

WAYS OF EXPRESSING THE CATEGORY OF DIMINUTIVENESS IN ENGLISH

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This paper studies the different opinions of linguists and their approaches to the category of diminutiveness in English. Based on Schneider's work (2003), who distinguishes synthetic and analytic diminutives, an overview of the types of diminutive formation and their specific features has been suggested. In addition to the examples given by researchers, the paper offers examples and conclusions based on the author's own corpus of excerpted data. This analysis is part of a bigger research project included in the author's doctoral thesis.

Key words: diminutiveness, diminutive formation, English, synthetic and analytic diminutives

Traditionally, the term 'diminutive' conveys the idea of 'smallness'. The fundamental assumption which most scholars share, however, is that the prototypical function of the diminutive is not only to indicate smallness, but also to convey a variety of pragmatic meanings that extend well beyond the notion of smallness. As Bauer (Bauer et al. in press) points out: "The notion of diminutive [...] is not easy to define clearly. One problem with this notion is the semantics, the other the kind of formal means employed to express diminutive meaning." (cited in Schneider 2013: 137). The prototypical meaning of the term 'diminutive' is 'smallness' but it can also express an attitude that 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." (Schneider 2003:1). The author further suggests that "diminution", also referred to as 'diminutivity', is a concept related to such concepts as quantification, qualification, modification, gradation, intensification, and evaluation." (Schneider 2003:1). He also asserts that "diminution can be considered the interface between concepts of quantification and qualification, in that it combines aspects of size and attitude, and more particularly of smallness and appreciation or depreciation." (Schneider 2003: 1).

Jurafsky (1996: 534-535) has also stated that the diminutive “can express a bewildering variety of meanings” among which he points out “affection, contempt, playfulness, pragmatic contexts involving children or pets, as well as metalinguistic hedges”. He defines the diminutive as a semantic category whose function “is among the grammatical primitives which seem to occur universally or near-universally” (1996: 535).

Huddleston & Pullum (2002) postulate that “the term diminutive applies to affixes which indicate small size and also, by extension, ones which (additionally or instead) mark the off-spring of animals, affection or informality, resemblance or imitation” (2002: 1677).

In general terms, the category of diminutiveness can be defined as a semantic and pragmatic linguistic category indicating smallness as well as expressing a wide spectrum of emotional nuances ranging from extremely positive to utterly negative depending on the context. Diminutiveness as a linguistic category can be expressed in all languages by various linguistic means on different levels of language.

The common opinion of many linguists is that English has no diminutives. In English grammar books diminutives are mentioned very briefly, if they are mentioned at all. Usually, a few diminutive suffixes are given as examples of English diminutives illustrating its basic meaning, namely, expressing the notion of smallness, e.g. *-ie*, *-ette*, *-let*, *-kin* (*doggie*, *kitchenette*, *streamlet*, *lambkin*).

Meaning and function.

Diminutiveness in English is a linguistic phenomenon which can find expression in different levels of language – morphological, lexical, phraseological. The semantics of diminutiveness can be expressed not only on the level of morphology (affixation, clipping, partial reduplication) but also on the syntactical level (rhyming, diminutive word groups). Diminutiveness conveys the meaning of small or little size, amount, quantity, power, value, importance, etc. which are often accompanied by different emotional nuances. However, the meaning of ‘small’ or ‘little’ is not absolute and depends on personal evaluation. As Schneider (2003: 11) puts it, “it must be emphasized that smallness [...] depends entirely on the category in question. A small elephant, for instance, is still considerably larger than a large mouse”.

Diminutives can be found in all national variants of English, but are more characteristic for Scottish, American or Australian English than British English. Of great linguistic interest is the process of ‘back borrowing’ when diminutive forms and means of diminutive expression

are borrowed by British English from American, Australian and other national variants of English.

Diminutives in English can be derived by the following semantic classes where common nouns are the base words: nouns referring to people kinship terms, appearance, age, gender, profession, job, social status, nationality; nouns referring to animals: size, names, pet names; nouns referring to plants; nouns referring to everyday objects; nouns referring to natural phenomena; nouns referring to time, weight, mass; etc.

In addition to nouns, other word classes can also be diminutivized in English, e.g. adjectives (*short* > *shorty*), verbs (*weep* > *weepie*), adverbs (*alright* > *alrightie*), and, arguably, exclamations (*Lord!* > *Lordy!*). Overwhelmingly, however, the base words are nouns. Adjectives are also used frequently, but verbs, adverbs and exclamations occur extremely rarely (Schneider 2003: 88).

