

NON-STANDARD DICTIONARY DEFINITIONS: WHAT THEY CANNOT TELL NATIVE SPEAKERS OF POLISH¹

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Abstract: Recently, a new defining format has been gaining in popularity in abstract noun entries of monolingual English learners' dictionaries: a single-clause *when*-definition. The present study attempts to investigate the role of the definition of this format, placed in a complete microstructure, in conveying information on the syntactic class of nominal headwords. To achieve this aim, tests were designed and run on several groups of Polish learners of English at the intermediate level. Balanced parallel forms were employed, where single-clause *when*-definitions were contrasted with their closest analytical analogs in full dictionary entries. It was found that both the new and the classical definition formats resulted in comparably frequent correct POS identification of the headword nouns. This is in stark contrast to the results yielded by Lew & Dziemianko's research (in press), which has inspired the present analysis, where the definition formats were investigated in isolation from other components of the microstructure. Analysis of the consultation behaviour suggests that the syntactic label was the only element of the entry consulted with any frequency, which suggests that the subjects may have approached the task as a metalexigraphic exercise.

Keywords: monolingual dictionaries, learner's dictionaries, definition format, dictionary entry interpretation, syntactic information, folk defining, language learners, dictionary use.

Non-standard dictionary definitions: What they cannot tell native speakers of Polish

1. Introduction

In the course of over 70 years since its rise in the 1930s, the monolingual dictionary designed to meet the needs of foreign learners of English has undergone a significant transformation. In fact, it is possible to venture a statement that the learners' dictionaries available at the beginning of the 21st century could not have been dreamed of by Harold Palmer, Michael West or Albert S. Hornby, referred to today as the founding fathers of EFL lexicography (Cowie 1999: 3). It is not only the electronic form of such dictionaries that should be mentioned at this point. Apart from the CD ROM routinely attached to a printed edition, there are many innovations, though maybe less obvious to the uninitiated, that have made the traditional, paper pedagogical dictionary of English more friendly to foreign learners of the language.

In keeping with the call expressed, for example, by Rundell (1988) or Battenburg (1991), such a dictionary does not boil down to a device for decoding language, a function typical of native speakers' dictionaries, but it also facilitates encoding and can even serve as a language learning resource. That is why it offers (audible) pronunciation, examples, a wealth of syntactic information, collocations, idioms, usage labels or study pages.

Still, the functional quality of learners' dictionaries is determined also by users' reference skills. The latter, however, are largely beyond the scope of lexicographers' influence, and, more often than not, attempts to develop them turn out to be futile (Swanepoel 2000). By the same token, dictionary users' conservatism and their rudimentary reference skills have an important bearing on EFL dictionary design, which turns out to be much easier to change than the habits of a human being. As Rundell (1998: 330) put it, it "would be unwise to produce dictionaries that relied on a more active engage-

ment by users". The redesign approach, by contrast, has already borne fruit in many forms, itemized by Swanepoel (2000: 407). Among the already prevalent innovative design features he lists a limited defining vocabulary, simplification of metalanguage, the use of full-sentence definitions and corpus-based contextual paraphrases as a defining technique, or the application of definitional schemata to ensure consistency in defining the meaning of headwords representing the same grammatical class. He also appreciates the extensive indication of paradigmatic sense relations of headwords, nonverbal illustrations and extended usage notes disambiguating semantically related lexical items. The problem of findability, in turn, is more and more appropriately tackled by ordering senses on the basis of corpus frequency data as well as the use of signposts or guidewords (Swanepoel 2000: 407).

Unfortunately, it is very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to find empirical justification for some of the changes. Undoubtedly, publishing houses try to excel and attract potential purchasers by new, attractive features of their products. Thus, market competition can surely be seen as an incentive for dictionary publishers to alter and hopefully – improve, their offer. Yet, few modifications to the learners' dictionary design are supported by published results of experimental research on how learners *really* use dictionaries, and too many seem to be inspired by common sense, intuition or informed opinion. Swanepoel himself (2000: 407) asks, and answers, a fundamental question: "On what do lexicographers base the perceived FQ [functional quality] of the innovative features that they have incorporated in the revised editions of MLD's? Again the answer is: We don't exactly know". What he calls for is more large-scale, replicable and experimental research on dictionary use. In fact, as he puts it, "we have no research that taps ... as it were, the real assumptions/principles that guide lexicographers' design decisions when they are compiling dictionaries ... At most, one could consider the proposed principles as sources of hypotheses that have to be tested empirically" (Swanepoel 2000: 408).

