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The conceptual category of the diminutive in English and Romanian – existence, recurrence, status in contemporary language

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The diminutive is a morphological linguistic category which allows the speaker to express positive feelings such as affection, endearment, or negative feelings like contempt, disdain, irony or even mockery. Apart from the expression of a variety of human feelings and their emotive charge, diminutive suffixes are also used to indicate the offspring of animals. This paper attempts to study and mention the status of the most productive and widely used diminutives in English, Romanian and Spanish, indicating their functions and semantic values in the discourse. It remains to be observed if there is any semantic or morphological connection between the intuitive preference of a certain diminutive suffix in comparison with other equivalent particles in the other studied languages, in which language registers and by what social groups they are used.

Keywords: *diminutive, diminutive's status, linguistic category, functions, language registers, Romanian, English*

1. Introduction

The semantic category of the diminutive is used in linguistics more often as a suffix which denotes multiple senses: that of smallness, affection, endearment, or it can simply mark the attitude of the speaker towards an object, person, fact, all of them at a certain degree. It is said that the English language has little or no diminutives, due to the fact that they are not so frequently encountered in English as in other languages, such as Spanish, French or Italian, and that they represent a morphological category (they are embedded in the process of word formation, and are therefore seen as morphological particles of a given compound word). Diminutive suffixes contribute to the formation of words with new meanings, which can refer to the same semantic area of the base word (e.g. pig – piglet "a small pig", star – starlet "a widely known person, a celebrity" / "a young actress

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with a promising career ahead of her") or they can contribute to semantic changes of the base word. (e.g. book – *booklet* "a written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side and bound in covers" / "a very short book that usually contains information on one particular subject".

This paper attempts to shed some light on some of the most productive and intensely used diminutive suffixes in English, Romanian and Spanish, and their status nowadays, their semantic values and functions in a given discourse. It can be remarked that the choice of a certain diminutive suffix is made intuitively, a strong point of reference of this article consists in whether there is a semantic or morphological link between the diminutive affixes in English, and those in Romanian and Spanish. Special attention will be paid to English, given the interest for its diminutive productivity level, which is quite low in comparison with the other ones mentioned above, and to the fact that many diminutivized words have become lexicalized in the course of time.

The New Fowler's Modern English Usage specifies that suffixes such as "-ette", "-et", "-ie-", "-y" help to form diminutivized words. For example, "-ette" is thus defined: 1. Origin. The suffix was first used to form diminutive nouns, representing the feminine form corresponding to the masculine "–et". Such words which received this suffix entered the language after the 17th century, e.g. chemisette (1807), cigarette (1842), and pipette (1839), terms obtained by diminutivization from *chemise, cigar*, and *pipe*. 2. As diminutive suffix. The association of "-ette" with the notion of "smallness" became popular in the 19th century. The literature from that period is rifled with terms from which a lot would not last for a long time, like statuette (1843), bannerette (1884), essayette (1877), novelette (1820), sermonette (1814). This corpus of words has diminished in the 20th century, but some words pertaining to it have remained in the lexicon: *dinette* (1930) - *a small dining-room, diskette* (1973) - *a floppy disk, kitchenette* (1910) - *a small kitchen, and superette* (1938) - *a small supermarket*. In some cases, this suffix does not express a small physical dimension (its function is not that of a diminutive), for example, *laund(e)rette*, whose base word is *launder* (verb) or *laundry*, or *serviette* which was for centuries a Scottish term, but reappeared in standard English as a French loan in the 19th century, and is also not a diminutive (Burchfield, 1998).

