

Suffixes –IE, -ETTE, -LING, -LET, -Y, -SY and Others

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Abstract: This article discusses diminutive suffixes, their uses, meanings and peculiarities. Diminutives in English can be formed in two ways: analytic and synthetic. In this research paper both of formations are analyzed. Diminutives are not only used to diminish objects, but also they can be used as a tool of emotion, attitude, evaluation and warmth toward people or objects. The use of diminutives in personal names and negative contexts, such as pejorative and derogatory meanings are worthy of attention.

Keywords: Diminutive, suffix, affix, prefix, analytic, synthetic, small, informal settings, warmth, intimacy, derogatory.

Introduction: English is said to have no diminutives (cf., e.g., Grandi 2011: 7). Yet, this is true only under specific conditions. These are: (a) that diminutives are considered a morphological category, and (b) that they are as frequent in use as diminutives in such languages as Spanish, Italian, Russian and Polish. If, however, condition (a) is rejected and diminutives are regarded not as a morphological, but an onomasiological category (as, we believe, they should be), then English does have diminutives, namely forms which are modified not by adding a suffix, but by adding little, as in, e.g., damn little game or nice little garden [Schneider, Strubel Burgdorf 2012].

LITERATURE REVIEW

The synthetical use of diminutives was broadly studied by [Schneider, 2003]. In "Diminutives in English" (2003), Klaus P. Schneider argues against the idea that English lacks diminutive forms, proposing that they include both synthetic (morphological) forms using suffixes and analytic (syntactic) forms using phrases. Schneider emphasizes that diminutives often convey a "subnormal" semantic notion and function pragmatically as evaluative modifiers. Furthermore, [Bialy, 2012], [Sicherl & Žele, 2011], [Lockyer; 2014] and

others also investigated peculiarities, uses and meanings of diminutive suffixes in different contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The research materials comprised examples from informal settings, fiction literatures, fragments from oral communication, scientific articles and children's literature. The primary research methods include discourse analysis, sociolinguistic analysis and the classification method.

Main body

Diminutive structures denote physical small size while simultaneously encoding the various affective attitudes and connotations linked to smallness.

Diminutives can be formed in two primary ways:

- 1) Analytically. Using separate, descriptive words (e.g. *little pig*).
- 2) Synthetically. Modifying the original word itself, typically through the addition of an affix, such as a suffix (e.g. the suffix *-let* in *piglet* or *-y* in *Johnny*). Diminutive affixes operate within diverse grammatical frameworks, dictated by their specific lexical targets and their structural placement within a word.

While the English language features as many as eighty-

six distinct diminutive affixes, scholarly consensus typically follows Schneider's (2003) classification of the fourteen most prominent and frequently utilized forms (Biały, 2012; Sicherl & Žele, 2011). These fourteen primary affixes are exclusively suffixes, comprising *-a*, *-een*, *-er*, *-ette*, *-ie/-y/-ey/-ee*, *-kin*, *-le*, *-let*, *-ling*, *-o*, *-peg*, *-poo*, *-pop*, and *-s*. Among these, the suffixes *-ette*, *-ie/-y/-ey/-ee*, *-let*, and *-ling* exhibit the highest levels of frequency and productivity, making them the central focus of linguistic research.

Although prefixes, such as *mini-*, *micro-*, and *under-* can denote smallness, they are frequently excluded from the category of English diminutive affixes by many scholars, as they often function as independent lexical units (al-Ghazalli, 2012; Schneider, 2003; Sicherl, 2012).

Despite the existence of up to eighty-six distinct diminutive affixes in English, this analysis of productivity prioritizes the four most prevalent suffixes—*-ie*, *-let*, *-ling*, and *-ette*—as identified by Schneider (2003).

It is common in English for diminutive markers to be added to nouns, resulting in a new noun form that conveys a sense of smallness or endearment (*horse becomes horsie*). Diminutive formation in English is not restricted to nouns; adjectives can also serve as bases for creating diminutive nouns (e.g., *cutie* from *cute*) (Schneider, 2003). Lockyer (2014) explored the use of diminutive affixes in social media discourse, specifically finding that interjections often take the *-ie* suffix. The study's findings include examples like *whoopsie*, *wowie*, *ouchie*, *oopsie*, illustrating how diminutive forms permeate informal English interjections.