While some of them have already been tested, there is still a need for research that would precede and determine, rather than follow and verify, redesign decisions; all the more so because improving learners' dictionaries is not an easy task. It should be remembered that such dictionaries cannot be reduced to an inventory of lexical items with their meanings, and even definitions themselves are much more than just loci of semantic information. As Maingay and Rundell (1987: 132) note,

[i]t would be all too convenient if we could make a neat rule about the distribution of information by saying ... for instance that the definition should take care of the semantic features leaving the examples to illustrate points of syntax, style and collocation; or in other words, that the definition should tell you what it means and the example should show you how it is used. This approach, however, would not address the real problem of the EFL dictionary entry.

The real problem is that the look-up process is a complicated procedure with many steps (Scholfield 1982, Hartmann 1989, Bogaards 1993), and that dictionary users want to find what they need very fast and understand it (Rundell 1998: 330). Moreover, in view of space constraints and the general inadequacy of users' reference skills, lexicographers cannot afford to assign each micro-structural component one function only, but some entry components need to serve several functions. Importantly, it is not only examples that are recognized as multifunctional (Cowie 1983, Drysdale 1987). Likewise, definitions (synonymous, analytical or contextual ones)² convey information not only on meaning, but also the grammatical category of the headword. A synonym or the genus in an analytical definition should belong to the same category as the word being defined (Kipfer 1984, Landau 1989). Likewise, the first part of a contextual definition leaves no doubt as to the syntactic category of the definiendum (Hanks 1993).

The fact that lexicographic definitions perform more than one function has been demonstrated empirically. Laufer (1993) shows that definitions not only contribute more to comprehension than examples, but also facilitate production to the same extent as the latter. It seems therefore largely inappropriate to see definitions as a source of semantic information only.

Yet, the development of defining techniques in monolingual learners' dictionaries did not stop at the stage of the contextual definition, an innovative design feature in COBUILD1, used consistently in further editions of the dictionary, and, occasionally, other pedagogical dictionaries. In recent years, a few English monolingual learners' dictionaries have introduced a new lexicographic definition format for certain abstract nouns, that of a single-clause *when*-definition, as in the following definition of the word **ascent** taken from CALD2: 'when someone starts to become successful'.³ Although the new format is recent indeed, the potential of the single-clause *when*-definition for conveying information on the part of speech of nominal headwords has already inspired some empirical research. Lew & Dziemianko (in press) show that the new type of definition, which cannot be substituted for the word being defined, proves much less useful as a source of part of speech information on nouns than the analytical definition, which is usually substitutable. This conclusion follows from an experimental study involving 129 upper-intermediate or advanced Polish students of English. Their ability to recognize the basic grammatical class of nominal headwords defined by single-clause *when*-definitions and analytical definitions was measured in two tasks, which consisted in supplying Polish equivalents of the English lemmata and composing English sentences with the use of the words defined. The results yielded by the two operationalizations were similar inasmuch as in both of them analytical definitions proved to be twice as useful as single-clause *when*-definitions.⁴ Still, the design of the study does not take account of sources of grammatical information other than definitions, such as grammar codes or examples, which have been shown

to play a role in the process of extracting syntactic information from the microstructure (Bogaards & Van der Kloot 2002; Dziemianko 2006). The present investigation tries to answer the question whether the disadvantage of the single-clause *when*-definition as a source of information on the grammatical class of nominal headword compared with the analytical definition is still practically important in entries with a richer microstructure. Moreover, it sets out to provide an answer with the help of subjects who are not university students of English, and thus may be assumed to be largely ignorant of English lexicographic traditions.⁵

2. The hypothesis

The single-clause *when*-definition has not yet served extensively as a basis for empirical research, and the study by Lew & Dziemianko (in press) appears to be the only experimental one where the usefulness of the definition format for conveying part of speech information was analyzed and juxtaposed with the usefulness of analytical definitions in this regard. Still, in the absence of any complete microstructure in that study, the null hypothesis of no statistically significant difference in the usefulness for conveying part of speech information between the single-clause *when*-definition and the analytical definition, when placed in an entry, is adopted below.

