Diminutivization as a metaphor engendered phenomenon

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Abstract

The roles of diminutive morphemes in English and in Polish are hardly equivalent. In English, diminutivization of a noun indicates either a relatively small size of a referent and/or a speaker's emotional attitude towards it (in the hypocoristic function). In Polish, however, besides the two aforementioned roles, a diminutive noun may mark a conception much more complex than just a smaller version of a regular noun's denotation, possibly very different than that represented by a regular noun. The semantic function of a Polish diminutive morpheme, thus, extends far beyond indicating smallness and amounts to specifying properties that may be absent from referents of regular noun forms. Oftentimes employing such a morpheme is indicative of metaphorical thinking.

Deminutywizacja jako zjawisko o genezie metaforycznej

Abstrakt

Role morfemów deminutywnych w językach angielskim i polskim nie są sobie równe. Deminutywizacja rzeczownika w angielszczyźnie podyktowana jest albo wskazaniem stosunkowo mniejszych rozmiarów denotatu i/albo wyrażeniem emocji wobec niego (funkcja hipokorystyczna). W polszczyźnie, natomiast, funkcje semantyczne morfemów deminutywnych wykraczają daleko poza wyżej opisany zakres. Rzeczowniki w formie deminutywnej mogą odnosić się do denotatów o cechach zgoła innych w porównaniu z tymi konwencjonalnie określanymi przez formy niezdrobnione; funkcje semantyczne morfemów deminutywnych są dalece szersze niż wskazywanie niewielkich gabarytów. Oprócz określania cech niewystępujących w denotatach rzeczowników w formie regularnej, ich zastosowanie często wynika z myślenia metaforycznego.

Słowa kluczowe

zdrobnienie, konceptualizacja, obrazowanie, metafora

1. Introduction

According to the accurate and comprehensive *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, the diminutive suffix is attached to "a word or name" in order to express "[…] smallness in size and sometimes endearment or condescension". This explanation may be quite satisfactory given the role which diminutives play in English, but it is seriously incomplete with regard to a language like Polish, which employs diminutives on a large scale for more numerous and by far more important purposes than those mentioned in WNWDAL. The aim of the present paper is to discuss semantic information contributed to conceptions represented by Polish complex words to which diminutive morphemes are suffixed. Especially important proves to be their conceptual (or so-called *intellectual* function),

thanks to which the meaning of lexemes to which they are affixed not only becomes richer and more complex, but can be metaphorically extended.

2. Diminutives in English – the most popular approach

English-based researchers generally seem to display little interest in diminutivization. If any references to the phenomenon are available in English linguistic literature, they mostly concern word formation mechanisms, i.e. the attachment of diminutive morphemes to regular nouns. As regards their meaning, its specification in principle does not extend beyond that already quoted from *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* succinct entry, which indicates that it boils down to expressing smallness or diminution. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992) adds that, apart from smallness, it may "[...] paradoxically [suggest] either affection or dismissal". It also identifies a diminutive as a nickname or hypocorism. If this explanation exhausts the subject in regard to English, then there is indeed no need to engage in a thorough study of the phenomenon in question by researchers concerned with that language, as its semantic role therein really appears to be of relatively little significance.

Therefore, there seems to be no reason to argue with the aforementioned stance represented by English-speaking linguists, at least those few who as little as mention diminutives in their works, e.g. Allan (1986: 240). It must, moreover, be indicated that there is practically hardly anyone to argue with, as many outstanding authors, e.g. Lyons (1968, 1995), Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), Palmer (1976), completely ignore the issue. Those who do not (Allan 1986, McArthur 1986), generally repeat definitions provided by the aforementioned sources stating that, apart from marking smallness, diminutives can be identified as hypocorisms and as means to create the atmosphere of comity and camaraderie (cf. Allan 1986: 240). All in all, it seems that diminutivization, though not alien to English, is not very

important for the language in which its role is reduced to occasional marking smaller than ordinary or average size of a referent and/or expressing tenderness.

