside world, included in the collection of lexical units of Polish language.

One should also mention the fast pace of technological development (e.g. the Internet, mobile phones, computers) and the dominance of Western patterns of consumer culture characterised by utilitarian values over spiritual ones.

The attitude of Poles towards their mother tongue also changed, since it no longer is the warranty for maintaining independence. We can see with our own eyes the creation of the stereotype of a modern human being, for whom language is a private matter, and not a national asset.

The situation of families in society also changed. Economic migration, single parenthood, broken families, shifting roles of mother and father in family, informal relations of parents, demographic processes unfavourable to Poland, social phenomena absent earlier, fashionable life-styles, changing value systems, individual perceptions of good and evil, absolutisation of liberty⁷ certainly impacted the way we see contemporary family and the way this family is in real life.

Taking up studies of thematic vocabulary of students, who were the first to graduate from primary schools and middle schools of the reformed Polish educational system seemed vital. By attempting a partial analysis of this lexicon, one can try to formulate an answer to the question how unprofessional language users perceived the surrounding reality.

3. Thematic vocabulary connected with the subject of: human being and family

Every act of naming is at the same time a proof of a certain vision and knowledge of the world represented by the surveyed student. The words entered in specific thematic centres and omitted from them, the way they are ordered and associated, reveal the way of perceiving the world by the student. Lexicon is also the proof of the amount of knowledge about the world possessed by the student. It reveals the student's extent of getting to know the world and his or her attitude towards the surrounding reality.

The definition of the lexeme "family" in Polish dictionary is as follows: married couple and their children; also relation and in-laws⁸.

Kinship is the basic bond deciding on the existence of family. This thesis is confirmed by the lexemes related to the theme of *human being and family*⁹: *mum, dad, grandma, grandpa, brother, sister, uncle, auntie, cousin, great-grandmother, great-grandfather, daughter, son, siblings, aunt, parents, father, mother, nephew, grandson, paternal uncle, brother-in-law,*

⁷ E. Osewska, *Wychowanie do wiary w polskiej rodzinie w kontekście współczesnej dezintegracji dzieciństwa*, "Studia nad rodziną" (2013), No. 1, p. 8.

⁸ *Słownik języka polskiego*, Warsaw 2002, p. 64.

⁹ These word lists maintain their ranking sequence, i.e. the first words on the lists have the most quotes, which translates to the highest rank.

*mother-in-law, wife, husband, niece, gramps, granddaughter, father-in-law, sister-in-law, godmother, son-in-law, great-great-grandmother, step-mother, great-great-grandfather, daughter-in-law, stepfather, stepson*¹⁰.

Kinship in the quoted vocabulary is present in two lines: ascendent (parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents) and descendant (parents, children, grandchildren). Apart from lineal relations, respondents also mentioned consanguinity relations. Contemporary families most often consist of parents and children, but the recorded vocabulary also includes the image of the multi-generation, traditional family. Both images are complementary, and both the nuclear families and extended, multi-generation families are the families of the surveyed students.

In 1979, Zofia Cygal-Krupa conducted an analogous experiment.

In the twenty five years, which passed since the studies of thematic vocabulary conducted at that time, it can be seen that the core vocabulary (lexemes with the highest frequency) has not changed substantially since it is formed by basic, stabilised lexemes that are the necessary minimum required for daily communication situations. However, their ranking has changed.

In 1979 the vocabulary of highest rank vocabulary was as follows: grandpa, grandma, brother, sister, father, uncle, mother, son, daughter, cousin, mum, auntie, aunt, dad, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, wife, husband, paternal uncle, grandson, father-in-law, son-in-law, daughter-in-law, nephew, sister-in-law, grandmother, great-grandfather, granddaughter, great-grandmother, uncle, niece, dad, grandchild, stepfather, step-mother, gramps¹¹.

After comparing the recorded noun groups from both experiments, it can be seen clearly that the rank of the words *grandpa and grandma* has changed. In 1979, they were the highest-ranking lexemes, and in later studies (from 2004) the words *mum and dad* have the highest rank. The words *grandpa and grandma* moved lower in ranking only by 2 positions, but their sequence also changed. Currently, the lexeme *grandma* has higher rank (in earlier studies, the word *grandpa* was higher-ranking). In the group of words collected by Zofia Cygal-Krupa, there are no lexemes recorded in *Słownik tematyczny uczniowskiej polszczyzny*, such as: *stepson, great-great-grandmother, great-great-grandfather, siblings, parents, sister-in-law, godmother*, but it includes words that are not present in contemporary studies, such as old Polish variants of the following words: *grandmother, aunt, great-grandmother*.

¹⁰ K. Choińska, M. Pachowicz, *Słownik tematyczny uczniowskiej polszczyzny*, Tarnow 2015, p. 35-61.

¹¹ Z. Cygal-Krupa, *Słownictwo tematyczne języka polskiego. Zbiór wyrazów w układzie rangowym, alfabetycznym i tematycznym*, Krakow 1986, p. 241-244.

The conclusion drawn from analysing this vocabulary is that for young people family is mum and dad, grandma and grandpa, and other relations. Parents are the most important persons in contemporary families, but grandma and grandpa are also important persons, closely following parents in young people's survey answers. This indicated long-term family bonds characteristic to multi-generation families.

Family is based on emotional bonds and the relations between various family members which result from these bonds.

