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Slovene Nominal Diminutives and their English Equivalents: A Comparison

Summary

A contrastive analysis of nominal diminutives in Slovene and English clearly shows that diminutive formation and use of diminutives in Slovene is tied to the morphological characteristics of nouns and, consequently, their morphological–lexemic features, whereas the focus of diminutive formation and use in English remains bound to the syntactic use, or rather, the respective syntactico–semantic use of a given lexeme. In all languages, diminutiveness is a basic meaning–forming element, which can, however, be realized predominantly morphologically, as is the case in Slovene, or predominantly syntactically, as is the case in English. As a meaning–forming element it also plays a crucial role in the development of terminology – in this case the diminutive as language metaphor gains semantic independence and becomes a technical term.

Key words: nominal diminutive, word–formation, syntax, connotation, denotation

Slovenske samostalniške manjšalnice in njihove ustreznice v angleščini: primerjava

Povzetek

Protistavna analiza samostalniških manjšalnic v slovenščini in angleščini jasno kaže, da sta tvorba in raba manjšalnic v slovenščini vezani na oblikoslovne značilnosti samostalnikov in posledično njihove morfološko–leksemске lastnosti, medtem ko ostaja težišče manjšalniške tvorbe in rabe v angleščini vezano na skladnjo oziroma skladenjsko–pomensko rabo določenega leksema. V vseh jezikih je manjšalnost ena osnovnih pomenotvornih prvin, ki jo lahko izražamo predvsem morfološko, kot na primer v slovenščini, ali predvsem skladenjsko, kot na primer v angleščini. Kot pomenotvorna prvina manjšalnost pomembno vpliva tudi na razvoj terminologije – v tem primeru se manjšalnica kot jezikovna metafora pomensko osamosvoji in postane strokovni termin.

Ključne besede: samostalniška manjšalnica, besedotvorje, skladnja, konotacija, denotacija

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1. Introduction

The present article deals with various ways diminutiveness can be expressed in Slovene and English respectively; the focus is on word-formational and syntactic properties of diminutive structures in the two languages concerned. While these two languages can to some degree express diminution, which is a language universal, in similar ways from the word-formational point of view, a more detailed analysis shows that because of language-typological differences between English (analytic language) and Slovene (synthetic language) diminution should be studied beyond mere lexical word-formation, surpassing the boundaries of single words or syntactic phrases.

2. Patterns for Expressing Diminution in Slovene

Since Slovene is a synthetic language, synthetic formation of diminutives by means of affixation is the most common way of expressing diminution. While diminutives in Slovene mainly belong to the word-class of nouns, diminution can also frequently be observed in verbs, adjectives and their adverbial derivatives, rarely also interjections and numerals (see an overview in Černe 2010, 24). Numerous suffixes are used to produce nominal diminutives, which are attached to either masculine, feminine or neuter bases. The exact number of affixes used for diminution may vary in different linguistic sources consulted; thus Toporišič (2004, 143–4) enumerates seventeen diminutive suffixes for masculine, feminine and neuter diminutive nouns (*-(an)ec, -ič, -(č)ek, -e, -i, -ko, -če* for masculine diminutives; *-ca, -(i)ica, -(i)ka, -i* for feminine diminutives; *-e, -(e)ce, -(i)če, -(e)ca, -ko, -ica* for neuter diminutives), while Bajec (1950, 127) lists eleven for all three genders. However, some of the suffixes mentioned either by Bajec or Toporišič are dated, dialectal or extremely rare (e.g. *-če* for masculine, *-iče, -če, -ko, -ica* for neuter diminutives). A study by Vidovič Muha (1995, 160), however, itemizes nineteen diminutive suffixes, six for masculine diminutives (*-(e)k, -č(e)k, -(e)c, -ič, -ic, -et*), six for feminine diminutives (*-ica, -ka, -ca, -ice, -ce, -ke*), and seven for neuter diminutives (*-ce, -ece, -ko, -iče, -eca, -ca, -ka*). All diminutive nominal formations, however, regardless of the original declension-type of their base, enter the first nominal declension pattern of their respective gender, the only exception being feminine diminutives ending in *-i* (e.g. *mami, babi*), which follow the third feminine declension pattern.

