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## **Factors of variation in World Englishes: the case of diminutives**

### **Abstract**

The paper examines variation of diminutives in World Englishes, concentrating primarily on Southern Hemisphere varieties. Both synthetic and analytical diminutives are analysed. The study shows that the diminutive “richness” of the variety can be caused by different groups of factors. The number of diminutives can be determined by the internal factors – the more diminutives the variety has, the more it is prone to further creation of new items in the domain by analogy. External factors (language contact) account as well for the diversity of diminutives, leading to numerous borrowings of diminutive items and the ways of their formation. Environmental and social factors can be named among the main extralinguistic factors that predetermine the variation of diminutives in World Englishes.

### **1. Introduction**

Some scholars note that English is rather poor in terms of diminutives (Wierzbicka 1992, Grandi 2011), but this is not completely true. The number of diminutives in English is quite high; several varieties are characterized as highly pro-diminutive. Mainly this concerns Australian English, where diminutives are considered as a distinctive feature of the variety (Sussex 2004, Simpson 2004, Kidd/Kemp/Quinn 2011, etc.).

Australian English is not the only variety one mentions speaking about diminutives in English. Scholars note that diminutives in general are characteristic of the so-called Southern Hemisphere Englishes, including English in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (Bauer 2002; Trudgill 2004), therefore in this article I will concentrate primarily on the distinctive features of diminutives in these varieties. According to Kachru (1992), the varieties under discussion are considered as inner-circle ones, together with British, Irish, American and Canadian Englishes. The status of South African English is subject to numerous discussions (Bauer 2002) due to the low percent of population using English as a native language, a large number of ESL speakers, and acquisition of English by patterns of an outer circle, see (Leitner 1992, Cichocka 2006).

The data discussed in this article allows to go beyond the concepts of dominance and non-dominance due to the uniqueness of English as a pluricentric language and the specificity of the items under consideration.

First, English itself is an interesting case to analyze the concepts of dominance and non-dominance. It demonstrates a tendency of symmetric pluricentricity, which is reflected in the blurring of boundaries between the dominant and the non-dominant varieties, at least with respect to the inner circle ones. However, the situation differs throughout the countries – even within the inner circle some varieties have more “weight”, while others are still in a more “inferior position”. A strong national self-consciousness of Australians, the need to express the national identity led to an extensive and aggressive export campaign and quite a large-scale codification of the variety, which resulted in Australian English gaining more power than, for instance, Canadian or New Zealand varieties (Clyne 1992:5,456). At the same time, there are varieties that are runners up in the race for dominance, as for instance, South African English vs. British or American English (Clyne 1992:455).

Second, diminutives are used mainly in informal communication that is less prone to the influence of a codified standard. As a result, the unifying effect of the standard language is not so powerful and the speakers of a variety can implement the ludic function of the language. This leads to a certain amount of playfulness found in a language variety (Sussex 2004). Numerous language phenomena resulting from these linguistic experiments (as in case of diminutives) sometimes find their place and take hold in a language. Due to their informal character and “playful” nature, diminutives may carry out a very wide range of different pragmatic functions. These functions are quite diverse – diminutive items can help express positive and negative emotions, act as markers of politeness, in-group / out-group membership, serve as pragmatic hedges, etc., which leads to quite an extensive amount of variation in their pragmatics (Merlini Barbaressi 2001, Muhr 2008).

The aim of this study is to find the specificities in the usage and functioning of synthetic and analytical diminutives in national varieties of the English language and to determine the factors that account for the observed differences, focusing primarily on the varieties of the Southern Hemisphere.

This study was based on lexicographical data taken from several dictionaries of national varieties of English (Australian Oxford Dictionary, New Zealand Oxford Dictionary, A Dictionary of South African English), as well as on corpus data

from the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE)<sup>1</sup> which allows the search and comparison of data between the national varieties.

