

Verbal diminutives: Not so weird after all?

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(Cognitive Linguistics: Empirical Approaches to Russian)

Diminutives – unity in diversity

- Diminutives – extensive variation:
 - Morphological expression: suffixes, prefixes
 - Functions: size, affection, politeness ...
 - Parts of speech: nouns, adjectives (?) , ... , verbs (???)
- Diminutives – a unified analysis possible?
- Proposal:
 - Diminutives are reference point constructions
- Benefits:
 - Accounts for differences and similarities
 - Explains why adjectival and verbal diminutives are non-prototypical:
 - Nouns: prototypical reference points (physical and concrete)
 - Adjectival and verbal diminutives lack concrete reference points, and are therefore less suitable as R-point constructions

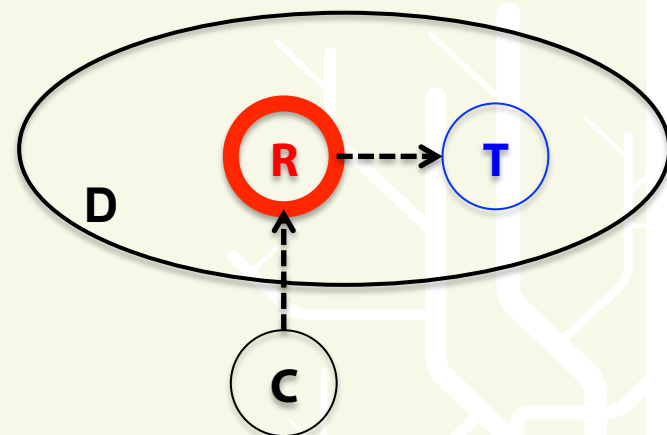


Nominal diminutives as R-point constructions

- Prototypical meaning: Small size (Wierzbicka 1980: 55)
 - (1) Russian *zaborčik* 'small fence'
 - (2) German *Häuschen* 'small house'
- Reference point constructions:
 - Mental access to **target** via **reference point**
 - Genitive construction: *Peter's car*
 - Mental access to **car (T)** via **Peter (R)**
- Diminutives as reference point constructions
 - *Zaborčik* 'small fence' presupposes comparison to *zabor* 'fence'
 - Mental access to **zaborčik (T)** via **zabor (R)**
- Similarities:
 - Physical objects as **T** and **R**
- Differences:
 - **Peter's car**: syntagmatic relationship
 - **Zabor** – **zaborčik**: paradigmatic relationship



Anna Wierzbicka



Strategy:

Well-understood phenomenon provides unified analysis of diverse category.

Nominal diminutives: Attitude

- Not size, but attitude towards object:
 - (3) Russian: *kakaja čašečka!* 'what a mug!'
 - (4) German: *ein großes Häuschen* 'a large house'
- Cognitive mechanisms:
 - Metaphor:
 - SMALL IS CUTE
 - Source: physical domain (size), target: emotional domain (attitude)
 - Motivation: our attitude towards children
 - Metonymy:
 - objects and attitude towards objects are metonymically related
- Reference point constructions:
 - Same relation between **R** and **T**
 - Different domains related via metaphor
 - From physical to emotional reference points



| Domain: | R: | T: |
|---------|---------|--------------|
| Size | neutral | small |
| Emotion | neutral | affectionate |

Reference point constructions:

Account for both metaphorical and non-metaphorical uses of diminutives

Adjectival diminutives

- Not size, but property:
 - (5) Russian *sinevatyj sneg* 'bluish snow'
 - Attenuated property (less blue)
 - (6) Russian *sinen'koe plat'e* 'nice blue dress'
 - Attitude towards object (nice dress)
- Cognitive mechanisms:
 - Metaphor:
 - SMALL IS ATTENUATED
 - SMALL IS CUTE
 - Metonymy:
 - objects and properties of objects are metonymically related
- Reference point constructions:
 - Same relation between **R** and **T**
 - Different domains related to the physical domain (size) via metaphor
 - From physical to emotional reference points



| | Domain: | R: | T: |
|---|----------|---------|--------------|
| N | Size | neutral | small |
| | Emotion | neutral | affectionate |
| A | Property | neutral | attenuated |
| | Emotion | neutral | affectionate |

