The *e~zero* alternation in Polish from the perspective of frequency and language use

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This paper examines the long-standing problem of the "ghost" vowel and the *e~zero* alternation in Polish from the perspective of language use and analogy. It will be demonstrated that the diachronic development as well as the synchronic patterns of the alternation depend on quantitative criteria, such as type and token frequency, which may trigger either proportional analogy or levelling. Generally speaking, high frequency words tolerate stem-alternation better than low frequency words. Likewise, the alternation is more salient and better preserved in large classes than in small ones. The two criteria cooperate and should be considered together, since they may come into conflict. For example, a class of *ek*-suffixed diminutives is very large, but their members are low frequency words.

The approach explains a number of puzzling facts concerning two paths of the historical evolution of the original yer: into an alternating ghost vowel, or into a non-alternating zero or e-vowel due to the levelling of the appropriate allomorph. For example, the historical feminine suffixes, such as *-ka, -da, -ba, -na* and *–va*, were all yer-initial and should therefore all exhibit the *e~zero* alternation within their declensional paradigms. However, each suffix shows an individual development. In the case of *-ka*, the alternation was not only preserved, but also extended onto some non-suffixed nouns, including loanwords, unlike in the case of *-da*, where it was completely eliminated. The remaining suffixes preserved the alternation to various degrees depending on category size and salience of a minor (less frequent) allomorph.

The usage-based approach adopted in the present analysis also explains a synchronic paradox of certain stems which seem to contain a ghost vowel when some of their word-forms are considered, e.g. *taśma* 'tape-nom.', *tasiemka* 'tape-dim.-nom.', but they seem not to contain a ghost vowel when other word-forms are considered, e.g. *taśm* 'tapes-gen.' (cf. the "regular" alternating pattern: *torba* 'bag-nom.', *torebka* 'bag-dim.-nom.', *toreb* 'bags-gen.').

The data for this paper have been drawn from a number of sources, including a frequency dictionary, an index a tergo, a large electronic corpus, as well as etymological dictionaries and other historical sources.