The suffix *-ie* (or *-y*) is the most common and versatile diminutive in English [(Schneider, 2003; al-Ghazalli, 2012; Biały, 2012)]. Beyond denoting smallness, it signals familiarity between speakers and can convey either appreciation or depreciation depending on the context [Schneider (2003) p 87]. Building on Schneider's work, Al-Ghazalli (2012) notes that the *-ie* suffix is added to both names and common nouns to signal smallness, intimacy, and endearment (p.396). Analyzing a corpus of 175 nursery rhymes, Biały (2012) identified *-ie* as the sole diminutive affix in use. By attaching it to people, animals, and concrete nouns—such as in *piggy*, *dishy*, or *Georgie Peorgie*—it serves to make them appear "small and sweet". Dossena (1998) argued that in Australian English, the diminutive suffix

-ie conveys "not just endearment, but good humor," citing the use of "mozzies" for *mosquitoes* as a primary example (p.24). These studies demonstrate that the suffix *-ie* denotes more than just physical smallness; it encapsulates the speaker's attitudes toward an object, such as intimacy and appreciation.

The suffix *-let*. The English suffix *-let* is probably among the first diminutive suffixes studied in linguistics. Early accounts date back to the mid-19th century (cf., e.g., Coleridge 1857). This suffix has received widespread attention ever since in the literature on English diminutives and, more generally, English word-formation (cf., e.g., Charleston 1960, Marchand 1969, Cannon 1987, Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994, Schneider 2003). Examples:

(1) "Jane is helping Batty with her pajamas. They'll be here soon." Skye shook her head violently, tossing *droplets* of water across the room. "Where's your Latin dictionary? I need to look up revenge." (Jeanne Birdsall 2011: *The Penderwicks at Point Mouette*. N.Y.: Knopf, 3; original italics)

(2) Angry Alan, Sally the *starlet* and a silent lurker (The Guardian, July 8, 2011)

The first example is an excerpt from a novel for girls aged between approximately ten and fourteen years, written by an author from the United States. The story told is set in contemporary America. The second example is a headline from the British newspaper "The Guardian". Both publications appeared in 2011. These purely illustrative examples suggest that formations with *-let* are used in present-day English, that they are used in British as well as in American English, that they occur in different discourse types and genres, e.g. prose fiction and newspaper headlines, that may have quantifying or qualifying meaning, and that they can be employed for description or for evaluation. Thus, *droplets* is used to denote very small quantities of water in a descriptive passage of the narrative in example (1), whereas *starlet* in example (2) serves to characterize Sally as a would-be star.

Less common diminutive affixes also convey meanings beyond mere smallness. Examining British and American English, Schneider and Strubel-Burgdorf (2012) identified three distinct functions for the suffix *-let*: small objects (e.g., *booklet*, *droplet*), young animals (e.g., *owlet*, *piglet*), and contemptible individuals (e.g.,

wifelet, princelet). The suffix *-let* consistently functions as a diminutive, though its specific application varies according to the noun it modifies.

The suffix –ette. According to various scholars, the suffix *-ette* functions in three ways: to describe something small (*kitchenette, novelette*), to mark a noun as feminine (*usherette, dudette*), or to label a substance as artificial (*leatherette, flannelette*) (Schneider, 2003; al-Ghazalli, 2012; Jurafsky, 1996). As this example demonstrates, diminutive affixes in English are not limited to indicating small size; they encompass a broader range of meanings.

The suffix –ling is originated in Old English times. Except from smallness, the diminutive suffix *-ling* gives the word a derogatory meaning: *manling* from *man*, *weakling* from *weak*, *changeling* from *change*. Furthermore, this suffix can also be used with the names of baby animals: *duckling* from *duck*, *catling* from *cat*, *gosling* from *goose* and the names of plants: *seedling* from *seed*, *sapling* from *sap*.