The two most common means of diminutive formation in English are affixation (suffixation as more frequent than prefixation) and periphrastic constructions. Based on these two processes, Schneider (2003, 2013) distinguishes two types of diminutive formation in English:

- 1) 'morphological' or 'synthetic' diminutives, and
- 2) 'syntactic' or 'analytic' diminutives.

Synthetic diminutives.

Contrary to the common opinion, English does have morphological or synthetic diminutives, i.e. formed by means of affixation. The process of suffixal formation of diminutives is much more frequent than prefixal formation in English.

Suffixation.

Alongside with adding some lexico-grammatical meaning to the stem, certain suffixes charge it with emotional force (Arnold 1966: 71). They may be derogatory (e.g. *-ard* 'drunkard', *-ling* 'underling', *-ster* 'gangster', *-ton* 'simpleton') and name only people, or they may be emotionally coloured diminutive suffixes (e.g. *-y/-ie/-ey* 'hanky, auntie, daddy') that can name not only persons but things as well (ibid). Other diminutive suffixes express smallness, e.g. *-en* 'chicken', *-kin/-ikin* 'mannikin', *-let* 'booklet', *-ock* 'hillock', *-et* 'coronet' (Arnold 1966: 71).

Analytic diminutives.

"The major alternative to synthetic diminutive formation is analytic diminutive formation" (Schneider 2003: 122). These are 'adjective + noun'

constructions where the noun is the base word and the adjective is the diminutive marker. This type of formation has also been referred to as “synthetic modification” (ibid.).

Analytic diminutive formation is a process of “combining words in juxtapositions or collocations” (Schneider 2003: 123) and the usual combination is Adjective + Noun (in which the adjective belongs to the word field of SMALL). The most common adjective used in this type of diminutive construction is LITTLE. The adjectives which belong to the word field of SMALL and are usually used in analytic diminutives can be considered as synonyms because they share the same basic meaning, i.e. denoting below average size. Schneider (2003: 125) divides them into three groups depending on the level of formality:

- a) Informal: *tiny, teeny, teensy, wee, weeny, teeny-weeny, teensy-weensy*;
- b) Neutral: *small, little*;
- c) Formal: *minimal, miniature, minute, diminutive, lilliputian*.

It is an interesting fact that, if compared with other languages which also have analytic diminutives, English uses two neutral adjectives in analytic diminutive constructions, whereas in other languages there is only one adjective, e.g. small and little vs *petit* (French), *klein* (German), *малък* (Bulgarian), *маленький* (Russian), etc. However, as adjectives can also be diminutivized in Bulgarian and Russian, there are additional attitudinal meanings in *мъничък* (Bul) and *малюсенький* (Rus), which cannot be expressed in the other exemplified languages.

