

Formation of Diminutives in English and Bangla: A Cross-Linguistic Study

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Abstract: - *Even though English and Bangla are geographically at an oceanic distance, the two languages have a genealogical connection. As members of the Indo-European (IE) language family, both the languages share some common features in the domains of lexis, grammar and morphology. At the same time, they have some dissimilar properties as well. The major purpose of this paper is to conduct a comparative study on one of the important aspects of morphology i.e. the formation of diminutives in English and Bangla. The processes of diminutive formation, in the parlance of Linguistics, are known as diminutivization.*

'Diminutive' literally means 'smallness'. Precisely speaking, it means, 'small counterparts of the standard'. Diminutives have a variety of shades in terms of meanings. They can refer to intimacy, familiarity, affection and contempt.

This paper explores the procedures of the formation of diminutives in English and Bangla. Affixation and compounding are among two major word formation processes used in English. Diminutives in English are mostly formed using the twin processes mentioned above. Bangla, on the other hand, apart from using compounding and affixation in forming diminutives, employs a number of other morphological and syntactic processes.

This article finds some striking similarities between the two IE languages in the construction of diminutives. Interestingly enough, there are some curious language-specific differences in the process of diminutivization in English and Bangla.

Keywords: - *Evaluative Morphology, Diminutivization, Affixation, Compounding, Truncation.*

Introduction

Etymologically speaking, the word 'diminutive' is of Latin origin meaning 'small' or 'little'. According to Hornby (1999), a diminutive is a word or final portion of a word which indicates that somebody or something is small, e.g. *piglet* (= a young pig), *kitchenette* (= a small kitchen). It is clear from this definition that the word 'diminutive' denotes 'smallness'. Crystal (1985) also echoes the famous lexicographer in his definition of diminutives. He thinks that diminutives generally refer to the addition of a derivational suffix mostly to a noun which results in a new noun conveying the general meaning of littleness. This conceptual category, however, contains affective meaning beyond the notion of smallness. Schneider (2003) mentions this in his definition of diminutives. According to him, diminutives are words denoting 'smallness' and 'attitude'. Jurafsky (1996), on the

other hand, prioritizes the emotive aspect of diminutives. He proposes a widely inclusive semantic structure of 'diminutives' which is composed of shades of emotions like affection, endearment, sympathy and contempt. If we synthesize the definitions of 'diminutive' from all the major dictionaries and sources, we get two common features of the entry: 1. smallness of stature and 2. by semantic extension affection, intimacy, condescension or contempt.

The prototypical diminutive in most of the languages is a denominal noun. It simply means that a diminutive is a complex noun derived from another noun by suffixation. This can be expressed by the following equation: $N + \text{Suffix } dim > N \text{ dim}$. Through the process of diminutivization,

the diminuted word does not change its class - the resultant word is a new noun denoting smallness.

Diminutives can also be formed by prefixation. To be inclusive, we can say that diminutives across many languages are formed by adding affixes to proper names and nouns. As a diminutive is mainly formed by affixation or compounding creating new words with new meanings, it is a morphological category. In linguistics, it is discussed in 'evaluative morphology'. Diminutives are also a significant component of 'morphopragmatics' as they carry affective meaning.

As diminutives are important part of language universals (Schneider, 2003), all languages share some dominant or popular processes of diminutivization. English and Bangla, two important members of the Indo-European (IE) language family, have some common and language-specific processes for the construction of diminutives.

Aim of the study

This study aims to investigate the processes of diminutive construction in English and Bangla. It is intended to be a cross-linguistic analysis of diminutivization in the two genealogically connected languages. In the process, we will try to discover the morphological processes that the diminuted words undergo in the two languages. Juxtaposition of the two languages on this aspect of morphology will also focus on the differences between the two languages in the expression of the notion of smallness. The diminutivizing of proper names is beyond the scope of the current study and hence we will not elaborately discuss the process of diminutive formation of personal names in this article.

