

# Defining Feminine Personal Nouns in Polish: A Practical and Postulative Overview Based on the *Dictionary of Polish Female Nouns*

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**Abstract:** This article considers and analyses various ways of defining feminine personal nouns in Polish-language lexicography. It deals with the techniques of defining products of the feminine word-formation category which have been recorded in historical and modern dictionaries. It aims to determine the best way to define feminine personal nouns from the perspective of what the modern user needs and how they perceive the world. Against the recognised definition practices, a proprietary method developed at the Formation of Feminine Personal Nouns Research Section at the Institute of Polish Studies of Wrocław University, Poland, has been proposed. It has become the basis for lexicographic description used in *Słownik nazw żeńskich polszczyzny* (Dictionary of Polish Female Nouns). This article puts forward a rationale for defining lexical items in which a reference to the generic masculine, i.e. a systemic motivation typical of presentations of Polish word formation, has been abandoned.

**Keywords:** FEMININE PERSONAL NOUNS, FEMINITIVE, POLISH WORD FORMATION, DICTIONARY, DEFINITION

**Opsomming:** Die definiëring van vroulike persoonsname in Poolse: 'n Praktiese en voorveronderstelde oorsig gebaseer op die *Woordeboek van Poolse vroulike naamwoorde*. In hierdie artikel word verskeie metodes vir die definiëring van vroulike persoonsname in die Poolse leksikografie beskou en geanaliseer. Aandag word geskenk aan die tegnieke waarmee die resultate van die feminitiese woordvormingskategorie wat in historiese en moderne woordeboeke opgeneem is, gedefinieer word. Dit het ten doel die bepaling van die beste metode om vroulike persoonsname vanuit die perspektief van die moderne gebruiker se behoeftes en beskouings van die wêreld, te definieer. Strydig met die erkende definiëringspraktieke, is 'n vertroulike metode wat by die Navorsingsafdeling vir die Vorming van Vroulike Persoonsname by die Instituut van Poolse Studies aan die Wrocław Universiteit, Pole, ontwikkel is, voorgestel. Dit het die grondslag vir die leksikografiese beskrywing wat in *Słownik nazw żeńskich polszczyzny* (Woordeboek van Poolse vroulike naamwoorde) gebruik word, gevorm. In hierdie artikel word 'n goed-gefundeerde voorstel vir die definiëring van leksikale items uiteengesit waarin

afgesien is van 'n verwysing na die generiese manlike, m.a.w. 'n sistemiese motivering tipies van die aanbieding van Poolse woordvorming.

**Sleutelwoorde:** VROULIKE PERSOONSNAME, FEMINITIEF, POOLSE WOORDVORMING, WOORDEBOEK, DEFINISIE

## 1. Introduction

In Poland, feminine derivatives (also referred to as feminitives) are entangled in history, and, consequently, have been a subject of lively normative, linguistic, political, ideological, identity-related and numerous other discussions for over a century. Małocha-Krupa (2018a, 2018b) defines feminine derivatives as language forms that are synthetic (one-word) names of females. These are nouns containing a morphological (suffixal or paradigmatic) indicator of femininity; they designate professions, titles, academic degrees, social positions and attributes of women, e.g. *reporterka* [a woman reporter], *nauczycielka* [a woman teacher], *prezeska* [a woman president], *doktorka/doktora* [a woman doctor].

At present there is an increase in the number of feminine personal nouns in Polish. For many years feminine personal nouns have been the subject of animated — frequently emotional — discussions which are not always related to linguistic parameters (Łaziński 2006). Currently there are discussions taking place regarding the stylistic value of many feminine personal nouns, their acceptability in standard Polish, and shortcomings in their codification (Krysiak 2020, Szpyra-Kozłowska 2021), as well as the way in which they should be treated in dictionaries of general Polish (Małocha-Krupa 2018b, Śleziak 2018). To contemporary lexicographers they are not easy to codify, because, for example, of the difficulty of determining which of them are used in general Polish, and which are only limited to specific speech communities or (equality-promoting) contexts. However, we are steadily observing the transfer from these limited contexts or specific linguistic communities to general, unmarked language. Such stylistic peregrination and reclassification of feminitives still means that a contemporary lexicographer faces difficulties when attempting to objectively classify a given linguistic unit as belonging to e.g. a specific register. As Szpyra-Kozłowska (2021) notes, something that was marked stylistically only recently may have since become neutral.

