

## **SOME CORRELATES BETWEEN DIMINUTIVE WORDS IN BULGARIAN, RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH**

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The paper deals with diminutiveness and presents an overview of the formation and meaning of diminutive words in Bulgarian and Russian. Based on L. Bossilkov and Ch. Grancharov's article "On the translation of the diminutive nouns from Bulgarian into English" (1982), the paper aims at showing language potentials for rendering diminutive words from Bulgarian and Russian into English. Using the approaches suggested by L. Bossilkov and Ch. Grancharov, I discuss typical cases of translation of diminutives.

**Key words:** diminutiveness, diminutive words

Diminutiveness in language has been studied widely in the past century or so<sup>1</sup> but still diminutives can be described as "funny animals" (Schneider 2003: 1). The reason for this is that although all languages have the category of diminutiveness and possess means of expressing it, they do not follow the same pattern and frequency of use. Diminutiveness is not a grammatical category; diminutives are a discourse marker with different pragmatic functions. The multifunctional character of diminutiveness adds to the problem. "Many researchers maintain that diminutives denote smallness, others argue that they denote smallness and have affective and evaluative connotations, and yet others claim that diminutives express affective and evaluative meaning alone" (Schneider 2003: 1).

Traditionally, the term 'diminutive' is used to refer to words which denote smallness and also to express an attitude which can be either positive or negative, i.e. either affectionate or derogatory, depending on the specific interplay of linguistic and situational factors in a given context

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<sup>1</sup> See Dementiev (1953), Dimitrova (1954 & 1959), Galkina-Fedoruk (1958), Andrejchin et al. (1962), Bratus (1969), Apresyan (1974), Krastev (1976), Dressler et al. (1990), Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994), Jurafsky (1996), Wierzbicka (1996), Baltova (2001), Schneider (2003), Zidarova (2004), Vaseva (2006), Averkova (2008), etc.

(Schneider 2003: 4). As Schneider suggests, “diminution” or “diminutivity” is a concept related to such concepts as quantification, qualification, modification, gradation, intensification, and evaluation’ (Schneider 2003: 4).

Diminutives are found in many languages. However, their formation, function and usage vary depending on different groups of languages. As a rule, Slavic languages, such as Bulgarian and Russian, possess different suffixes for expressing smallness and dearness respectively. Generally speaking, diminutives can be derived from all word classes, but there is difference in productivity and frequency of occurrence.

According to *Gramatika na savremennija bulgarski knizhoven ezik* (*Grammar of Modern Bulgarian Standard Language*, (1993)<sup>2</sup>, in Bulgarian the word classes which can be turned into diminutives are the noun, the verb, the adjective, the adverb, the numeral and the pronoun. Diminutive forms are derived by means of suffixation.

In Russian, diminutives can be formed from nouns, adjectives and adverbs. Verbal diminutive forms are also possible, although they are not typical for the language. In contrast to Bulgarian, Russian has no mechanism to derive diminutive forms from pronouns and numerals.

The noun is the word class which is most often diminished. There are a large number of diminutive suffixes with very different shades of meaning which can be classified according to gender, declension, degree of expressiveness, etc. Most diminutive suffixes are multifunctional and are not restricted to only one gender or declension. Bratus (1969) identifies two functions of the diminutive suffixes in Russian – the function of form-derivation and the function of word-derivation. In the first case, the diminutive suffix derives a new form of the same word by adding to it “supplementary expressive nuances: diminutiveness, tenderness, irony and so on” (Bratus 1969: 12). In the second case, the diminutive suffix derives a new word which becomes independent and has a different lexical meaning from the base word, e.g. “ручка двери (door-handle), ножка стола (table-leg), носик чайника (teapot spout), косточка сливы (plum-stone), хрусталик глаза (the lens of the eye)” (Bratus 1969: 13).