Dictionaries such as *Fowler and Fowler* also refer to the attitude of the speaker towards an object or person, an attitude of affection, endearment or closeness implied. Another definition of the diminutive is found in the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, as being: „a word formed by adding a diminutive suffix: the word *gosling* is a diminutive, formed from *goose*; another definition of the diminutive suffix is "an ending which is added to a word to express smallness". Another dictionary, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's*

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Dictionary stresses that the diminutive is: "a word or an ending of a word that shows that somebody/something is small", for example *starlet* (=a young woman that is set to become a celebrity), *kitchenette* (=a small kitchen).
We can easily observe that all definitions include the notion of physical smallness, of the little dimensions of an object or person, it is the first condition of the diminutive use. However, there are other semantic charges that this type of suffix can acquire, such as the expression of a positive or negative attitude towards an object or person. The same diminutive affix can indicate both affection, endearment and contempt, which denotes that diminutives are a polysemantic category, where both the speaker and the hearer(s) seize the hint which they refer to. The perception of a positive or negative attitude indicated by means of using a diminutive affix is also guided by a certain intonation or specific gestures, hence nonverbal communication is an important factor in understanding a given message.

There are various different types of diminutive suffixes in English, each one of them indicating a different meaning: "-let" (e.g. *booklet, starlet, leaflet, hamlet),* "-ie / y" (e.g. *groupie, doggy, druggie, birdie, daddy, kitty*), "-ette" (e.g. *kitchenette, cigarette, marionette*), "-ling" (e.g. *gosling, fingerling*), "-erel" (e.g. *mackerel, cock-erel*), "-sie / -sies" (e.g. *tootsie, onesies*), "-ish" (e.g. *smallish, reddish*), "-en" (e.g. *kitten, maiden),* "-ock" (e.g. *mullock, bullock, hillock*). Other diminutives may be found in hypocoristics, such as Beth, Betty, Lizzie < Elizabeth, Robbie < Robert, Maggie < Margaret, Pete < Peter, Willie < William, Charlie < Charles, Eddie < Edward, Freddy < Frederick / Alfred; Jamie < James; Jenny < Jane / Jennifer, Jerry < Gerald / Gerard / Jeremy etc. It can be observed that, in English, the majority of diminutives are used most frequently with nouns, and less with adverbs (e.g. *tallish, largish)* or verbs (e.g. *puddle, sparkle*).

In English, given the examples mentioned above, there are various types of diminutives which are mostly used in the informal, spoken language or baby-talk. (*dolly* (English) – *păpuşică* (Romanian) – *muñequita* (Spanish); *nanny* (English) – *bonă* (Romanian) – *niñera* (Spanish); *footsies* (English) – *plimbărică* (Romanian) – *patita* (Spanish); *mommy / daddy* (English) – *mami / tati* (Romanian) – *mama / tata* (Spanish), *teenie (-weenie)* (English) – *micuţ* (Romanian) – *tiquitito* (Spanish). The other ones have become lexicalized in the course of time, like *kitchenette, cigarette*. However, the choice for the morphological particle is based on a logical argument, regarding the origin of the suffix, and its meaning in the language from which it was borrowed. The existence of the diminutives as a way of linguistic enrichment by denoting the pejorative connotations, the physical dimensions of an object or person, the attitude towards a person, object or fact, marks of affection, all expressed with

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the help of these morphological particles lead us to the need to analyze its meanings, origins and evolution through time.

It is necessary to stress the German, French, Scottish, Dutch origins of these lexical particles, in order to emphasize the development and perpetual evolution of the languages implied in the process themselves. Some French diminutive affixes are "**-ette**", e.g. *fillette* "little girl or little daughter"; "**-ot / -on / ou**"**:** *chiot* – from *chien* „puppy"; "**-et**"**,** e.g. *porcelet* – from *porc* "piglet". In German we have "**-lein**", associated with the English "-let" and "-ling": *fräulein* – from *frau* "young lady", *setzling* "seedling". In Dutch, there are diminutives such as "**-ie**", "**-kie**": *makkie* – from *gemak* "piece of cake"; *jonkie* "a young person". Regarding the Scottish loans, there are various diminutives, among which "**-ock**", "**-ie**": *bittock* "little bit", *wifie* "woman". With respect to the English language, there are linguistic theories which imply a high level of diminutive borrowings from other languages mentioned above. For example, we have identified the diminutive suffixes "-ette", "-ine", as being borrowed from and specific to the French language, because of the linguistic influence of the French in a certain era, when it was very common to retrieve cultural and linguistic elements and „translate" them into English.