As indicated, some authors (e.g. Allan) point to the fact that the use of diminutives, on a par with hypocorisms, is characteristic of informal, in-group language. He also seems to recognize little difference between the two notions proposing that "Hypocorisms […] are without exception informal, and often have similar status to diminutives […]" (1986: 240). This statement seems to be a slight oversimplification considering the presence in standard English of such "serious" diminutive lexemes as e.g. *novella, homunculus, cigarette, piccolo, casserole.* Nevertheless, since the classes of diminutive and hypocoristic words are not clearly distinguishable, Allan's claim can be to a degree justified.

However, it must be mentioned that, despite the common opinion that English is an "adult" language, reportedly free of diminutives, which are generally associated with child speech, it sports over 50 diminutive suffixes (cf. http://www.dailywr itingtips.com/50-diminutive-suffixes-and-a-cute-little-prefix/), many of which have been borrowed from other languages, such as Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, but there are also quite a few native ones. Some selected examples are:

> *-cule/-culus*: *molecule, homunculus*
> *-een*: *childreen, girleen*
> *-ella: novella*
> *-ette*: *cigarette, kitchenette*
> *-erel/-rel*: *doggerel, mongrel*
> *-ie*: *doggie, laddie, Willie*
> *-ine*: *figurine, linguine*
> *-kin*(s): *napkin, mannequin, Motherkins*
> *-ling*: *duckling, gosling, darling*
> *-let/-lette*: *booklet, leaflet, roulette, omelette*
> *-o*: *kiddo, wacko, milko*
> *-sie/-sy*: *footsie, tootsie, Betsy, sissy*
> *-ster*: *youngster, bankster*

-ula/-ule: *spatula*, *granule*
-y: *puppy*, *Mummy*, *Bobby*
(http://www.dailywritingtips.com/50-diminutive-suffixes-and-a-cute-little-prefix/)

Indeed, a brief look at the provided examples justifies the less than limited interest of English-based linguists in diminutive morphemes, as it confirms the assumption that they only mark smallness, and/or an emotional (predominantly, though not always, positive) speaker attitude towards a given denotation. Nevertheless, even if English diminutive morphemes have little semantic significance, it is still possible to recognize two general functions which they perform:

- the semantic function, i.e. introducing the notion of smallness into the conception represented by the basic noun;
- the pragmatic – expressive function, i.e. indicating an emotional attitude of a speaker (generally positive, as in *doggie, mummy, sissy* but also possibly negative: *doggerel*).

It should be indicated that an overlap of both functions is possible, since small size in humans and animals is usually coincident with youthfulness, and children (as well as young animals) typically arouse warm feelings in normal people, whence the abundance of diminutives in child speech (by and to children), e.g. *footsie/tootsie*, *handies*, *girlie*, *sissy*. These two classes of lexemes (diminutives and hypocorisms) do, indeed, seem to be closely related - to the degree of merging with each other, even though a diminutive does not always have to be a hypocorism, and not every hypocorism is necessarily a diminutive (at least in Polish).

As mentioned, despite the fact that English diminutive morphemes do not contribute very significant contents into the conceptions represented by entire lexemes, they perform generally the same roles as their equivalents in other languages, such as, e.g. Polish, do. However, while the expressive function is very similar in both languages, even though Polish speakers seem to

depend on diminutives to express their feelings to an incomparably higher degree than English speakers, the semantic function is in Polish by far more extensive, as the meanings thereby expressed involve a broad array of various issues beyond smallness.

3.   The role of diminutives in Polish

Though diminutives are not treated very seriously by researchers concerned with English, such an attitude would be unprofessional and extravagant in regard to Polish. Definitely, in the case of the latter language it is necessary to classify as untenable Allan's statement that all hypocorisms, which, as indicated, he seems to treat on a par with diminutives "[…] are synonymous with the standard words from which they derive and should probably be included in the same lexicon entry, with some attached note that they are generally excluded from formal discourse" (1986: 240). As is further demonstrated, Polish hypocorisms may well be metaphorical, therefore it is impossible to talk about their synonymousness with standard words.

