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SYNTHETIC DIMINUTIVES IN ENGLISH NURSERY RHYMES: FORMATIONS WITH THE SUFFIX *-IE*

Streszczenie:

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu omówienie procesów sufiksacji jako sposobów tworzenia zdrobnień w języku angielskim, biorąc pod uwagę w szczególności sufiks *-ie*. Analiza 175 wierszyków dla dzieci z książki *The Collins Book of Nursery Rhymes* dowodzi, iż jest on najczęściej stosowanym sufiksem w angielskiej literaturze dziecięcej. Posiada on wiele znaczeń, co sprawia, iż może być użyty w różnorodnych kontekstach, w zależności od rozmówców i sytuacji, w jakiej się znajdują. Ponadto, łączy się z rzeczownikami różnego typu, co podkreśla jego uniwersalność. W artykule pokrótce omówione są także pozostałe sufiksy powszechnie stosowane do tworzenia form zdrobniałych w języku angielskim.

1. Introduction – the focus of this paper

There are two major ways of forming English diminutives. They are obtained either analytically by using lexical elements such as *little* and *small*¹, or synthetically by adding diminutive suffixes such as *-ie*, *-ette*, *-let*, *-kin* or *-s* to a noun². This paper focuses on the description of the processes of suffixation, and, in particular, on the suffix *-ie*, which, on the basis of the analysis of the texts taken from *The Collins Book of Nursery Rhymes*, proves to be the most widely-used one in English nursery rhymes.

2. Defining the diminutive suffix

Diminutive formation is a type of modification, rather than derivation proper, as diminutives are considered to be “variants of existing words” due to the fact that

¹ Dressler, Wolfgang U., and Barbaresi, Lavinia Merlini: *Morphopragmatics. Diminutives and Intensifiers in Italian, German, and Other Languages*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter 1994. P. 114.

² Schneider, Klaus P.: *Diminutives in English*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag 2003. P. 2.

they “can be replaced by their base forms in many contexts”. They are “nouns formed from nouns”³.

Diminutive suffixes in English can be attached to countable nouns, inanimate and animate ones, and to some human nouns⁴. There are, however, uncountable nouns that occur with a diminutive suffix, but “the derived words containing the diminutive suffix have some of the syntactic properties of countable nouns [...] which indicate that such uses represent cases of recategorization of the bases from uncountables to countables”⁵. Diminutive suffixes are described as category neutral suffixes as they “inherit the lexical category of the base to which they are attached, or they are transparent to the lexical category of the base”⁶. What is even more, they “allow for a consecutive application of the diminutive formation rule, and [...] the result is an existent word”⁷. Besides, unlike other suffixes, diminutives “allow repeated application of the same suffix formation rule [...] and at each point in the application of the rule the derived word is a possible word”⁸. It is also worth mentioning that diminutive suffixes are applied after all the other derivational suffixes and before the inflectional ones⁹. Furthermore, “one and the same base allows several possible diminutive suffixes”¹⁰.

3. English diminutive suffixes

Schneider¹¹ distinguishes fourteen diminutive suffixes in contemporary English:

- suffixes which are considered “the most productive diminutive suffixes in English today”: *-ie*, *-ette*, and *-let*;
- originally Germanic suffixes: *-kin* and *-ling*;
- originally Irish English the suffix *-een*;
- suffixes “referred to as ‘familiarity markers’”, which Schneider¹² describes as expressive, affective or evaluative, as they all denote an attitude but not smallness: *-s*, *-er*, *-o*, *-a*, and *-le*;
- suffixes rarely mentioned in the literature: *-poo*, *-pop*, and *-peg*.

Each of those suffixes will be described very briefly below, except for the suffix *-ie*, analysed in section 6.

³ Ibidem. P. 9.

⁴ Stefanescu, Ioana: On Diminutive Suffixes. In: *Folia Linguistica: Acta Societatis Linguisticae Europaeae* 26: 3 (1992). P. 349.

⁵ Ibidem. P. 350.

⁶ Ibidem. P. 341.

⁷ Ibidem. P. 342.

⁸ Ibidem. P. 343.

⁹ Ibidem. P. 343.

¹⁰ Ibidem. P. 351.

¹¹ Schneider, K.P.: Diminutives in English. Pp. 85–86.

¹² Ibidem. P. 108.