Rationale of the study

Even though ample researches have been conducted on English evaluative morphology i.e. diminutives and augmentatives, cross-lingual researches on diminutive formation in English and Bangla have not been conducted. Bangla and English have rich history of researches conducted on Contact Linguistics, especially on lexicology. But comparative study of diminutivization in the two cousin languages is scarce. The implication of this

observation is that this research can contribute to filling the missing gap on the study of diminutive formation in English and Bangla.

An overview of diminutivization in English

Though diminutives are marginal in English (Jespersen, 1948), the global lingua franca has developed an array of diminutivizing processes. Most linguists have mentioned four processes of word-formation in the English language – prefixation, suffixation, compounding and conversion (Zandvoort, 1972; Crystal, 1988; Katamba, 1993). Stekauer et al (2012) have identified the following processes of diminutive formation – suffixation, prefixation and compounding. Schneider (2003) further adds truncation, inflection and periphrastic constructions to the catalogue.

Diminutives in English are basically of two types: synthetic and analytic. Synthetic diminutives are formed by affixation. For example, if we add the diminutive suffix 'ling' at the end of the word 'duck' we get the diminutive, 'duckling' (young duck). Analytic diminutives in English, on the other hand, are formed by placing an adjective before the word to be diminuted. For example, if we place the adjective 'little' before 'prince', we get the diminutive form, 'Little Prince'.

Formation of Synthetic Diminutives

The following are the major types of synthetic diminutives in English – prefixation, suffixation and truncation or clipping.

1. Prefixation

The English language has a remarkable number of diminutive prefixes –

Mini – Mini-bus, Mini-lecture

Micro – Micro-skills, Micro-bus

Demi – Demi-God, Demi-devil

Hemi – Hemisphere

Mono – Monogram, Monolingual

Vice – Vice-chancellor, Vice-president

Uni – Unidirectional, Unilateral

Under- Underfed, underpayment

Sub – subtitle, subsonic

2. Suffixation

Even though English is not remarkably rich in diminutives, it has accumulated a good number of diminutive suffixes from diverse sources. French, Italian, Latin and Dutch have generously contributed to the suffixational melting pot of the English language. Let us have a look at the following selected cute, little suffixes:

-aster: poetaster, criticaster

-cule: animalcule, molecule

-ster: youngster, bankster

-ette: cigarette, kitchenette

-let: brooklet, booklet

-rel: mongrel, cockerel

-et: cabinet, circlet

-ie, y- sweetie, Johnny (from John)

-Ling- suckling, weakling

3. Truncation

Truncation is a form of clipping. It is widely employed in the formation of pet names-

Joanna – Jo

Michael – Mike

Richard – Dick

Elizabeth – Liz

Catherine – Cathy

Formation of Analytic diminutives

Analytic diminutives in English are formed through the process of compounding. An adjective is placed before the noun to be diminuted. For example: Tree – Baby tree.

Compounding is a major English word formation process. Its productivity is manifest in the formation of diminutives as well –

Tree – Baby tree/dwarf-tree

Cottage – Little cottage or small cottage (‘little’ has affective connotation while ‘small’ is emotion-neutral)

Tim – Tiny Tim

Dorrit – Little Dorrit

House – Little house

Besides the above mentioned categories, there are some other forms of diminutives popularly used in the English language -

Partitive expressions

Partitive expressions refer to the tiny portions of big things or abstract ideas. They denote the notion of smallness periphrastically. Hence these expressions can also be considered as diminutives -

a pat of butter

a clove of garlic

a morsel of food

a scrap of difference

a bit of fun

a scoop of ice-cream

a slice of meat

a dab of perfume

a pinch of salt

Semantic diminutives

Apart from morphological diminutives, English also has semantic or lexicalized diminutives. For example -

City – Town

Mountain – Hill

There is a good number of diminutive lexical items denoting ‘a young bird or animal’ –

Horse – foal

Sheep – Lamb

Cat – Kitten

Dog- Puppy

Tiger – Cub

Diminutive address forms

These diminutives belong to the domain of ‘morphopragmatics’. They are basically terms of endearments and their functions are pragmatic by nature -

Mother – Mommy

Father – Daddy

Grandmother – Grandma

Grandfather – Grandpa

Diminutives from adjectives or adjectival stems

Yellow – Yellowish (Refers to the weakening of the quality)

Sweet – Sweetie

An overview of diminutivization in Bangla

Like its continental cousin, Bangla also has synthetic and analytic diminutives.

