



Components of Emotional Meaning: A sourcebook

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CHAPTER

36 Happiness and contentment in English and Polish

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Abstract

The GRID paradigm was employed to compare the differences between the conceptualizations of American English terms *contentment* and *happiness* with those of their respective Polish counterparts, *zadowolenie* and *szczęście*. Consistent with the prediction that the basic emotion status of happiness would restrict cross-linguistic variation, the sole difference between *szczęście* and *happiness* was the higher ratings of the former over the latter on the AROUSAL features. As expected, there were more cross-linguistic differences between *zadowolenie* and *contentment*, with *zadowolenie* being more associated with relatively more positive VALENCE, and higher POWER, AROUSAL and NOVELTY than *contentment*. This pattern of results is consistent with dictionary definitions showing that *zadowolenie* is characterized by elements of satisfaction and pleasure. The relatively closer proximity of *zadowolenie* to pleasure is supported by further analyses on the GRID data showing higher correlations between *zadowolenie* and *szczęście* than between *contentment* and *happiness*.

Keywords: [contentment](#), [happiness](#), [zadowolenie](#), [szczęście](#), [cross-linguistic](#), [valence](#), [power](#), [arousal](#), [novelty](#)

Subject: [Developmental Psychology](#), [Social Psychology](#)

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36.1 Introduction

Many studies show that emotion terms do not translate well across languages. For example, Wierzbicka (2009) explains that many languages do not have an equivalent to the English word *happy*. The focus of this study was to investigate the degree to which the American English terms *happiness* and *contentment* correspond to the widely accepted Polish equivalents *szczęście* and *zadowolenie*. Our everyday experience with the two languages as well as the lexicographic material from monolingual and bilingual dictionaries drew our attention to a certain asymmetry between the putative equivalents. For example, according to a leading English–Polish Dictionary (*Oxford–PWN English–Polish and Polish–English Dictionary*, 2002), the Polish equivalent of English *happiness* is *szczęście*, while the entry for *szczęście* offers the English equivalents *happiness* on the one hand and *luck* and *fortune* on the other. The word *contentment* corresponds to *zadowolenie*, while the English equivalents of Polish *zadowolenie* are *satisfaction* and *contentment*. As for definitions in monolingual dictionaries, the Polish *Uniwersalny Słownik Języka Polskiego* (2003) foregrounds an element of pleasure in *zadowolenie* and *satisfakcja*, while Polish *szczęście* has at least three different senses (polysemous): *happiness*, *good fate*, and *good luck*. The *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (2003) explains that *happiness*, “as a derivative of *happy* is used to describe feeling or showing *pleasure* or *contentment*,” whereas *content*, and by extension *contentment*, is “a state of peaceful happiness”; *satisfaction* is defined as “fulfilment of one’s wishes, expectations, or needs, or the pleasure derived from this.”

Considering the vagueness and a certain circularity present in dictionary definitions, the GRID instrument was employed to provide further insight into the differences that might exist between *szczęście* and *happiness*, and between *zadowolenie* and *contentment*. The results are reported within the framework of the universal dimensional structure of emotions identified in the GRID data, which comprises four dimensions: VALENCE, POWER, AROUSAL, and NOVELTY (cf. Chapter 7 for more details).

p. 478 There is a paucity of evidence on the differences in dimensional patterning that might exist between *szczęście* and *happiness*, and between *zadowolenie* and *contentment*. However, differences between the latter two emotions might be predicted on the basis of the above dictionary definitions ↵ that state that *zadowolenie*, in contrast to *contentment*, is associated more with *satisfaction* and *pleasure*. Shaver et al. (1987) showed that *happiness*, *satisfaction*, and *pleasure* were associated with a relatively more positive VALENCE than *contentment*, and from this we can deduce that the elements of satisfaction and pleasure in *zadowolenie* will result in *zadowolenie* being evaluated relatively more positively than its English counterpart, *contentment*. Shaver et al. (1987) also found little difference between *contentment* and *satisfaction* in terms of potency, which is equivalent to the POWER dimension in GRID. We therefore do not expect the relatively greater association between *zadowolenie* and *satisfaction* to produce any significant differences between *zadowolenie* and *contentment* on the POWER dimension in the present study.