As mentioned, the quoted above statement by Allan does not apply to Polish, where the role of diminutive suffixes (the most common ones are *-ek*, *-ka*, *-ko*, marked, respectively, for the masculine, feminine and neuter gender) is extremely important, incomparably more important than in English, where diminutive morphemes are only occasionally used to indicate smallness of a noun referent. In Polish this property is not incidentally but typically signaled by means of diminutivization, whereas in English there is a strong tendency to develop separate, morphologically independent lexemes to achieve a similar semantic effect. Some examples are presented in the following table, which comprises a list of selected nouns referring to phenomena differing from each other along the parameter of size. As can be observed, the English lexemes are composed of completely distinct, simple stems, while the corresponding Polish ones are morphologically complex and contain a suffixed diminutive morpheme (Table 1).

Table 1

Common techniques to mark the difference in size –
some examples in English and Polish

English		Polish	
shed	booth	buda	bud**ka**
mountain	hill	góra	gór**ka**
bell	ring	dzwon	dzwon**ek**
gulp	sip	łyk	łycz**ek**
branch	twig	gałąź	gałąz**ka**
clock	watch	zegar	zegar**ek**
shovel	spatula	łopata	łopat**ka**

Of course, Polish also has some non-diminutive lexemes, part of the meaning of which is the conception of smaller size, such as, e.g. *kuc* 'pony', or the loaned *bus* 'minibus'; also the terms for young animals in whose case smallness is determined by age do not have to be diminutive, e.g. *szczenię* 'pup', *kocię* 'kitten', *cielę* 'calf', *źrebię* 'foal', etc. Generally, however, such words are hard to find since the need to morphologically mark the property of smallness of an entity on a noun referring to it seems irresistible to Polish speakers, who are rather more likely to describe the just mentioned smallish phenomena with such words as *kuc**yk***, *bus**ik***, *szczeni**ak***, *koci**ak***, *ciel**ak***, *źreb**ak*** – all of which are diminutive versions of regular terms. However, the non-diminutive lexemes quoted above have a technical and formal tinge, and speakers tend not to use them in casual speech.

3.1. Bogusław Kreja'a research and findings concerning the semantics of diminutives in Polish

The Polish linguist Bogusław Kreja (1969), in his account of Polish diminutives, also recognizes basic functions of such lexemes, which are the same as those performed by their counterparts in English, i.e. the expressive/emotional function, connected with the pragmatics of language, and the semantic,

conceptual function. However, the latter one extends in Polish far beyond the semantic role ascribed to English lexical units of this type.

The range of emotions and attitudes which a speaker of Polish may express through the use of diminutives is very broad, and it may encompass, e.g.

- tenderness, affection
- pity
- satisfaction, contentment
- irony
- contempt, criticism
- suspicion
- servility

Attending to this function, Polish lexemes of the type in question do not necessarily instantiate metaphorical mappings. An exception is constituted by diminutive terms of endearment, expressing affection for loved ones, which often involve the A PERSON IS A SMALL ANIMAL / OBJECT type of conceptual metaphor. Some most common examples are *kotek* 'pussycat' (literally 'little cat'); *rybka* 'little fish'; *żabka* 'little frog'; *myszka* 'little mouse'; *słonko* 'little sun'; *kwiatuszek* 'little flower'. As can be observed, in such uses a lexeme is, at the same time, a diminutive and a hypocorism.

However, it is due to the semantic (conceptual) function of the discussed morpheme, which Kreja calls *intellectual*, that it is an extremely important part of the inventory of symbolic units developed by Polish. Thus, the diminutive morpheme is a marker of a certain specific construal of a cognitive input, i.e. its intellectual, conceptual assessment, a mental operation described by Langacker (1987). That assessment may merely concern the evaluation of the size of the referent of a diminutive noun, which is considered smaller than average or expected. In this respect, Polish diminutives impart the same information as English ones. Nevertheless, performing their semantic function

the Polish diminutives accomplish much more than that; Kreja points out that the morpheme in question may mark differences between the referents of the regular and the diminutive nouns other than those pertaining just to size. Those differences more often than not are of qualitative rather than quantitative nature.