In what follows, I am going to discuss some cases of rendering diminutive words from Bulgarian and Russian into English<sup>3</sup>. As in English

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<sup>2</sup> All Bulgarian and Russian citations are translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> While the author mentions other researchers observations about the fact that Bulgarian and specifically Russian diminutive suffixes are extremely rich in expressing various meanings of subjective evaluation (cf. Bratus 1969), the discussion below tends to

diminutive words are mainly diminutive nouns derived by a suffix, diminutive nouns and their translation or rendering into English will be considered first. Bossilkov and Grancharov (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982) in their article “Za nyakoi osobenosti pri predavaneto na bulgarskite umalitelni imena na anglijski ezik” (“On some specifics of rendering of Bulgarian diminutives into English” ) propose four approaches to rendering Bulgarian diminutive nouns into English: 1) by the addition of diminutive nouns, 2) by diminutive adjectives, 3) by noun phrases and idiomatic expressions, and 4) by some specific diminutive words. They also discuss cases when diminutive nouns are not translated into English and give account of the reasons for that. Having in mind the genetic closeness of Bulgarian and Russian, I assume that the same approaches can be applied to Russian-English translations of diminutive nouns.

1) Rendering diminutives by using diminutive suffixes is not a productive way of translating diminutive nouns and is considered to be the most uncommon. It is due to the fact that English has very few diminutive suffixes which cannot render the great variety of meanings which Bulgarian and Russian diminutive suffixes have. Moreover, diminutive suffixes in English denote mainly small size or young age of an animal, which is scarcely sufficient to express all the meanings of Bulgarian and Russian diminutives. Naturally, when an appropriate diminutive suffix exists in English, it will be used accordingly. E.g. *прасенце* – piglet, *агънце* – lambkin, *кученце* – puppy; “Ела тук, *гълъбче*.” – “Come here, dearie” (Bossilkov, Grancharov, 1982: 40-41).

The translation of Russian diminutive nouns is even more difficult because Russian nouns may have more than one diminutive form. Bratus (1969) claims that there are more than thirty diminutive suffixes which can derive diminutive nouns in Russian with different emotive-expressive undercurrents. E.g. *книга* – *книжка* (with a nuance of scorn), *книжечка* (diminutive expressing smallness and tenderness), *книжонка* (disparaging diminutive), *книжоночка* (with condescension), *книжица* (with a nuance of irony and condescension) (Bratus 1969: 6). In English the noun “book” has only one form derived by a diminutive suffix which can be considered diminutive – *booklet*- but this form has no emotive-expressive nuances whatsoever. Depending on the lexical meaning of the original word, on the

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focus on possibilities of using diminutive forms (or forms of expressing diminutiveness – e.g. noun phrase) in English when rendering a source (Bulgarian or Russian) diminutive form without considering the actual meaning that the diminutive suffix introduces. Thus the correlations suggested here are primarily based on formal (and not semantic) criteria. – Editor’s note.

context, situation and intonation, the same diminutive suffix in Russian may have different shades of meaning. E.g. the diminutive suffix *-ик*: *животик* (with nuance of tenderness), *винтик* (smallness), *студентик* (scorn), *тинчик* (with nuance of irony) (Bratus 1969: 7).

2) Rendering diminutives by combination of nouns and adjectives. This is the most common way to translate a diminutive into English. The adjectives which are often used are “small” and “little”, as they usually render the idea of small size in English. There is a difference in meaning between these two adjectives. English usages of “little” include contempt (“you little so-and-so”, female (“the little woman”), partitive/individuating (“a little water”, “rest a little”), small type (“little finger” to mean specifically the pinkie), approximation (“a little tired”), and children (“my little ones”) (Jurafsky, 1996: 38). A distinction is made between “little”, which can occur in any of these senses, and “small”, which usually occurs only in the central sense – “small size”. All in all, “small” denotes “size”, while “little” has diminutive and emotional meanings. They are not interchangeable, and can even be combined in one phrase, for example, “a small quiet little street” (малка тиха уличка).