A further problem for Polish lexicographers is related to the various traditions of defining feminine personal nouns as these traditions are mostly rooted in historical lexicographic practices (cf. Małocha-Krupa 2021). This problem was initially encountered by the team of female linguists from Wrocław University (Marta Śleziak, Patrycja Krysiak, Katarzyna Hołojda-Mikulska and Agnieszka Małocha), who compiled the *Słownik nazw żeńskich polszczyzny* (SNŻP — Dictionary of Polish Female Nouns; cf. Małocha-Krupa 2021). Currently, because of the problematic defining practices and the growing textual frequency of feminine personal nouns, as well as increased naming needs, lexicographic work is under way on a new, expanded edition of SNŻP, to be published in 2025.

## 2. What's new in the SNŻP II?

The first edition of the SNŻP contained 2,100 entries. The currently prepared second edition has twice as many entries. The lexicographers decided to extend their area of research and to register, apart from the contemporary, frequently innovative femininities, such as: *boomerka* [a female boomer], *celebrytka* [a female celebrity], *couchsurferka* [a female couchsurfer], *genderystka* [a female gender researcher], *hipsterka* [a female hipster], *homofobka* [a female homophobe], *japiszonka/japówka* [a female yuppie], *singielka* [a female single], to words that are used to describe professions, customs, etc. that are now obsolete, e.g. *grabarka* [a gravedigger's wife or daughter], *pończoszniczka/pończoszarka* [a woman engaged in the making, repair or sale of stockings]. To that end, the task of excerpting material from historic sources was undertaken, starting from the oldest lexicographic monuments, such as *Dykcjonarz Jana Murmeliusza* (*Dictionarius Ioannis Murellii variarum rerum*) from 1526. Material was also collected from other historic dictionaries such as *Słownik języka polskiego* [Dictionary of the Polish Language] by Samuel Linde (1807–1814), *Słownik wileński* [The Vilnius Dictionary] (1861) and *Słownik warszawski* [The Warsaw Dictionary] (1900–1927), as well as from corpora containing historic material, such as the *Elektroniczny korpus tekstów polskich z XVII i XVIII w* [Electronic Corpus of 17th- and 18th-century Polish Texts — [https://korba.edu.pl/query\\_corpus/](https://korba.edu.pl/query_corpus/)].

To date, about 5,000 personal nouns have been collected (as of 15 April 2024). The collection, which not only enriches the knowledge of contemporary linguistics on the productivity of the very feminine personal noun category, but also provides many valuable examples of semantic changes that have occurred in Polish, e.g. as regards the evolution of the semantic category of possessiveness or within homonymic relations.

## 3. How to define femininities in Polish

The proposed practice for explicating meaning outlined here, developed and adopted by the lexicographical team preparing the SNŻP II, is in response to some opinions expressed after the publication of the first edition of the SNŻP, especially those by Łaziński (2016: 127): "The editors seem not to have agreed on how the definitions and genus proximum, i.e. the root personal name, should look like."

The editors of the SNŻP II, namely Katarzyna Hołojda-Mikulska, Patrycja Krysiak, Agnieszka Małocha, Simone Pasternak, Marta Śleziak, Julia Wójcik, Małgorzata Winnicka and Alicja Wrzyszczyńska, faced, as suggested, the lexicographic problem of how to define feminine personal nouns. So far, Polish lexicography has been dominated by models of explicating meaning by reference to the generic masculine form. It was recognised that a definition using the masculine form was the optimum one, as it was in agreement with the structural, systemic thinking about language. In Polish, more often than not, feminine personal

nouns derive from masculine nouns. It was therefore accepted that the most appropriate way of defining them was to refer to the relevant masculine root of a given feminine personal noun, i.e. — within that meaning (a feminine personal noun as a modificational derivative of the masculine form) — *nauczycielka* used to be defined as a 'woman teacher'. A similar model for explication of meanings dominated in numerous Polish dictionaries, i.e. definitions made references to systemic Polish word-formation knowledge, e.g.

- *adwokatka* was defined as 'a female advocate'
- *autorka* was defined as 'a female author'
- *wariatka* was defined as 'a female lunatic'

Some dictionaries also explicate meaning by referencing the derived feminine to the equivalent of the masculine personal noun, e.g.

