

Baddie or baddo? The weight of -ie and -o affixes in creating connotations

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While there is a considerable body of research on the form and function of evaluative derivatives within the Descriptive Grammar approach, not much attention is given to these units in the interface of Cognitive Linguistics, Cognitive Morphology, Pragmatics and Sociolinguistics. The pragmatic effects such as irony, sarcasm or pejoration can be recognised in the meaning of diminutives (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 2015), but the relations between particular affix forms and nuances of created connotations and pragmatic meanings have scarcely been considered in the research to date.

The presented study is aimed at examining the suffixes *-ie* and *-o* and their contribution to the connotative meaning of diminutive formations. Even though *-ie* is generally acknowledged to convey positive attitudes, as in *hubbie* (< *husband*) and *doggie* (< *dog*), it is not uncommon for its function to be cognitively reanalysed to produce pejorative forms, as in *blackie* (< *black person*) and *pervie* (< *pervert*). It is commonly believed that the evaluative reading that a diminutive receives is largely dependent on the meaning of the derivational base and the context in which the item is used. Yet, examples where the derivational bases have positive connotations, like *conchie/concho* (< *conscientious objector*), and *poshy/posho* (< *upper-class* (i.e. “posh”) *person*) indicate the recategorisation of the sense as pejoration, which can be attributed to the use of the affixes. It has also been suggested that pejoratives ending in *-o* convey more negative (or offensive) connotations than *-ie* items (Schneider, 2003, p. 111), which indicates that the role of the suffixes may have been underestimated.

Tarasova and Sánchez Fajardo (2021) show that morphological process of diminution may be viewed as an example of diagrammatic iconicity in language on the level of word-formation. The current research looks deeper into the issue to understand the degree of contribution of the two diminutive suffixes to the iconicity of the word-formation process and their weight in creating positive and/or negative connotations.

The study is based on the combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses of NZE native speakers' perceptions of the differences in the connotations of *-ie* derivatives (e.g. *smallie*) and corresponding *-o* derivatives (e.g. *smallo*) which are presented in and outside of contexts. To alleviate the effect of the semantics of the derivational base, the study uses nonce-words, i.e. words that are not registered in English (based on OED3).

The study uses multivariate quantitative analysis to identify the correlation between the form of a diminutive affix and the speaker perceptions of the emotional connotations of the derivatives. The qualitative analysis also aims to show the relation between morphological structure and semantic ambivalence in the expression of pejorative meaning and discuss the cognitive processes involved in meaning construal of evaluative derivatives in communication.

References

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