3. Design and materials

In order to investigate the effect of definition format (analytical versus single-clause *when*-definitions) on the recognition of the part of speech of headwords, test sheets were prepared, each containing a list of twenty headwords with their definitions. Half of these were target items: carefully selected nonce words pos-

ing as nouns. The remaining ten items, actual low frequency adjectives and verbs with their definitions, were included to make the target items less salient as well as to conceal the fact that they were nonce words. The order of the target items as well as their position relative to the distractors was randomized. Five target items were accompanied by *when*-definitions, the other five by analytical definitions. Two versions of the test sheet were prepared, differing in the assignment of definition format to specific target items, so that each subject was exposed to both *when*-definitions and analytical definitions, and each target item was presented with both definition formats in equal measure, producing a counter-balanced design.

The use of nonce words for target headwords was to ensure that subjects did not have any knowledge of the items that could help them to derive the POS information. Care was taken to select constructions morphologically neutral with respect to the word-formation patterns typical of a specific syntactic class, so as not to provide our subjects with any undesirable hints in this regard.

Definitions of all test items were based on those given in the most popular English learners' dictionaries (CALD1, CALD2, CLD, LDOCE4, MEDAL, OALDCE6, OALDCE7), modified in order to make the paired *when*-definitions and NP-definitions maximally parallel except for the tested criterial feature. The target items and definitions were the same as in Lew & Dziemianko (in press). Unlike in our previous study, however, part-of-speech labels, other functional labels, mainly syntactic codes, example sentences and, where applicable, usage labels were supplied, and the task was different.

4. Subjects

All data were collected in April and May 2005 from 238 native speakers of Polish receiving EFL instruction in 23 different learner

groups from various schools around Poland, most being at the intermediate level of proficiency in English.

5. Procedure

The subjects were asked to complete a single multiple-choice task using the entries provided. For each entry, a choice of three Polish equivalents were given, all related in that they represented three different parts of speech, i.e., adjectives, nouns and verbs, in this order, all derived from the same root. The subjects were also asked to underline those parts of the entries which they were referring to while engaged in the task. 45 minutes were allowed for the completion of the test. All responses were entered into a relational database and fed into a statistics package for further processing.

6. Results

6.1 Syntactic class identification accuracy

Overall, as well as detailed per-item syntactic class identification accuracy rates for all target items are presented in Table 1.

item definition	3	4	7	8	10	13	14	16	17	19	Total
analytical	82.5%	85.6%	88.3%	88.1%	85.0%	83.3%	86.4%	88.1%	83.3%	90.7%	86.1%
when	84.7%	83.3%	88.1%	85.8%	85.6%	86.4%	83.3%	86.7%	83.1%	86.7%	85.4%
Overall	83.6%	84.5%	88.2%	87.0%	85.3%	84.9%	84.9%	87.4%	83.2%	88.7%	85.8%

Table 1: Syntactic class identification accuracy rates for all target noun items⁶

The overall figures show that exposure to analytical definitions resulted in correct syntactic class identification across all

our target items in 86.1% of cases, while the corresponding accuracy rate for single-clause *when*-definitions stands at 85.4%. This effect of definition type turned out to be nonsignificant (one-way ANOVA, $F_{(1,236)} = 0.73$, $p = ns$). But, in fact, the difference in syntactic class identification accuracy rates in our sample between the two definition formats is so small that it would be of no practical significance, even if statistically significant. This stands in stark contrast with the results of our original study (Lew & Dziemianko in press), where the accuracy rate for analytical definitions was much higher compared to single-clause *when*-definitions (66.7% versus 33.2%, respectively, for the supply-equivalent task; and 53,6% versus 26,6%, respectively, for the compose-sentence task). A graph combining the results of the two studies is given in Figure 1 (the present study being referred to as Study Two, our original study as Study One).