Another adjective that very often is used to render expressive diminutiveness in English is “poor”, which usually combines with an adjective expressing actual size and denotes animate referents. E.g. *сиромашинките* – poor young devils, *Найдичка* – poor little Nida. If used alone, “poor” may render sheer expressiveness, e.g. *добичето* – the poor beast. In Bulgarian, there exist many cases of redundancy, i.e. diminutiveness rendered by a diminutive suffix and combined with a diminutive adjective. This redundancy is usually not translated into English. E.g. *малки съндъчета* – small chests, *малко прозорче* – little window (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982: 41).<sup>4</sup> Still, the phrase *a tiny little window* is also possible in English.

Adjectives that can express small size or emotive diminutiveness in English are *fine*, *thin*, *light*, *slight*, *narrow*, *minute*, *tiny*, etc. E.g. *слаба искрица* – a tiny spark, *тъничка чертица* – a thin stroke, *малки мустачки* – minute moustache, *дъждец* – a fine rain, *тънка жичка* – a narrow strip (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982: 42).

3) Rendering diminutives by other noun phrases and idiomatic expressions. Bossilkov and Grancharov (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982)

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<sup>4</sup> All Bulgarian and English examples are taken from Bossilkov, Grancharov: 1982 (see Bibliography).

mention two types of noun phrases which can render diminutiveness in English: 1) N1 + of + N2 and 2) N1 + N2.

3.1) N1 + of + N2 – where N1 renders the idea of diminutiveness and modifies N2 which bears the lexical meaning, e.g. *железца* – bits of iron, *ветрец* – a gust of breeze/ breath of wind, *дъсчица* – a strip of wood, *ракийца* – a drink/sip of brandy, etc.

3.2) N1 + N2 – where N2 bears the diminutive meaning and modifies N1, e.g. *пастурчета* – shepherd boys, *селянчета* – peasant boys, *мече* – a bear cub, *кошче* – rubbish-basket, *ножче* – pocket-knife, etc. (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982: 43 – 44).

Rendering diminutives in English by means of an idiomatic expression is also possible. But the notion of diminutiveness is lost. E.g. ...всеки си правеше *сметчица*, надяваше се да му падне нещо. - ...everyone...was hopefully scheming how to cash on it; Да ми изгориш *душичката*? – You will be my ruin; ...ще ги помете като *перушинки* – it'll wipe them off the face of the earth (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982: 44).

4) Rendering diminutives by some specific words that bear the idea in their meaning. These are cases with objects of smaller size or young animals. While in Bulgarian and Russian diminutiveness of objects is rendered mainly by a diminutive suffix, in English there exist lexical words which have a connotation of small size as their component. E.g. *столче/стульчик* – stool, *листенце/листочек* – petal, *поточе/ручеек* – brook, *рекичка/речка* – stream, *горичка/лесок* – grove, *кърпичка/платочек* – handkerchief, *ветрец/ветерок* – breeze, etc.<sup>5</sup> (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982: 44).

In cases when the noun denotes a young animal, in Bulgarian and in English there exist lexical words (predominantly referring to domestic animals or pets) which render the diminutive meaning without suffixation, i.e. by means of suppletion, e.g. *овца* – *агне*/ ewe – lamb, *крава* – *теле*/ cow – calf, *кокошка* – *пиле*/ hen – chicken, *куче* – *пале*/dog – puppy, etc. The diminutive meaning here is “young age.” However, in Bulgarian, all these diminutive words can be further diminished by means of suffixation and the resulting forms will have additional emotive-expressive meaning, e.g. *агънце*, *теленце*, *пиленце*, *паленце*. Non-diminutive words denoting animals can also be diminished by means of suffixation, but then the resulting diminutive form will either refer to small size of the animal or express affection, e.g. *овчица*, *кравичка*, *кокошчица*, *кученце*.

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<sup>5</sup> All Bulgarian and English examples are taken from Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982. Russian examples are in my translation.

In Russian, there are also lexical words denoting young domestic animals or pets, but, unlike Bulgarian, their forms are necessarily diminished by a suffix, e.g. овца – ягненок, корова – теленок, курица – цыпленок, собака – щенок.

