

INSTANTIAL COMULATIVE USE: THE POTENTIAL OF THE DIMINUTIVE IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY

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Summary: Reiteration of a PU or its parts organised consecutively is not the only technique of cohesion and enhancement. A cumulative concatenation of instancial items in linear sequence may also achieve a cumulative effect by successive reiterations of the same single pattern of instancial use over a larger stretch of discourse. The Stylistic effect keeps increasing steadily in quantity, degree, or rate of development, augmenting by successive additions. Incremental use of one stylistic element gains a cumulative momentum of its own. Let me explore the cumulative potential of one instancial element on the basis of the diminutive in English phraseology. In order to be able to draw inferences or make judgements about instancial use of the diminutive in phraseology, It is essential to have a clear understanding of the linguistic character of this phenomenon.

Key words: diminutive, diminutive in English phraseology, diminutive forms, diminutive in Lewis Carroll's poem.

Diminutive:

Usually the diminutive is seen as a morphological category (Taylor [1989] 1995: 144–147). I would argue that the diminutive in phraseology is a semantic stylistic category that has diverse forms and means of expression.⁹ Its semantic and stylistic load is of great interest both in language and discourse: in the system of language as an inherent part of the stable language form of a PU and part of its semantic structure, in discourse emerging as a natural stylistic functional break of phraseological stability. In order to understand discorsal use of the diminutive in phraseology, it may be helpful first to discuss formation of the diminutive as part of the structure of phraseological meaning in the system of language. The diminutive constituent(s) of Pus may be formed by morphological means, lexical means, or in a combined lexical morphological way. Each of these is characterised by a varying degree of frequency, productivity, and diversity.

Diminutive in English phraseology:

The morphological way of expressing the diminutive in phraseology is untypical of English. The occurrence of diminutive suffixes in phraseological constituents is extremely rare, a fact which can be explained by the scarcity of live diminutive suffixes in the lexical system of MoE, -y (-ie, -ey) being the most common of all of them all;

To watch a birdie; an ugly duckling; a silly billy; a charley horse (AmE); a sugar daddy (AmE); the daddy of them all; little Rhody (AmE); Johnny Newcome/Johnny Raw; coal-oil Johnny (AmE)

Though rare, these examples are relevant, as they demonstrate the possibility of use of a suffix to express the diminutive in Pus in MoE. In English the diminutivisation of phraseological constituents affects only nouns. Variants containing a diminutive constituent are very rare, e.g., to shoe a goose/to shoe a gosling. They are certainly not identical from the stylistic and semantic point of view, as the diminutive constituent brings about a change in the formation of phraseological meaning, and hence, a change in the semantic structure of the PU.

Diminutive forms:

Analysis of the diminutive constituents of Pus brings out the complexity of their semantic structure and shows that the diminutive forms part of their stylistic potential. It is a powerful stylistic means with a variety of semantic and stylistic functions.

1. As PUs are figurative representations, diminutives may be central to the formation of phraseological meaning and play the leading role in the semantic structure of Pus in the process of metaphorisation, image formation, and phraseological cohesion.

2. The diminutive may perform a euphemistic function. Euphemistic Pus are ameliorated secondary nominations of notions that are morally or socially unacceptable. The stylistic effect of euphemism in a PU may be created by a diminutive:

A bit on the side – a sexual relationship outside marriage

A sugar daddy – an elderly man who supports a girl or young woman in return

For sexual favours

To have/get the drop on – to aim or be ready to shoot a gun at an antagonist before he can draw his gun

3. The diminutive constituent plays a decisive semantic role in creating the stylistic effect of meiosis (understatement) in Pus. The implication conveyed by the diminutive serves as a specific mode of intensification:

The role of diminutives in formation of phraseological meaning:

Free word combination Phraseological unit

An ugly duck → an ugly duckling – a dull ordinary child, plan, and so on, that becomes interesting and successful

Watch the bird! → watch the birdie! – Used to attract attention while taking snapshots, especially of children

Someone's joke → someone's little joke – Something that irritates or offends

Green men → little green men – facetious extra-terrestrial beings

A bird told me → a little bird told me – used about someone whose name the speaker prefers not to reveal

Love lost between → little love lost between – There is a great dislike

The end of the wedge → the thin end of the wedge – The beginning of something that seems harmless is likely to become important or harmful in the future.

