

A SHORT SURVEY OF DIMINUTIVES IN SLOVAK AND ENGLISH

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Abstract: The article deals with the issues of diminutive structures in the Slovak and English languages. It surveys their forms and ways of usage, providing means of their formation and situations in which diminutives tend to occur in the two languages whether projecting an endearing or derogatory meaning. In the article, the differences in usage between the two languages are pointed out. When discussing the English language, the Australian variety is given appropriate space due to the wealth of such forms, as opposed to American English; British English bears resemblance to Australian English in this respect. The survey provides preliminary material, compiled through personal observation, not yet methodically attested.

Key words: affective connotation, child-centered discourse, diminutives, hypocorisms

Introduction

Every language is charming in its own way. That charm is recognized through particular features typical of that particular language. A means by which a language can be considered ‘cute’ is the usage of diminutive forms of nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. Most often they are formed morphologically, by means of adding a derivational morpheme, yet analytical forms are also possible. Inasmuch as languages differ in the frequency of their occurrence or in the formation of these forms, “linguists have frequently observed that universal statements could be made about semantic aspects of the diminutive” (Jurafsky, 1993: 423). The connotations identified in diminutive forms are of affective nature and range from endearment to tenderness on the positive end of the semantics of diminutives; the negative connotations range from belittlement or deprecation to derogation and insult (ibid). When searching for the areas of usage of diminutives across languages, it seems that the most prominent one is hypocorisms closely followed by baby talk. This prompts the question what a semantically central sense of the diminutive construction is. Jurafsky (1993: 425) agrees with Heine et al. that the historically and semantically prior sense of the diminutive is the sense *child*, yet adds that most of the extensions of the category have linkage with the sense *small*. This may serve as reasoning why diminutives are so closely linked with child-centered discourse and why many languages use the diminutive form to name an offspring of an animal. The two meanings are obvious in the English language; in the Slovak language, diminutives are also used with intentions other than these two. The aim of the presented paper is to survey diminutive forms – their formation, areas of usage and connotations – in the Slovak and English languages.

1 A General Overview of Diminutives in Slovak

A user of Slovak can make use of adjectives like *maličký*, *malinký*, *malilinký*, which are diminutive forms of the adjective *malý* [*small/little*]. Such formations of a word convey a slight degree of the notional content of the root morpheme. Diminutive forms like these make the speech genteel and the relationship between interlocutors familiar. Using diminutives is most frequent in adult-child talk. Not only do names get a diminutive form on a regular basis but also most objects and activities can be referred to in this way to make the speech sound softer. Many languages apply the diminutive suffix only to nouns (English being the case), however, in Slovak, diminutive forms are found among other parts of speech, too. In Slovak, almost every noun, adjective or verb takes a diminutive suffix when talking to children (or like children). Slovak diminutive constructions range as follows; the forms in question are given in italics. A note on the translation of the following Slovak diminutive forms is necessary. In the following exemplification, not all Slovak diminutive forms are translated into

English; those that have an English alternative (e.g. an implicit superlative) are given. The English alternatives are not provided if the translation would produce incompatible structures causing confusion or false impression. In order to make the lexeme or phrase understandable, its base form is supplied.

- nouns – *bielunký sniežik* [white *snow*], *drobunký chrobáčik* [a tiny *bug*]
- adjectives – *bielunký* [*white*], *drobunký* [*tiny/wee*], *peknučké bábo* [a *cute* baby]
- adverbs – *o chvíľku* (in general) [in a little *while*], *pomalinky* (child-oriented talk) [*slowly*]
- verbs – *spinkat'* (child-oriented talk) [*sleep/go to bed*]
- greetings – *ahojky* [*hi*], *čauko* [*hi/bye*], *sevasky* [*hi/bye*], *pekny dník* [have a nice *day*]

In the case of adjective phrases, the diminutive adjective typically triggers the usage of a diminutive noun, as shown in the examples above.