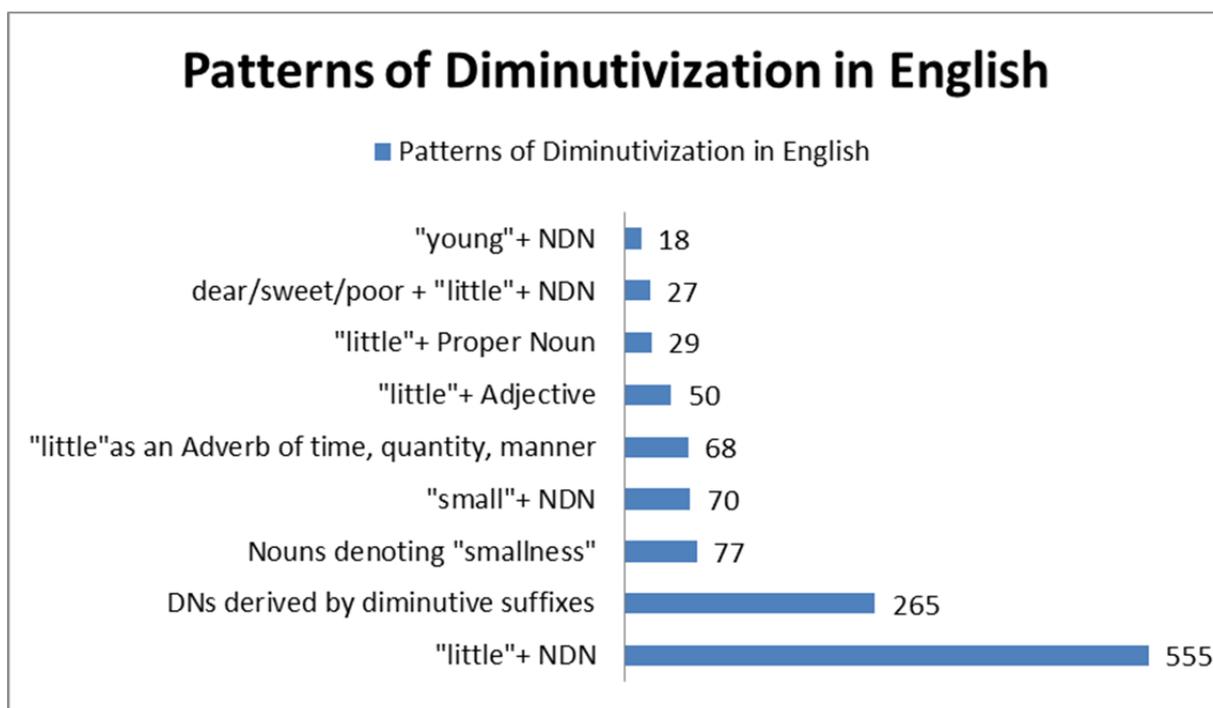
Compounding is another process by which diminutives can be formed in English, i.e. diminutiveness is expressed by lexical means. These are compound nouns of the type N1 + N2, where N1 is a noun denoting smallness (e.g. *baby, dwarf, pygmy*) and modifying N2, e.g. *baby elephant, baby tree, baby fly, baby camel, dwarf mammoths, pygmy elephants*, etc. In these cases, N1 denotes small size because of young age. Metaphorically used, such forms can denote the meaning of ‘young, inexperienced’. In the last two examples, however, the combination of N1 + N2 marks a certain breed of the animal rather than young age.

Semantics of diminutiveness is undoubtedly very clear with names of young animals or more specifically with names of animals’ offspring, e.g. *calf, colt, whelp, cub, kid, pup*, etc. There are also **lexical words** which have the feature /+ small/ in their semantic field, e.g. *brook* (a small, natural stream of fresh water), *grove* (a small wood or forested area,

usually with no undergrowth), *breeze* (a wind or current of air, especially a light or moderate one), *twig* (a small offshoot from a branch or stem), etc.

In what follows I will analyze the data excerpted for my doctoral thesis on the category of diminutiveness in English, Russian and Bulgarian, and I will present my observations based on the English examples. The linguistic corpus of examples was excerpted from Oscar Wilde's *Tales* (adapted for children), "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe, "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass" by Lewis Carrol, and "Winnie-the-Pooh" by A. A. Miln.

The total number of instances being studied amounts to 1248, excerpted from approximately 727 pages, the approximate number of words is 366 885. After a detailed analysis of the excerpted material, I have identified 28 patterns by means of which diminutiveness can be expressed in the researched English texts. The most common patterns are shown in the table below:



Based on my corpus, the most frequently used pattern expressing diminutiveness in English and indeed the one resulting in numerous examples is the combination of the adjective 'little' and the base form of a common noun. This pattern has been found in 555 cases, which is 44.47% of the total number of instances. The results show that almost 45% of all cases of diminutiveness attested in the English texts are rendered by this combination. The diminutive meaning of this pattern is either proper diminutive, i.e. denoting small size only (e.g. *a little case of books*, *the*

little package, the little table, a little grave, a little pin, etc.) or diminutive-hypocoristic (e.g. *the little sleepy head, little devil, little children, little girl, etc.*). On the other hand, diminutive-pejorative meaning can be rendered only if the base noun is modified by another adjective expressing a pejorative meaning, e.g. *an ignorant little girl*.

The second most common pattern expressing diminutiveness is when diminution is rendered by means of a diminutive suffix. The number of these cases is 265 or 21.23% of all examples. The number is not surprising, provided that the investigated texts are children's books in which young animals become common characters and the nouns denoting young animals are predominantly derived by means of suffixation, e.g. *kitten, chicken, goosie, piglet, piggy, eaglet, puppy, etc.* Another group of suffixed diminutive nouns, expressing endearment, tenderness, love, consists of nouns denoting family members, e.g. *granny, mommy, auntie, mamma, papa, etc.* And there is a group of nouns wherein the diminutive suffix expresses only a small size, e.g. *statuettes, streamlet, trinket, ringlet, gimlet, etc.* As can be seen, synthetic diminutive formation is not infrequent in English and even comes second in place in the table illustrating the possible types of diminutive patterns. It proves that synthetic diminutive formation is quite productive and frequent in English, as opposed to the commonly accepted opinion of most linguists.

