

Single-clause *When*-definitions: Take Three

Robert Lew, Anna Dziemianko

Department of Lexicography and Lexicology, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

(rlew@amu.edu.pl, danna@ifa.amu.edu.pl)

ABSTRACT: In our EURALEX 2006 contribution (Dziemianko and Lew 2006), we focused on the practice of defining certain abstract nouns by means of a *when*-clause, which seems to have gained much popularity in recent years in some major monolingual English learners' dictionaries (MLDs). We tested the hypothesis that a definition of this format would fare worse than the classic analytical definition in terms of conveying information on the syntactic class of the lemma. Experiments with Polish high-intermediate and advanced learners of English provided strong empirical support for this hypothesis. However, the testing instruments employed in the 2006 study used a relatively restricted microstructure, with just headwords and definitions. In the present follow-up study, we attempt to verify the results using a more complete microstructure to assess the strength of the effect of single-clause *when*-definitions on syntactic class identification in the presence of other potential indicators of syntactic class.

1. INTRODUCTION

- ▶ The single-clause *when*-definition – a stand-alone relative clause introduced with the relative word *when*, e.g.:

re-noun - *when you are famous and a lot of people admire you for a special skill, achievement, or quality* (LDOCE online);

- ▶ present in English-language lexicography since the 16th and 17th centuries (Osselton 2007; Stein 2011),
- ▶ employed in spontaneous folk defining (Fabiszewski-Jaworski 2011),
- ▶ currently used in MLDs to define abstract nouns.

Advantages:

- ▶ less 'pedantic' than the genus-differentia structure,
- ▶ shorter than full-sentence definitions (Hanks 1987).

Disadvantages:

- ▶ no overt information on the syntactic category of the word being defined; cf. the traditional analytical definition of *renown*:

re-noun - *the state of being famous and admired for a special skill or achievement* (MED online).

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES INTO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF *WHEN*-DEFINITIONS FOR CONVEYING PART-OF-SPEECH INFORMATION

STUDY 1: Lew and Dziemianko (2006a)

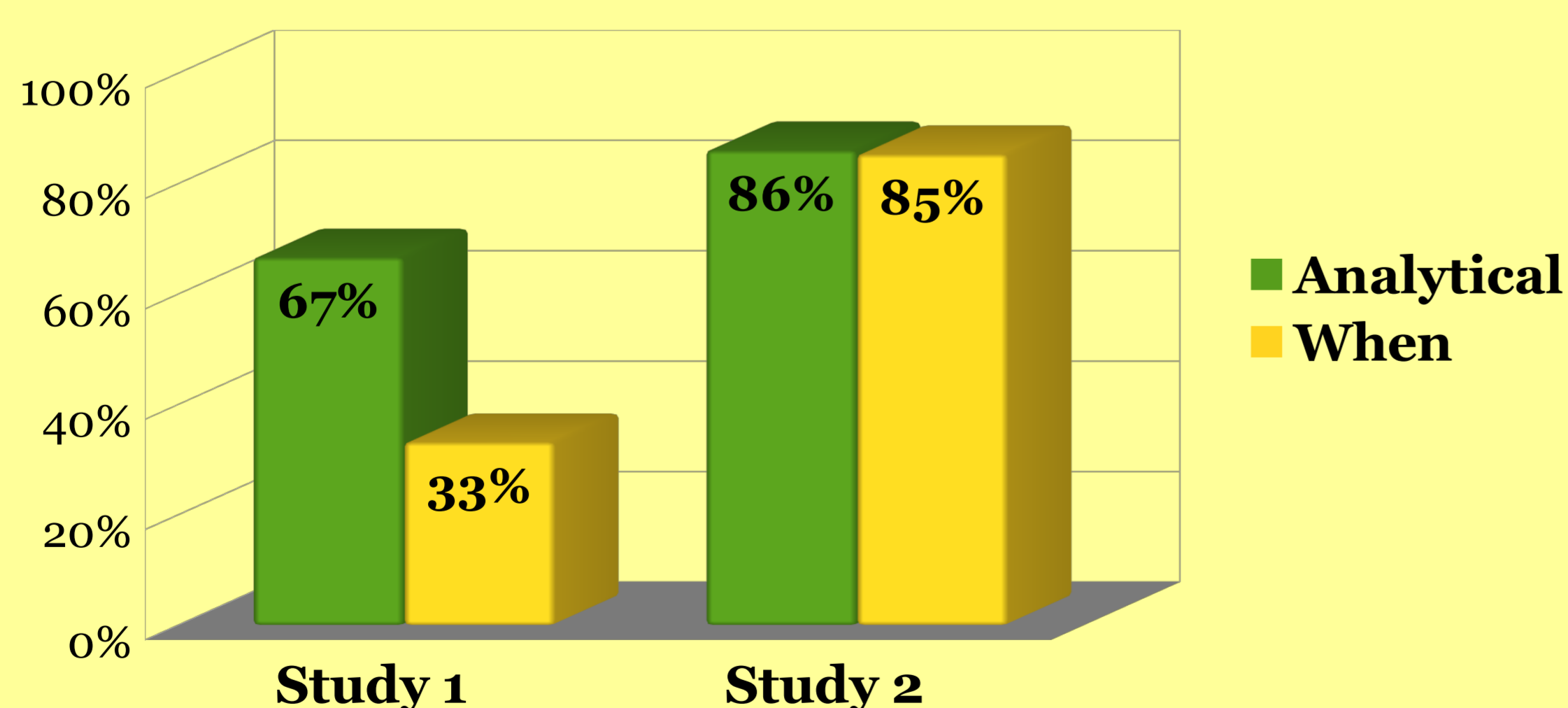
TASK: 129 Polish advanced students of English were presented with definitions in two formats: single-clause *when* and analytical, and asked to supply Polish translations of the invented headwords.

