

Field Labels as Markers of Language Change

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For a long time, dictionaries make use of labeling entries with social, stylistic, dialect, and chronological markers. Labels outline domains of vocabulary — how detailed are the domains depends on factors such as the dictionary's vocabulary volume, presence of the specialized, dialectal, colloquial or slang vocabulary, the overall concept of information on usage, etc. However, field marks can be a resource of valid data to trace language change.

In this paper, we present a simple experiment in which we compared chronological and dialect labels in two large monolingual general dictionaries of Polish. First dates from 1900–1927 (further on Older Dictionary, OD), the second is fifty years newer (1958–1969; further on Newer Dictionary, ND). The data come from a tergo indexes which are lists of headwords with basic markers and some additional information, e.g., the numbering of homonyms. The compilers of the ND index did not label a headword if at least one of its senses was in common usage at the time of publishing of ND.

At the start of the experiment, we extracted entries labeled dialectal or Old Polish in OD and obsolete or old-fashioned in ND. The OD index consists of 287,000 entries, almost 49,000 are marked as dialect variants and nearly 30,000 as Old Polish. In ND, there are over 127,000 entries, of which more than 11,000 are marked obsolete, and over 5,000 old-fashioned, but just under 900 dialectal. In the next step, we compared the headwords of both dictionaries. 2700 Old-Polish entries from OD are labeled old (obsolete) in ND, and less than 700 old-fashioned. As we see, slightly over 10% of Old-Polish in OD is still among entries of ND, the remaining part has since vanished. Almost 80% of dialect-labeled headwords in ND also reside in OD. It can indicate commonly known words of dialectal origin. We also compared label-based lists from OD with the complete list of ND headwords. While none of the OD Old-Polish words was present outside the chronologically labeled set, over 2800 dialect words from OD were marked old-fashioned or obsolete in ND. A query in the dictionary proves that they are marked outdated, but they are still preserved in dialects. The presented method is slightly rough for detailed research but can be useful for the preselection of vocabulary that vanished over a specified time.

AG 11

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