3.1. Suffix *-ette*

It is used for diminutivisation of object nouns, that is nouns referring to architecture, interior design, furnishings, and furniture (e.g. *balconette*, *kitchenette*), which gain the feature of being small¹³. Furthermore, it is used in case of nouns referring to genre names (e.g. *novelette*, *letterette*) which denote ‘a short specimen of the respective category’ or ‘a specimen which fails to meet the qualitative criteria of the respective genre’¹⁴.

3.2. Suffix *-let*

It is used for diminutivisation of object nouns. Diminutives represent entities which are smaller than prototypical members of a particular category (e.g. *droplet*). It is also used for diminutivisation of animal nouns¹⁵. This particular suffix adds the component [+young], therefore, diminutives refer to non-adult members of a particular species (e.g. *froglet*). The next case, of diminutivisation of personal nouns, concerns nouns referring to an adult person (e.g. *kinglet*, *wifelet*, *starlet*) gaining negative, depreciative meaning of contempt¹⁶.

3.3. Suffix *-kin*

It carries the meaning of ‘small’ and ‘charming’ (*babykin*)¹⁷. It can also be used in ironic contexts or for diminutivisation of first names in order to form address terms¹⁸.

3.4. Suffix *-ling*

It is often replaced by other diminutive suffixes in contemporary English as it is now considered old-fashioned and comical. It is attached to nouns referring to humans, animals, and plants¹⁹:

- diminutives referring to animals and plants mean “young one of the category denoted by the base word” (e.g. *catling*, *seedling*);
- diminutives referring to adult humans gain negative connotations of being ‘petty, unimportant’ (e.g. *princeling*)²⁰.

¹³ Adams, Valerie: *Complex Words in English*. Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd. 2001. P. 56.

¹⁴ Schneider, K.P.: *Diminutives in English*. Pp. 93–94.

¹⁵ Adams, V.: *Complex Words in English*. P. 56.

¹⁶ Schneider, K.P.: *Diminutives in English*. Pp. 97–102.

¹⁷ Adams, V.: *Complex Words in English*. P. 58.

¹⁸ Schneider, K.P.: *Diminutives in English*. Pp. 105–106.

¹⁹ Adams, V.: *Complex Words in English*. P. 57.

²⁰ Schneider, K.P.: *Diminutives in English*. Pp. 103–105.

²⁶ Ibidem. Pp. 112–113.

3.11. Suffix *-poo*

Diminutives of this type are mostly first names used as terms of endearment or nicknames (*Katiepoo*)²⁷.

3.12. Suffix *-pop*

Diminutives of this type are “derived from first names and used as terms of address in casual conversation between persons with a close relationship” (*Rosiepops*)²⁸.

3.13. Suffix *-peg*

Diminutives of this type are considered to be “nursery words” (*Daddypegs*), but they can be used jocularly or ironically in other contexts²⁹.

4. Multiple diminutivisation in English

In English, two or more different diminutive suffixes may be attached to a single base simultaneously. Schneider³⁰ claims that in this particular language, multiple diminutivisation is “particularly productive in deriving diminutives from names”. He distinguishes the following types of suffix combinations³¹:

- *-er* + *-s* (e.g. *preggers*),
- *-ie* + *-kin* + *-s* (e.g. *Lizzykins*),
- *-ie* + *-o* (e.g. *Stevio*),
- *-ie* + *-peg* + *-s* (e.g. *Daddypegs*),
- *-ie* + *-poo* (e.g. *Katiepoo*),
- *-ie* + *-poo* + *-s* (e.g. *kissypoos*),
- *-ie* + *-poo* + *-le* + *-s* (e.g. *Mikeypoodles*),
- *-ie* + *-pop* + *-s* (e.g. *Rosiepops*),
- *-ie* + *-s* (e.g. *milkie*s),
- *-le* + *-kin* + *-s* (e.g. *Franglekins*),
- *-le* + *-s* (e.g. *Bobbles*),
- *-s* + *-a* (e.g. *Shazzya*),
- *-s* + *-ie* (e.g. *Momsie*),
- *-s* + *-o* (e.g. *fatso*).

Schneider³² summarises his findings about combinations of diminutive suffixes by stating: “The longer the stronger, and the stronger the rarer”.

²⁷ Ibidem. P. 114.

²⁸ Ibidem. P. 115.