RESULTS: Compared with the analytical definition, the *when*-definition did very poorly: only a third of the syntactic classes were recognized correctly.

STUDY 2: Lew and Dziemianko (2006b), Dziemianko and Lew (2006)

TASK: 238 Polish intermediate learners of English were shown more complete microstructures (with POS and usage labels, codes, examples) and asked to choose one out of three Polish translations of the invented headwords; the translations differed in their syntactic class. Participants were asked to underline helpful entry components.

RESULTS: Students using both definition formats were equally successful in identifying the syntactic class of the headword.



CONCLUSIONS: The part-of-speech label was mostly underlined, but the definition was not processed attentively. The task was seen as *metalexigraphic* and the study did not reveal much about the effect of the format of the definition itself.

REFERENCES

- Dziemianko, Anna and Robert Lew 2006. 'When You Are Explaining the Meaning of a Word: The Effect of Abstract Noun Definition Format on Syntactic Class Identification.' in Corino, Elisa, Carla Marengo and Cristina Onesti (eds.), *Atti Del XII Congresso Di Lessicografia*, Torino, 6-9 Settembre 2006. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 857-863.
- Fabiszewski-Jaworski, Mateusz 2011. 'Spontaneous Defining by Native Speakers of English.' in Akasu, Kaoru and Satoru Uchida (eds.), *Asialex2011 Proceedings Lexicography: Theoretical and Practical Perspectives*. Kyoto: Asian Association for Lexicography, 102-109.
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3. STUDY 3

3.1. AIM

To verify the findings from the previous two studies in more naturalistic conditions – using a meaning-focused task (translation into L1) and a complete microstructure of test entries, with phonetic transcription in its usual place (thereby reducing the salience of POS labels, cf. Study 2).