The differences between *szczęście* and *happiness* are likely to be fewer than between *zadowolenie* and *contentment*, because, as Shaver et al. (1987) explain, there is more cross-cultural equivalence between basic emotions such as happiness due to their biological grounding. Nevertheless, the element of luck and fortune implicit in *szczęście*, but not in *happiness*, suggests that there will be differences between *szczęście* and *happiness* on some of the four underlying dimensions, although it is difficult to predict in which of the dimensions they might be located.

On the basis of the element of pleasure implicit in *zadowolenie*, and the natural association between pleasure and happiness in general, it can be predicted that there will be a higher correlation between *zadowolenie* and *szczęście* than between their English counterparts, *contentment* and *happiness*.

36.2 GRID data

The mean ages and gender ratios of the participants for each of the emotion terms were as follows: *zadowolenie* (20 Polish-speaking participants; mean age 26.1 years, 17 females); *contentment* (30 American English-speaking participants; mean age 18.3 years, 21 females); *szczęście* (20 Polish-speaking participants; mean age 23.5 years, 16 females); *happiness* (32 American English-speaking participants; mean age 18.4 years, 23 females).

Analyses were performed to compare the GRID features that were associated with the four dimensions identified in the GRID data: VALENCE, POWER, AROUSAL, and NOVELTY. Tables SM 1 to 4² show the features that loaded on these dimensions following principal component analysis (with VARIMAX rotation). Mean values of the features that loaded on these dimensions were obtained for each participant, producing a mean value of each of the four dimensions for each participant. These mean values of the four dimensions comprised the dependent variables of a MANOVA that had two between-subjects variables (emotion: happiness vs contentment; language: Polish vs American English). There was a significant main effect of language, $F(4, 94) = 7.9$, $p < 0.0001$, showing that the Polish-speaking participants rated the features as comparatively more likely to occur than American English-speaking participants (means of 6.18 and 5.62, respectively). There was also a significant main effect of emotion, $F(4, 94) = 9.9$, $p < 0.0001$, showing that the feature ratings of happiness were associated with a higher likelihood of occurrence than the feature ratings of contentment (means of 6.16 and 5.64, respectively). There was also a significant interaction between language and emotion, $F(4, 94) = 8.46$, $p < 0.0001$. This showed that whereas the feature ratings of contentment were associated with a higher likelihood of occurrence for the Polish-speaking participants compared with the American English-speaking participants (means of 6.13 and 5.15, respectively), there was less difference between the Polish-speaking and American English-speaking participants for happiness (means of 6.23 and 6.09, respectively).

The results for VALENCE showed a significant main effect for language, $F(1, 97) = 10.32$, $p < 0.01$. The Polish-speaking participants rated the VALENCE features as more likely to occur than the American English-speaking participants (means of 7.19 and 6.68, respectively). There was also a significant interaction between language and emotion, $F(1, 97) = 9$, $p < 0.01$. This was broken down with contrasts comparing VALENCE ratings for Polish contentment (*zadowolenie*), English contentment (*contentment*), Polish happiness (*szczęście*), and English happiness (*happiness*). These ratings showed a significant difference between *zadowolenie* and *contentment*, $F(1, 48) = 7$, $p < 0.05$. *Zadowolenie* was characterized by a relatively higher degree of perceived positive VALENCE than *contentment* (means of 7.33 and 6.35, respectively). There were no significant differences between *szczęście* and *happiness* on the VALENCE dimension.

The results for POWER showed a significant main effect for language, $F(1, 97) = 4.39$, $p < 0.05$. The Polish-speaking participants rated the POWER features as more likely to occur than the American English-speaking participants (means of 5.95 and 5.65, respectively). There was also a significant interaction between language and emotion, $F(1, 97) = 22.25$, $p < 0.001$. This was broken down with contrasts comparing POWER ratings for the four words. These ratings showed a significant difference between Polish contentment (*zadowolenie*) and English contentment, $F(1, 48) = 25.59$, $p < 0.001$. *Zadowolenie* was relatively more associated with experiences of high POWER than *contentment* (means of 6.14 and 5.18, respectively). There were no significant differences between *szczęście* and *happiness* on the POWER dimension.

