



Speaking about the preborn. How specific terms used in the abortion debate reflect attitudes and (de)mentalization☆



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ABSTRACT

According to the Whorfian approach, language reflects and shapes cognitive processes, as well as attitudes. In this article, we analyze how people's preference to use one of the two terms used in the abortion discourse: "fetus" and "unborn child" can reveal their attitudes toward abortion and reflect deeper processes of (de)mentalization of the preborn. Study 1, which utilized a convenience sample of Polish internet users ($N = 102$), showed that people who used anthropomorphizing language opposed elective abortion more firmly than those using dementalizing language. The opposition to abortion among people using anthropomorphizing language could not be attributed to their religiosity, nor to their conservatism. Study 2, conducted with a more diverse sample of adult Poles recruited through an on-line research panel ($N = 248$), found that these differences were mediated by the emotionality ascribed to the preborn. Both studies provide evidence for the role of specific terms as reflections of deeper attitudes about the ontological nature of certain beings.

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1. Introduction

In 2004 the US Senate introduced the "Unborn Victims of Violence Act" in which the term *child*, who is in utero was used to describe "a member of the species *homo sapiens*, at any stage of development, who is carried in the womb" (Holzapfel, 2001: 434). The establishment of the law elicited a broad discussion on the humanness of the preborn and his/her moral and legal rights (Alongi, 2008). From the pro-choice perspective, the Act was creating a legal framework for re-criminalizing abortion. Moreover, pro-choice activists argued the Act provided an important legal argument that could threaten women's rights to liberty and privacy, which are protected under the 14th Amendment. Consequently, it created a possibility for conservatives to overturn the Roe v. Wade decision, the ruling protecting the right to seek an abortion in the US.

The usage of specific terms to describe the preborn, such as in the above-mentioned example, seems to reflect the attitudes and ideological positions of the speakers. A similar case occurred during a highly publicized medical abortion performed in a Polish hospital. While right-wing journalists reported that "the *child* was crying and dying in

front of the doctors' eyes", the doctors performing the abortion refuted these allegations by stating that "the *fetus*' lungs in the 24th week of pregnancy are incapable of normal breathing" (Zuchowicz, 2016: 1). It appears that the terms used in these statements were chosen not at random, but rather used purposefully to legitimize the argumentative goals of the speakers. In this regard, the language used to denote the preborn can never be fully objective.

The heated abortion debate provides an interesting example of the link between language use and attitudes of the speaker. Previous evidence indicates that minor differences in linguistic forms, or even grammatical forms (e.g. "Jewish owners" vs. "Jews, owners") can elicit significant changes in attitudes among listeners (Graf, Bilewicz, Finell, & Geschke, 2013). Related research in the domain of abortion attitudes focuses on differences in the terms "fetus" and the "unborn child" (e.g. Alston, 1990; Graff, 2008; Joseph, 2009; Matuchniak-Krasuska, 1991; Mikołajczak & Bilewicz, 2015; Tan, 2004). These studies show that people presented with a passage of text containing anthropomorphizing language about the preborn (as reflected in the term "unborn child") responded with greater opposition to abortion than people presented with dehumanizing language (as reflected in the term "fetus"; Simon & Xenos, 2004).

Importantly, this persuasive effect was elicited by greater ascriptions of humanness to the preborn among people presented with the anthropomorphizing term (Mikołajczak & Bilewicz, 2015). All these studies focused on the effects of exposure to specific lexical markers. It is known, however, that preference for specific linguistic or grammatical forms could be considered a part of an individual's characteristics (Giles &

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Powesland, 1975), reflecting one's values or political attitudes. For example, the use of nouns as opposed to adjectives by conservatives (e.g. "gays" vs. "gay people") is indicative of higher need for structure and lower integrative complexity among conservatives (Cichocka, Bilewicz, Jost, Marrouch, & Witkowska, 2016). Still, to our knowledge, no previous research has tested whether one's preference for a specific term to describe the preborn explains abortion attitudes beyond other well-known correlates (i.e., religiosity and conservatism), reflecting deeper anthropological beliefs about the nature of the preborn.

1.1. (De)mentalizing of the Preborn

Social psychological research provides some initial evidence on laypeople's appraisals of the mental capacities of the preborn (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007; MacInnis, MacLean, & Hodson, 2014). Gray et al. (2007) determined that mind perception lies along two dimensions: experience, which refers to traits such as the ability to feel hunger, fear or pleasure, and agency, which refers to traits such as the ability to plan, think and communicate. Further, they established that attributions of experience and agency have an impact on moral judgments: individuals high on the agency dimension are perceived as moral agents—capable of doing right or wrong, while individuals high on experience are perceived as moral patients—targets of right or wrong (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Interestingly, Gray et al. (2007) found that a 7-week-old fetus was rated as relatively high (i.e., comparable to an adult in a persistent vegetative state) on the experience dimension, yet very low (i.e., comparable to a frog) on the agency dimension. This can suggest that, although the preborn is not perceived as a moral agent, it can be seen as a moral patient and, therefore, easily imagined as an innocent, suffering victim.