- *nauczycielka* — a feminine form of the noun *nauczyciel* [a male teacher]
- *autorka* — a feminine form of the noun *autor* [a male author]
- *realistka* — a feminine form of the noun *realista* [a male realist]
- *zabójczyni* — a feminine form of the noun *zabójca* [a male killer]

The editors of the SNŻP decided not to define meanings by means of the generic masculine form. They recognised that to a modern recipient, systemic (structural) knowledge is of secondary importance in the light of 'naïve, common-sense conceptualisation' (Apresjan 1980: 79-84, Anusiewicz 1992: 9-11). Research has shown (e.g. Tambor 2013) that to many users of contemporary Polish, the word *nauczycielka* means 'a woman that teaches/trains,' not 'a female teacher.' Thus, due to the nature of the registered material, the systemic method of explicating word-formation roots and using them to describe meanings has been abandoned in the SNŻP. The decision was not entirely innovative or trailblazing, as such a description of linguistic units was already applied in some historical dictionaries, e.g. *Słownik wileński* [The Vilnius Dictionary] which describes *nauczycielka* as 'a female who teaches someone' (and also: '*zbawczyni* [a female saviour], *oswobodzicielka* [a female liberator]').

The editors of *Wielki Słownik Języka Polskiego* [The Great Dictionary of the Polish Language] also did away with using the masculine form to define meaning and included information about the word-forming motivation of feminine derivatives in the tab *Pochodzenie* [Origin]. By way of example, the innovative entry *forumowiczka* is defined as 'a woman expressing herself on an online forum' (instead of the systemic: '*kobieta forumowicz*' [a woman forum member] — all the more so that the noun *forum*, not the masculine form *forumowicz* [a man that participates in a forum], was rightly recognised as the word-formation root).

The way of defining meanings used in the SNŻP reflects the simplest text conceptualisation model, corresponding to naïve, everyday, common-sense knowledge about the defined entry. Description of feminine personal nouns by referring to the generic masculine form is a construct typical of inside-system thinking, incompatible both with an equality-based vision of the world, linguistic sym-

metry theories or a cultural way of thinking about a female subject expressed by means of a specific morphological form. The speaking subject does not perceive a woman, e.g. *nauczycielka* [a woman that teaches] in terms of a sum of semantic components [+ femininity *woman* + the generic masculine form *nauczyciel*]. Thus, for the SNŻP, a decision was made not to update the systemic motivation model, which is very useful and valuable elsewhere, e.g. in the theory of descriptive word formation, in establishing formal and structural relations that occur between a derivative and its root, and to define meanings in a way that omits relations between feminine nouns and masculine nouns/the generic masculine or other possible word-formation motivations (Skarżyński 1999: 64).

Consequently, such an approach facilitated resolution of the problem of how to explain meanings of feminine personal nouns with meaning asymmetry in relation to their masculine roots, both from the (1) diachronic, and (2) synchronic perspectives. Semantic asymmetry is illustrated for instance by a pair of extant nouns (1): *spodniarz* and *spodniarka*. *Spodniarz* means 'a man sewer specialising in sewing trousers', but what about *spodniarka*? It may be assumed that it was understood symmetrically as 'a female sewer specialising in sewing trousers.' However, because of the fact that culturally and socially, in the 19th century, it was not acceptable for a woman to sew trousers for men, the historical dictionaries define *spodniarka* pejoratively: 'an annoying and cocky woman with a lower social status'. Differentiation of the referential potential and semantic scope between contemporary masculine and feminine forms is also quite common. This is exemplified by (2) the pair of nouns *ambasador* and *ambasadorka*. The generic noun *ambasador* refers most frequently to 'a person who is a highest-ranking diplomatic representative of a state in relations with the authorities of another state or international organisation', while the feminine personal noun *ambasadorka* predominates in social custom with a more modest-ranking reference. It means 'a woman promoting an issue or idea or protecting someone's interests'. Therefore, it is clear that defining a feminine personal noun by referring to its corresponding masculine noun is not always a fail-safe method of defining feminine nouns. The decision by the editors of the SNŻP not to define feminine personal nouns by referring to the generic masculine has also simplified explication of meanings of nouns that do not derive from the masculine, e.g. *cygarniczka* once meaning 'a woman that was a manual worker in a cigar manufacturing plant in Kraków'; the word's masculine equivalent has never been used.