Reference point constructions account for both types of adjectival diminutives

Verbal diminutives

- Functions of verbal diminutives vary across languages
- “Small size”
 - Brief/sudden/secondary action (7: Finnish)
 - Low intensity of action (8-10: Russian, Italian, German)
- Emotion – discourse functions:
 - Cuteness of verbal argument/addressee (11-13: Czech, Passamaquoddy, Aleut)
 - Politeness (14-15: Russian, Aleut)
 - Irony (16: Arabic)
- Metaphor:
 - SMALL IS ATTENUATED
 - SMALL IS CUTE
 - ACTIONS ARE OBJECTS



In order to serve as reference points, actions are construed as things (nouns)

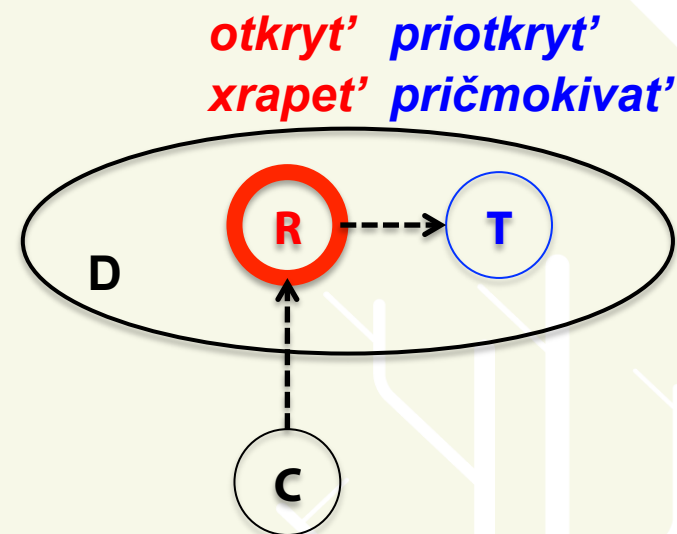
| | Domain: | R: | T: |
|---|----------|---------|--------------|
| N | Size | neutral | small |
| | Emotion | neutral | affectionate |
| A | Property | neutral | attenuated |
| | Emotion | neutral | affectionate |
| V | “Size” | neutral | attenuated |
| | Emotion | neutral | affect. etc. |

Reference points:

Metaphorical extensions parallel those for adjectives and nouns

Verbal diminutives: Russian attenuatives

- Normal → low intensity
 - (17) *Otkryt'* 'open completely' – *priotkryt'* 'open slightly'
 - Actions as reference point: metaphorically construed as things
 - **R** usually explicit in context; **R** and **T** are paradigmatically related
- Primary → secondary action
 - (18) *Xrapet'* 'snore' – *pričmokivat'* 'smack one's lips, chirrup'
 - Actions as reference point: metaphorically construed as things
 - **R** explicit in context; **R** and **T** are syntagmatically related
 - **R** and **T** not related morphologically



Verbal diminutives:

- R = action, R usually in context
- Further removed from prototypical diminutives (N) than Adj

Wrapping up

- Diminutives are reference point constructions
- Nouns are prototypical diminutives
 - include reference to size
 - have concrete reference points
 - metaphorical extensions: R points from concrete to emotional domain
- Adjectives are less prototypical
 - involve metonymy from object to property
 - reference points less concrete
- Verbs are furthest from the prototype
 - involve additional metaphor ACTIONS ARE OBJECTS
 - actions as reference points
 - being less prototypical, verbal diminutives are less widespread across languages



Diminutives represent a radial category: more or less prototypical reference points.