

The evaluative adjectives *głupi* ‘stupid’ and *mądry* ‘wise’ in social intercourse

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Abstract

Among the numerous judgemental adjectives, one can encounter two which are of interest for this research, namely *wise* and *stupid*, or rather *mądry* and *głupi* as this study deals with the Polish language. The question was posed how the adjectives in question function in social discourse. To search for the answer to the aforementioned question, a survey was conducted. It was prepared with the help of Google Forms and contained 15 questions. 58 people, students of secondary school and university, took part in the survey in November 2023. In the conduct of the research, the author tried to find out whether (and if, how often) the respondents use the selected adjectives, towards whom or in what circumstances. Moreover, one of the hypotheses of the present research was that the respondents would show the tendencies visible in the Polish society, and actually they did.

Keywords

judgement, evaluative adjectives, intercourse, *mądry* ‘wise’, *głupi* ‘stupid’

Przymiotniki wartościujące *głupi* i *mądry* w kontaktach społecznych

Abstrakt

Wśród licznych przymiotników wartościujących w języku polskim napotkać można między innymi dwa, tj. *mądry* i *głupi*, które stanowią obiekt zainteresowania niniejszej analizy. Postawiono pytanie, w jaki sposób wyżej wspomniane przymiotniki funkcjonują w dyskursie społecznym. W poszukiwaniu odpowiedzi na tak postawione pytanie, przeprowadzono badanie ankietowe. Kwestionariusz został opracowany przy pomocy Google Forms i zawierał 15 pytań. 58 osób, uczniów szkoły ponadpodstawowej i studentów uniwersytetu wzięło udział w ankiecie w listopadzie 2023. Przeprowadzając badanie, autor podjął próbę znalezienia odpowiedzi na pytania czy (a jeśli tak, to jak często) ankietowani używają wybranych przymiotników, w stosunku do kogo i w jakich okolicznościach. Ponadto, jedną z hipotez badawczych niniejszej analizy było założenie, że badani wykażą tendencje widoczne w polskim społeczeństwie w odniesieniu do wyżej wspomnianych aspektów użycia podanych przymiotników i wyniki potwierdziły owo założenie.

Słowa kluczowe

ocenie, przymiotniki wartościujące, kontakty społeczne, dyskurs, *mądry*, *głupi*

1. Introduction

As Clark and Schober claim (1992: 15), it is a "common misperception that language use has primarily to do with words and what they mean. It doesn't. It has primarily to do with people and what they mean. It is essentially about speakers' intentions". The inferences we draw from speakers' utterances often go beyond the logical truth value of the literal statement. What is expressed in conversations is usually the result of judgement which is an inseparable element of our linguistic (and not only)

social existence, of social intercourse (Grech 2020). Culture and family history influence the development of our personal judgement. Judgements are continuously shaped by the facts at hand and by personal opinions. The feelings and emotions evoked by the situation or conversation are the final factor shaping our constant evaluation. Central to a conversational analysis of human judgment is the distinction between the semantic meaning of a sentence and the pragmatic meaning of an utterance. (Schwarz 1996) As always in a conversation, context is the key. This context is understood here as an area evolving depending on the text, its receiver and sender and the particular interaction between them (Miczka 2002).

Which part of language carries the most judgement? Adjectives, according to Simon Heffer, editor of the Daily Telegraph. (Rees 2011) Theoretically, using judgemental adjectives is possible when there exists a norm referring to either quality or quantity that is respected by the user. However, it is not always the case. It happens that the norm is so blurred and so context dependent that cannot be perceived as a norm. It is not the factor, though, that limits the use of such adjectives.

Among the numerous judgemental adjectives, one can encounter two which are of interest for this research, namely *wise* and *stupid*, or rather *mądry* and *glupi* as this study deals with the Polish language. References to the analysis of the above mentioned judgemental area that can be found in literature concentrate mainly within the problem of human functioning in the society. Furthermore, the presumably negative element of the two aforementioned ones seems to be more pervasive in the presented analyses. The researchers delve into for instance the issue of feeling inferior in the society, underestimating one's abilities or the influence of the society and culture on human willingness and aptitude to express their opinions, etc. (for example Kaufman 2016, Tagliamonte and Pabst 2020, Cabrera and Ross 2021, Grimwood 2023, de Vries 2024) These analyses take into account predominantly the psychological or/and social aspect of the issue. However in this very research, emerging from the

interest of the author, that is the linguistic aspect of the problem area, the question was posed how the analysed adjectives, *mądry* and *glupi*, function in social intercourse. To search for the answer to the aforementioned question, a survey was conducted. It was prepared with the help of Google Forms and contained 15 questions. 58 people, students of secondary school and university, took part in the survey in November 2023. In the conduct of the research, the author tried to find out whether (and if that was the case, how often) the respondents use the selected adjectives, towards whom, referring to what aspects of human existence or in what circumstances. The results and analysis are presented below.