²⁹ Ibidem. P. 115.

³⁰ Ibidem. P. 117.

³¹ Ibidem. P. 118.

³² Ibidem. P. 118.

5. Competing diminutive suffixes in English

In English, different suffixes can be used to form diminutives from the same base word. Schneider³³ distinguishes numerous pairs of competing diminutive suffixes. The ones involving the suffix *-ie* are listed below:

- *-ie* vs. *-er* (e.g. *footie/footer*) – the suffix *-ie* has more positive connotations and refers to children, whereas the suffix *-er* to youths and adults; forms in *-er* are “register or in-group markers”;
- *-ie* vs. *-o* (e.g. *kiddie/kiddo*) – the suffix *-ie* has more positive connotations and refers to children, whereas the suffix *-o* to youths and adults;
- *-ie* vs. *-s* (e.g. *Mommie/Moms*) – the suffix *-ie* refers to child-oriented discourse, whereas the suffix *-s* to informal adult conversation;
- *-ie* vs. *-let* or *-ling* (e.g. *piggie/piglet*, *pigling*) – suffixes *-let* and *-ling* add the semantic feature [+young] in derivations from animal terms; the suffix *-ie* puts emphasis on the positive attitude towards the referent.

6. The analysis of the suffix *-ie* on the basis of examples taken from *The Collins Book of Nursery Rhymes*

In order to assess the frequency of the diminutive affixes described above, an investigation of selected nursery rhymes, included in *The Collins Book of Nursery Rhymes*, was carried out. The analysis of the corpus texts proves that the suffix *-ie* is the most widely-used form of deriving synthetic diminutives in English as it was the only suffix used to create diminutives in 175 nursery rhymes. 25 diminutives formed in this way were found. They are included in Table 1 given at the end of the paper.

As these formations indicate, the suffix *-ie* causes no phonological changes in the base word. It does not change the part of speech of the base (both *pig* and *piggy* are nouns), and it causes no obvious semantic change (both *pig* and *piggy* denote the same animal, except that the form *piggy* is used in particular contexts)³⁴. Following Leisi, Schneider³⁵ claims that this is the only “native” English diminutive suffix which is also the most productive one.

There are three different spellings for this suffix: *-ie*, *-y*, and *-ey*. The form *-ie* is preferred in Scottish English and Australian English, whereas the form *-y* in English English and American English³⁶. As the text analysed here was published in London, the majority of diminutives are of *-y* type (20 out of 25). The form *-ey*

³³ Ibidem. P. 119.

³⁴ Akmajian, Adrian, et al.: *Linguistics. An Introduction to Language and Communication*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press 1990. P. 31.

³⁵ Schneider, K.P.: *Diminutives in English*. P. 87.

³⁶ Ibidem. P. 86.

usually, but not always, appears in diminutives formed from base words which end in 'e'. In the text there is one example of diminutive of this type: *goosey*. All forms of this suffix may occur in free variation, that is all of them can be attached to the same word³⁷. The usage of a particular suffix depends on individual preferences. In the text some inconsistencies can also be found, especially when taking into account first (i.e. Christian) names: there occurs the form *Charlie* on one hand, but on the other one – *Johnny* and not *Johnnie*.

Diminutives of *-ie* type are bisyllabic nouns stressed on the first syllable. They may be derived from monosyllabic (e.g. *handy*, *Johnny*) or polysyllabic words and then they are truncated (e.g. *Elizabeth* – *Elsa* – *Elsie*, *William* – *Will* – *Willie*)³⁸.

According to Schneider³⁹, the suffix *-ie* usually “indicates familiarity between speaker and hearer, and may express appreciation or depreciation, depending on the respective context”. Relevant examples from the text under analysis could be as following:

- (1) *Dance to your **daddy**, my little **babby***⁴⁰.
- (2) *You shall have a **fishy** in a little **dishy***⁴¹.
- (3) *She won't get up to feed the swine, but lies in bed till eight or nine. Lazy **Elsie** Marley*⁴².

Following Leisi, Schneider⁴³ remarks that in British English the suffix *-ie* is only used in child language. Dressler and Barbaresi⁴⁴ extend this definition to include one more aspect of usage, that is in “any situation metaphorically recreating a child's world”. This is confirmed by the sentence quoted in (4):

- (4) *(he) stole a piece of sugar candy from the grocer's **shoppy** [...]*⁴⁵.