The results for AROUSAL showed a significant main effect for language, $F(1, 97) = 17.21$, $p < 0.001$. The Polish-speaking participants rated the AROUSAL features as more likely to occur than the American English-speaking participants (means of 6.1 and 5.11, respectively). There was also a significant main effect for emotion, $F(1, 97) = 34.26$, $p < 0.001$. Happiness was characterized by a relatively higher degree of perceived AROUSAL than contentment (means of 6.3 and 4.9, respectively). Contrasts showed that this effect was similar for both languages. There was a significant difference between *szczęście* and *happiness*, $F(1, 49) = 7.9$, $p < 0.01$. *Szczęście* was relatively more associated with experiences of higher AROUSAL than *happiness* (means of 6.72 and 5.88,

respectively). There was also a significant difference between *zadowolenie* and *contentment*, $F(1, 48) = 9.33$, $p < 0.01$. *Zadowolenie* was characterized by a relatively higher degree of perceived AROUSAL than *contentment* (means of 5.47 and 4.33, respectively).

There was a significant main effect of language on the NOVELTY dimension, $F(1, 97) = 7.93$, $p < 0.01$. The Polish-speaking participants rated these features as more likely to occur than the American English-speaking participants (means of 5.49 and 5.03, respectively). There was also a significant interaction between language and emotion, $F(1, 97) = 6.03$, $p < 0.05$. This was broken down with contrasts comparing NOVELTY ratings for the four terms. These ratings showed a significant difference between *zadowolenie* and *contentment*, $F(1, 48) = 12$, $p < 0.01$. *Zadowolenie* was relatively more associated with experiences of higher unpredictability than *contentment* (means of 5.57 and 4.72, respectively). There were no significant differences between *szczęście* and *happiness* on the NOVELTY dimension.

Finally, recall that, on the basis of the common association of *zadowolenie* and *szczęście* with pleasure, it was predicted that there would be a higher correlation between *zadowolenie* and *szczęście* than between *contentment* and *happiness*. Pearson correlations were performed on the mean values of the complete profile of GRID features between *zadowolenie* and *szczęście*, and between *contentment* and *happiness*. Pearson correlations were additionally performed on the mean values of the features that loaded on each of the four dimensions. It can be seen in Table 36.1 that the relatively stronger correlation between *zadowolenie* and *szczęście* was more pronounced for these four dimensions than for the complete profile of features.

Table 36.1 Correlations (*zadowolenie*–*szczęście*, *contentment*–*happiness*)

	Zadowolenie–szczęście	Contentment–happiness
Complete profile of GRID features	0.742**	0.72**
VALENCE features	0.791**	0.649**
POWER features	0.636**	0.475*
AROUSAL features	0.694**	0.618*
NOVELTY features	0.828**	0.441 (ns)

Note: * correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed); ** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Summarizing the GRID results, it was found that *zadowolenie* was relatively more associated with experiences of higher VALENCE, POWER, AROUSAL, and NOVELTY than *contentment*. *Szczęście* was characterized by a relatively higher degree of perceived AROUSAL than *happiness*. The higher correlation between *zadowolenie* and *szczęście* than between *contentment* and *happiness* is consistent with the relatively greater degree of pleasure associated with *zadowolenie* than *contentment*.

36.3 Discussion and conclusions

As predicted, *zadowolenie* was more positively evaluated than *contentment*. Recall that, according to dictionary definitions, *zadowolenie* is associated with pleasure and satisfaction. When this is considered in the light of Shaver et al.'s (1987) finding that *pleasure* and *satisfaction* are relatively more positively evaluated, it would appear that these elements are responsible for the more positive VALENCE of *zadowolenie* over *contentment*.

Contrary to our prediction that there would be no difference between *zadowolenie* and *contentment* in terms of POWER, it was found that *zadowolenie* was more associated with a higher degree of POWER than *contentment*. A moment's reflection, however, on the GRID features that comprise high POWER (e.g., "increased volume of voice," "feeling dominant," "speaking faster," and "wanting to act, whatever action it might be") indicate that one would expect *zadowolenie*, following the energizing effect of its association with pleasure and elements of happiness, to be relatively more associated with these features than *contentment*. Further research is clearly necessary to gain a better understanding of the relationship between *zadowolenie* and *contentment* in terms of POWER.