In *Słownik tematyczny uczniowskiej polszczyzny*, in part dealing with human being and family, among the lexemes excerpted from the surveys, there are the following words referring to the relations between family members – nouns: friend, warmth, friendship, joy, help, trust, care, happiness, work, community, hearth, row, peace, holiday, feeling, concern, friend, conversation, understanding, bond, duty, affection, life, respect, goodness, walk, closeness, kindness, support, shelter, hate, responsibility; verbs: to love, to help, to work, to talk, to take care of somebody, to like, to clean, to respect, to cook, to play, to care about somebody, to look after somebody, to love, to visit, to live, to reside, to cherish, to trust, to argue, to enjoy, to meet, to support, to think, to read, to care for something, to laugh, to watch, to raise somebody, to comfort, to be friends with somebody, to hug, to speak, to walk, to understand, to give, to rest, to cry, to sympathise, to kiss, to worry, to adore, to amuse, to like one another, to miss somebody, to spend (time), to shout, to envy, to celebrate, to dislike, to rejoice, to nurse, to die, to smile, to support one another, to quarrel, to dream, to pray, to respect one another, to believe, to fight, to understand one another, to forgive, to relax, to get angry; adjectives (students also included participles in this category): good, loving, beloved, caring, happy, family, warm, joyful, bad, attentive, wise, joyous, helpful, friendly, safe, peaceful, hard-working, sad, polite, agreeable, honest, cordial, great, common, responsible, frank, sensitive, cool, understanding, stupid, well-mannered, cosy, kind, well-meaning, liked, pleasant, pathological, patient, emotional, spiteful, vulnerable, in love, smiling, brave, lonely, human, satisfied, helping, respectful, trusting, trusted.

The recorded material leads to several conclusions. Family life is characterised by a certain complexity. The dominant qualities in these relations are devotion and selfless kindness. Certain types of positive behaviours are clearly accepted by the students, however, there are also present lexemes referring to opposite behaviours. In families, sometimes there are negative emotions, but the words pointing to them are not of the first rank, e.g. row is a lexeme quoted by 41 students, including 14 boys and 27 girls, 10 primary school students and 31 middle school students; 28 living in urban areas and 13 living in the country; however, the word hate was quoted by 13 students, including 5 boys and 8 girls, 6 primary school students and 7 middle school students; 9 living in urban areas and 4 living in the country.

Family and home are places for having necessary relations not only with family members, but also with other people, therefore, the words like friend, neighbour appear. Performing actions together and participating in common actions is an element characterising family. This is indicated by the following lexemes: dinner, holiday, conversation, birthday, walk, meeting, wedding, trip, name day, etc.

In families, there are also pets present: dog – this word was quoted by 127 students, including 52 boys and 75 girls, 71 primary school students and 56 middle school students; 69 living in urban areas and 56 living in the country; cat – this lexeme was entered in the survey by 80 students, including 36 boys and 44 girls, 53 primary school students and 27 middle school students; 40 living in urban areas and 40 living in the country; while the lexeme hamster – was quoted by 11 students, including 5 boys and 6 girls, 7 primary school students and 4 middle school students; 6 living in urban areas and 5 living in the country.

Few words related to the material-economic function of family were observed in the recorded material, and they include: money (21 responses in surveys), work (58 responses in surveys), rich (17 responses, including 15 boys and 2 girls quoting this word). Lexemes: car (quoted in the survey by 32 students, including 18 boys and 14 girls, 7 primary school students and 25 middle school students; 7 living in urban areas and 25 living in the country), TV set (quoted by 16 students, including 8 boys and 8 girls, 8 primary school students and 8 middle school students; 5 living in urban areas and 11 living in the country), and computer (quoted by 13 students, including 12 boys and 1 girl, 4 primary school students and 9 middle school students; 5 living in urban areas and 8 living in the country) present in the thematic vocabulary indicate objects that are important for the family. It is significant that the lexemes to leave and to earn have the same rank among verbs, as they have the same number of 22 quotes each.

Among the 344 words from the thematic centre *human being and family*, no lexemes pointing to a crisis of family, such as *divorce, separation* were recorded. Few lexemes indicate relations between family and school: *teacher* – this lexeme was quoted by 17 students, including 5 boys and 12 girls, 13 primary school students and 4 middle school students; 3 living in urban areas and 14 in the country; and *school* – this word was quoted in the surveys by 41 students, including 14 boys and 27 girls, 10 primary school students and 31 middle school students; 28 living in urban areas and 13 living in the country.

The gathered material reveals the socialising function of family. This is supported by the selected lexemes: *help, trust, care, work, bond, concern, duty, affection, life, honesty, respect, goodness, closeness, kindness, atmosphere, support, responsibility, society, to love, to help, to work, to take care of somebody, to respect, to raise somebody, to sympathise, to be sick,*

to die, to forgive. On the basis of this material, one can even point to spontaneous socialisation, which Józef Chałasiński calls “upbringing by life”.

The gathered material (among the words with up to 10-quote frequency) does not include lexemes pointing to relations of family with environment.

4. Summary

The students' lexicon is not only a photographic reflection of the reality, but is also models this reality to the extent of students' mental abilities and in accordance with the point of view of an average language user.

The world is perceived by young people in a specific way, and the reality they see, experience and verbalise is reflected in their lexicon. Within the centre *human being and family* students generally quoted three words: *to live, to love* and *to help*. These choices prove that the family, being the students' microworld, is a safe place, where young people can count on love and support.

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