Diminutive in Lewis Carroll's poem:

The aim of this study is to look at the stylistic discursial significance of the cumulative effect of one instantial element by exploring the diminutive in Lewis Carroll's poem *The Little Man that Had a Little Gun*.¹⁵ In this poem Lewis Carroll uses the form and imagery of an English folk ballad. He imitates and parodies the folk ballad by keeping to its conventions – its rhythmic and narrative elements, frequent repetitions, rapid action, abrupt effects, and stark characterisation. In contradistinction to the rigid economy of narrative in a folk ballad, Lewis Carroll's poem is more stylistically charged and more saturated with stylistic elements. Another feature is Lewis Carroll's disregard of the conventions of common sense. We are led to believe impossible things, as the poet takes delight in the imaginary, the inexplicable, and the nonsensical.

The diminutive is an arresting device. Lewis Carroll not only uses it to create improbable lexical forms but also exploits poetic license to produce novel turns of

pus. He is often called “an innovator of nonsense poetry” (Hudson 1958: 27). In verse I the dwarfish Manlet asks his Wifelet:

“Now reach me, sweet Atom, my gunlet,

And h u r l t h e old shoel e t for luck:

Let me hie to the bank of the runlet,

And shoot thee a Duck!”

THE LIST OF USED LITERATURE:

1.Cf.: the Latvian language can boast a wealth of diminutive suffixes in the lexical system of Language (Endzelīns 1951; Rūķe-Draviņa 1959; Rozenbergs 1983; Veisbergs 1997a: 135–137), and the morphological way of forming diminutive constituents is widespread in Latvian phraseology, too. For a comparison of diminutive formation in English and Latvian phraseology, see Naciscione (1995). Some examples of Latvian Pus with diminutive constituents are: ķerties pie salmiņa; izmirkst līdz pēdējai vīlītei; kad zaķītis rikšus tecēs; rauj viņu kociņš!; dzimis laimes Krekliņā; dzīvo ka divi balodiši; prātiņ, nāc mājās; slaida kā smildziņa; sešu dēļu mājiņa; kurš putniņš agri ceļas, agri slauka deguntiņu; nieciņš ar nieciņu iztaisa sieciņu; kāds podiņš, tāds vāciņš. The diminutive is also productive in some other languages, e.g., Italian and Spanish. See Taylor ([1989] 1995: 144–148) for diminutivised forms in Italian.

2.For use of diminutives in lexical endearments in English, see Mills (1995: 116–117).

3.As a synthetic language, Old English had a whole list of diminutive suffixes. Chambers Etymological Dictionary of the English Language(1882: 576–578)registers 13 diminutive suffixes; Nesfield (1924: 136) gives 14.

4.Cf.: the role of diminutives as a derivational tool in the lexical system. Diminutive suffixes may be used to create new lexical items. This process is fairly common in Latvian, e.g., zīle (an acorn) – (acu) zīlīte (the pupil of an eye); lāpsta (a spade) – (plecu) lāpstiņa (a shoulder blade). This process is a rare phenomenon in English, e.g., an eye – an eyelet, a bird – a birdie (in golf), a vein – a veinlet, or a plate – a (blood) platelet which is not a small plate, but a medical term, meaning a thrombocyte (see MWCD 1996). It also has further derivation by compounding, e.g., plateletphoresis. Interestingly, derivation of new words by a diminutive suffix usually occurs in terms. Semantic specialisation may be considerable, e.g., a

tumourlet has a different meaning from a tumour, although both are medical terms (DPMD 1995).

5.The example is taken from Bryan (2001: 36).

6.Dicky bird/dickybird/dicky – a small bird (used esp. by or to children) (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 1978: 302).

7.From Sylvie and Bruno Concluded.