
Uninflectedness as a rule in Polish, an inflected language

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The paper focuses on one group of Polish uninflected nouns, considering their exceptional regularity, diachronic development and attitudes of speakers.

Polish uninflected nouns stand out against a background of rich inflection (7 cases, 2 numbers, several declension classes). Most of them can be captured by regularities such as: poor match between phonetic shape and existing inflectional classes (e.g. *kiwi*, *alibi*, *Peru*) or denotation of culturally distant concepts, including foreign names (e.g. *karate*, *San Francisco*, *Sukarno*). Still, usage varies from noun to noun, e.g. both *papaja* and *mango* refer to exotic fruit, both fit productive declension classes, but the latter remains uninflected.

However, uninflectedness is a perfectly regular feature of Polish animate nouns of masculine morphonetic shape used for female referents. The group encompasses common nouns (e.g. *profesor*, *minister*, *architekt*) and most surnames other than adjectival ones ending in *-ska/-cka/-dzka*. Uninflectedness is a signal of feminine gender in such structures (Obrębska- Jabłońska 1949) although it is questionable whether the uninflected feminine forms and their inflected masculine counterparts have developed into separate lexemes (cf. Łaziński 2005).

These feminine forms are relatively new in Polish (since c. 1900) and have always been in competition with normally inflected words derived by productive (cf. Szpyra-Kozłowska 2019) feminine suffixes, e.g. *lekarka* ‘female medical doctor’. The choice between the uninflected and inflected forms for female referents was heatedly debated in the early 20th century and is so again today. Interestingly, the strong ideological undertones have virtually swapped sides between the two periods (cf. Woźniak 2014). One possible outcome of the current debate could be the demise of the uninflected pattern, the “ironing out” of this robust instance of uninflectedness.

Yet, it is only the common nouns (and not the surnames) that are the subject of ideological controversy and the two subgroups of uninflected feminine forms are likely to develop differently. This suggests that the fate of uninflected words may well be shaped most by factors other than systemic pressure and cognitive load associated with uninflectedness as such.

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