

Verbal diminutives: Not so weird after all?

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While nominal diminutives have received considerable attention in the scholarly literature, verbal diminutives are less broadly attested across languages and less well described. Why have verbal diminutives been to some extent overlooked, and why do they display different, more abstract meanings than their nominal counterparts? We propose a general theory of verbal diminutives, arguing that the asymmetries between nominal and verbal diminutives receive a straightforward explanation if analyzed as radial categories with metaphorical and metonymic extensions from a prototype.

Nominal diminutives like Russian *okoško* 'little window' from *okno* 'window' signal small size, but at the same time tend to assume secondary functions (*explicative diminutives* in the terminology of Bakema and Geeraerts (2004)), conveying such emotions as affection. Inspired by Wierzbicka (1980, 1992) we analyze this as metonymic extensions from a property of an object (smallness) to the emotions people tend to have for such an object, since people tend to consider small things and children endearing. On the basis of this and similar metonymic extensions from the prototypical meaning of smallness, we propose a radial category for nominal diminutives, further developing proposals by Jurafsky (1996).

We report on a database of more than 2000 verbal diminutives in Russian as well as supplementary data from other languages, arguing that Russian attenuative verbs such as *priotkryt* 'open slightly' from *otkryt* 'open (completely)' can be analyzed as diminutives. Since actions can be perceived as metaphorical objects (Langacker 1991, Janda 2004), we argue that the properties of verbal diminutives are motivated by the metaphor ATTENUATED ACTIONS ARE SMALL OBJECTS. Being metaphorical by nature, verbal diminutives are more abstract and diverse than their nominal counterparts and for this reason they have not received due attention in the literature. At the same time, verbal diminutives develop secondary functions through metonymic extension in a similar way as nominal diminutives. Our data indicate that verbal diminutives are used as markers of politeness. For example, in contemporary Russian usage *priotkrojte okno, požalujsta* 'please, open the window (slightly)' with the diminutive verb *priotkryt* tends to be perceived as more polite than the standard *otkrojte okno, požalujsta* with a non-diminutive verb. We analyze this as an example of metonymic extension, since a speaker requests carrying out the action completely (*otkryt okno* 'open window completely') by using a verb that only denotes part of the action (*priotrkyt okno* 'open window slightly').

Relating nominal and verbal diminutives, we propose a three-dimensional radial category. Nominal and verbal diminutives occupy different plains connected by conceptual metaphor, while the local prototypes in each plain represent the centers of networks of metonymic relations. This conception of diminutives offers a unified account of verbal diminutives, accommodating both similarities and differences with nominal diminutives by means of theoretically well-understood notions such as *radial category*, *metaphor* and *metonymy*. Without the tools of cognitive linguistics, an explanatory approach to diminutives seems infeasible.

References

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