The history of feminine personal nouns has numerous lexical and semantic asymmetries which can be shown if definitions are based on semantic relations and the convention of semantic interpretation is adopted, while formal interpretation is used in structural descriptions. Especially considering the fact that in word-formation theory, establishment of relations between the derivative and its root may be characterised by the existence of numerous motivations (Skarżyński 1999: 64). Ultimately, the editors of the SNŻP decided not to refer to the word-formation motivation of the analysed feminine personal

nouns when explaining their meanings, and to use the following forms as the initial element of the definiens:

- (1) the demonstrative pronoun *ta* ['that' referring to a female/feminine noun]:
  - *abstynentka* is defined as 'that [female] who gives up on something, especially drinking alcohol',
  - *administratorka* is defined as 'that [female] who administers, runs something';
- (2) or other forms resulting from the semantic relations in which a given personal noun functions. Thus, some definitions with *genus proximum* are used, e.g. *pracowniczka* [that [female] who works], *specjalistka* [that [female] who is a specialist in something], *wykonawczyni* [that [female] who does something], *zawodniczka* [that [female] who competes], *znawczyni* [that [female] who knows something very well], *zwolewniczka* [that [female] who supports something or someone], for instance:
  - *aptekarka* is 'a woman who works in or owns a pharmacy'; *farmaceutka*<sup>1</sup>
  - *archeolożka* is 'a woman specialising in archaeology'
  - *kaskaderka* is 'a woman performing an especially risky and dangerous movie scene, usually instead of an actor or actress'; *dublerka*; *zastępczyni*
  - *chodziarka* is 'a woman competitor in racewalking'
  - *fashionistka* is 'a woman expert in fashion, a woman fashion designer'
  - *demokratka* is 'a woman supporter of the democratic system, a woman with democratic persuasion'

Furthermore, some definitions are encyclopaedic in nature. In particular, this applies to feminine personal nouns that today are not very transparent semantically, as they refer to concepts or ideas that are less known. Examples include:

- *Katofeministka* is a Catholic woman who supports some feminist views, especially those connected with Christian feminism, which recognises the Church and its teachings, but which also aims to raise women's status in the Church and to redefine the grounds for theological tradition, regarded as androcentric from the feminist perspective.
- *Fenomenolożka* is a woman supporter, representative of phenomenology — an ontological direction in philosophy that assumes the possibility of reaching an object thanks to its direct observation; phenomenology was formulated by Edmund Husserl and developed by Roman Ingarden, who adapted inspirations of the direction to the philosophy of art, aesthetics and theory of literary work and its cognition; Ingarden's key terms introduced into literary theory include: the diegetic world, places of indeterminacy, concretization and the idea of ideation, which is relevant to the entire current of phenomenology and which is connected with a reduction in incidental (inessential) features of an object.

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- *Flapperka* in the 1920s was a young woman from the West who opposed the then prevailing canon of femininity, who had an independent, ostentatious and provoking lifestyle, who wore clothes masking her womanly shape and short hair; *chłopczyca*; *chłopobaba*.

Regular, systematic use of the defining techniques referred to above will enable presentation of the collected lexical material of the SNŻP in a clear way, in line with the lexicographical method adopted by the dictionary editors.

#### 4. Conclusions

The SNŻP is the result of many years of work by a team of experienced Polish linguists that are keenly aware of the shifting linguistic landscape, especially as it pertains to how modern Polish reality is reflected in the language. This reality has been changing and transforming very dynamically in recent decades. In contemporary Polish texts we observe increased productivity, or even an expansion, of female nouns. It seems understandable, therefore, that new tasks are emerging for lexicography: the codification of innovative feminines, but also the revival of old ones, which nowadays often undergo neosemantization and various semantic evolutions.

The new edition of the SNŻP, currently under preparation, requires many new, innovative solutions in defining/describing feminine lexical items. As noted, the issues on defining feminine lexical items are complex and rooted in historical lexicographic or linguistic traditions. This is supported by the current linguistic discourse in Poland and with the publication of the first edition of the SNŻP, the difficulties with defining feminines again became apparent, especially as these definitions did not necessarily meet the needs of the contemporary dictionary user. Therefore in the forthcoming SNŻP, defining through reference to grammatical and word-formation knowledge, that is, to the masculine form (which is often the word-formation base of a given feminine), has been abandoned. This decision is based on the assumption that the description of feminine personal nouns by referring to the generic masculine form is a construct typical of inside-system thinking, incompatible both with an equality-based vision of the world, linguistic symmetry theories or a cultural way of thinking about a female subject expressed by means of a specific morphological form. Therefore, a method of explicating meaning was chosen that reflects the simplest text conceptualisation model, corresponding to naive, everyday, common-sense knowledge about the defined entry. Sometimes it was deemed necessary to include encyclopedic definitions, especially for lexemes that are less recognizable and less semantically transparent. The choice of these methods of defining seems to be in line with the needs of contemporary users, and it also allows for consistency and clarity in the presentation of lexical material.

## Endnote

1. In some entries, the definition ending with a semicolon is followed by synonyms of the given lemma.

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