The pattern expressing diminutiveness that ranks third in the English texts consists of base nouns for which the feature 'smallness' is an inherent semantic component of the lexeme. The number of these nouns is 77, which is 6.17% of all instances. E.g. *brook* (= a small, natural stream of fresh water), *pebbles* (= small, rounded stones), *calf* (= the young of an animal), *lad* (= young man, a youth), *urchin* (= a young, small child), *colt* (= a young male horse), *breeze* (= a light, gentle wind), *beads* (= small, round pieces of material or objects), etc.

The pattern which comes fourth in the table combines the adjective 'small' with a base common noun. There are 70 cases of this combination in the studied texts, which equals 5.6% of all examples. Compared to approximately 45% instances of the combination 'little' plus a base common noun, constructions with 'small' seem to be rare. Moreover, the latter type denotes only the small size of an object, as the adjective 'small' does not express a hypocoristic meaning. E.g. *a small bedroom, a small estate, small white onions, a small book, a small town, a small ear, etc.*

Very close in number to the above pattern comes the pattern in which 'little' is used as an adverb of time, manner, quantity – 68, which is 5.45% of all examples. E.g. *'She feels a little rested', 'after a little', 'drink a little*

brandy, ‘*turn a little to one side*’, ‘*a little while after supper*’, ‘*She nibbled a little*’, etc.

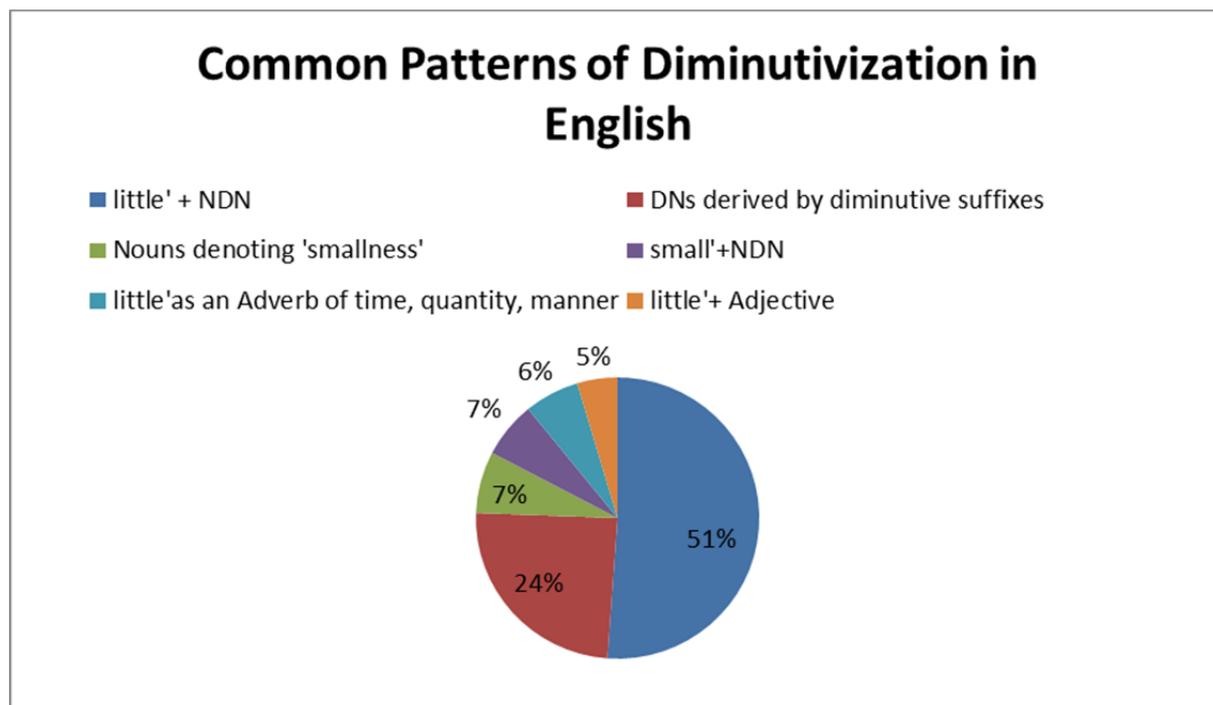
In 50 cases or 4.01% of all instances, the adjective ‘little’ occurs as an intensifier of another adjective, predominantly used in the form ‘a little’, e.g. *a little alarmed/ anxious/ timid/ sorry/ nervous/ ashamed/ queer/ blue/ provoking*, etc. In such examples ‘a little’ denotes a low degree of the expressed quality.