Differences between the Polish and English representations of contentment also provide an explanation of the more unpredictable nature of *zadowolenie* relative to *contentment*. This is connected with the fact that the noun *zadowolenie* is used much more frequently in Polish than *contentment* is in English, and also in more varied contexts. The Polish adjectives *zadowolony/-a/-e*, and their grammatical case and number variants, are most frequently rendered as *glad* or *satisfied* and less often as *content*. *Satysfakcja* (i.e., the satisfaction that Polish dictionary definitions associate with *zadowolenie*) occurs more frequently than *contentment* in reactions to specific events. For example, one is more likely to feel *satysfakcja* than *zadowolenie* as a reaction to some personal or professional achievement that may involve some effort to attain. This has an element of unpredictability, as one is never certain of the outcome of such occasions before the event. This can be contrasted with the more long-term, less sudden state of peaceful happiness, tranquillity, or well-being that characterizes *contentment*.

p. 481 As predicted on the basis of happiness being more of a basic emotion than contentment (Shaver et al., 1987), there were fewer differences between *szczęście* and *happiness* than between *zadowolenie* and *contentment*. In fact, there was only one notable difference between them, namely the higher ratings of *szczęście* than *happiness* on the AROUSAL features. This is consistent with the polysemy of *szczęście*, between happiness and luck, as luck can be associated with energy and activation. It seems Polish *szczęście* is characterized by higher levels of activation and energy and appears to be a more intense emotion than *happiness*. In this sense, Polish *szczęście* appears to be similar to the French *bonheur*, German *Glück* and Italian *felicità*, which, in comparison to the weaker English *happiness*, express "a common European concept" of an emotion that "fills a human being to overflowing, leaving no room for further desires or wishes" (Wierzbicka, 1992a, p. 299).

A picture which evolves from the discussion presents a fairly complex network of English–Polish correspondences in the domain of happiness and contentment. There exist no one-to-one equivalents in this respect, which, based on the results of our investigation of other emotion concepts across languages, is rather the rule. Attempts to identify one-word equivalents usually fail. A certain approximation toward the complexity of English–Polish equivalence in the domain of happiness and contentment is presented in Figure 36.1.

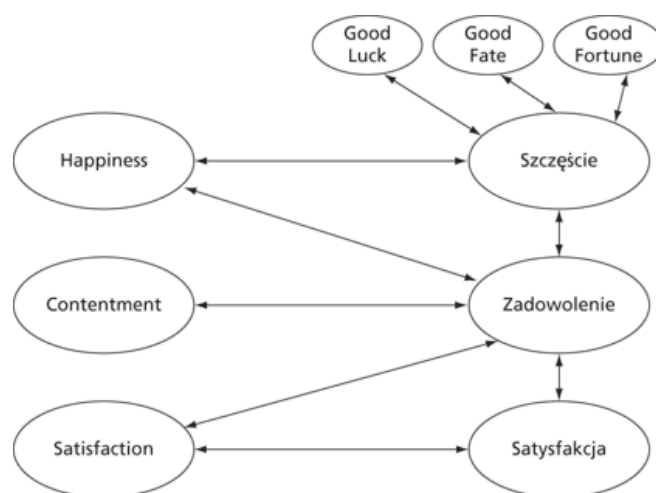


Figure 36.1 Relationship between Polish and English happiness, contentment, and satisfaction.

As can be seen from Figure 36.1, the relationship between *happiness* and *szczęście* is only partial due to the polysemy of the Polish form, which is ambiguous between happiness, good luck, good fate, and good fortune. A Polish speaker using this form most often activates a blend of these meanings rather than one crisp concept. English *happiness* is also partly equivalent to Polish *zadowolenie*, particularly in politeness formulas, whereas Polish *zadowolenie* in turn (which is used in many diverse contexts), also partly corresponds to English *contentment* and *satisfaction*. The latter is a close equivalent to Polish *satysfakcja*, both referring to a scenario in which an experiencer develops this emotion as a result of a positively completed task or achievement.

Notes

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- 2 All supplementary materials (SM) are available at the GRID website: <http://www.affective-sciences.org/GRID>. See Appendix 1 (“Availability”) for further details.