[majhen] grič[-∅] > -ek, grič- > grič-ek	(hillDIM)
[majhen] bik[-∅] > -ec, bik- > bik-ec	(bullDIM)
[majhna] hiš[-a] > -ka, hiš- > hiš-ka	(houseDIM)
[majhno] jezer[-o] > -ce, jezer- > jezer-ce	(lakeDIM)

Far less frequently, clipping, compounding and reduplication are used to produce synthetic diminutive nouns in Slovene. Thus, for example, clipping is used in the production of diminutive

pet forms from personal names; similarly, reduplication can occasionally be found in names in children's literature or facetious (nick-)name forms:

Vladimir > Vlado > Lado > Ladko/Ladi	(clipping, often further combined with affixation)
Žogica Marogica	(reduplication)
Tonček Balonček	(reduplication)

Compounding, however, is to be encountered in nouns beginning in *mikro-* or *mini-* (e.g. *minikrilo*, *minigolf*, *mikroprocesor*, *mikrofilm*). While Slovene grammarians strictly consider the two elements *mikro-* and *mini-* as compound elements (Stramljič Breznik 2007, 36), English grammarians tend to treat them as prefixes rather than elements of a compound (Bauer 2002, 1678). It is also worth noting that most of these formations in Slovene have been imported from foreign languages (usually English, often via German) as anglicisms or have been partly calqued (e.g. *miniskirt* > *minikrilo*).

Another type of expressing diminution connected with nouns in Slovene is the analytic type; these formations normally contain nouns preceded by the adjectives meaning 'small' or 'little' (usually *majhen*, *droben*, etc.), as in:

majhen kos	(a small piece)
majhna hiša	(a small house)
drobna deklica	(a small girl)

Interestingly, analytic diminutives and synthetic ones are practically always interchangeable in Slovene; thus, for example, *majhen kos torte* (a small piece of cake) can be replaced by *košček torte* without any change in meaning.

Another interesting feature of Slovene is the fact that the language quite often produces multiple diminution. In these structures, the two types, analytic and synthetic, are often combined:

hči > hčerka > hčerkica	(daughterDIMDIM)
hiša > hiška > hiškica	(houseDIMDIM)
<i>majbno</i> jezerce	(a small lakeDIM)
<i>majcena</i> punčka	(a littleDIM girlDIM)

3. Patterns for Expressing Diminution in English

While in the Slovene language diminutiveness is mostly expressed by means of suffixal endings within a lexeme, the English language only occasionally expresses diminutiveness in this same, synthetic, way. More often, expressing diminutiveness in English demands going beyond the borders of a lexeme and stretching over an entire syntactic structure or even sentence. Traditionally, linguists have considered English a language with hardly any diminutives, if any at all (Schneider 2003, 75). Even more recent works on English word-formation seem to deal somehow perfunctorily with diminution; thus, for example, Plag (2003, 13, 120–1) comments

on diminution only in terms of pet forms where clipping is combined with suffixation. Adams (2001, 55–8) covers diminutives in more detail, listing eight nominal suffixes with (partly) diminutive meaning. Further, Bauer (2002, 1677–8) lists five regular suffixes, two prefixes, and a few “irregular” or historical forms. Schneider (2003, 78), on the other hand, enumerates as many as 86 different formatives that can be classified as diminutive suffixes of English, but, admittedly, many of these are only rarely used or are decidedly foreign in origin. Schneider therefore analyzes the following fourteen suffixes as present–day diminutive English suffixes (Schneider 2003, 85 ff): *-a*, *-een*, *-er*, *-ette*, *-ie/-y/-ey/-ee*, *-kin*, *-le*, *-let*, *-ling*, *-o*, *-peg*, *-poo(h)*, *-pop*, *-s*. Like in Slovene, the suffix is attached to a nominal base to produce a diminutive form:

[small] kitchen > kitchen–ette	(kitchenDIM)
[baby] boot > boot–ee	(bootDIM)

Occasionally, prefixation, clipping, compounding and reduplication are used to produce synthetic diminutive nouns in English (Schneider 2003, 8, 84; and Bauer 2002, 1678):

microwave, minicab	(prefixation)
sec (< second)	(clipping)
baby lion, dwarf conifers	(compounding)
Annie–Pannie	(reduplication)