3.2. The partitive (singulative) function

The simplest qualitative difference marked by diminutivization of a noun is individuated, partitive construal of a mass, un-countable entity. This mental process has certain grammatical consequences and results in a speaker's using a count, poten-tially pluralizable, noun instead of a mass one. Langacker (1987) illustrates this process with examples similar to *She roasted a chicken for dinner*; *We ate roast chicken for dinner* or *a roof of red tiles*; *a roof of red tile*. The reference by means of a count noun is claimed to indicate the recognition of disconti-nuity, a bounded region (typically, though not necessarily, in such domains as physical space or time) occupied by the entity in question. By the same token, a Polish diminutive form of a mass noun may (but does not have to) refer to an individual, limited in space, sample of a mass material. Kreja calls this function of the respective morpheme the *partitive* (*singulative*) one. It may indicate the small size of a referent but also the presence of its special qualities not represented by the "regular" counterpart (cf. examples provided below, especially *mydełko*, *szkiełko*, *papierek*, *słomka*, *cukierek*). Diminutivization in the provided instances applies to mass nouns and changes them into count ones. As mentioned, the referents of so affected words, in addition to their relatively small size often display cer-tain, often numerous, special properties. Some examples are:

- *mydło* 'soap' → *mydeł**ko*** 'bar of soap'; literally 'small soap'
- *węgiel* 'coal' → w*ęgiel**ek*** 'glowing coal'; literally 'small coal'
- *szkło* 'glass' → *szkieł**ko*** 'watch glass'; literally 'small glass'
- *papier* 'paper' → *papier**ek*** 'sweet wrap'; literally 'small paper'

- *ogień* 'fire' → *ogn**ik***/*ogien**ek*** 'glimmer'; literally 'small fire'
- *słoma* 'straw' → *słom**ka*** '[drinking] straw'; literally 'small straw'
- *trawa* 'grass' → *traw**ka*** 'grass leaf'; literally 'small grass'
- *cukier* 'sugar' → *cukier**ek*** 'sugar candy'; literally 'small sugar'

As can be noted, the diminutive noun may merely stand for a chunk of substance separated from a mass but otherwise displaying the same characteristics as the "parent", e.g. *węgielek, ognik, trawka*, but, more commonly, it represents a conception involving the specification of properties additional to those "inherited" from the regular term. For example, the conception represented by *mydełko* involves the notions of scent, handy shape, color, apart from that of a chemical substance also found in the semantic representation of the non-diminutive word *mydło*. Similarly, the conceptions of such special, unprecedented properties are represented by *szkiełko, papierek, słomka* and, especially, *cukierek.*

3.3. The gradual transition from the partitive/ conceptual to the purely conceptual function

In the case of many diminutives the partitive function becomes subdued or entirely muffled, and is superseded by the clearly conceptual (intellectual) one. Such diminutives may highlight certain characteristics very different from those found in the referents of regular nouns, and the phenomena symbolized by both forms are related by only vague similarity. The following examples illustrate the fact that the similarity between the entities represented by the regular and the diminutive forms is a matter of degree. The provided list of words referring to various phenomena demonstrates that in some cases the resemblance is relatively close (as between a mitten – *rękawica* and a glove – *rękawiczka*, or a gown – *suknia* and a dress – *sukienka*), in others only few general properties are shared, e.g. *biuro* and *biurko* are both places to work and prepare documents at, *komin* and *kominek* are both fire-resistant places where smoke is emitted.

- *biuro* 'office' vs. *biur**ko*** 'desk'
- *komin* 'chimney' vs. *komin**ek*** 'fireplace'
- *rękawica* 'mitten' vs. *rękawi**czka*** 'glove'
- *suknia* 'gown' vs. *sukienka* 'dress'
- *sałata* 'lettuce' vs. *sałat**ka*** 'salad'
- *potrawa* 'dish' vs. *potraw**ka*** 'stew'
- *kieł* 'fang' vs. *kieł**ek*** 'sprout'