2. Results of survey

As it was mentioned above, 58 people participated in the survey which was voluntary and anonymous. Because the research deals with the Polish language, the questionnaire was also designed in this language. All the numbers visible on the diagrams refer to percents.

The following two figures present the range of age and gender of the respondents.

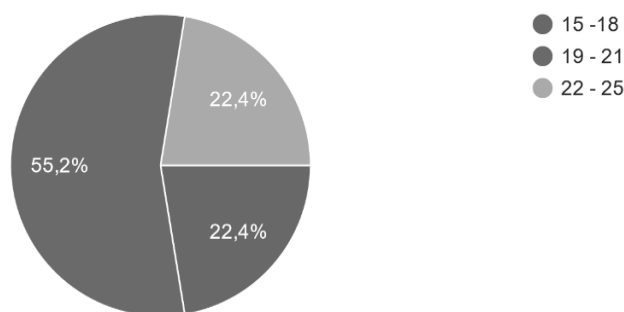


Figure 1
Age of the participants

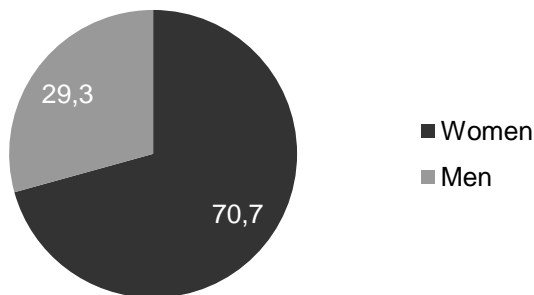


Figure 2

Gender of the participants

The above graphs present the structure of the group of the participants. As the data show, there were 22.4% of the people aged 15–18, 55.2% – aged 19–21 and 22.4% – aged 22–25. According to the criterium of gender – there were 70.7% of women and 29.3% of men.

Responding to the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to answer two sets of questions concerning the usage of the expressions *mądry* (wise) and *glupi* (stupid) in social intercourse. The quantitative analysis of the results is presented below.

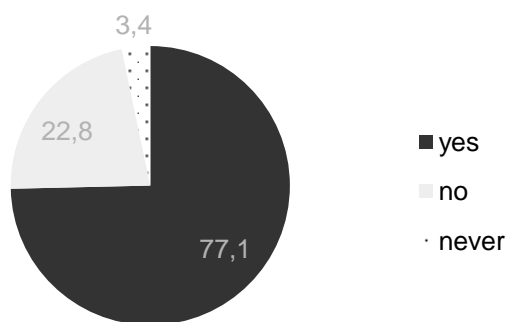


Figure 3

Answers to the question "Do you often use the expression wise/intelligent (*mądry* / *inteligentny*) referring to other people?"

Answering the question whether they use the expressions wise/intelligent (*mađry / inteligentny*) referring to other people the respondents declared that 77.1% do, 22.8% do not and 3.4% never do.

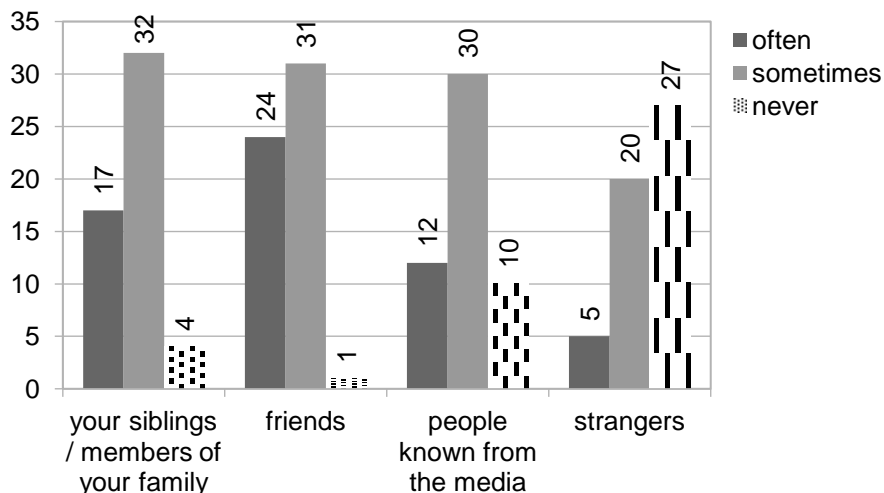


Figure 4

Answers to the question “If you use the expression wise/intelligent, do you refer to your siblings / members of your family, friends, people known from the media, strangers?”