As already mentioned, it is far more common to express diminution by means of analytical formations in English; in these diminutive expressions we encounter nouns preceded by the adjectives *small*, *little*, and the more specific *diminutive*, *tiny*, *wee*, etc.:

a little girl
small children
his diminutive kitchen

Of these, the two adjectives *small* and *little* are frequently used; however, it needs to be noted that while *small* used in its literal meaning appears in neutral contexts, *little* carries with it an additional emotional component (Schneider 2003, 126; Klınar 1996, 199). Thus, for example, *a small house* is more appropriate in neutral and/or technical texts, while the syntagm *a little house* is more readily encountered in literary texts (Klınar 1996, 199).

Multiple diminution seems to occur very rarely in English, and in the rare examples when it is used, the emotionality of the context is clearly visible:

Once upon a time in a *tiny little cottage* lived the three bears;
One was the papa bear, one was the mama bear, one was the wee bear [...]
(taken from: *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*)

4. The Semantics of Slovene and English Diminutives

The basic, prototypical semantic meaning of a diminutive is denotative and refers to the (small) size of the referent (Schneider 2003, 10). The feature [small] is added to the base, indicating that

the referent is smaller than the average of the category that the referent belongs to. This applies to both Slovene and English diminutives:

kuhinja + [majhen] > kuhinjica kitchen + [small] > kitchenette (kitchenDIM)

Quite often, however, the semantic feature [small] may not be restricted to size only, but may also be slightly extended to denote the age of the referent, adding the semantic feature [young] to the base:

raca + [mlad] > račka	duck + [young] > duckling	(duckDIM)
prašič + [mlad] > prašiček	pig + [young] > piglet	(pigDIM)

Additionally, however, most diminutives also seem to express some connotational value (Schneider 2003, 1; Adams 2001, 13). In these cases, a semantic feature carrying some kind of relative evaluation is added to the base, expressing the speaker's emotional attitude towards the referent, which can be either positive or negative in connotation:

mama + [drag, ljub] > mamica	mum + [dear, sweet] > mummy (motherDIM)
predavanje + [ničvreden] > predavanjce	lecture + [worthless] > lecturette (lectureDIM)

It should be stressed, however, that the connotative values of individual diminutives may vary considerably, depending on the situational contexts and linguistic factors. Another point to bear in mind is the frequent overlapping of the denotative and connotative elements within the same diminutive; it is often difficult, if not impossible, to draw a division line between denotation and connotation.

Another group of nominal diminutives deserves special attention as to its semantics. These nouns are diminutive in form only, but their semantic meaning has specialized so that they no longer express any diminutiveness. Quite often, they seem to have been formed on the basis of metaphoric association with the diminutive or its base form:

metulj (butterfly) >	metuljček (little butterfly) >	metuljček (bow-tie)
steklenica (bottle) >	steklenička (little bottle) >	steklenička (baby bottle)
copat (slipper) >	copatek (child's slipper) >	copatek (ballet shoe)
brada (beard) >	bradica (little beard) >	bradica (goatee)

In some other examples, however, the analogy has been completely lost or has never existed at all, and these lexicalized diminutives are simply used as neutral forms filling lexical gaps; the bases they are supposedly derived from carry a different meaning altogether or are non-existent:

marelica (apricot)
 babica (midwife)
 vrtec (kindergarten)
 spominek (souvenir)

Often, these lexicalized diminutives are to be found in technical language, thus acquiring the status of technical terms:

bobnič (eardrum) /anatomy/

rakec (small crab) /zoology/

matica (nut) /engineering/

lepi čveljc (lady's slipper orchid) /botany/

5. Comparison of Contexts with Diminutives in Slovene and English - An Analysis

The following Slovene contexts with their English translations aim to illustrate how the diminutive meaning of the Slovene original (whether denotative or connotative) often needs to be distributed along an entire syntactic structure in English if diminution is to be expressed. While some contexts can indeed be translated “directly” with English diminutives, in most translations (quoted from Černe 2010; translations into English mostly provided by Černe himself) diminution exceeds word and phrase boundaries of the Slovene originals.