## 2. Variation in diminutives in national varieties of pluricentric languages

Abundance or, vice versa, lack of diminutives, preferable ways of diminutive formation, certain (groups of) diminutives characteristic of a variety – all this demonstrates distinctiveness of the varieties of pluricentric languages and adds to the lexical variation between them. Differences in diminutives across the varieties of different languages can be found both in their formation and their usage. Variation in diminutive formation (primarily in markers used) may be the result of different preferences of speakers (within one language, there can be a tendency to use particular suffixes in a particular variety), or may also arise from language contact (borrowings of derivational devices from other languages and their incorporation into the language system). For example, Bolivian and Peninsular Spanish demonstrate different preferences in formation devices, e.g. [o'tel] 'hotel' → [otel'sito] (Bolivia) vs. [ote'lito] (Peninsular) (Prieto 1992:170). Ingrid Norrmann-Vigil (2012) also points to such differences between Porteño Spanish and Peninsular Spanish.

In Greek, there are differences in diminutive formation between Cypriot variety and Greek Greek: diminutive suffix *-u* is used in the former one, while the latter one prefers *-ak*. These two morphemes are functionally equivalent, i.e. similar in their meaning and function; the only difference between them is in the varieties they belong to (Leivada/Papadopoulou/Kambanaros/Grohmann 2017, Papapavlou 2009).

Differences resulting from intra-systemic factors are found as well in Arabic diminutives, particularly in Kordofanian Baggara Arabic, where vowel alternation (central/back to high) that affects all vowels, and suffixation of *-ay* could be “a re-interpretation of the two traditional Arabic diminutive markers (the affix *-ay-* and vocalisms in *i/ī*)” (Taine-Cheikh 2018).

At the same time, origins of the various suffixes are generally ascribed to the influence of a substrate or adstrate (Aramaic, Berber, or even Latin). There are diminutive morphemes that appeared due to the influence of some neighboring languages, as in case of Arabic and Greek, coexisting in Cyprus. According to Owens (2013:357):

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.english-corpora.org/glowbe/>

“Cypriot Arabic has substituted the Arabic diminutive formation by the Greek diminutive suffix, including Greek gender-number inflection, such as masculine *payt-payt-ui-payt-ukkyā* ‘house-little house-little houses’”.

The differences are found not only in the formation of diminutives, but also in the ways of their usage. In Spanish, for example, the usage of diminutives reflects varying levels of politeness. J. Cesar Felix-Brasdefer (2006) mentions that in Mexican Spanish requests with diminutives are rated as more polite than in Peninsular Spanish. The same is observed in the Ecuadorian and Coastal Spanish – according to Maria-Elena Placencia (2008), Quiteños tend to be more polite, which is shown in a larger number of politeness formulas and diminutives than in Coastal Spanish.

In Arabic, there is a gender difference in the usage of diminutives in sedentary and Bedouin dialects. The former ones demonstrate the general tendency of diminutive usage in Arabic – there the diminutive items are restricted to the speech of women and children, mainly women referring to children. Saada (1970:323) notes that “a woman would never use a diminutive when addressing a man”. In contrast, in Bedouin dialects, diminutives are not limited to women’s or children’s speech and are present in men’s speech as well. As for the meaning of these diminutives, the majority of them in sedentary dialects are caritative, while diminutives in the Bedouin dialects can be either caritative or pejorative, with the latter ones more frequently found in men’s speech (Taine-Cheikh 2108).

Preferences of suffix usage within one language also differ across the varieties of German. In relation to Austrian German this is described inter alia in the paper by Sonja Schwaiger et al. (2019). The study describes the differences in distribution of two diminutive suffixes: *-chen* (Standard German) and Bavarian-Austrian *-erl*. The work shows that the choice of suffix is to a large extent determined by a text genre: in standard language (in media corpus) frequency of *-chen* suffix is higher, while in informal twitter texts *-erl* is much more widespread (the ratio of *-chen* to *-erl* in media corpus is 4:1, in twitter corpus is 1:270).

Moreover, the authors have found that in child-directed speech there are a bit fewer *-erl* diminutives than in adult-directed speech, which may be explained by the fact that when talking to children, adults possibly want to sound more “correctly” and make more effort to control their speech. Therefore, the study of diminutives in different text genres may provide a more comprehensive insight into their variation.