The next question searched for the information who the surveyed refer to when using the terms in question. There was an option of four groups, namely siblings / members of family, friends, people known from the media, strangers to take into consideration together with three frequency choices – often, sometimes, never. The results for the siblings / members of the family group were respectively 17%, 32%, 4%; for friends – 24%, 31%, 1%, people known from the media – 12%, 30%, 10%, strangers – 5%, 20%, 27%.

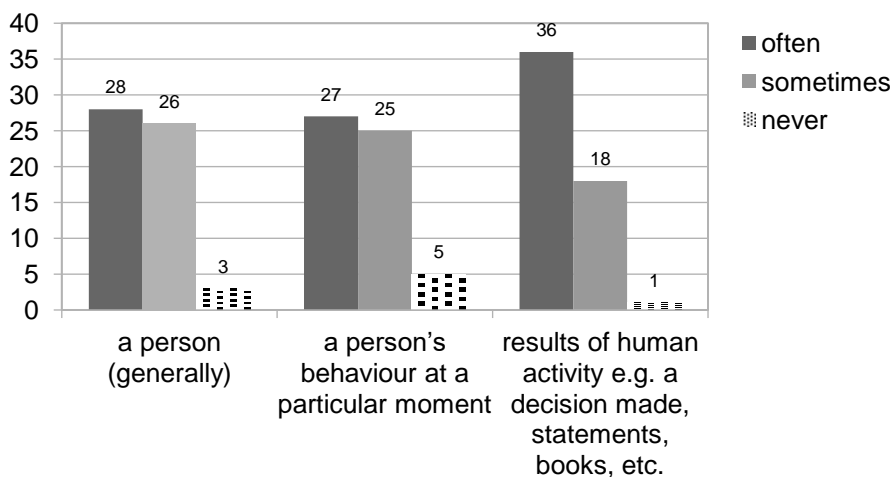


Figure 5

Answers to the question “When you use the expression *mądry* / *inteligentny* (wise/intelligent) or their synonyms, do you refer to a person (generally), a person’s behaviour at a particular moment, results of human activity e.g. a decision made, statements, books, etc.?”

This element of the survey was to discover the frequency of choice of the reference points for the *mądry* / *inteligentny* (wise/intelligent) expressions selected from the three suggested, i.e. a person (generally), a person’s behaviour at a particular moment, results of human activity, e.g. a decision made, statements, books etc. Again, the frequency factor was taken into account – often, sometimes, never. What the data suggest is that a person (generally) is named *mądry* / *inteligentny* (wise/intelligent) respectively by 28%, 26%, 3% respondents, a person’s behaviour at a particular moment – 27%, 25%, 5%, results of human activity, e.g. a decision made, statements, books, etc. – 36%, 18%, 1%.

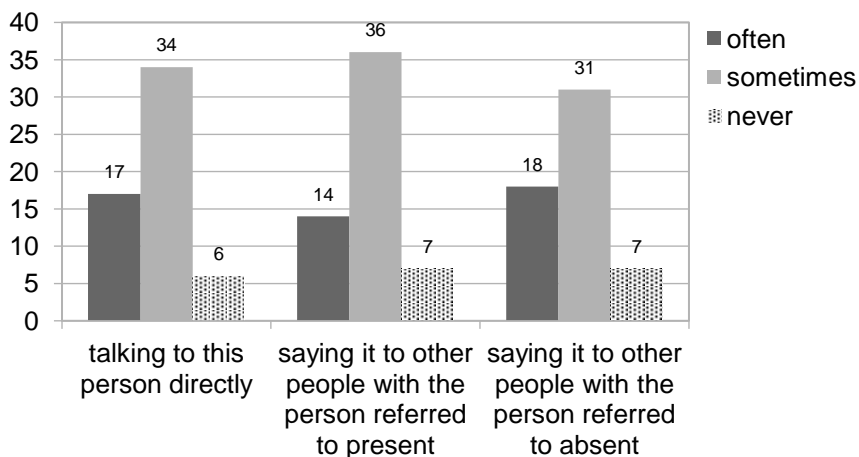
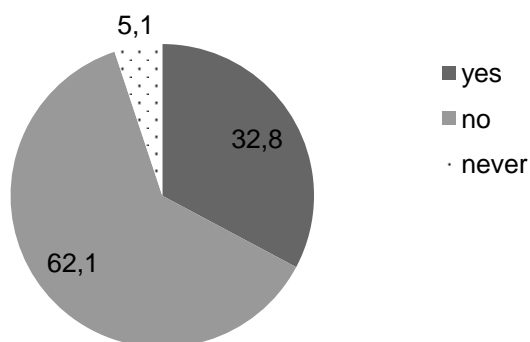