The diminutive suffixes are very often encountered in Spanish, where they are used in almost every circumstances and situations, with a higher use and predominance in the informal, spoken language. For instance, we use the noun *perrito,* derived from *perro* in order to say "doggie", whose use can denote a strong feeling of affection, or pity towards a certain animal, or simply a way of connecting with another human being. Other nouns like *hermanito, chiquita, laguito* also stress positive feelings like love, endearment, affection, but in the case of *laguito* the use of the same diminutive suffix "-ito" expresses a small dimension of a lake "lago", that is meant to be taken literally.

From a semantic standpoint, the opposite of the diminutive is the augmentative, also used very often in Spanish or Romanian, but less often in English or French. In English, we encounter very often the diminutive suffix "-let", originating from Middle English and it is said to be a morphological diminutive, due to its formation with an affix. Diminutives can also be expressed through the use of the adjective "little" which clarifies and potentiates the meaning of the noun used.

2. The status of the diminutive in English and Romanian

The diminutive is a morphological linguistic category which allows the speaker to express positive feelings such as affection, endearment, negative feelings like

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contempt, disdain, irony or even mockery. Apart from the expression of a variety of human feelings and their emotive charge, diminutive suffixes are also used to indicate the offspring of animals (e.g. *piglet, duckling, squirreling, gosling* etc.). It can easily be observed that there are many diminutive suffixes that can have the same connotation used on the same base word, others completely change the notion entailed. The semantic changes that the diminutive brings to the base word can relate either to a pejorative denotation, or to a positive improvement of the connotative meaning of the word. For example, if the diminutive suffix "-let" is added to the base word *star*, the new word *starlet* will refer to „a young female actor who hopes to be or is thought likely to be famous in the future", its meaning serves as an example for the latter sense of the future, its meaning serves as an example for the latter sense of the transformation of a word by adding a diminutive. Concerning the former, we might take as example the word *princeling*, where the diminutive "-ling" indicates the idea of a piteous, young prince, incapable of assuming the responsibilities that come with his royal title, whereas *princelet* stresses the idea of a young prince, without giving it a derogatory emotive charge, as the first one does. Why do the two diminutive suffixes used at the end of the same word give such different connotative meanings? Apparently, the speakers and hearers, unconsciously make this linguistic choice in their minds before they transmit the message or after they hear it. (in the case of the listener)

It is said that the English language has less diminutives, or they are used less than is other languages (Schneider 2003, 93-94). For example, in Spanish diminutive suffixes are used very often, for the same reasons – in order to express endearment, affection, smallness or to minimize the pressure that the listener senses when he/she is given an order. A significant example is represented by the word *¡Ahorita!,* derived from *ahora* (now) with the diminutive suffix "-ita", indicating the precise moment in which the listener should do what he/she was asked to do. In this context, the use of the diminutivized word indicates that the listener needs to perform the action immediately, and not a minute later. It is a way of asking or ordering somebody to do something in a relatively polite way, by making it seem an easy task.

In Romanian, however, the tendency to use diminutives with many common words has been increasingly high in the past years, because people tend to be and act very emotional about many things or persons in their surroundings. Terms often encountered, like *berică* (a little beer), used when one goes to the bar and asks for a beer, or *ciorbiță* (small bowl of soup) when one asks the waiter to bring him a bowl of soup, or he / she asks for a *cafeluță* (a small cup of coffee) indicate an affectionate attitude towards everything that one comes in contact with (Schneider 2003, 93-94). These words whose meaning has been modified

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due to the diminutive suffixes help to enrich the sense and the visualization of the notion that one talks about. It isn't about the dimensions of the beer pint / glass, or of bowl or cup that one drinks the liquid from, the diminutive suffix is not related to their smallness, but one simply adds "a pinch" of emotional charge to the message that he/she wants to get across, everything seems to achieve an affective value, from the smallest object around him/her to the dearest person that one sees, loves or talks to.