In English, diminutives are usually described in general; apart from the Southern Hemisphere, there is a scarce number of works, in which diminutives in

national varieties are discussed, see e.g. Earle (1946) for Scottish English, Kallen (1997) for Irish English. The largest number of works describes formation and functioning of diminutives in Australian English (Wierzbicka 1984, Kidd et al. 2011, etc.). Diminutive items in New Zealand English and South African Englishes are described less frequently (see Bardsley/Simpson 2009, Bardsley 2010 for New Zealand English); some individual facts for South African English diminutives are presented in Donaldson (1993).

### 3. Diminutives in English

#### 3.1. Synthetic and analytical diminutives

Synthetic suffixal diminutives are considered the most typical members of the category of diminutiveness (Schneider 2003). Speaking of the derivation base, scholars note that in English, diminutives may be formed from any part of speech, not necessarily a noun (*auntie* from *aunt* (n.), *goodies* from *good* (adj.), *underling* from *under* (prep.), etc.) (Schneider 2003, Gorzycka 2012, etc.).

As I have mentioned earlier, some linguists point to the poorness of English in terms of diminutives, while others prove the contrary. Discussing synthetic diminutives, Klaus Schneider (2003) mentions not only a variety of suffixes used in diminutive derivation, but also several other ways of synthetic diminutive formation. According to Schneider, synthetic diminutives in English can be formed with the help of:

1. affixation, including: (a) suffixation (*-ie*, *-ette*, *-let*, etc.), with *-ie* (*-y*) being the most productive suffix of the category; (b) prefixation (*mini-*, *micro-*);
2. reduplication (full and partial);
3. truncation (initial, medial and final).

Semantics of synthetic diminutives is rather diverse, however, there are some links between the way of diminutive formation and the expressed senses. For instance, prefixal diminutives, as a rule, convey only the meaning of smallness, while truncated items and diminutives formed by reduplication are usually expressive. The “core” ones – derived by suffixation – may have both some expressive meaning and the meaning of smallness.

Lists of English diminutives are not limited to synthetic items. As English is an analytic language, researchers (Schneider 2003, Gorzycka 2012) include in the domain of diminutives also analytical units. Analytical diminutives are word combinations of an adjective – marker of the category – and a noun. As in the case of synthetic diminutives, there are two central markers of the category – *small* and *little* – and a range of other markers with the meaning of smallness, such as *tiny*,

*teeny, teensy, teeny-weeny, teensy-weensy, wee, diminutive, minute, miniature, minimal, lilliput, and petite.* The centrality of *small* and *little* is attributed to their more or less neutral character – they are characterized by a higher frequency of usage and can be found in more (stylistically) diverse contexts, while the distribution of other adjectives is more limited and their combinations with nouns are more expressive and stylistically marked (Schneider 2003). Still, one can choose a “more diminutive” marker even out of the two central markers of analytical diminutives. While *small* expresses solely the idea of smallness, combinations with *little* are more subjective and have some additional emotional coloring (Schneider 2003).

### 3.2. Diminutive richness of texts (including synthetic and analytical diminutives)

My first hypothesis for this study is that if Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans really love diminutives, they do not only use the variety-specific diminutives, but also show a significant increase in usage of the “universal” ones (items more or less equally distributed among all varieties).

The material for this study was limited to the “core” items of the category of diminutiveness. As mentioned earlier, in case of synthetic diminutives, these are items with an *-ie* (*-y*) suffix, as 1) this suffix is the most productive one for English diminutive formation; 2) diminutives in *-ie* (*-y*) can both denote smallness and express some kind of attitude. The same is relevant for the marker of analytical diminutives *little*. My sample included the words with no apparent tendency of usage in one or several national segments of GloWbE. For this, I used a corpus-embedded tool that allows the visualization of the distribution of language items within different subcorpora. As for the varieties, here I compared the usage of diminutives only in the inner circle ones.

Synthetic diminutives in *-ie* (*-y*) were selected on the basis of Schneider’s (2003) work where he describes diminutives in English in general (the linguist does not focus on any specific features of functioning of diminutives in the national varieties of English). I have made a list of synthetic diminutives found in Schneider’s work and, with the help of GloWbE, defined their overall frequency and the frequency for each inner circle variety.

