

# **SEMANTIC NOTION OF DIMINUTIVES IN THE FORMATION OF UZBEK AND ENGLISH.**

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**Abstract:** Diminutive research is often too narrowly focused on suffixed nouns, while other types of diminutive formation are neglected. A plea is therefore made to also consider other formation types including reduplication, compounding and periphrastic constructions. Furthermore, it is shown that a more differentiated account of diminutive meaning is needed than is currently available. It is suggested that an adequate semantic description, which can accommodate the various ambiguities of diminutives, can best be found in systematic corpus-based analysis of diminutives in context. Pragmatic approach is outlined which avoids the problems pertaining to diminutive formation and meaning and is particularly relevant for cross-lingual and typological studies. This approach is focused on the social functions of diminutives in specific types of contexts.

**Key words:** Notion of diminutive, diminutive formation, prototypical diminutives, morphological approach

## **INTRODUCTION**

The truth about diminutives is not easily found, given the specific nature of this phenomenon. Bauer et al. (in press: 664) aptly summarize the situation, as they note: “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.” Indeed, it is not a trivial task to identify formal means when it is not entirely clear what these means are supposed to express. The problems, at least in part, stem from the fact that ‘diminutive’ is a category derived

from traditional grammar, originally used in the description of Latin, with a typical mélange of structural and semantic aspects. Thus, as traditional definitions tend to be circular, and as it is neither clear what exactly diminutive formation is, nor what diminutive meaning is, diminutives pose a two-fold challenge.

### **MAIN PART**

In this paper, I want to address the semantic problems of both Uzbek and English diminutives and the problem concerning diminutive formation, and thus contribute to a solution to these problems. Furthermore, I would like to go beyond form and meaning and suggest an alternative approach to the study of diminutives. This approach focuses on the communicative functions of diminutives, yet not on their functions in general, but on their functions in specific types of context.

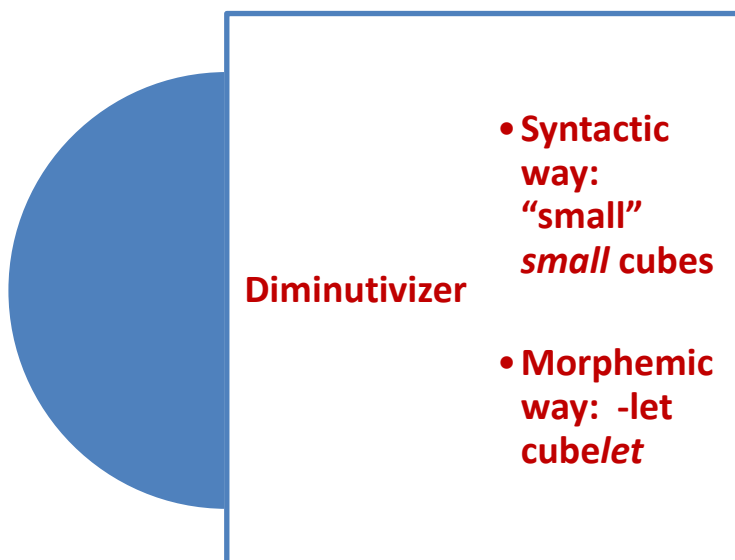
The problem concerning the formal means which can be employed to express diminutive meaning can in essence be attributed to a prototype effect in the category ‘diminutive’.

Prototypical diminutives, i.e. diminutives generally considered to be the “best” examples of this category, are nouns derived from nouns by attaching a suffix which functions as the diminutive marker (or ‘diminutivizer’): N + suffix dim > N dim ‘small N’, ‘kichkina OT’. In this case, the suffix does not change the word class of the base, nor does it crucially change the meaning of the base. The meaning of the base is merely modified by adding the semantic component SMALL (KICHKINA). Thus, cubelets, for example, are still cubes, (kubikchalar in Uzbek and they are still cubes) and droplets still drops (tomchilar and diminutive form not with suffix yet syntactic way as mitti tomchi), albeit small ones compared to the size considered normal for cubes and drops respectively. It has therefore been suggested that prototypical diminutives do not result from a process of derivation, but from a process of modification, in which word class is retained and the meaning just modified (cf., e.g., Schneider 2003: 9).

### **The Uzbek language**



### The English language



With this prototype in mind, diminutives have been, and predominantly still are, narrowly defined as a morphological category belonging to the realm of word-formation commonly referred to as 'evaluative morphology', together with only very few other phenomena including, first and foremost, 'augmentatives'. This approach seems entirely valid for languages which have developed from Latin, such as Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, and some other Indo-European languages, especially Slavic languages and also Dutch and German but this never happens nearly in Uzbek language from Turkic group. This approach is, however, inadequate for the description of languages in which prototypical diminutives do

not exist. A statement to the effect that, e.g., the English language does not have any diminutives, or that diminutives are only marginal in English (cf., e.g. Grandi 2011: 7), only make sense if the notion of diminutives is reduced to the prototypical form. More generally, a narrow morphological approach is particularly unsuitable for typological work, because many of the world's languages e.g. in Africa or Asia do not have any suffixes, or have no affixes at all. As Haspelmath (2007: 128) reminds us: "Typologists must realize that they cannot base their comparisons on formal categories ...". What is needed, therefore, and especially for cross-lingual comparison, is an onomasiological perspective, i.e. taking diminutive meaning, and not (prototypical) diminutive form, as the starting point for analysis. Needless to say, such an approach presupposes a clear idea of the meaning which is expressed, in other words, of the common denominator which justifies the identification of formal means as means of diminutive formation (cf. section 3 below). Adopting an onomasiological approach in their survey of word-formation in the world's languages, which is based on a sample of fifty-five languages, Štekauer et al. (2012: 237-303, esp. 264-274) identify a total of four different processes which are employed to form diminutives. Apart from suffixation, these are prefixation, reduplication and compounding (Štekauer et al. 2012: 267-269). Schneider (2003), whose primary interest is in English diminutives, also discusses the formal means generally available in languages to convey diminutive meaning, but does not limit his survey to word-formation processes alone.