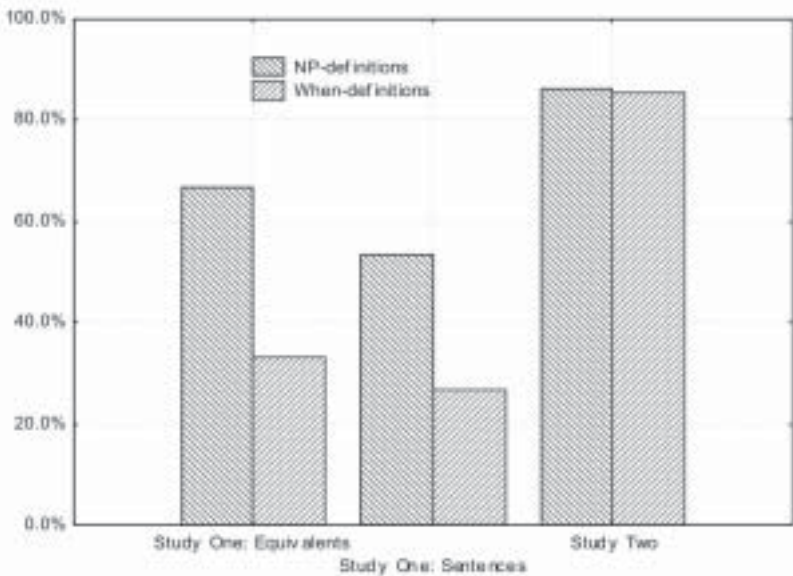


Figure 1: Syntactic class identification accuracy rates for all target noun items

As can be seen from the above figures, overall accuracy rates were also distinctly higher than in our original study, even though the proficiency level of the subjects was lower in the present study. This may be due to the more syntax-focused tasks and/or the richer microstructure in the present study.

Table 1 above reveals a remarkable degree of consistency in accuracy rates across items, all of them fitting within the 83%-89% range. Again, this is very much unlike in our original study, where accuracy rates ranged from 23% to 96% across items.

6.2 Elements of the entry consulted

As the subjects were asked to underline those parts of each entry that they referred to during the completion of the task, it is possible to assess the relative frequency with which the subjects made use of the microstructural elements present in our test entries (to the extent that the underlining reflected the true consultation behaviour of our subjects). The reported consultation rates for noun entries are given in Table 2, giving the mean number (across all subjects) of consultations of syntactic labels (in noun entries the label was always *noun*), syntactic codes (in noun entries the codes were [U], [C], or [U, C]), definitions, and examples, respectively.

Entry element	Mean consultations per 10 entries	Valid N
Syntactic label (<i>noun</i>)	7.43	238
Syntactic code (e.g. [U])	0.34	238
Definition	1.11	238
Example	1.52	238

Table 2: Mean number of consultations of the four microstructural entry elements for all Noun items (out of 10)

Data in Table 2 show that syntactic labels were consulted very often indeed: in over 7 noun entries out of 10 on average. This means that an average subject underlined the syntactic label in 7 or

8 entries out of all 10 noun entries (though see Table 3 for a detailed distribution). The remaining three elements of the microstructure were consulted far less frequently. This includes the definition, which was consulted for only 1 in 10 noun entries, on average (see Table 3 for a detailed distribution).

The detailed distribution of the consultation patterns for syntactic labels and definitions, being the most important in the current context, is given in Table 3.

proportion of noun items for which specific entry elements were consulted	syntactic labels consulted		definitions consulted	
	subjects	% subjects	subjects	% subjects
none	36	15.1	162	68.1
1 out of 10	5	2.1	22	9.2
2 out of 10	3	1.3	14	5.9
3 out of 10	2	0.8	11	4.6
4 out of 10	10	4.2	6	2.5
5 out of 10	6	2.5	5	2.1
6 out of 10	6	2.5	5	2.1
7 out of 10	6	2.5	7	2.9
8 out of 10	7	2.9	3	1.3
9 out of 10	23	9.7	1	0.4
all 10 items	134	56.3	2	0.8

Table 3: Detailed breakdown of consultation patterns for syntactic labels and definitions in noun entries

Data in Table 3 reveal that the distribution of consultation patterns of syntactic labels is trimodal, with over half of the subjects (134 or 56.3%) underlining syntactic labels in all ten entries. The second most numerous group (36 subjects, 15.1%) did not underline any labels at all. The third modal value is 4 entries out of 10 (10 subjects, 4.2%).

With the data available on the consultation rates of the different microstructural elements of the entries, it is possible to investigate the interrelationship of these rates with the accuracy of syntactic class identification, and also amongst the consultation pat-

terns for different elements themselves. An appropriate measure for such interrelationships is the Spearman rank order correlation coefficient. The relevant matrix of correlation coefficients for noun entries is given in Table 4.