The sampling presented a certain number of problems, as the usage of several synthetic diminutives in the aforementioned work in the corpus was rather limited, while other items demonstrated a very significant increase of frequency in one or several varieties, which was sometimes quite unexpected. Examples of such diminutives include *housie* (a significant increase in New Zealand English),

*footie* (British English), *undies* (Australian English), etc. As a result, 10 synthetic high-frequency diminutives which are more or less equally distributed in the varieties under discussion were chosen for the study.

Analytical diminutives were chosen from the corpus itself. I used the request of 'little NOUN' type and selected 10 diminutives with a comparable frequency in the varieties under discussion.

Lexeme	Observed frequency		Expected frequency		Over (+) / under (-) use	Log-likelihood (G2)
	SHEs	Other varieties	SHEs	Other varieties		
<i>Auntie</i>	401	1582	424,26	1558,74	-	1,64
<i>Foodie</i>	443	1197	350,88	1289,12	+	29,06
<i>Techie</i>	160	817	209,03	767,97	-	15,59
<i>Biggie</i>	268	714	210,10	771,90	+	19,12
<i>Goodies</i>	304	569	186,78	686,22	+	82,99
<i>Cutie</i>	138	599	157,68	579,32	-	3,23
<i>Sissy</i>	111	660	164,95	606,05	-	24,63
<i>Kiddie</i>	169	608	166,24	610,76	-	0,06
<i>Girly</i>	136	551	146,98	540,02	-	1,06
<i>Doggie</i>	130	529	140,99	518,01	-	1,11
<b>Total</b>	2260	7826	2157,89	7928,11	+	6,08

Table (1): Frequency of synthetic diminutives in Southern Hemisphere Englishes and other varieties of the inner circle

Lexeme	Observed frequency		Expected frequency		Over (+) / under (-) use	Log-likelihood (G2)
	SHEs	Other varieties	SHEs	Other varieties		
<i>Little girl</i>	2632	10616	2834,39	10413,61	-	18,72
<i>Little thing</i>	1950	6783	1868,41	6864,59	+	4,49
<i>Little boy</i>	1721	5928	1636,49	6012,51	+	5,48
<i>Little kid</i>	575	2357	627,30	2304,70	-	5,66
<i>Little child</i>	589	1991	551,99	2028,01	+	3,11
<i>Little guy</i>	502	2198	577,66	2122,34	-	13,04
<i>Little piece</i>	558	1629	467,91	1719,09	+	21,14
<i>Little man</i>	566	1705	485,88	1785,12	-	16,19
<i>Little brother</i>	403	1538	415,27	1525,73	-	0,46
<i>Little sister</i>	341	1352	362,22	1330,78	-	1,60
<b>Total</b>	9837	36097	9827,52	36106,48	+	0,01

Tab. 2: Frequency of analytical diminutives in Southern Hemisphere Englishes and other varieties of the inner circle

To find if there are any significant changes in frequency of the diminutive usage across the varieties, the log-likelihood function (Rayson 2002; Rayson et al. 2004) was calculated for the study material, see the tables above. The log-likelihood function makes it possible to determine if the language unit is over- or underused in a corpus based on the comparison of its observed and expected fre-

quencies. According to Rayson (2002), the higher the log-likelihood is, the more significant is the difference between the frequencies. To ensure the 99.99% accuracy of the results, the log-likelihood critical value should exceed 15.13.

As one can see from the tables above, the hypothesis that the usage of diminutives is prominently more in the varieties of Southern Hemisphere is not confirmed by the study material. There is no clear tendency to an increased usage of diminutives in Southern Hemisphere varieties; the log-likelihood of several items does not even reach the critical value and there are items characterized by underuse. This suggests that the differences between the national varieties of English included into the inner circle are attributed not to a higher or a lower frequency of diminutives as a class of lexical items, but are manifested in the distinctive ways of formation and functioning of individual words, i.e. these differences are lexicalized.

However, even though there is no considerable increase in the quantity of diminutives, there should be some reasons that led linguists to the conclusion on the abundance of diminutives in several varieties, mainly in Australian English. In this case, one can still talk about the diminutive “richness” of the variety based on their quality rather than quantity, i.e. their diversity.