Betnava je res bila “čudovit baročni *dvorec*”, kot je 17. t.m. na TV rekel minister Školč, vendar kot pravijo domačini, le do konca 2. svetovne vojne. Zdaj je le še za silo obnovljen in vzdrževan *gradič*, in še to ne po zaslugi države, ampak predvsem po zaslugi Lipe iz Ajdovščine in nekaj tudi lokalne skupnosti. (*Delo*, 1.7.1999)
Betnava used to be a “wonderful baroque *manor*”, as Minister Školč put it on the 17th of this month in a TV programme; however, according to the local people, that was only until the end of the Second World War. Now Betnava is nothing but an *insignificant little castle*, poorly restored and barely preserved, with no funds from the state, on top of everything, and kept up mostly by Lipa from Ajdovščina and partly by the local community. (Translation by Černe)

The two nominal diminutives in this context, *dvorec* and *gradič*, illustrate the denotative and connotative meanings respectively, while the referent remains the same. The semantically neutral diminutive (*baročni*) *dvorec* is thus translated as (*baroque*) *manor* (an even more frequent English collocation to use would be *baroque mansion*), while the slightly pejorative *gradič* demands a different translation. The translator opted for the phrase *insignificant little castle* to convey the sense of negative connotation.

Resda domača zmaga niti za *hipec* ni bila ogrožena, a tako tekoče igre kot v lepem drugem delu le ni bilo. (*Delo*, 20. 3. 2007)

Although the victory of the home team was not jeopardized even for *a second*, the game was not as smooth as in the exciting second part. (Translation by Černe)

The Slovene text uses the diminutive *hipec* (momentDIM) although the base form *hip* (moment) could be employed instead with practically no change in meaning. Although the translator decided to use a non-diminutive form *a second* in his English translation, the meaning of the entire Slovene context is correctly rendered into English, even though it lacks the diminutive form.

“Bi prišla naprej ti, s *čopki* ... lahko tudi z *mamico*. Boš *bombonček*?” je prvo gostjo spodbudila voditeljica. (*Delo*, 10. 8. 2005)

“You, with *pigtails* ... yes, you can bring your *mommy*, too. How about some *candy, sweetheart*?” the hostess encouraged her first guest. (Translation by Černe)

This Slovene context includes three diminutives and is taken from child-oriented speech in which diminutives are commonly used. The first diminutive noun *čopki* suggests that the little girl addressed was a small child wearing her hair plaited into pigtails, and in the English translation *pigtails* has been used but nothing diminutive to suggest the child's small size. The diminutive *mamica* has been translated by using the corresponding English diminutive *mommy*, which is one of the rare examples where the two languages correspond in the use of diminutive equivalents. The third diminutive *bombonček* (candyDIM) has again been translated using a neutral non-diminutive noun in English (*candy*). However, the translator here added the noun *sweetheart*, inserting in the translation some further positive connotative value with which to enhance the English context, compensating for its lack of diminutiveness in *pigtails* and *candy*. Another possible translation for the diminutive *bombonček*, however, could be found in the English synthetic diminutive *sweetie*, which would again establish exact formal equivalence between Slovene and English.

“Oj, pa si že vstala? Zgodaj je še in ti bi še lahko spančkala v *posteljici*. Pa zakaj si tako zgodaj vstala?” (Vandot: Kekec na volčji sledi)

“Up already? It's still early, *angel*, you could've slept in your *little bed* a little longer. Why did you get up so early?” (Translation by Černe)

The above context is again an example of child-oriented speech, but has been taken from children's literature. Again, the translator rendered the synthetic Slovene diminutive *posteljica* (bedDIM) into English analytically by using *little bed*. However, he again added a noun to address the small child (*angel*), probably to compensate for the diminutiveness expressed in the Slovene verb *spančkati* (sleepDIM).