	Accuracy	Label	Code	Definition	Example
Accuracy score for nouns	1.000	0.340*	-0.020	-0.093	-0.201*
Syntactic label (<i>noun</i>)	0.340*	1.000	-0.018	-0.337*	-0.536*
Syntactic code (e.g. [C, U])	-0.020	-0.018	1.000	0.214*	0.114
Definition	-0.093	-0.337*	0.214*	1.000	0.409*
Example	-0.201*	-0.536*	0.114	0.409*	1.000

Table 4: Spearman correlations between accuracy of syntactic class identification for noun entries and consultation rates for microstructural elements (marked correlations are significant at $p < 0.05$)

An analysis of the correlation figures in Table 4 reveals that:

Firstly, consultation of syntactic labels correlates positively with syntactic accuracy identification. This means that those who underlined syntactic labels tended to be more accurate in their judgments of syntactic class of nouns.

Secondly, consultation of definitions displays a marginal (and nonsignificant) negative correlation with syntactic accuracy identification.

Thirdly, consultation of examples correlates negatively with syntactic accuracy identification. This effect is open to at least two interpretations: either there is a the direct negative effect of examples on accuracy, or else focusing on the example distracts subject from the more useful syntactic label.

In terms of the correlations between the consultation rates themselves, those who consulted the definition also tended to consult the example, but were less likely to consult the syntactic label or code.

7. Discussion and conclusions

The results of this first follow-up study to Lew & Dziemianko (in press) throw new light on the issue of the role of single-clause *when*-definitions in conveying syntactic class information. Unlike in our first study, no significant differences were found between subjects' performance with, on the one hand, entries with analytical definitions, and, on the other, those with single-clause *when*-definitions. We must now look at the differences between the two studies in order to offer our best interpretation as to the reasons why the two studies have produced such radically contrasting results.

Firstly, in our follow-up study we have included a richer microstructure, the crucial difference lying in the inclusion of syntactic class labels (*verb, noun, adj.*). By doing so, we have provided a rather explicit indication of syntactic class in the entry microstructure for those dictionary users who are able to identify and use it appropriately.

Secondly, the task employed in the present study is radically different: we have now asked the subjects to select between three Polish equivalents, all derivatives from the same root differing only in their syntactic class. Thus, semantic information is now given to the subjects (except that part thereof which regularly correlates with syntactic class membership). Furthermore, subjects no longer have to engage their mental lexicon in a search for Polish equivalents, nor do they have to compose any sentences or other construction. All in all, they can focus on syntactic class membership alone.

Thus, some experimental conditions in the present study are more naturalistic (a fuller microstructure), and others are less naturalistic (a rather artificial task focused on syntactic class identification), than the experimental conditions in Lew & Dziemianko (in press). Overall, the modifications to the design of our original study all conspire to facilitate the extraction of correct syntactic class information. In fact, there is yet another element that facilitates syntactic class extraction: we have not included any phonetic tran-

scription in our microstructure, thus placing the syntactic class label in a salient position immediately following the lemma sign.

In our original study we emphasized the need

to test how a (more) complete microstructure influences the role of definition type in part of speech recognition, and in particular – whether single-clause *when*-definitions are then still much less helpful to dictionary users than analytical ones, or whether users can somehow sense the problem and compensate for it by referring to other elements of the article microstructure for guidance on syntactic class. (Lew & Dziemianko in press: no page)

Our present study gives a tentative answer to the question we posed then: our dictionary users have indeed been able to compensate for the syntactic inadequacy of single-clause *when*-definitions by referring to other elements of the microstructure, but under conditions strongly conducive to such compensation, rather more strongly than is the case in typical situations of dictionary consultation. There is good reason to believe that our subjects approached the task not so much in terms of normal dictionary consultation, but rather as a kind of *metalexigraphic* task somewhat along the lines of *Let's see if you know where syntactic class information is located in a dictionary entry*. Records of the subjects' consultation behaviour appear to give strong support to such an interpretation: syntactic class labels were by far the most frequently consulted elements of the microstructure, very much more so than the remaining elements, including definitions. In fact, our subjects largely ignored everything but the syntactic labels. This pattern of consultation appears to diverge from that found in previous studies of dictionary consultation for syntactic information, notably Dziemianko (2006), who found examples and definitions to be frequently consulted sources of syntactic information.