### 3.3. Synthetic diminutives characteristic of Southern Hemisphere Englishes

To conduct a deeper analysis of the diminutives in Southern Hemisphere Englishes, I combined the data from lexicographic sources with a corpus study.

The analysis of lexicographic sources showed no significant differences in the inventory of diminutives between the varieties. In line with the previous studies that demonstrate similarity of Australian and New Zealand varieties (Bauer 1999, Smith 2009, Bardsley/Simpson 2009, etc.), the study proved lexical closeness of the two varieties regarding the ways of diminutive formation and their frequency.

Differences, however, were found in South African English, with several specific diminutives for the variety that emerged as a result of language contact with local Afrikaans, e.g. *mannetjie* ‘a little man’ or *kleinhuisie* from *klein* ‘little’ and *huis* ‘house’ (Chudar 2020). The spread of the contact-induced diminutives is, however, rather typical for the varieties of pluricentric languages (as the literature review presented above shows).

The analysis of diminutive meanings reveals more interesting results. Though there are diminutive items shared by all three or at least two of the varie-

ties, the corpus analysis of diminutives in SHEs allowed the detection of some semantic domains of diminutives that are used predominantly in one of the varieties. Among them are diminutive items that serve as names for the representatives of flora and fauna, elements of the local topography, items naming the distinctive features of the local social system, etc. (Chudar 2019).

### 3.4. Analytical diminutives characteristic of Southern Hemisphere Englishes

As mentioned earlier, analytical diminutives are combinations of nouns with adjectives – markers of the category. To find any specific patterns in usage of diminutive markers in the SHE varieties, the log-likelihood function was applied to the corpus data. Statistical analysis demonstrated that there are some differences between the expected and observed frequencies of the adjectives used to form diminutives in the varieties of English under discussion. The most interesting example is the adjective *wee* which demonstrates a significant rise in its frequency in New Zealand English (observed frequency 449, expected frequency 199.51, log-likelihood 418.82).

In the Oxford English Dictionary, *wee* in the meaning of ‘little’ is defined as chiefly Scottish, however, this primarily reflects the origin of the word (according to OED, *wee* is originally a noun used in Scots, usually as *a little wee* ‘a little bit’). According to GloWbE data, analytical diminutives with *wee* are found in different varieties of English, but their usage increases prominently in Irish and New Zealand varieties. Speaking of the New Zealand variety, several scholars mention *wee* in the meaning of ‘very small’ as a distinctive feature of New Zealand English, finding its way to the variety from Scotland (Trudgill/MaClagan/Lewis 2003).

Apart from that, there are some deviations in functioning of the most common markers. For instance, the frequency of *small* in Australia and New Zealand is higher than expected; *little* increases in usage in Australia and decreases in New Zealand and South Africa. In New Zealand, *tiny* is found more seldom than expected. However, these differences are not so prominent as with *wee*. Still, they reflect some preferences in diminutive usage of Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans.

With the help of GloWbE, I have also analyzed which analytical diminutives are used more often in SHEs in comparison with other varieties of the inner circle. According to the corpus data, analytical diminutives characteristic of SHEs are not frequent and often found in a very limited number of sources included into the

corpus, as, for instance, *little biz* (76 tokens from 9 sources), *little traveler* (68 tokens from 13 sources). In some cases, there are several diminutives found in one text:

And then our **little kiwi** friend did something rather peculiar... This curious **little kiwi** was incredible... After about 10 or 15 minutes of time together, the **little kiwi** continued on his journey to find food, disappearing among the long grass on the marked track behind us. And then, he was gone<sup>2</sup>.

As for the qualitative characteristics, in general, the situation is quite predictable – among the most common diminutives in the varieties one can find those denoting concepts that are important for the country where the variety is spoken, for example: *little desert* (AusE), *little Aussie* (AusE), *little quilt* (AusE), *little kiwi* (NZE), *little cub* (SAE), etc.

