

Towards a Typology of Transcategorial Diminutive Markers in the Uralic Languages of Northeastern Eurasia

Maria Ilinichina Satina, independent researcher, Moscow

The vast majority of the works, e.g. (Nieuwenhuis 1985; Jurafsky 1996; Dressler, Barbaresi 2001), is primarily concerned with describing the properties of diminutives in the nominal domain, therefore diminution is conventionally perceived as a purely nominal category. I aim to highlight the fact that a number of noteworthy phenomena can be observed in languages, where the diminutive markers are of transcategorial nature.

The data from the following languages will be discussed: Northern Mansi (NM; Ob-Ugric < Finno-Ugric), Kazym Khanty (KKh; Ob-Ugric < Finno-Ugric) and Nenets (Samoyedic); a considerable part of the NM data was gathered from the speakers of the Sosva and Upper Lozva dialects during the field trips to Khanty-Mansiysk in 2024.

The main phenomena under discussion in the present study are the following:

1. Both in NM and KKh the diminutive suffixes, when used in the verbal domain, act as inflectional rather than derivational markers and seem not to modify the meaning of the base verb *per se*, as would be expected of the verbal diminutive in its canonical understanding (Audring, Leufkens, van Lier 2021), but to put one of the participants of the situation described in the sentence in empathy focus, e.g. in (1) the empathy is directed at the object. We argue that the main factor influencing the choice of the participant to be put in empathy focus is discourse salience. In (1) the noun *pīy* ‘boy’ is located in the focal position and the empathy encoded by the marker *-rie* is directed at it. In (2) the noun *xājtnut* ‘wolf’ takes the clause-initial focal position, therefore this sentence was considered unnatural by the speakers, who were instructed that in the described situation they should empathize with the boy.
2. The diachronic data suggest that transcategoriality is one of the stages that a diminutive marker undergoes before grammaticalizing in either verbal or, more commonly, nominal domain. In KKh most of the instances of the diminutive marker *-ije* occurring on particles, verbs and adverbs, as in (3), are found in relatively old and mostly folklore texts (Solovar 2012); in modern KKh the diminutive markers are only productive in the nominal domain. In modern NM the strategy of encoding empathy via the use of the diminutive in the nominal domain is more common than in the verbal one, although both uses are grammatical. The Nenets diminutive marker *-ko/-ku*, which serves as a marker of positive evaluation (Tereschenko 1947,

p. 55-56), bears close resemblance to North Mansi transcategorial suffix *-kwe* in its semantics and external form¹, but synchronically can only occur on nouns.

Examples

(1) NORTHERN MANSI

am pīy-um xājtnut-na tajapa-we-s-rie
1sg boy-POSS.1sg wolf-LAT eat-PASS-PST-**PEJ**

‘My son was eaten by the wolf.’

(2) NORTHERN MANSI

ʔxājtnut pīy-um juw-tajapa-s-rie-t-e
wolf boy-POSS.1sg inwards-eat-PST-**PEJ**-SG.O-3SG.S

‘The wolf ate my son.’

(3) KAZYM KHANTY

wet m̥w s̥uŋa at-ije-n m̥antaλ, šaj
five earth corner.DAT let-DIM-POSS.2sg go.EVID.NPST.3sg tea
jańši χot ar-ije t̥ajtem
drink.NFIN.NPST house many-DIM have.EVID.NPST.1sg

‘Let him go to the five corners of the earth; I have many houses where I can drink tea.’

(Solovar 2012, p. 62-63)

References

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¹ We presume that these markers might be cognates, despite the fact that the number of common suffixes in Samoyedic and Ob-Ugric languages is rather scarce; this claim requires serious testing.