Figure 6

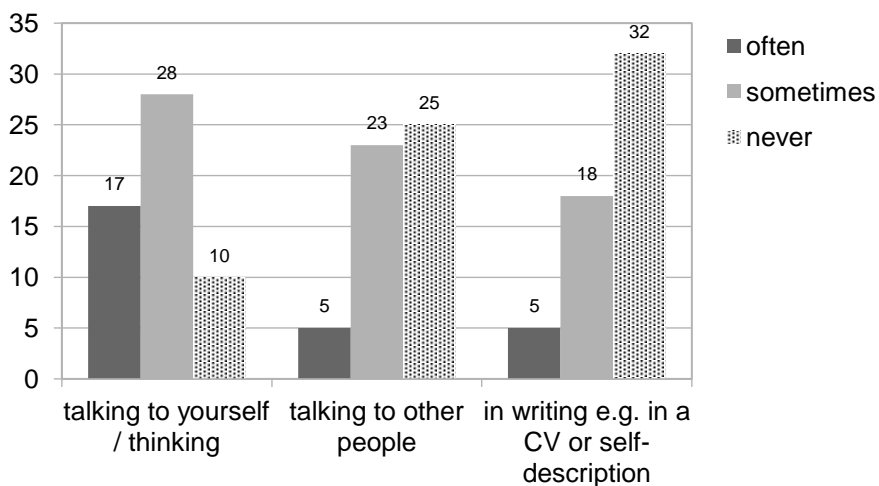
Answers to the question “If you use the expression *mądry/inteligentny* (wise/intelligent) towards other people, do you do it talking to this person directly, saying it to other people with the person referred to present, saying it to other people with the person referred to absent?”

In the next question the interviewees were asked to choose the circumstances of expressing their opinion about other people in reference to the addressee of such an opinion. They express it to the person directly often – 17%, sometimes – 34%, never – 6%; to other people with the person referred to present – respectively 14%, 36%, 7%; to other people with the person referred to absent – respectively 18%, 31%, 7%.

Analysing the data provided by the next graph, one can find out whether the respondents use the expression *mądry / inteligentny* (wise / intelligent) referring to themselves. 62.1% of the interviewees answered no, 32.8% – yes, 5.1% – never.

**Figure 7**

Answers to the question “Do you often use the expression *mądry* / *inteligentny* (wise / intelligent) referring to yourself?”

**Figure 8**

Answers to the question “If you use the expression *mądry* / *inteligentny* (wise / intelligent) referring to yourself, do you do it talking to yourself / thinking, talking to other people, in writing, e.g. in a CV or self-description?”

The next question is to show in what circumstances people refer to themselves as *mądry* / *inteligentny* (wise/intelligent). People do it while talking to themselves / thinking – often – 17%, sometimes – 28%, never – 10%. They do it talking to others – often – 5%, sometimes – 23%, never – 25%. The last option, in writing was chosen as follows – often – 5%, sometimes – 18%, never – 32%.

The questioner was divided into two, in a sense, twin parts. The second part, which results are to be presented below, concerns the same aspects of using the opinion / judgemental adjectives. This set of questions, however, refer to the expression *głupi* (stupid).

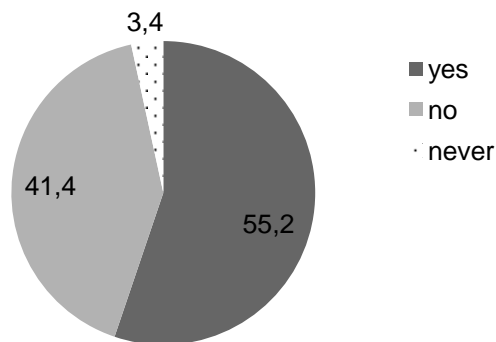
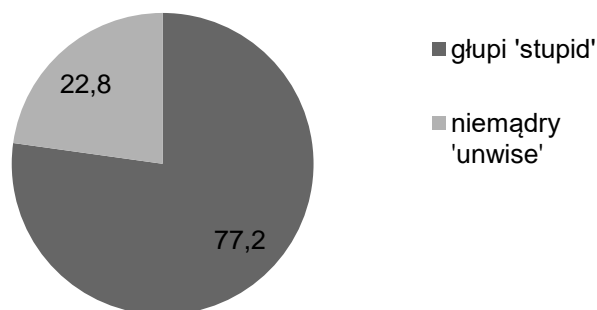


Figure 9

Answers to the question “Do you often use the expression *głupi* (stupid) referring to other people?”