Diminutive words of wild animals are derived by suffixation in Bulgarian and Russian, but by means of the combination of the lexical word *cub* and a noun modifying it in English. Compare мечка/медведь – меча/медвежонок, вълк/волк – вълче/волчонок; in English – bear cub, wolf cub.

In their article Bossilkov and Grancharov (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982) state four possible reasons why diminutives are not rendered from Bulgarian into English by means of diminutive forms and they are the following: 1) when diminutives in Bulgarian have mainly emotive-expressive nuances and their rendering into English by some of the suggested linguistic devices is extremely difficult; 2) when diminutives in Bulgarian have lost their semantic meaning and are not considered to be diminutives any longer, which makes their rendering into English unnecessary; 3) when the idea of diminutiveness is implied in the context; and 4) when the translator of a text considers rendering diminutives into English unnecessary.

On the whole, the noun is the most often diminished word class in all three languages due to the fact that in Bulgarian and Russian it has the largest number of diminutive suffixes expressing an array of emotional meanings as well as physical smallness, while English diminished words express primarily small size and rarely some emotional connotation. But in Bulgarian and Russian other word classes can be diminished too, e.g. adjectives, adverbs and some verbs in Russian, and adjectives, adverbs, verbs, numerals and some pronouns in Bulgarian. This makes their translation a complicated issue. I can suggest some approaches to do this based on Bossilkov and Grancharov's study of rendering diminutive nouns into English (Bossilkov, Grancharov 1982).

The most usual way to render a diminutive adjective from Bulgarian and Russian into English is by using a non-diminutive adjective and thus losing the connotation of diminutiveness. As diminutive adjectives are mainly evaluative, i.e. expressing emotive-expressive attitudes can be rendered by some other means. E.g. миличък/миленький – dear, лошичък/плохонький – bad, умничък/умненький – clever, чудесничък/чудненький – marvelous.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> All Russian and English examples are taken from Bratus 1969. Bulgarian examples are in my translation.

Another way is to place a modifier before the non-diminutive adjective: this combination expresses either a low or high degree of the quality, and thus imparts to the adjective various expressive-emotive nuances, e.g. хитричък/ хитренький – *rather* cunning, горчивичък плод/ горьковатенький фрукт – *rather* bitter fruit, кратичко разказче/ коротенький рассказик – a *very* short story. In a noun phrase where both an adjective and a noun are diminuted in Bulgarian and Russian, a combination of non-diminutive adjectives may serve to render this meaning into English. E.g. мръснички ръчички/ грязноватенькие ручонки – *dirty little* hands, мъничко дете/малюсенький ребенок – *tiny little* child, старичко палтенце/ старенький пальтишко – *little old* coat. However, there exists a suffix in English which can be used to emotive nuances. It is the suffix *-ish* which added to an adjective expresses the presence of a given quality in a certain degree or gives the idea of “somewhat/fairly/approximately”+ adjective. E.g. скъпичка книжка/ дороговатая книжка – a *dearish* book, слабичка пиеска/ плоховатая пьеска – a *poorish* play, слабичък аргумент/ слабенький аргумент – *weakish* argument.

Diminutiveness of adjectives may also be rendered by idiomatic expressions or descriptively through the context. E.g. Она от страха еле живехонька остана. – She was nearly dead [ lit. barely alive] with fright.

Although I have given various examples of diminutive adjectives both in Bulgarian and Russian, I must point out their rather different functions and frequency of use. While Bulgarian diminutive adjectives are basically expressive-emotive, the diminutive adjectives expressing negative qualities in Russian have a quite different meaning, i.e. they do not soften but rather intensify the quality they express, e.g. подлый – подленький.