In addition to the four processes identified by Štekauer et al. (2012), Schneider furthermore lists truncation, inflection and periphrastic constructions (Schneider 2003: 7-10). The first two of these are also morphological processes, although the status of truncation has sometimes been challenged. While some scholars have argued that truncation is an extra-grammatical process and, hence, does not belong to word-formation or morphology, others have classified it as a secondary or unpredictable word-formation process, or have dealt with it in the framework of prosodic morphology (for a discussion, cf. Schneider 2003: 9; cf. also Lappe 2007:

31-58). The third type, on the other hand, i.e. periphrastic construction, is definitely outside the scope of morphology. Diminutives formed by employing this formation type are sometimes referred to as ‘syntactic diminutives’ or ‘analytic diminutives’ (as opposed to ‘morphological diminutives’ or ‘synthetic diminutives’; cf. Schneider 2003: 7). As a rule, such constructions comprise two constituents, namely the base word and an independent diminutive marker, which may be an adjective as in the A+N pattern found, for instance, in both English and Uzbek as in little house, little chat and little boy (mitti uy or uycha, kichik suhbat but not suhbatcha, kichkina bola or bolacha ).

It has been further suggested that three semantic patterns can be observed in formations with the suffix -let (Schneider & Strubel-Burgdorf 2012: 17-18).

These are:

### **In English**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>N ‘object’ + -let &gt; N ‘small object’</b>             | <i>e.g. cubelet, droplet, bomblet</i>           |
| <b>N ‘animal/plant’ + -let &gt; N ‘young animal/plant’</b> | <i>e.g. piglet, skunklet; plantlet, nutlet)</i> |
| <b>N ‘person’ + -let &gt; N ‘despicable person’</b>        | <i>e.g. wifelet, princelet, thieflet</i>        |

### **In Uzbek**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>N ‘object’ + -cha &gt; N ‘small object’</b>       | <i>e.g. uycha, kitobcha, sochiqcha</i>   |
| <b>N ‘animal/plant’ + -cha &gt; N ‘young animal’</b> | <i>e.g. buzoqcha, qushcha, echkicha,</i> |
| <b>N ‘person’ + -cha &gt; N ‘despicable person’</b>  | <i>e.g. yigitcha, qizcha, oyimcha</i>    |

Discussing formations with -let taken from the British National Corpus, also distinguish the first two of these patterns, but not the third. In the first pattern, they describe the meaning component added by the suffix as “a simple meaning of small size used on inanimate entities”. The label ‘object’ employed in the table

above is, in fact, shorthand for ‘inanimate entities’, as this category includes not only man-made objects such as bomblets, pielet and flatlets, but also natural phenomena such as droplet, cloudlet and wavelet (*uycha, kitobcha, sochiqcha in Uzbek*). The suffix meaning in the second pattern is characterized by Bauer et al. (in press: 666) as “‘small of a species’, occasionally ‘young of a species’”. Their examples include animal terms exclusively, while data also include plant terms, e.g. branchlet, bulblet and rootlet. Plant terms are, however, much less frequent in the corpus. While the meaning of diminutives derived from plant terms seems to be ‘small X’ more often than ‘young X’, the opposite seems to be true for animal terms. Diminutives such as piglet, skunklet, froglet etc. (*buzoqcha, qushcha, echkicha in Uzbek*) usually refer to ‘young of a species’ rather than ‘small of a species’. Young animals are, of course, not only younger but also smaller than adult animals. As mentioned before, Bauer et al. (in press) do not identify the third semantic pattern listed above (i.e. N ‘person’ + -let > N ‘despicable person’), despite the fact that they discuss the forms wifelet and kinglet (*yigitcha, qizcha, oyimcha in Uzbek*) and the various meanings these forms may express, before they present their semantic groups (Bauer et al, in press: 664-665). They do, however, list another third group, for which they characterize the meaning of -let as “slightly disparaging” (Bauer et al., in press: 666). This group includes godlet, playlet and starlet. These forms do not, however, pose any serious problems and can actually be subsumed under the semantic patterns listed above.

## **CONCLUSION**

Despite a very large body of research on diminutives, there are still problems pertaining to both the formation and the meaning of diminutives. At least some of these problems stem from the traditional notion of prototypical diminutives and are particularly acute in cross-linguistic and typological work. For such work, a focus on prototypical diminutives is too narrow, as is a limitation to word-formation or morphology. In short, diminutives are not, generally speaking, a morphological category. Other linguistic devices must also be considered in the analysis. These include, for instance, constructions of word formation in English

and Uzbek languages. To avoid formal and semantic problems, an alternative approach is proposed which seems particularly suitable for cross-lingual and typological studies. In this approach, the starting point for the analysis is neither form nor meaning but function, and especially socially motivated functions which diminutives fulfill in specific types of context

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