The desired effect is achieved when the notional content of a diminutive form is intensified by means of adding an expressive suffix. Not all forms having a diminutive suffix are actually diminutive forms with affective connotation implying tenderness or endearment. In Slovak, many words have such a structure even though they are not meant to function as diminutives. They have a diminutive structure either for no specific reason or because they are somehow attributed to the 'smallness' of the object. The examples are as follows: *vreckový nožík* [a jack *knife*], *ponožky* [*socks*], *čajová lyžička* [a *teaspoon*], *vrecko na nohaviciach* [a pants *pocket*], *kolienka* [a type of *pasta*], *vianočný darček/stromček* [Christmas *gift/tree*]. If this is the case, the unmarked member is missing, that is to say no word form free of a diminutive suffix exists for denoting the objects of extra-linguistic reality named so.

The stylistic and semantic function depends on the context of usage and/or sphere of application. The communication registers typically include hypocorisms and baby talk. However, diminutive forms were spotted also in other areas. The following examples (personal observation) represent situations in which we would not use a diminutive construction as a rule; my assumption is that such constructions were used to:

a) give a friendly tone to an utterance

“Tu máte *zmluvku*.” /Union, the insurance company, 27/08/2008; client-oriented talk/ [a *contract*]

“stiahneme *bruško* a *zadoček*” /aerobic class/ [pull your *abdominals* (*tummy* and *bummy/botty*) in]

b) make an unfavorable condition less so

“prídem o *chvíľku*” /a door notice – be back *soon*/

c) talk about a topic which is one's expertise or familiar to the presenter and/or include the receiver into the assumed in-group

“odoberieme *krvičku*” /TV News, Markíza Channel – a coverage from a blood transfusion clinic, 23/08/2008/ [take *blood*]

“pripravíme si *cibuľku* a *mrkvičku*, do oleja vložíme *mäsko* z *kuriatka* a dusíme *štvrt'hodinku*. *Šalátik* zapijeme červeným *vínkom*.” /a TV cooking show/ [make *onion* and *carrots* ready, heat oil and add the *chicken pieces* to the pan, *sauté* for about 15 minutes. Serve it with red *wine*.]

d) emphasize a contrast to the context, provide a characteristic opposite to the context

85-kilová *osôbka* [85-kilo *person*]; *Kováčka* (for *Kováčová*; a *last name*)

All of them add to the informal tone of the transmitted message which is necessarily linked with expressiveness and emotionality paired up with subjectiveness. In example d), the effect of diminution is more derogatory than endearing, especially in the case of the diminutive form of a surname (*Kováčka*). In listing examples of overtly manifested diminutive forms not intended to show affection or intimacy, it is necessary to mention toponyms, i.e. names of cities, villages etc, like *Lesíček*, *Krásna Hôrka*, *Zlaté mestečko*, which are not rare in the Slovak language either.

The usage of diminutive structures is highly idiosyncratic. Many users indulge in such formations and use them abundantly, even contribute new structures prolifically. Others loath any sign of a word

layered with tenderness and exaggerated intimacy; they view the overusage of diminutive structures as displeasing and annoying. As an example might serve an article *Neserkat' sa so zdrobneninkami* posted on T-Station on 31st July, 2008 (Uhrová, 2007) presenting the usage of diminutives in a rather derogative way, viewing diminutives as unnecessary bulk and an overvalued feature of a language. The article called attention and encouraged 121 responses, for the most part approving of its content. Even so, a moderate usage of diminutives scattered reasonably in adult verbal production is acceptable, hence widespread among speakers of the Slovak language.

2 A General Overview of Diminutives in English

English, being an analytical language, does not pride itself in a wealth of diminutive forms. Their scarce distribution in the language may well be the reason why it is almost non-existent in the English language (especially in the American variety), except for baby talk. The mindset of native speakers of English is such that endearing names of everyday objects or activities do not make part of their verbal production; they are not very common in adult-adult speech. The primary reason for their usage is, as it were, implying smallness or endearment/tenderness towards a child.