Several lines of research have analyzed perceptions of pre-born humanity, which is certainly related to perceptions of mental capacities. For example, MacInnis et al. (2014) considered three types of the humanization measures: *blatant dehumanization* (measured with a direct question about the extent to which participants considered the preborn to be human), *subtle measure of human uniqueness* (the degree to which the preborn can be characterized by traits and emotions considered uniquely human, such as disgust, guilt, humbleness, or politeness) and *human nature* (the degree to which the preborn can be characterized by emotions that people share with other living beings, such as affection, fear, or sadness). Denial of human uniqueness or human nature traits leads to different type of dehumanization: animalistic and mechanistic, respectively (Haslam, 2006). Contrary to their predictions, neither explicit nor subtle measures of perceived humanness accounted for differences between conservative *pro-life* and liberal *pro-choice* attitudes toward abortion. In a recent study, Mikołajczak and Bilewicz (2015) found that denial of human nature, but not of human uniqueness, was an antecedent of *pro-choice* attitudes, as opposed to the *pro-life* stance. That is, the traits that *pro-choice* advocates deny to the preborn are the traits which distinguish living creatures from automata, not the traits which distinguish humans from other living creatures.

This is an important finding given that the denial of human uniqueness can be considered a process of dementalization – perceiving a target as incapable of experiencing any inner states. Kofta and Slawuta (2013) define dementalization as the inability to experience any mental states, such as emotions, intentions, thoughts, and imaginations. They claim that dementalization can be observed in people's attributions of emotional life, and that is a distinctive process from *infrahumanization* (Leyens et al., 2001). When people *infrahumanize* others they deny secondary emotions, the ones that are unique to humans. People dementalizing others deny any emotions – also the more basic, primary ones (Kofta & Slawuta, 2013).

The opposite of dementalization is anthropomorphization – attributing mental states and capacities to inanimate objects (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Anthropomorphism is defined as the "tendency to imbue the real or imagined behavior of nonhuman agents with

humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions" (Epley et al., 2007: 864). The theory posits that people are more likely to anthropomorphize other beings when anthropocentric knowledge is accessible and applicable. It is easy to imagine that, in the case of the preborn, this may happen because of ultrasound technology. According to Morgan (1997), when prospective parents use ultrasound to determine the sex of the preborn and employ that knowledge to name their child, they are "constructing" the preborn as a valued member of the family. In a similar vein, Mitchell and Georges (1997) analyzed sonographers' interactions with prospective parents showing that medical personnel typically "personalize" and "sentimentalize" ultrasounds with important implications for parents' notion of the preborn as a social actor.

We argue that the same process occurs with the usage of specific terms – namely "fetus" versus "child" – where each reflects a different lay anthropological view of the preborn. Previous research focused on the influence of specific terms on attitudes toward abortion (Mikołajczak & Bilewicz, 2015). We hypothesize that one's preference to use a given term can reflect more basic beliefs about the inner life of the preborn. Therefore, we expect that a person's preference to use dementalizing vs. anthropomorphizing terms can reflect his/her attitudes toward abortion, above and beyond other well-known correlates of abortion attitudes, such as conservatism, gender and religiosity (CBOS, 2011; Hodson & MacInnis, 2017; MacInnis et al., 2014).

1.2. The present research

In the present paper, we address the question of whether particular terms used to describe the preborn reflect corresponding perceptions and abortion-related attitudes. Following previous research (e.g., Mikołajczak & Bilewicz, 2015; Osborne & Davies, 2012), in the studies below we differentiate between the two types of abortion – traumatic and elective. While the former is performed because of an external *force majeure* (in the case of rape, genetic malfunctions, or threat to a woman's life), the latter is performed as a personal choice. This distinction is often reflected in different level of social support given to different types of abortion; abortion for medical or legal reasons is more widely accepted than the elective abortion (Craig, Kane, & Martinez, 2002). Moreover, it has been shown that the approval of each type of abortion attitudes is related to different types of beliefs and attitudes toward women (Osborne & Davies, 2012).

Two studies were conducted in Poland, where the traumatic versus elective abortion distinction lines up with the current distinction between abortions which are admissible and inadmissible by law (Criminal Code of the Republic Poland, 1997). In both studies, we tested whether abortion-related attitudes depend on people's preferences to use specific terms when describing prenatal-life, over and above two other well-established correlates of abortion attitudes: conservatism and religiosity (CBOS, 2010). To test these predictions, we presented participants with pictures depicting a preborn, and asked them to provide descriptions of what they saw. Subsequently, we measured their attitudes toward the legal (in)admissibility of abortion. Additionally, Study 2 explored the degree of emotional life (cf. dementalization; Kofta & Slawuta, 2013) ascribed to the preborn as a mechanism responsible for the observed relationships.

2. Study 1

The aim of the study was to test whether a preference for the dementalizing/anthropomorphizing term is related to people's attitudes concerning abortion. Specifically, we wanted to assess the relationship between such linguistic preferences and attitudes toward traumatic and elective types of abortion, when controlling for religiosity and conservatism.

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