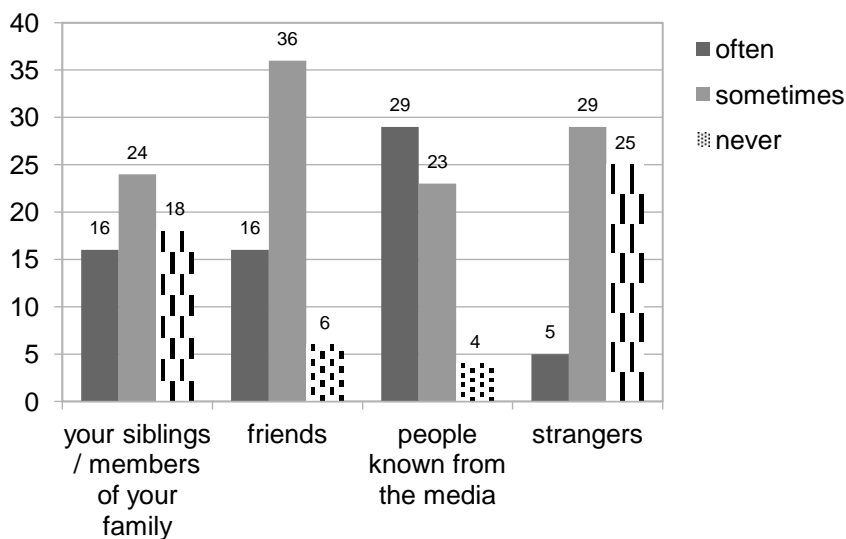
Answering the question whether they use the expression stupid (*głupi*) referring to other people the respondents declared that 55.2% do, 41.4% do not, 3.4% never do.

Although generally the questions connected with using the subject adjectives are of identical nature for both analysed elements, there is one question that appears only within the section devoted to *stupid* / *głupi* expression.

**Figure 10**

Answers to the question “Which one do you use more often – stupid or unwise?”

The respondents declared as follows: *głupi* (stupid) – 77.2%, *niemądry* – 22.8%.

**Figure 11**

Answers to the questions “If you use the expression *stupid*, do you refer to your siblings / members of your family, friends, people known from the media, strangers?”

The results show that the respondents answered as follows: towards siblings / a member of the family – often – 16% of the surveyed, sometimes – 24%, never – 18%. In the case of colleagues – often – 16%, sometimes – 36%, never – 6%. As for the option of people known from the media – often – 29%, sometimes – 23%, never – 4%. The last group to be taken into account, strangers resulted in: often – 5%, sometimes – 29%, never – 25%.

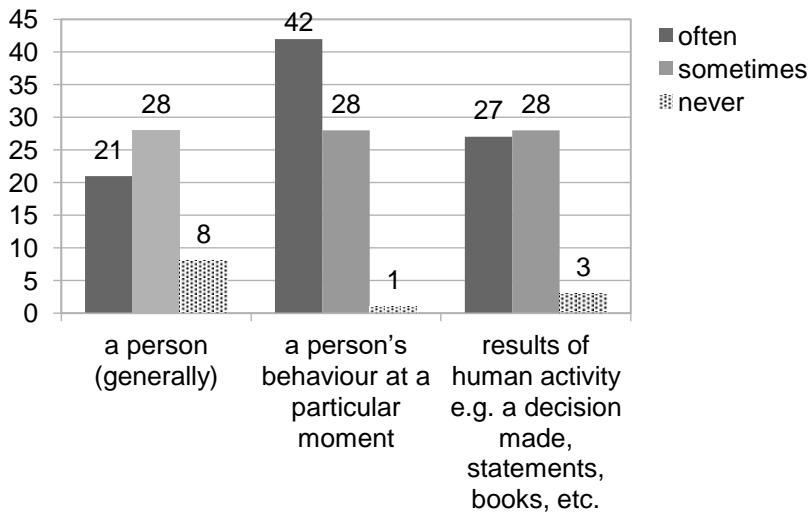


Figure 12

Answers to the question “When you use the expression *glupi* (stupid) or its synonyms, do you refer to a person (generally), a person’s behaviour at a particular moment, results of human activity e.g. a decision made, statements, books, etc.?”

The analysis of the data above shows that the respondents answered the question concerning the judged aspects in the following way: a person (generally) – often – 21% of the respondents, sometimes – 28%, never – 8%; a person’s behaviour at a particular moment – often – 42%, sometimes – 28%, never – 1%; results of human activity e.g. a decision made, statements, books, etc. – often – 27%, sometimes – 28%, never – 3%.