3.2. MATERIALS

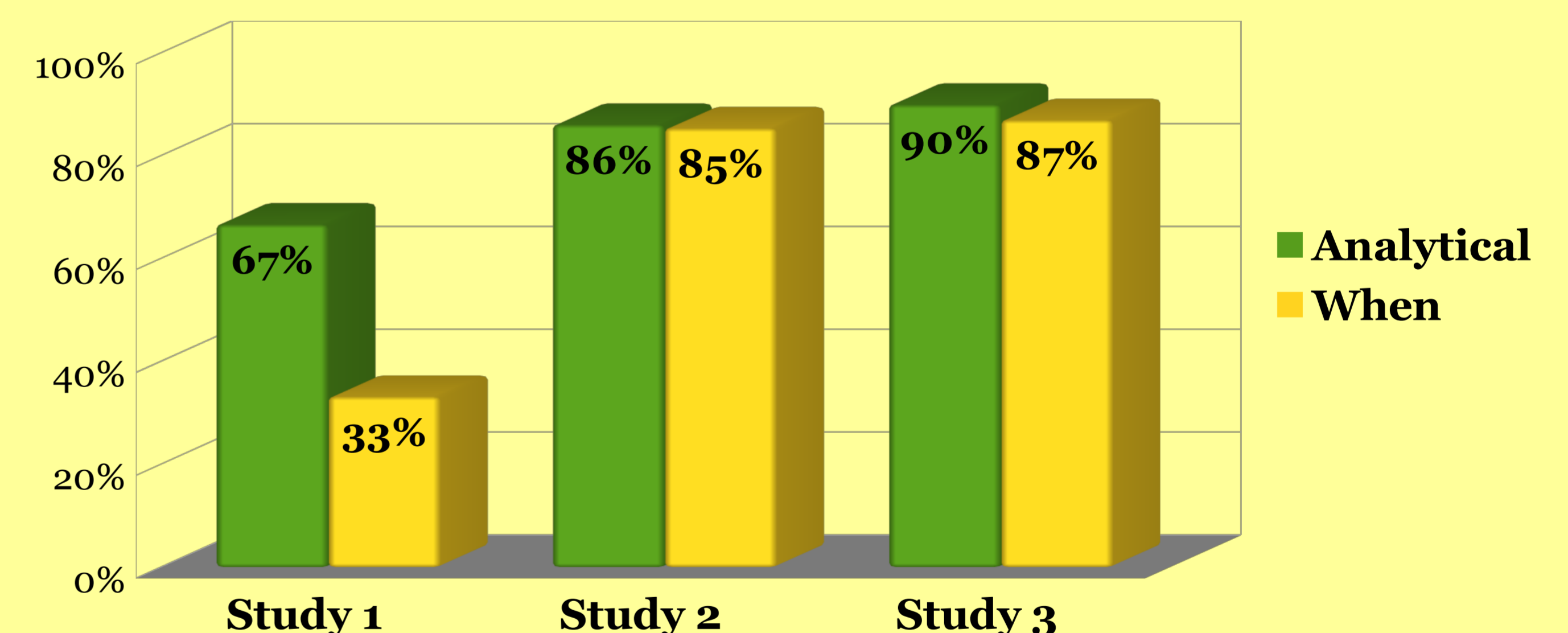
- a sheet with 20 entries (10 target noun entries + 10 filler verb and adjective entries to lower the salience of the target items),
- 5 target noun definitions in the analytical format, the other 5 in the single-clause *when*-definition format,
- 2 test forms with reversed assignment of definition type to target item (to minimize item and subject effects),
- headwords replaced with invented, morphologically neutral non-words.

3.3. PARTICIPANTS AND TASK

134 Polish learners of English (upper-intermediate to advanced) were instructed to give a Polish equivalent based on experimental dictionary entries (cf. Study 1).

3.4. SCORING

- a Polish noun given as an equivalent counted as a correctly recognized item,
- for each subject, POS recognition rates computed separately for each defining format and per-subject differences calculated to better control subject-related variation and high overall recognition rates.



4. RESULTS

- difference of 3 percentage points in favour of the analytical definition,
- marginally significant (one-way GLM ANOVA, $F(1,132)=3.95$, $p=.049$),
- little *practical* significance; very small effect size (partial $\eta^2 = .03$),

Someone or something right after the word *when* (e.g.: *when someone is easily upset by things that people say*) – particularly misleading.

5. CONCLUSIONS

- ▶ a small *practical* effect of definition type on POS recognition of abstract nouns in a naturalistic dictionary entry and a meaning-based task,
- ▶ an important compensatory role of a complete microstructure in POS identification (example sentences and POS labels),
- ▶ the compensatory effect only attested with proficient users – better avoid single-clause *when*-definitions (esp. *when + someone/something*),
- ▶ *when*-definitions only acceptable for advanced learners and when embedded in a rich, complete microstructure.

- Lew, Robert and Anna Dziemianko 2006a. 'A New Type of Folk-Inspired Definition in English Monolingual Learners' Dictionaries and Its Usefulness for Conveying Syntactic Information.' *JLL* 19.3: 225-242.
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- Stein, Gabriele 2011. 'The Linking of Lemma to Gloss in Elyot's Dictionary (1538).' in Timofeeva, Olga and Tanja Säily (eds.), *Words in Dictionaries and History. Essays in Honour of R.W. Meconchie*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 55-79.