Our present results may be seen as mildly encouraging to lexicographers since they suggest that Polish intermediate students of English, who could not have been very familiar with the English lexicographic tradition, apparently possess fairly satisfactory reference skills (of the type relevant in the present context, at least), as they can extract syntactic class information from entries with high accuracy. In doing so, they are able to fully compensate for the syntactic-information vacuity (demonstrated in our original study) of the new single-clause *when*-definitions. We would still like to know, though, if such compensation would remain to be effective under less syntax-focused task conditions, and when the salience of the syntactic class label were reduced by separating it from the lemma sign with the phonetic transcription in its customary location. Another follow-up study is needed to fully clarify this issue.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the EURALEX 2006 congress in Turin.
2. MacFarquhar and Richards (1983: 113) consider such definitions to be the most frequent in dictionaries.
3. This single-clause definition format, which can be found in CALD1, CALD2, CLD and LDOCE4, should not be confused with the more elaborate two-clause *when*-definition, also known as contextual or full-sentence definition, first used in COBUILD1. For a comparison of the form of the two definition types, a discussion of their origin and more on theoretical background see Lew & Dziemianko (in press).
4. Details are given in Section 6. below.

5. Students' of English familiarity with this lexicographic tradition could have influenced the results obtained in the previous study (Lew & Dziemianko, in press).
6. The numbers in the first row of the table indicate the position of the target items on the test sheet.

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APPENDIX

Initial fragments of the two versions of test sheets with the instruction and its English translation

Version 1

Instrukcja: Poniżej znajdziesz 20 s³ów angielskich. S¹ to s³owa trudne, w większości nie b^{êd¹ Ci znane, ale dla ka^zdego z nich podano po znaku „▶” has³o s³ownikowe. Na podstawie informacji w ha^çe dla ka^zdego ze s³ów angielskich **wyberz** jeden z trzech odpowiedników polskich podanych pod has³em, *a*, *b*, lub *c*, który, Twoim zdaniem, najlepiej pasuje do danego s³owa. Ponadto **podkr^æ** t^ê informacj^ê w ha^çe, która pomog³a Ci podj¹æ decyzj^ê i udzieliæ odpowiedzi.}

1	forlorn ▶ <i>adj.</i> (<i>literary</i>) seeming lonely and unhappy: <i>She looked a forlorn figure standing at the bus stop</i> a. ζ a ³ osny b. ζ a ³ o ζ æ c. ζ a ³ owæ
2	emblazon ▶ <i>verb</i> [T] [usually passive] to print or decorate something in a very noticeable way: <i>The sponsor's name is emblazoned on the players' shirts</i> a. ozdobny b. ozdoba c. ozdabiaæ
3	stinch ▶ <i>noun</i> [U, C] a formal decision to no longer believe in something, live in a particular way etc: <i>The talks were dependent on a stinch of terrorism.</i> a. porzucony b. porzucenie c. porzuciæ
4	quasant ▶ <i>noun</i> [U] when you cannot make a decision: <i>There were weeks of quasant about who would go and when</i> a. wahaj ¹ cy si ^ê b. wahanie si ^ê c. . wahaæ si ^ê

Version 2

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 | forlorn ▶ <i>adj. (literary)</i> seeming lonely and unhappy: <i>She looked a forlorn figure standing at the bus stop.</i>
a. ζa ³ osny b. ζa ³ oœæ c. ζa ³ owaæ |
| 2 | emblazon ▶ <i>verb</i> [T] [usually passive] to print or decorate something in a very noticeable way: <i>The sponsor's name is emblazoned on the players' shirts.</i>
a. ozdobny b. ozdoba c. ozdabiaæ |
| 3 | stinch ▶ <i>noun</i> [U, C] when someone makes a formal decision to no longer believe in something, live in a particular way etc: <i>The talks were dependent on a stinch of terrorism.</i>
a. porzucony b. porzucenie c. porzuciaæ |
| 4 | quasant ▶ <i>noun</i> [U] the state of being unable to decide: <i>There were weeks of quasant about who would go and when.</i>
a. wahaj ¹ cy siê b. wahanie siê c. . wahaæ siê |

English translation of the instruction:

Instruction: Below you will find 20 English words. They are hard words, so you will not be familiar with most of them, but each of these words is supplied with a dictionary entry after the “▶” symbol. Using the dictionary information, **select** one of three Polish equivalents given under *a*, *b*, or *c*, that which best fits the entry word. Also, **underline** those parts of each entry which has helped you decide and answer the question