Cases in which ‘little’ is used with a Proper noun (person’s name) are 29, which makes 2.32% of all examples. The meaning of ‘little’ in these examples is diminutive-hypocoristic, e.g. *little Lily, little Alice, little Roo, little Hans, little Jake, little Ruth, little Eva, little Rosa*, etc.

Very often the most frequent and common combination of ‘little’ and a base noun (approx. 45% of the examples) is further intensified by other qualitative adjectives such as ‘*dear/sweet/poor*’, which emphasize on the emotional-expressive meaning of this construction. Such cases amount to 27 or 2.16% of all examples. This pattern is very expressive, limited mainly to characters’ speech aiming at rendering different emotions, which explains its small number of occurrences. E.g. *poor little Carlo; our dear, loving, little Henry; the poor little children, your poor little heart; you sweet little obliging soul; dear little Eva*; etc.

The last pattern shown in the table is the construction “young” + a base noun, which is found in 18 examples or 1.44% of all cases. Its meaning is diminutive-hypocoristic, e.g. *young imps, young uns, young boys, a young child, a young lady, the young girl, the youngest urchin*, etc.

The table below reveals the percentages (approximate numbers) obtained for the six most frequent diminutive patterns in English. It illustrates to what extent the frequency rate of the first pattern outnumbers the other five most common diminutive patterns in English.



Based on the analyzed examples as well as on the comprehensive study of the category of diminutiveness in English in my doctoral thesis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Diminutives in English can be formed either synthetically (by means of affixation, predominantly, suffixation), or analytically (by means of adjectives denoting smallness or littleness), or by means of other processes such as reduplication, clipping and compounding. As it seems, the major type of diminutive formation in English is analytic diminutive formation.

2. Due to the analytic character of the language, diminutive suffixation is not characteristic of English (in contrast to Russian and Bulgarian), but it is quite common in deriving diminutive forms of personal names and nicknames, as well as diminutive forms denoting the young ones of animals and birds, which are frequently used in children's books.

3. The word class that is most often diminutized by means of diminutive suffixes in English is the noun, although there are a few diminutive suffixes which can be used to form adjectival diminutives as well, e.g. *brownish*, *yellowish*, *cutesy*, *booksy*, *comfy*, etc. The remaining word classes cannot be diminutized by means of diminutive suffixes.

4. The most common type of diminutive formation in English is by means of adjectives belonging to the word field of SMALL, such as *small*, *little*, *tiny*, *teeny*, *teensy-weensy*, *minute*, etc. which fall into three groups according to their level of formality – neutral, informal and formal.

5. The two most frequent adjectives used to express diminutiveness in English are *small* and *little*, with *little* being multifunctional. The basic meaning of *small* is to denote small size as it lacks any affectionate connotations, e.g. *a small house, a small bird, a small town*, etc. The connotations of *little* are various, for it has inherent emotional implications and can convey a variety of meanings such as ‘feelings of affection, sympathy, pity’ on the one hand, and ‘feelings of scorn, annoyance, sarcasm’, on the other. *Small* expresses objective smallness and refers to a quality of the referent while *little* expresses the subjective attitude of the speaker towards the referent or the addressee.

6. Other qualitative adjectives are frequently used in combination with *little* to convey a variety of expressive nuances, e.g. *dear little girl, sweet little boy, poor little girl*, etc.

In conclusion, the category of diminutiveness is a linguistic phenomenon not very common in British English, but there are certainly ways to express most of the diminutive meanings which can be found in other languages. Although English opts for analytic diminutive formation, it also allows for synthetic diminutive formation and in some contexts synthetic diminutive forms are preferably used. As the category of diminutiveness can be rendered in all languages by different means of expression and on different linguistic levels, it proves a challenging linguistic phenomenon to be studied not only in separate languages, but mostly, contrastively between two or more languages. By analyzing the various aspects of diminutiveness in different languages – its formation, frequency of occurrence, semantic and pragmatic meanings, etc. – researchers can better describe and interpret the specific cultural, social and linguistic features of different people, which will facilitate intercultural and international relations between people of different historical and cultural backgrounds.

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