In Romanian, diminutives are also encountered in the gastronomy field, e.g. *mici / mititei* or *sărmăluţe*, *mămăliguţă, vinuleţ, pâinică* etc., which do not have a precise translation in English, and are not used in formal language. In this case, the diminutives indicate a certain familiarity with the speaker / listener, the context of use is quite informal. Moreover, the diminutive suffixes used along with culinary terms are scarcely used by people with a superior level of studies.

The use of diminutives can easily be observed in baby-talk language or in informal language, but they are not well received in the context of a solemn, serious tone, that lacks affectation and mannerism. A great Romanian literary critic and academician, Titu Maiorescu, believed that diminutives were "the contagious viciousness of which most of the Romanian poems suffer; those who get rid of the debauchery of ideas die of diminutive illness" or simply "forms of linguistic decadence". Moreover, he also believed that diminutives were a form of mockery due to the fact that they would be the proof of effeminacy, softness of the spirit, or a grotesque tendency to miniaturize everything. Other intellectuals, such as Ion Heliade-Rădulescu defined the diminutive as "illustrating a mentality according to a state of humiliation: diminutive forms would have demonstrated the "lessening" of a language, its decay, implicitly indicating the slavery of its speakers". Nevertheless, this form of expressing feelings or ironies can be retrieved anywhere in the everyday language, especially in the familiar, informal one, in the Internet messages and even in the press.

The diminutive expresses the manner in which we relate to a certain dimension. Is it believed that there are situations where the diminutive is excessively used, as in when one asks someone to give him a "very short" minute (*un minuţel*). This kind of diminutive utilization suggests the kindness and politeness of the speaker, it is a social convenience that ought to be respected for a successful communication. In Romanian, the relation between the structural tendencies of a language and the variations of their cultural evaluations can be easily noticed in the case of the diminutive suffixes. The ability to easily form diminutive derivatives is considered to be a characteristic of the Romanian language, a commonly known fact to the majority of the Romanic languages, that of preferring the derivation to other internal means of enriching the vocabulary (Zafiu 2010, 291-297).

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However, the literary Romanian language avoids the diminutivization, which remains circumscribed more adequately to the popular orality. This situation has a more general justification, due to the fact that literary languages were formed through delimitation from the popular language, which favors the denotative referential aspects that are objective to the communication, but also some particular historical explanations. It is believed that an important role in the tendency of the diminutive elimination from the standard, spoken Romanian language was played by ancient cultural judgements, based on psychological and social interpretations of the diminutive, and also by the subjective evaluations of this method. In the 19th century – an essential period for the stylistic configuration of the modern Romanian language, many evaluations of the diminutive were registered, most of them negative (Zafiu 2010, 291-297).

In both Romanian and English languages, the use of the diminutives is widespread, the former in its informal register most of the time, regarding the latter -only in informal language and in baby-talk, with many specific situations, but their usage and presence is undeniable and makes proof of the fact that the diminutive is a well-represented conceptual category in any language.

3. Types of diminutive suffixes in English

Schneider (2003) indicates that there are fourteen diminutive suffixes in contemporary English, as follows: "**-let**", "**-ie**", "**-ette**" (the most productive ones nowadays), "**-kin**", "**-ling**" (which have a German origin), "**-een**" (of Irish origin), suffixes that express an attitude and not the dimensions of an object, person (that have an expressive, evaluative or affective function): "**-s**", "**-o**", "**-a**", "**-er**", "**-le**", rare suffixes, even in literary work: "**-poo**", "**-pop**", "**-peg**". The suffixes "-let", "-ling", and "-ette", "-et" will be considered, as they are three of the most often used, and have a high level of productivity in English.

The diminutive „-let" in English has been one of the most productive for the past two hundred years, with lots of proofs of its productivity in contemporary English, it is most frequently encountered with nouns. Words which contain diminutives are considered smaller in dimensions than the prototypical members of one linguistic category in particular. (e.g. *hamlet, leaflet*). If it concerns the process of diminutivization of nouns expressing animals, this type of suffix indicates young animals of a certain species, the offspring of the animals to which we make reference. (e.g. *piglet, pullet, eaglet*). Through the use of this suffix, we can also diminutivize common nouns denoting adult persons (e.g. *wifelet, starlet, princelet*), but the semantic charges in these cases would be contemptuous or derogatory (Schneider and Strudel-Burgdorf, 2012).