Diminutive affixes are widely used in social discourse, especially in informal settings (Lockyer, 2014). Scholars note that these forms are frequently employed when speaking to children, as the affectionate tone of such interactions encourages the use of diminutive language (Biały, 2012; Mattiello et al., 2021). As adult-to-child speech is typically characterized by informality and warmth, it serves as a natural setting for the use of diminutive language (Bystrov et al., 2020).

The suffix –sy(-sie/-sies) is considered to be an unproductive English diminutive suffix. For example: *Bitsy* (tiny, teeny-weeny); *footsie* (little foot); *halfsies* (halves, "go halves"); *onesies* (one-piece garment / infant bodysuit); *popsy* (pop song / catchy tune); *twosies* (sets of two); *Betsy, Patsy, Robsy* (diminutive proper names). [Стр 17].

Oh, *Betsy*, I'm pretty tired of this fucking case.

Too many bad shit. *Robsy* – he is really shy guy, but actually he is a ball of fire. *Patsy* turned to be guilty. She is always a dump bunny. How is your warm-up, Michael? – The warm-up fell flat, mum. My *footsie's* hurt. Are you kidding? – It's just a fucking popsy. What your snitch fund look like we could go there, the agent said, if you do *halfsies*. If you get in, you shoot to *twosies* (С.В.Лексина, Ю.В.Слабко, 2015).

The most frequent uses of the suffix *-sie(s)* or *-sy* are

found in baby-talk. Examples: include *teensy-weensy* (tiny), *footsie*, and *onesies*.

The suffixes *-sie(s)* or *-sy* can also be used with the names of people. The diverse diminutive names' meanings that can be found in children's literature sometimes depend on the character who speaks them and the narrator's own preferences. For example, in L'Engle's "A Wrinkle in Time", the character *Mrs.*, who remains the sole character throughout the whole book, who diminutivizes the main children's names through the suffix *-sie*, specifically in *Charlsie* (for Charles Wallace) and little *Megsie* (for Meg). This happens solely because of Mrs. Who's dramatic and expressive personality, as demonstrated through the diminutives' immediate contexts:

(1a) The plump little woman beamed at him. "Why, *Charlsie*, my pet!" (34)

(1b) "And he's a very good man, *Charlsie*, darling, but right now he needs our help." (35)

(2) "And little *Megsie*! Lovely to meet you, sweetheart." (35) [pp 17-18, That Poor Little Thing: The Emotive Meanings of Diminutives in Polish and Russian Translations of Alice in Wonderland by Dorothy Lockyer BA, University of Victoria, 2010].

The suffix –aster. This primarily pejorative (derogatory) suffix was quite common in Middle and Early Modern English. However, in Modern English, it is encountered rather rarely. For example, in the word *poetaster* – a term describing a poet of little talent.

The suffix –erel and –rel. These suffixes are borrowed from Latin and carry a pejorative connotation. They can be used to form words of abuse or disparagement. For example, *doggerel* from *dog* – poorly written poetry, *cockerel* from *cock-feisty* (someone who is ready to argue).

The suffix –o. The diminutive suffix *-o* is characteristic of both American and Australian English. For example: *kiddo* (little baby), *wacko* (a person who is very foolish).

The suffix –kin. This Dutch diminutive suffix is usually found in the plural form, often attached to names to create an affectionate or pet name: *Mollykins* (from *Molly*).

DISCUSSION

As we have analyzed above, diminutive suffixes can be divided into two groups: productive (*-ie/y, -let, -ette, -*

ling) and unproductive –sie(s), sy, -aster, -erel/-rel, -o, -kin. It must be acknowledged that the suffixes mentioned above can indeed be classified as unproductive if productivity is defined as the "ability to form new words", since they are no longer used to create new words representing modern realities.

CONCLUSION

Diminutives, therefore, represent a significant aspect of the English language. As previously discussed, they convey a wide range of meanings and are formed through both synthetic and analytic constructions. Without diminutives, English would lose a vital tool for expressing emotion, attitude, evaluation, and warmth. By providing a means to show affection toward people or objects, diminutives enhance the expressive capacity of the language, whether in spoken discourse or literary texts.

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