In the sample, there are as well a lot of diminutives functioning as proper names. They include place names, names of local public organizations, businesses, cultural products popular in the countries under discussion: *Little Fork* (restaurant in New Zealand), *Little Quilt Store* (in Australia), *Down the Little Lane* (Australian online shop), *Defending the Little Desert: The Rise of Ecological Consciousness in Australia* (book of an Australian professor Libby Robin), *Little Birdy* (Australian rock band), *Little Karoo* (part of a semi-desert natural region of South Africa).

Diminutives found in SHEs can also reflect some values of the respective nation. This is primarily the case with Australian English, where diminutives themselves are believed to be related to one of the core values of the Australian nation – egalitarianism, which is expressed through the concepts of equality and mateship (Kidd et al. 2011). With their playful, ludic character, diminutives make the speech and the communicative situation less formal and less serious, which contributes to a friendlier atmosphere of a communicative situation. Most transparently the idea of equality is presented in such diminutives as *little mate*, *little bloke*, or the diminutive *little Aussie* – an informal name for Australians.

#### 4. Conclusion

Potentially, diminutives as quite a productive class of language items can be derived from a large number of words to name a variety of different objects, however, the realization of this potential is predetermined by different factors. Furthermore, one needs to remember that diminutives are often highly expressive, and, as expressive lexis in general, are prone to change. The nomination process is characterized by some extent of selectivity, which is reflected in the choice of ob-

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<sup>2</sup> <http://wheremyfeethavebeen.blogspot.com/>

jects of nomination and the nomination types, word-formation units used in morphological derivation, etc. Therefore, it is quite natural that there are differences in the formation and functioning of diminutives in the national varieties of the English language.

In comparison with analytical diminutives, the synthetic ones are more prone to variation in national varieties of English. The formation of synthetic diminutives is regulated by the intra-language factors (morphological mechanisms), which results in more diverse variation (and once again justifies the status of the “core” elements of the category of diminutiveness attributed to the synthetic diminutives). In case of analytical diminutives structural differences between the varieties are quite limited, however, some formation preferences (as, for example, in case with New Zealand English) can still be found.

Speaking of semantics, the existence of diminutives, both synthetic and analytical, that are typical of one specific national variety of English in most cases is attributed to extralinguistic factors and reflect the distinctive features of the location the variety is spoken at.

Among the main factors that predetermine formation and functioning of diminutives in national varieties of English one can name the following:

1) Language contact, which predetermines the emergence of some specific diminutives and the ways of their formation. In my sample, this is primarily the case with South Africa, where the contact of English and Afrikaans led to numerous lexical borrowings. In case of Australian and New Zealand Englishes, there is no such apparent evidence of the influence of other languages on the diminutive system. However, scholars note that the Yorta Yorta language spoken by the indigenous people of Australia and Cockney could predetermine such an abundance of diminutives in Australian English (Curr 1887:569).

2) Intra-language factors should be taken into account as well. If a language variety is rich in diminutives, it can by analogy stimulate further linguocreative activity in the domain.

3) The creation of variety-specific diminutives is related to the differences in the lives of Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans. In every country, there are some country-specific phenomena that need to be considered. Everything – from the specific features of local environment, including flora and fauna, elements of local topography, to local people, organizations, businesses, cultural products and events – needs to be reflected in the vocabulary of the variety.

4) Local social landscape, values of the society also have an impact on functioning of the diminutives. In Southern Hemisphere this is primarily discussed in

relation to Australians. With their playful character (Dressler/Merlini Barbaresi 1994), diminutives help to express the Australian values of equality and mateship through the language, making the communicative situation less formal and more friendly (Kidd/Kemp/Kashima/Quinn 2016).

If diminutives are perceived as a distinctive feature of the variety of a pluricentric language, they do not only decrease the formality of communication, but also serve as in-group markers, in case of Australian English – markers of belonging to the Australian society. This view of diminutives, in turn, also leads to an increase of their usage, as the language variety adapts to the communicative needs of its speakers (Labov 1972).

Thus, there are two types of factors that may influence functioning of the diminutives in national varieties of a pluricentric language – those that lead to a rise in the usage of diminutive items and those that predetermine the formation of certain (groups of) diminutives. While the impact of the latter factors may be verified empirically, it is quite difficult with the former ones, though all of them must be taken into account in search of truth about the functioning of diminutives.

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