The suffix *-ie* is attached to nouns referring to persons, animals, and concrete objects. Among diminutive formations in the nursery rhymes, the following sub-classes of nouns referring to persons were identified:

- a) proper nouns – first names occur more frequently than last names, e.g. *Elsie Marley*, *Jerry Hall*,
- b) kinship terms – they refer to the closest family members and relatives (e.g. *daddy*, *babby*);

There occur nouns referring mostly to domestic animals, gaining the semantic feature [+little], meaning ‘small and sweet’, therefore they are used mainly in communication with or by children or in children's stories (e.g. *fishy*, *piggy*, *goosey*);

Diminutives are derived from nouns referring to concrete objects in two cases:

³⁷ Ibidem. P. 86.

³⁸ Plag, Ingo: Word-Formation in English. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003. Pp. 116–120.

³⁹ Schneider, K.P.: Diminutives in English. P. 87.

⁴⁰ The Collins Book of Nursery Rhymes. London: Premier Books 1995. P. 10.

⁴¹ Ibidem. P. 10.

⁴² Ibidem. P. 41.

⁴³ Schneider, K.P.: Diminutives in English. P. 77.

⁴⁴ Dressler, W.U., and Barbaresi, L.M.: Morphopragmatics. P. 112.

⁴⁵ The Collins Book of Nursery Rhymes. P. 41.

- a) when the objects belong to children – they are “miniature versions of the adult world” which evokes positive feelings, relevant examples from the text are as follows:
- diminutives referring to body parts, e.g. *bandy*,
 - diminutives referring to food, e.g. *fishy*,
 - diminutives referring to utensils, e.g. *dishy*;
- b) when “the nouns denote everyday objects, but display a complex structure” (e.g. *shoppy*)⁴⁶.

The suffix *-ie* is frequently used in rhyming reduplication, which is, according to Schneider⁴⁷, the most productive type of reduplication in English. Usually the reduplicative forms consist of two constituents: a diminutive of *-ie* type as the left-hand component and a rhyming form, which is often semantically empty, as the right-hand component. There is a single example attested in the corpus, namely *Georgie Porgie*.

7. Conclusions

Although suffixal derivation is a productive means of forming diminutives in English, the investigation of the corpus of nursery rhymes indicates that diminutives of this type do not constitute a considerable part of the English lexicon. What is more, diminutive suffixes are polysemous and can be used in numerous contexts, depending on the speaker and discourse situation. Furthermore, they can be added to various types of bases.

All 25 suffixal diminutives found in *The Collins Book of Nursery Rhymes* and formed with the use of the suffix *-ie* (which occurs mainly in the variant *-y*) are listed in the table below. For clarity, they are divided into groups depending on the semantic type of the nouns they are attached to.

Table 1. Diminutives formed with the use of suffix *-ie*

DIMINUTIVES REFERRING TO PROPER NAMES:	<i>Betty</i>	-y form
	<i>Jacky</i>	
	<i>Jenny</i>	
	<i>Judy</i>	
	<i>Billy</i>	
	<i>Bobby</i>	
	<i>Jerry</i>	
	<i>Johnny</i>	
	<i>Neddy</i>	
	<i>Tommy</i>	

⁴⁶ Schneider, K.P.: Diminutives in English. Pp. 89–91.

⁴⁷ Ibidem. P. 91.

Table 1. Diminutives... (cont.)

DIMINUTIVES REFERRING TO PROPER NAMES:	<i>Elsie</i> <i>Charlie</i> <i>Willie</i>	–ie form
	<i>Georgie Porgie</i>	– rhyming reduplication
DIMINUTIVES REFERRING TO KINSHIP TERMS:	<i>daddy</i> <i>babby</i>	
DIMINUTIVES REFERRING TO DOMESTIC ANIMALS:	<i>fishy</i> <i>piggy</i> <i>goosey</i>	
	<i>kitty</i> <i>pusy</i> <i>puppy</i>	– the base word is itself a diminutive
DIMINUTIVES REFERRING TO OBJECTS BELONGING TO CHILDREN:	<i>disby</i> (utensils) <i>fishy</i> (food) <i>handy</i> (body parts)	
DIMINUTIVES REFERRING TO COMPLEX OBJECTS:	<i>shoppy</i>	

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