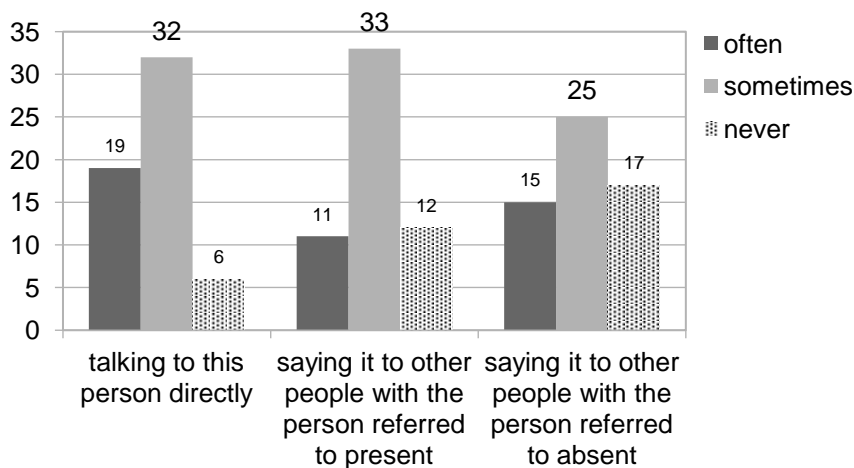


Figure 13

Answers to the question “If you use the expression *glupi* (stupid) towards other people, do you do it talking to this person directly, saying it to other people with the person referred to present, saying it to other people with the person referred to absent?”

As far as the answers to the question dealing with the circumstances of expressing the opinion of someone’s being stupid are concerned, the distribution is as follows: talking to this person directly – often – 19% of the respondents, sometimes – 32%, never – 6%; saying it to other people with the person referred to present – often – 11%, sometimes – 33%, never – 12%; saying it to other people with the person referred to absent – often – 15%, sometimes – 25%, never – 17%.

As the data in Figure 14 show, the respondents call themselves stupid with the following frequency: often – 46.6%, sometimes – 50%, never – 3.4%.

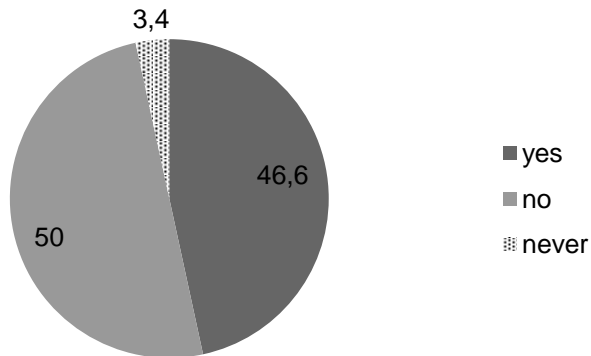


Figure 14

Answers to the question "Do you often use the expression *glupi* (stupid) referring to yourself?"

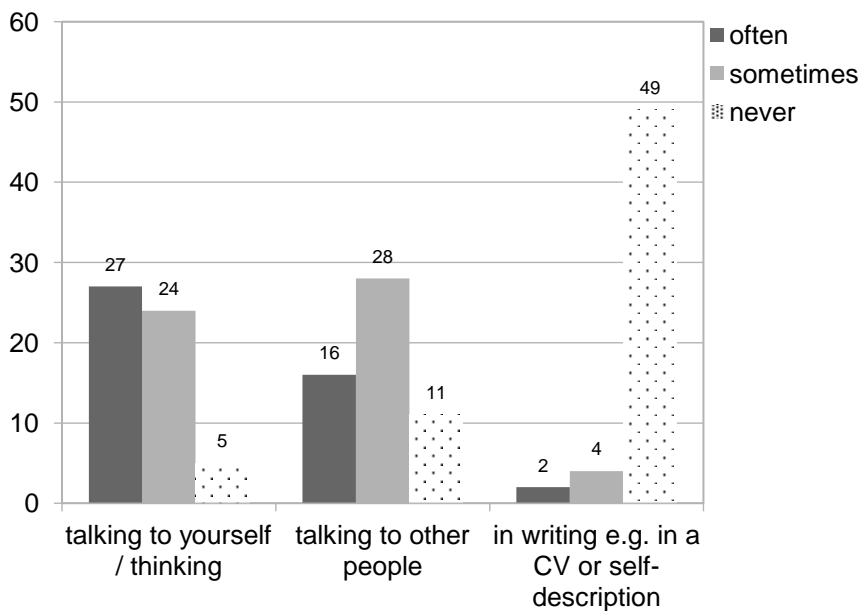


Figure 15

Answers to the question "If you use the expression *glupi* (stupid) referring to yourself, do you do it talking to yourself / thinking, talking to other people, in writing e.g. in a CV or self-description?"