Kdo misli, je nabijal Adam z vrčem po mizi, kdo misli, da bo ta smrkavi *cesarček* s svojim podkupljivim uradništvom, s samovoljnimi stanovi, s pogoltno duhovščino, s svojo dobro voljo in s svojim slabištvom napravil red v tej prekleti zmedeni deželi? (Jančar: *Galjot*)

Tell me who could think, Adam was slamming his mug against the table, who could possibly think that this *little brat of an emperor* is capable of setting things straight in this goddamn messed-up country with his corrupted officials, disobedient classes, greedy clergy, with his positive spirit and his spinelessness? (Translation by Černe)

In this context taken from a literary text, the Slovene diminutive form clearly expresses pejorativeness; *smrkavi cesarček* (emperorDIM) could literally be interpreted as *this snotty little emperor*. The translator opted for *this little brat of an emperor*, which fully conveys the meaning intended by the author; the Slovene diminutive is in this case expressed by using an analytical diminutive phrase in English.

To pa pomeni, da je naše morebitno članstvo odloženo za nekaj let ali kar *ad calendas graecas*. Po drugi strani pa bomo v teh nekaj letih najbrž vendarle sprejeti v EU in tako bo odpadel tisti *argumentek*, ki pravi, da je za našo varnost dobro, da smo vsaj v Natu, dokler ne bomo v Uniji. (*Delo*, 4.8.2001)

This, however, means that our potential membership will be postponed for a few years, or even “*ad calendas graecas*”, so to speak. On the other hand, we will probably become a full member of the EU in the next few years after all, which will discredit that *piffling argument* supporting the belief that it would be safer for us to be at least a NATO member until we finally obtain EU membership. (Translation by Černe)

Here another pejorative journalistic context shows how easily the Slovene language forms a synthetic diminutive from practically any nominal base (*argument* > *argumentek*); English, on the other hand, although having several pejorative suffixes at its disposal (e.g. *-ette*, *-so*), prefers an equivalent formed analytically to render the same meaning: the noun *argument* is premodified by the slightly informal adjective *piffling*, which adds the necessary pejorative tone to the English translation. Less informal, but still pejorative, would be the phrases *trifling argument* or *trivial argument*.

Našemu sodelavcu Mitji Šumaku je na eni največjih kasaških dirk na svetu, Elitloppu na Švedskem, uspelo fotografirati nagca, ki je na progo hušknil med 4. in 5. dirko. Vsega hudega vajeni varnostniki ga sploh niso zaustavljali, očitvidci pa so mnenja, da je bil *debelušček* tudi zmerno okajen. (*Delo*, 7. 6. 1999)

During Elitlopp, one of the biggest horse racing events in the world that takes place in Sweden, our correspondent Mitja Šumak managed to take a shot of a man who jumped onto the tracks stark naked between the 4th and the 5th race. The security guards, who are probably used to all sorts of eccentricities, did not even make an attempt to stop him, and the eyewitnesses claim that *the chubby prankster* appeared to be rather “merry” too. (Translation by Černe)

The diminutive *debelušček* (fat manDIM) used in the above context is again connotative in meaning and adds a decidedly jocular note to the text. The translator decided to convey this same meaning in English by using the phrase *the chubby prankster*; thus, the component [fat] is expressed in the adjective *chubby*, and the humorous, jocular quality of the fat man’s action in the noun *prankster*. Another option in English would be to use the diminutive noun form *fatty*, which, according to Schneider (2003, 111), is positive in connotation; yet another solution, *fatso*, would be clearly wrong as it conveys a pejorative shade of meaning which the source-language item lacks.

Za prihodnje leto je najprej predvideno čiščenje usedlin iz kanala za dovod morske vode, očistiti bo treba preliv med *malim jezercem* in večjo vodno laguno, z območja zatoka pa se bodo morali umakniti tudi *mali vrtičkarji*. (*Delo*, 15. 12. 1998)

The schedule for next year includes clearing the sediments for the seawater supply channel, clearing the passageway between *the little lake* and the bigger water lagoon; also, *garden owners* will be asked to leave the area around the inlet. (Translation by Černe)

This context brings two Slovene diminutives, *malo jezerce* and *mali vrtičkarji*; both are double diminutives in which analytical and synthetic diminutives are combined to enhance the expressive force of diminution. This kind of gradation is nearly impossible to render in English, *malo jezerce* (little lakeDIM) is therefore translated as *little lake*, while *mali vrtičkarji* (owners of little gardensDIM) can only be rendered as *garden owners*.