Diminutives of adverbs are not commonly used in Bulgarian and Russian. Such forms basically render emotive-expressive nuances of tenderness and affection or nuances of condescension and irony. These expressive colourings are very difficult to translate into English, because adverbs in English are not diminuted. However, if one must render this connotation in English, it can be done by means of modifiers or intensifiers, by idiomatic expressions or descriptively. E.g. отдавничка/ давненько – *fairly* long ago, хладничко/прохладненько – *rather* cold, близичко/ близенько – *quite/ very* near; Мъничко закъснях./ Я маленечко опоздал. – I am *just a little* late.; В стаята беше тъмничко./ В комната было темновато. – The room was *pretty* dark.; Студеничко ви е

тук./ Холодненько тут у вас. – Your place (house/apartment) is *a bit on the cold side*. Diminutive adverbs are not rendered into English, unless they are used by the author to give a stylistic description of characters and their speech. Generally speaking, modifiers of the type *rather, quite*, etc. perform diminutive function, softening the effect of the quality they modify. Most often diminutive adverbs in Bulgarian and Russian are rendered into English by non-diminutive adverbial forms. So in English this is done by using quantifying phrases.

**Verbal** diminutives are not very common in Bulgarian and Russian, mainly in child-directed speech and are not characteristic of either language. If they are used in texts, then it is the author's attempt to express a nuance of diminution of the action, i.e. an action very short in duration, which is reduced or has happened once only, e.g. бодна, тропкам, боричкам се; пийна, клъвна (Krastev 1976: 58). Purely diminutive verbal forms are not typical of Russian, but, as it seems, in certain contexts some verbal forms have the subjectively coloured nuances of diminutiveness (a diminution of the action), e.g. Он похохатывает (Bratus 1969: 53). In English, these subjective-expressive nuances can be rendered by **intensifiers** or by **adverbs** such as “gently”, “slightly”. E.g. Много ми се спинка./ Я хочу спатеньки. – I want to go to bed *so much/a lot*. ; Той куцукаше лекичко./ Он прихрамывал легонечко. – He was limping *slightly*. On the whole, diminutive verbs are translated into English without the notion of diminutiveness.

Unlike Russian, in Bulgarian **numerals** and **possessive pronouns** are also diminished but these forms are considered to be colloquial. Diminutive numerals and possessive pronouns are translated just as numerals and pronouns respectively. If the possessive pronoun becomes substantivized, then it is possible for this form to be rendered into English by means of some informal or colloquial noun. E.g. Момичкият се прибра късно снощи. – *My hubby* came home late last night. It is possible for possessive pronouns in case of substantivization, and basically mainly for masculine gender.

Two things should be added to complete the analysis of the possible transformation of diminutive language patterns:

– It becomes clear that Bulgarian and Russian do not usually translate all diminutive forms into English. Even in cases when lexically the speech parts are translatable in their modified forms of belittlement they might not be translated according to the mechanisms described above for reasons of subjective and situational character.



– The cases when a text is translated from English into Russian and Bulgarian are practically not studied. Based on my experience of teaching English to Bulgarian learners of all levels and interests, I have observed the stable tendency of not considering all the markers of emotional language suitable to be rendered into diminutives. Thus the influence of urbanized and unified language use typical of modern English affects the use of languages such as Bulgarian and Russian.

In conclusion, I would draw attention to the fact that diminutiveness is not a grammatical category of language. Diminutives are morpho-syntactic forms and structures which express stylistic and pragmatic functions in language. They are not independent lexical units either, but are derived from certain parts of speech and are characteristic of speech. Their function depends on the social, cultural, and individual uses of language. Some languages (like Bulgarian and Russian) use diminutives very often in different contexts and have a range of devices to derive diminutive forms with various emotive-expressive nuances. Other languages (like English) are not characteristic for having diminutives. Thus, rendering diminutives into English becomes rather complicated due to the fact that there are very few diminutive forms.

In my article I have tried to show possible ways of translation of diminutives from Bulgarian and Russian into English and to explain the reasons why in some cases this is not possible. On the whole, although English is limited in linguistic devices to form diminutives, there are other mechanisms to express diminutiveness and preserve, to some extent, the emotive-expressive nuances implied in a text.

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