The next question referred to expressing self-opinion of the respondents with the use of the adjective *stupid*. The frequency of the given circumstances was selected as follows: when talking to themselves / thinking: often – 27% of the respondents, sometimes – 24%, never – 5%; when talking to other people – often – 16%, sometimes – 28%, never – 11%; in writing e.g. in a CV or self-description – often – 2%, sometimes – 4%, never – 49%.

3. Analysis of results

The data given above present the results of the survey for both discussed elements separately. This discussion concentrates on their comparison, searching for the significant features of the lexemes in question use and possible interdependences.

Both adjectives, as it was mentioned above, seem to represent opposite, though still evaluative meanings within the area of mental abilities or states. Taking into account the fact that the aforementioned thematic area may be considered ambiguous in the sense that there are no strictly established criteria for such an evaluation and the judgements in this matter are undoubtedly highly subjective (as most of them generally are), they still are not infrequent in communication. Looking at the data, one can see that referring to others with *wise* (*mądry*) as often used has been chosen by 77.1% of the respondents. For *stupid* (*głupi*) it is 55.2%. Although the difference may seem to be quite significant, still it can be surprising that so many respondents are willing to choose the (let us call it) negative adjective to be used in the social intercourse. The 41.4% result for *never* to use it, however, shows the tendency of rather avoiding *stupid* in discourse in contrast to 22.4% of *no* answers in the case of *wise*. In both cases, 3.4% of the respondents selected the *never* option.

The question that was not following the twin system of questions (*wise* vs. *stupid*) was the one concerning using two adjectives seemingly of the similar meaning, i.e. *głupi* (*stupid*) and *niemądry* (*unwise*). Provided below is the definition of *niemądry*

according to *Słownik Języka Polskiego (Dictionary of the Polish Language)*.

Niemądry (unwise) – having little knowledge, little intelligence, little experience (translated by the author)

(<https://sjp.pwn.pl/slowniki/niem%C4%85dry.html>)

The definition shows that *niemądry* shares a significant semantic area with *głupi* (stupid), though the meaning of the latter seems to be broader. Despite the differences, *niemądry* is definitely synonymous enough to be used in the majority of situations when *głupi* can be employed. It goes without saying, though, that *niemądry* in its very structure can be considered more positively perceived since we have the *wise* element and just the negative prefix to suggest little knowledge or experience for instance. What the data show, however, is the fact that 77.2% of the respondents use *głupi* (stupid) in the intercourse and *niemądry* just 22.8%. The data given by NKJP concerning these two adjectives prove the same tendency, there are 3821 instances of *głupi* (stupid) and just 108 of *niemądry* (unwise).

The next pair of the twin questions is related to the group of (human) reference for the subject adjectives. The first adjective to be analysed here is *wise*, which in this criterium proved the following order of *often* choices of the respondents: friends, family members, people known from the media selected for all the groups but the strangers. For the *never* option the order seems to be the opposite, namely strangers and people known from the media are selected most often. The answers to the same type of a question but concerning the adjective *stupid* reflect a different situation. Here, the group most *often* referred to as *stupid* are people known from the media, followed by family members and friends both holding a similar number of choices. used for friends and strangers, followed by similar results for members of the family and friends. The results show that strangers are the group with the highest number of *never* choices, with family members being the next in this criterium.

It seems to imply that both the positive and negative adjectives (in the particular understanding of the expressions selected for this research) are not often used in reference to strangers. That may imply that the respondents are careful with expressing evaluation of someone's mental or intellectual condition not being acquainted with this person at least to some extent. Looking at the results of using *stupid* towards people known from the media, one cannot notice the same criterium since this is the group most willingly called *stupid*. It is hard to justify that this reference group is the one the respondents know a lot about in terms of their mental or intellectual condition, unless we treat the news and general gossip as the source of information. The analysis of various news and comments people post for example on forums prove that the society believe in having the suitable knowledge of the publicly known and the right to judge them with *judge* having negative connotations in this case.

The next question was related to the aspects undergoing evaluation. The option of a person (generally) was chosen by approximately the same number of the respondents for *wise* and *stupid* with the results 28% and 21% respectively. The difference in the interviewees' preferences is visible in the case of behaviour as the evaluated aspect, because it was selected by 27% for *wise* and 42% for *stupid* as being *often* used. The option "results of human activity e.g. a decision made, statements, books, etc." for *wise* as being often used was chosen by 36% and for *stupid* by 27%. From the above we can assume that the respondents are more inclined to use negative evaluation for the momentary situations, meaning the conduct at a particular moment. For *wise*, 'the effects of human activity' (see Figure 5) is the most frequently selected group presumably due to being perceived as the result of someone using their knowledge and experience.