Indicating that diminutive nouns highlight some properties absent from the conceptions represented by their regular counterparts, Kreja points out that the relationship between them is, nevertheless, based on "objective similarity". Furthermore, he notes that in some cases the similarity between the denotations of regular and diminutive nouns cannot be recognized as "objective", like in the case of, e.g. *cukier* 'sugar' and *cukierek* 'candy', or *młyn* 'mill' and *młynek* (*do pieprzu*) 'pepper mill'. Consequently, he concludes that when the differences between the denotations are considerable (i.e. there is no "objective" similarity), as in, e.g. *pięt**ka*** '[bread] heel', referring to a part of a loaf rather than a part of a foot, *głów**ka*** 'nail head', referring to the upper part of a metal object rather than a body part, the considered words must be classified as "false diminutives". In such "false diminutives" the only function of the attached morpheme is supposed to merely indicate that a respective referent is of small size. However, from the perspective of recent developments in linguistic studies, such a conclusion definitely needs to be revised.

4. The metaphorical extensions of diminutives

Since Kreja published his paper well before the advent of the cognitive theory of conceptual metaphor, he did not consider the role of figurativeness in establishing new senses of lexical units. Yet, in view of the findings presented by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), instead of calling the apparently incidental diminutives "false" ones, it is possible, in an attempt to explain their genesis,

to refer to the Cognitive Linguistics account of polysemy, where the senses of a lexeme representing a number of meanings are either[1]

- elaborations (specializations) of a basic, prototypical sense (which seems to be the case with *młynek* 'pepper mill', *rękawiczka* 'glove', *biurko* 'desk', *sałatka* 'salad', *cukierek*, in whose case the referents of both regular nouns and their diminutive forms indeed share some "objective" properties, or
- metaphorical extensions, senses which are inspired by conceptualizing a certain target notion in terms of another, source one. In their case the similarity is of mental, rather than independent-of-cognition, nature; it is conceived similarity. Such is the case of e.g. *kiełek* 'sprout'.

The present author discusses these issues in relation to the phenomenon of *subjectification* in an earlier work (cf. Sokołowska 2010).

In view of certain assumptions concerning human knowledge and the way it is obtained, it seems dubious whether there is at all such thing as "objective similarity". The unreliability and erroneousness of people's sensory perception was already drawn attention to by the Sceptics in Ancient Greece, cf. Tatarkiewicz (1973: 146-153). Recognizing this fact leads to the conclusion that the knowledge of objective reality, of the world "as it is", is in principle inaccessible to human mind, just because it is human, and whatever reaches the mind is determined and shaped by human perceptual and mental capacities. This idea, promoted specifically in the works by Lakoff (1982, 1987 lies at the foundation of cognitive linguistics, which claims that the human account of the reality is entirely determined by human physical and mental capacities. Therefore, the term "objective similarity" should, as it seems, be re-phrased as "the recognition

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[1] Lakoff's account of polysemy (the *Full Specification* approach) has been revised and completed with a more synthetic and economic explanation of the phenomenon, the *Principled Polysemy* approach proposed by Evans (2019: 435-445) (also in the earlier edition of 2006, co-authored by Melanie Green).

of shared properties that appear similar from the human point of view". Resemblance, in turn, is a matter of degree, and, as indicated, it is based on conceived correspondence of certain properties shared by two phenomena. The properties may be of, e.g. visual (in general sensory), functional or interactional nature, and they can be considered similar as a result of an assessment influenced by the human factor, rather than of registering by the mind an objective state of affairs.

It is such conceived (not objective) similarity that lies at the foundation of many well-known and widespread conceptual structural metaphors, such as

LIFE IS A JOURNEY
ARGUMENT IS WAR
TIME IS MONEY
THE MIND IS A CONTAINER

In their case the metaphorical mappings are indeed established on the basis of a certain similarity, yet this similarity is recognized only in conceptualizers' minds, it is not a matter of sharing any physical, "objective" properties by the two phenomena involved. Such conceived similarity can be, for example, observed between the entities represented by the polysemous English noun *ram*, which can refer to a male sheep or to an ancient military machine, both of which are associated with forceful striking, but which "objectively" have nothing in common. By the same token, the Polish diminutive noun *kiełek* applies to an entity (a sprout) whose shape and color are conceived by humans as similar to those characterizing a fang – *kieł*, even though, otherwise, the two phenomena are completely distinct. These simple examples illustrate how metaphorical thinking engenders diminutive lexemes in Polish. English, in accordance with the general policy followed in this language, has produced two distinct lexical representations of the two objects, despite the fact, registered by Polish, that they are similar to the human eye.