Na glavi ima *majhno*, visoko *čepico* iz črnih čipk, ki so tako trdo naškrobljene, da je videti, kakor bi bile izrezljane iz starega lesa in ne stkane iz rahlih nitk. Njen *drobčkani obraz* je ves naguban in zarjavel od žgočega južnega sonca. (Kosmač: *Težka nedelja*)
 She is wearing a *small*, tall *hat* with black lace starched so heavily that it seems as though it had been carved out of an old piece of wood rather than knitted with delicate yarn.
 Her *tiny face* has wrinkled and burnt under the southern sun. (Translation by Černe)

The above context taken from a literary text contains two analytic diminutives in Slovene, which are both rendered analytically into English. The more neutral combination *majhna čepica* is translated as *small hat*, while the more expressive *drobčkani obraz* is transferred as *tiny face*. Another nominal alternative to *hat* that could be used by the translator in the above context is *bonnet*.

Ljudje z začudenjem spremljajo, kako lahko *drobčen virus* pahne ves svet v svetovno računalniško krizo. Te pa niso lansirali veliki računalniki, temveč običajni PC z domače pisalne mize. (*Delo*, 20. 5. 2000)
 People find it incredible that *a tiny virus* can cause a global computer crisis which is usually started not by super computers, but an ordinary PC on a desk in somebody's home. (Translation by Černe)

In this context, the analytical diminutive *drobčen virus* is translated into English by means of another analytical formation *a tiny virus*.

In Bjork? Fino je bilo videti, kakšna *majčkена* bledolična *smrklja* je. In kakšen glas! (*Delo*, 23. 6. 2001)
 And what about Bjork? It was nice to see what *a teeny* pale *brat* she is. And what a voice! (Translation by Černe)

The above context again illustrates how an analytical diminutive formation in Slovene can be rendered into English directly by using a corresponding analytical diminutive. Such a direct, literal rendition of Slovene diminutives into English seems to be mainly possible in the case of Slovene analytical diminutive formations (whether denotative or connotative) and synthetic formations denoting primarily family relationships.

When Slovene lexicalized diminutives are to be translated into English, it is very rare that corresponding English terms also have diminutive suffixes, as in the pairs *bradica* – *goatee*, *kipec* – *statuette*. The equivalents in English are in most cases lexemes with no diminution expressed in them, as for example in:

Marellice izvirajo iz Kitajske. (www.mojirecepti.com/sadje/koscicasto/marellice-sveze.html)
Apricots have their origin in China. (Translation by Sicherl)

Nekateri so odšli v cerkev, nekateri pa so [...] **kupovali spominke**. (www.rihpovec.si/index.php/dogodki.html)

Some of them went into the church, the others walked around buying souvenirs. (Translation by Sicherl)

However, the translation of such diminutive forms into English is the least demanding, although the translation equivalents in English practically never have a diminutive form.

6. Concluding Remarks

While in Slovene it often seems to come to hyperproduction of diminutive formations, the English language is more reserved and less productive in this respect. Slovene uses both synthetic and analytic formations, often combining the two, as well as gradation of diminutives, which is a feature that the English language with its word-formational means cannot cope with accordingly. However, diminutiveness as one of language universals is expressed in English as well, albeit at other levels of language structure. Based on the typology of the language, English seems to use fewer synthetic diminutive forms in comparison to Slovene, but the production of analytic diminutives does not seem to lag behind in any respect. Within monolingual Slovene diminutive research it is therefore possible to remain limited to the lexemic-morphological level and analyze Slovene diminutives exclusively in terms of word-formation. As soon as the research becomes bilingual, including English, the analysis must expand to syntax and context, as diminution in English can often be expressed only beyond the borders of single words. Semantically, however, diminutives in both languages can express either denotative or connotative meanings, with frequent overlapping of both; in these cases the context again plays a crucial role in assigning either primarily denotative or connotative value to a lexeme. A special group of Slovene diminutives is lexicalized diminutives. These are diminutive in form only, but are semantically neutral, and often (as extended metaphors) play a role in the formation of terminology. Their English equivalents only rarely display diminutive forms (e.g. *bradica* – *goatee*; *rakec* – *small crab*).

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