From the analysis of the data collected from the next questions, we get some information concerning the social situations of the intercourse employing *wise* / *stupid* evaluation. It can be seen that if one decides to call another person *wise* or *stupid*,

they most often do it directly to the addressee or in his/her presence. The option *never* is equally frequently chosen for all the situations concerning the use of the *wise* adjective. The situation in the case of *stupid*, however, is different. Although pronouncing the opinion directly to the person being subject of the expressed judgement shows insignificant difference between *wise* and *stupid*, in terms of the situations, when the person is just a witness of the opinion being expressed or simply is absent then, the *never* option is decidedly more often chosen for *stupid* (wise both 7, stupid 12 and 17 respectively). It may be inferred that the respondents are aware of the fact that evaluation of human mental or intellectual condition is highly personal and to a large extent subjective. Although people are willing to present such opinions, they still show some respect to others.

Leaving the judgemental statements concerning other people, the survey leads to the questions concentrated on self-opinion. The opposite tendency can be noticed here. The respondents were significantly less inclined to select *wise* than *stupid* to describe themselves (32.8% to 46.6% respectively). The question arises as to the reason for that. Is it their modesty (or maybe false modesty), having low self-esteem, being more critical towards themselves than towards others? Or maybe it is a culturally and socially dependent phenomenon. The preferred situation for expressing self-judgement is talking to yourself / thinking with 17% for *wise* and 27% for *stupid*. 25% of the respondents pointed at *never* for telling others about being *wise* and 11% - about being *stupid*. That may suggest that generally it is easier for people to confess to being (subjectively) *stupid* than claiming to be *wise*. The *never* option is the most frequently chosen one for both positive and negative evaluations presented in writing (32% and 49% respectively). Thus, if one wants to express their opinion concerning their own mental or intellectual condition, they should do it to themselves, and if publicly – rather in speech than in writing. What is written seems to be more reliable, justified and persistent, presumably. However, if someone calls themselves stupid it may be a signal to others that a

problem of a serious nature may arise. It can be just a mere reaction to a particular situation, but when repeated should draw the interlocutors' attention (<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/understanding-childrens-challenges/talking-with-your-child/experts-weigh-in-what-should-i-do-when-my-child-says-im-dumb>).

All in all, the present research evoked some further research questions, pre-eminently whether similar mechanisms governing the use of the adjectives in question discussed above are visible in other cultures and by the same token languages. Furthermore, if there are any contextual or situational restrictions or tendencies concerning the use of other selected adjectives referring to mental abilities of a human being. And last but not least, whether translation of such seemingly pervasive and theoretically semantically unequivocal terms can impose any problems while interpreting a text.

4. Discussion

The language we use, apart from numerous other functions, helps us to assign value to our interlocutors and influences our interactions. When we call our conversationalist *stupid* or *wise*, we actually structure the whole (hopefully still ongoing) conversation. The words have a huge impact on the world and especially human intercourse.

Speaking out of any type of judgment (conscious or unconscious) can close a conversation, while non-judgmental language keeps the communication open and we may have a better understanding of the situation. Ravishankar (2020) even claims that using *stupid*, *insane*, *crazy*, *lame*, or *dumb*, in a conversation you have (even if unwillingly or unknowingly) participated in spreading ableist language. You also perform some kind of discrimination.

In Poland, the attitude towards using the word *stupid* is presumably not that negative. However, the observation of the society and the results of the aforementioned questionnaire may

imply that it is not socially expected and acceptable to talk negatively about people you know well or you are close to, like your family or friends, but the same attitude of the society applies to praising ourselves publicly.

The inclination to refer to people known from the media as stupid may be connected with the general tendency to ridicule and criticise people of whom we have little knowledge or mostly assumptions or false evidence and whom we envy; or maybe they (or the media) provide us with sufficient evidence to pronounce such negative judgements.

Moreover, it was expected that the respondents would show the tendencies visible in the Polish society and actually they did. For instance, it is not common and well received if a person implies that he or she has high intellectual value. Evaluating your knowledge or mental abilities low is definitely more common. If we call someone or something wise, there is obviously some kind of an assumption that they should really deserve this opinion. It should be based on some evidence or at least such an opinion should be shared by a group of people. Then the positive evaluation appears justified. That may be the reason why it is the result of human activity, e.g. a decision, a book, etc., that was most often referred to as wise. When something is accepted, published, presented it must have a high value. Unless people have reason to believe otherwise. On the other hand, people are more prone to use the adjective *stupid* to characterise a person's behaviour, especially at a particular moment. It seems not to be long-lasting, it may be the result of some coincidence, thus there is some hope for the change. This might prove that generally people are not so eager to judge others in a negative way.

Anyway, what is of unquestionable importance in the social intercourse is the respect to the person or even the thing judged, though still judged, as this is the function of the evaluative adjectives.

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