The largest area in which diminutives are used is hypocorisms, when a suffix is added to the end of an already shortened name, typically of a child; yet it is not uncommon for an adult to be referred to by the diminutive especially by family and friends. “Usually meant affectionately, often times there are varying degrees of diminutives. A man is William to his acquaintances, Will to his friends, and Willie to his mother” (webspaces.webring.com). Slovak parents, grandparents or other relatives may view English as rather cold due to its incapability to form diminutive forms of names on a systematic basis. This is only a skin-deep impression; morphologically it is impossible to add a diminutive suffix to some names, but English has other means to compensate for the absence of morphological means. The emotional relationship is maintained through analytical structures, i.e. through pairing the names up with names of endearment like sweetie, honey, sweet pea, pumpkin, baby. In this way, the alternative to Slovak address form *Janka* may well be *Jane pumpkin/baby/sweetie*, etc.

In English, terminologically speaking, diminutives and hypocorisms are often used interchangeably, which might as well suggest the spheres of usage of these forms. It follows that diminutives can fall in three fields in English: endearing first names (nicknames) or address forms, objects of extralinguistic reality in baby talk, and names of baby animals (mostly in baby talk).

English diminutives are formed through shortening a word and adding a Scottish suffix *-ie*, or *-ee*, or *-ey*, *-y*. This suffix “gave rise to the most common type of diminutive ending used in modern-day English. It was applied at first only to names popular in Scotland. Christopher became Christie, which was originally a male name. James became Jamie. Later, the Scottish “ie” became popular in England and gave rise to Johnny from John, Gracie from Grace, and Rosie from Rose” (Carman, 2009). The same suffix is applied also to general nouns, which is the only word class in English that allows for such alteration. Some nouns may also take other suffixes, yet *-ie* seems to be the most frequent. As a result, the following forms occur in adult-child talk: *-y*, *-ie*: kitten – kitty, *-ette*: kitchen – kitchenette, *-let*: book – booklet, pig – piglet; *-ling*: duck – duckling; a *-kin*: lamb – lambkin (Vít, 2008). In addition to diminutive address forms like mommy/daddy/granny/grandma/grandpa/auntie and diminutive structures like *pacie* (for pacifier), *diapie* (for diaper) children analogically come up with new structures. The following examples are my personal observation: I want *milkie* (i.e. milk); Where is your *cuppie* (i.e. cup)? Don’t lie down there. Come on up, *uppie up* (intensified up).

Another alternative to Slovak morphologically formed diminutives is an analytically formed structure making use of lexemes *little* (little house) and *baby* (a baby elephant). If this is the case, one has to be aware of the difference between *little* and *small* since *little* has more meanings. The difference can be seen in the following examples:

- 1 They have a *small weekend house* in the woods. – the speaker provides factual information, size (i.e. how big the house is)
- 2 They spend their weekends in a *little house* in the woods. – the speaker implies his/her positive feelings about the house

The above lines, however, cannot be applied to all “Englishes”. The stated is for the most part true of American English. “Australian English is becoming well known for its quirky, larrikin, idiosyncratic creativeness. [...] A major strand in this intense creative layer of Australian English belongs to hypocorisms, also known as diminutives” (Sussex, 2004). A typical feature of Australian English is shortening words. Shortened or modified forms of words have become a regular part of Australian English morphology and can be found in all lexical fields – from general vocabulary (*hubbie* for husband, *barbie* for barbeque, *sunnies* for sunglasses, *cab-sav* for cabernet sauvignon, *arvie* for afternoon, *pollie* for politician, *yuppie* for young urban professional), through place names (*Brizzie* for Brisbane, *Gabba* for Wooloongabba), hotels (*The Wello* for The Wellington Hotel, *The Bouldie* for The Bouldecombe Hotel, *The YJ* for Young and Jackson’s) to sportspersons (*AB* for the cricketer Alan Border). Some shortened forms are even accepted into *Aussie* (for Australian) national dictionaries (Sussex, 2004). Diminutives form an open-class category in Australian English; the majority belongs into the informal and colloquial style, however, many are becoming part of a formal style.