Generally, the metaphors involved in certain senses of Polish diminutives seem to be of the ontological type, i.e. they structure target notions (domains) in terms of common, well-known physical entities, like containers, buildings, animals and, of course, persons (source domains). Such metaphors are cognitively quite simple since the mappings are based on visual or functional, easy to conceive similarity, as in the case of *kieł* 'fang' vs. *kiełek* 'sprout' – the example provided above. Metaphorical uses of words do, of course, also function on an everyday basis in English, but the mappings are not morphologically signaled, as in the above-presented example of *ram*, or also *leg* (of a table), *face* (of a watch), *foot* (of a mountain).

In metaphorical mappings marked in Polish by the use of a diminutive morpheme the source domains are typically such phenomena as body parts, animals, plants, e.g.

- *głowa* 'head' vs. dim. *główka (sałaty)* 'head (of lettuce)'
- *stopa* 'foot' vs. dim. *stopka* 'presser foot of a sewing machine'
- *żaba* 'frog' vs. dim. *żabka* 'wrench' or 'curtain hook'
- *świnia* 'pig' vs. dim. *świnka* 'mumps'
- *róża* 'rose' vs. dim. *różyczka* 'rubella/German measles'

There are numerous other examples illustrating how the observation that some property appears to be shared by two different phenomena has inspired metaphorical extensions of the meanings of diminutive nouns in Polish. It should be noted, however, that diminutivization does not always have to be indicative of metaphoricity; it may very well mark nothing beyond smallness. In the case of metaphorical uses, however, the extensions are motivated by conceived resemblance. Table 2 illustrates this process.

Table 2

Properties highlighted by Polish metaphorical diminutives – examples

Diminutive noun	Conventional sense	Metaphorical sense	Highlighted (shared) property
byczek	small bull	athletic male	massive body build
sarenka	small roe deer	long legged, slender girl (also dog)	light body build
mostek	small bridge	breastbone	connecting function
łopatka	small shovel	shoulder blade	overall shape
żabka	small frog	wrench	overall shape: broad "mouth"
krokodylek	small crocodile	crocodile clip	overall shape
świnka	small pig	mumps	roundness and puffiness of face
różyczka	small rose	rubella	red color
maczek	small poppy seeds	small print	fine structure
żółwik	small turtle	fist bump	overall shape
stopka	little foot	presser foot of a sewing machine	overall shape
paprotka	small fern	a female, participating in some organization or event, but unimportant, considered to be just an "ornament" (ironic)	function

5. Final remarks

The above-presented examples of metaphorical extensions of di-
minutive lexemes belong, as indicated, to the group of the sim-
plest ontological metaphors, in which the mappings between the
source and the target domains are based on physical similarity.
Moreover, the target domains involved are conceptions of mate-
rial entities, such as people, physical objects or physical condi-
tions. The metaphorical cognitive strategy does not seem, thus,
to be in such cases adopted for the sake of better understand-
ing, as is normal in figurative thinking, where the typical target
domains are abstract, intangible phenomena, whose mental ac-
cession and processing requires expending certain mental ef-
fort. Thinking metaphorically about such notions as time, life,
love, freedom, etc., makes them mentally better manageable. By
contrast, metaphorical diminutives, such as those described
above, seem to be used for a more mundane purpose, which is
efficient reference, rather than for enhancing comprehension.
They effectively highlight properties (mostly shape or color)
shared by entities whose conceptions are involved in a meta-
phorical mapping, thus making the so-named phenomena eas-
ier to identify. Diminutivization in Polish, often metaphorical,
transparently points to those properties and, at the same time,
it is a formally simple and productive method of creating new
lexical items. The effectiveness and practicality of this method
must be appreciated, since the Polish lexicon involves a great
number of basic vocabulary (basic-level terms) coined in this
way, which is used on an everyday basis by casual speakers.

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