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If we add the diminutive suffix to a word denoting an inanimate object, or a phenomenon, the newly-modified forms of the word will indicate members of that category physically smaller that their prototypical members, for example *droplet* "small drop", *streamlet* "small stream". If the suffix is added to a base word indicating an animal, the modified forms will refer to smaller and younger animals from the same category, e.g. *froglet* (derived from „frog"), *eaglet* (derived from "eagle"). The animals' dimension is in close relationship with their age, one influences the other. We might also refer to the diminutivization of nouns expressing plants, where the suffixed word *nutlet* means "small or young, not fully-grown nut", or *treelet* "small or young tree as seedling or sapling". They all indicate young and small specimens from the same category, semantically more peripheral than the base words. If we add a diminutive affix to a noun indicating a person, especially referring to roles in the society, or functions that a person appears in (e.g. *star, wife*), the newly suffixed words indicate that the persons involved do not live up to the standards, do not perform as expected in that role or function as they are expected to. Therefore, we are witnesses to a subjective judgement over the person we refer to, intentionally or not (Schneider and Strudel-Burgdorf, 2012).

The diminutive suffix "-ette" has been added to a base word referring to furniture, furnishings, interior design or architecture (e.g. *suffragette, usherette, kitchenette, ovenette, terracette*), which imply smaller dimensions than the prototypical members of the same category. This type of suffix is also used to denote genre names (*novelette, letterette*), which indicated a short specimen of that category, or more precisely "a specimen which fails to meet the qualitative criteria of the respective genre" (Schneider 2003, 93-94).

On the other hand, the diminutive suffix „-ling" is considered to be obsolete, ridiculous nowadays. It can be added to nouns which refer to objects, plants, animals or people. If the suffixed word refers to animals or plants, it will mean „a young specimen of the category indicated" (e.g. *catling, seedling*), whereas if added to nouns referring to adult people, the suffixed words will have a derogatory connotation. (e.g. *princeling*: a petty, irresponsible prince, who isn't capable of assuming its function and role in the society) (Bialy 2012, 115).

Furthermore, the diminutive affix "-et" is also an important morphological particle which requires a short analysis. This suffix originates from French, but the words containing it became lexicalized in the course of time, so nowadays they are used without having any knowledge over their initial diminutive sense. (e.g. *tablet, pocket, bullet, hatchet*). *Hatchet*, for example, originates from the French word *hache* ("ax, halberd") and designated at first "a small ax", but its diminutive value has lost its original meaning, by means of lexicalization. In addition, *tablet* suffers the same semantic change, because at first it was the

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diminutive term of *table* "small table", the term having appeared in the language for the first time in the 14th century.

The distribution and recurrence of diminutives in languages such as English, Romanian and Spanish has been enriching for a long time the informal register of each language, pervading the discourses of all types of social groups and spreading the semantic values of affection, endearment, contempt or even irony.

4. Conclusions

The morphological category of the diminutive is a particularly productive category which uses diminutive suffixes in order to denote the "colourness" of the language, the vast set of human emotions and feelings, and it can denote multiple and various senses: that of smallness, affection, endearment, or it can simply mark the attitude of the speaker towards an object, person, fact, all of them at a certain degree. Diminutives help express an affectionate human interaction between two persons, the offspring of animals, the little plants not yet fully grown, or simply an emotional bond between adults and children (in the case of baby talk). The diminutive has a widespread use in all languages, hence the emphasis on this morphological category in English and Romanian and its semantic charges. Seizing the linguistic „hints" and details that a diminutive provides about a thing is important in a world of subliminal and intuitive linguistic choices, where every means of expressing a physical dimension, attitude or emotion denotes a speaker's or listener's attitude. This category has started to become lexicalized nowadays, thus the level of productivity has started to diminish, but diminutives still continue to exist and to help enrich the semantic level of each language in which they exist and persist.

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