Alternants of the voiced velar plosive in novel masculine diminutives in Polish
with the suffix \{-ek\}

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses data which indicate that there is variation in the behaviour of the stem-final voiced velar plosive in novel masculine diminutive forms in Polish formed with the suffix \{-ek\}, as in blog ‘blog’ and the competing forms blożek and blodżek. In both forms the plosive of the stem is subject to the so-called first velar palatalization, but while one of the forms exhibits the so-called spirantization, giving the voiced alveolar fricative, the other emerges with the voiced alveolar affricate. In the study reported on here, a list of potential diminutive forms was queried in the internet search engine Google Search. Polish orthography helped distinguish the alveolar consonants in question. Double quotation marks were used in each query to return exact matches.

As many as 30 of the potential pairs gave positive results for novel diminutives, of which 21 had at least 1 hit for the form with the affricate. The study also found the variation did not occur in established diminutives, some of which were common enough to be lemmas in dictionaries, and in diminutive-like forms whose denotational meaning did not match that of the alleged base. While most of the base forms were borrowings, the variation was found to apply to a few native words in the list, too.

The analysis did not find any strictly-phonological conditions which could facilitate the choice of either of the alveolar consonants in the diminutive forms.

The current findings are juxtaposed with the analysis given by Rubach (1984) of first velar palatalization and spirantization in Lexical Phonology and with the model of morphophonological palatalization replacements by Gussmann (2007). It is argued that spirantization is not a truly phonological regularity of Polish, and that Lexical Phonology is unable to explain the variation satisfactorily. Conversely, it is claimed that while Gussmann’s (2007) analysis does not predict that the type of data discussed here will ever appear, the palatalization replacement approach could, in principle, accommodate the new pattern of consonantal alternation.

Keywords: Polish, phonology, first velar palatalization, spirantization, diminutive