It appears Australians do not view the usage of diminutives as irritating; quite on the contrary, they see it as a sign of having become a member of a particular in-group. Wierzbicka (1984) tags diminutives a solidarity code. Sussex (2004) explains, “...we use hypocoristics among ourselves as a way of indicating a good-humoured, but also quite serious, sharing of social space. Foreigners using hypocoristics can sound intrusive: hypocoristics require Australian phonology to be consistent and fully solidaristic. Furthermore, not using customary hypocoristics will sound formal, stilted or unnatural.” Even more, the usage of diminutives points to the laid-back social and linguistic behavior of Australians. Sussex (2004) maintains, “...we play with language creatively, and share this playfulness, at all levels of society. What other country would use *pollie* for both politicians and parrots?” Other examples (Sussex, 2004): *barbie* – barbiturates, Barbie dolls, and barbecues; *flattie* – flathead (a fish), flat-soled shoes, flatmate, flat tyre, a flat-bottomed boat. These examples raise a question of whether homonymy obscures communication in any way. Sussex (2004) assures, “such homonyms are part of word-play. They seldom cause problems of communication, and where there are collisions, they present welcome opportunities for punning.” I dare add another reason for having such an abundance of diminutives/hypocorisms, and that is the economy of the language, the shortening of words to make a talk smooth. Nevertheless, the stated reason is obviously not as sound, as it might seem at first, since if it were so, other Englishes would adopt this means of economizing, too.

In terms of vocabulary, grammar, or spelling, Australian English is generally understood as a combination of British and American varieties of English. Especially vocabulary is mainly British. For this reason, one needs to consider the usage of diminutives in British English as fairly common, too, though not as much so as it is in the Australian variety. Based on an interview with a native speaker of British English, the following are used commonly: *baccy* – tobacco, *backy* – to give a person a lift on a bike or motorcycle, *bezzie* – ‘best’ as in ‘bezzie mate’, *biccy* – biscuit, *bookies* – betting shop or bookmakers, *breakie* – for breakfast, *chippy* – carpenter or fish and chip shop, *choccie* – chocolate, *cuppa* – for cup of tea/coffee, *hippy/yuppy/nimby/dinky* – social groups, *leccie* – electric or electricity, *moby* – mobile phone, *offy* – an off-licence, *prezzie* – present /as in gift/, *rom-com* – romantic comedy, *sat-nav* – satellite navigation, *sparky* – electrician, *touchy feely* – to describe a tactile person or overly ‘hippy’ emotions, *wheelie* – to drive a car on two wheels or a bike on one wheel (Eddy, 2010). Some of the presented examples can be found in both British and Australian varieties of English.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that the primary meaning of diminutives is baby talk and secondary meaning – endearing address forms and establishing intimacy, whether in Slovak or English (Australian English being an exception). Slovak diminutives tend to be longer due to the addition of suffixes and not necessarily colloquial in style; diminution is part of grammar. English diminutives tend to be shorter than their base forms and rather colloquial in style; they are absent from the speech of news presenters or from other general-viewer-oriented situations. Australian English strays away from this generalization as many diminutive structures are making their way to formal discourse.

The most common ways in which diminutive suffixes are used are as follows; communicating these meanings can be done through diminutive structures in both languages, or in one, yet not in the other – as a matter of fact in Slovak but not in English:

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| - to talk to very young children: | vtáčik – a birdie |
| - to indicate something is small: | domček – a little house |
| - to indicate something is charming or endearing: | mamka – mommie |
| - to provide a nuance of meaning (esp. adj and adv): | máličko – a tiny little bit |
| - make an unfavorable condition less so: | o chvíľku – one second, please |
| - to give a friendly tone to a sentence: | tu je kávička – here's your coffee |
| - to indicate something is unimportant: | malá ranka – tiny ache |
| - to show solidarity: | manželík – a hubby |

The issue of diminutives falls in the field of morphopragmatics. It is a subbranch of linguistics in which morphology and pragmatics meet. A morphological device, a derivational morpheme, is used to project a pragmatic meaning. Largely dependent on the context, diminutives provide, most commonly, the way of establishing rapport, solidarity or friendliness. They make one's production emotional, expressive, and most of all subjective. The survey of their usage in the varieties of English shows that their occurrence differs in the three "Englishes" – American, British, and Australian. This serves as a springboard for the research into its usage, how and why, and with what frequency diminutive structures are used by either native or non-native speakers of English throughout the world.

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