Synthetic diminutives

Diminutives in Bangla are synthetically formed in three ways -

1. Suffixation

Synthetic diminutive is formed by the addition of a suffix to a word. For example, by adding the suffix 'ika' to the word 'katha', we get 'kathika'. Some other examples of this type are -

Patra (Letter/Paper) – Patrika (Small letter/ Small paper; popularly it refers to newspapers)

Natak (Play) – Natika (Small play)

Lipi (Letter) – Lipika (Small letter)

Upponnash (Novel) – Upponnasika (Novella)

Mala (Garland) – Malika (Small garland)

The following diminutive suffixes are also used in Bangla to refer to small counterpart of the standard

–

- Ti : Chalti/Chakti
- Ra : Gachhra/Chamra/Amra
- Ri : Kuthri/Banshari/Ganthri
- Chi : Degchi
- Cha : Degcha/Narcha/Bukcha (Bochka)/Nimcha/Bagicha/Kitabcha

2. Prefixation

Morphological diminutives in Bangla are also formed by the process of prefixation –

Zilla (Administrative unit) – Upazila (Small administrative unit)

Sagar (Sea) – Upasagar (Bay)

Graha (Planet) – Upagraha (Satellite)

Mahadesh (Continent) – Upamahadesh (Subcontinent)

Neta (leader) – Patineta (Petty leader)

Hansh (Duck) – Patihansh (A variety of small duck)

3. Truncation

This is a form of clipping. The truncated forms are often terms of endearment or pet names.

Monilal - Moni

Badiuzzaman – Badi

Shamsuzzaman - Shamshu

Dulari – Duli (Poet Nazrul's pet name for his wife Pramila)

Moitreey – Mitra (Tagore's pet name for Moitreey Devi)

Analytic diminutives

Analytic diminutives in Bangla, in unison with the English language, are formed through the process of compounding i.e. by placing adjectives before nouns:

Gayak (Singer) – Khude gayak (Little singer)

Shilpi (Artist) – Shishu shilpi (A tender aged artist)

Shikhok (Teacher) – Pichchi shikkhok (Little teacher)

Numeral classifiers/ enclitic definitives

Bangla also employs numeral classifiers, enclitic definitive and numeratives like *ta, ti, khana, khani, gacha, gachi, gota, guti, jona* etc. to convey affective or diminutive sense -

Jona – Jona dui (small number)

Gachi – Ekgachi chabi (a bunch of keys)

Khana – Gramkhana (the village, affectionate)

To refer to small quantity, Tagore (2011) shows, we use *te, tuk, tuku, tukun, to, gota* etc. For example, 'chartebhat', 'dudhtuku', 'dudhtukun', 'dutobhat', 'gotacharek' etc.

Lexicalized diminutives

Bangla has a remarkable number of lexicalized diminutives. Most of the following examples have been collected from Islam (2015):

Chhoto mugur (Small hammer) – Pitna

Chhoto ghora (Small pitcher) – Gagree

Chhoto chitthi (Small letter) – Chirkut

Chhoto thali (Small metallic plate) - Rekabi

Chhoto chimta (Small tongs) – Sonna

Chhoto talwar (Small sword) – Bhujali

Chhoto mota bansher lathi (A small, thick bamboo stick) – Pabra, khentey

Partitive Expressions

Like English, Bangla also uses partitive expressions as a means of diminutivization –

Ekmutho bhat - a morsel of rice

Ekchimta laban - a pinch of salt

Eksbindu rokto - a drop of blood

Khudrotomo bebodhan - a scrap of difference

Ektukhani moja - a bit of fun

Ekkosh roshun - a clove of garlic

Ekkhondo jomi - a piece of land

Ektukro mangsho - a slice of meat

Eksfonta sughandhi - a dab of perfume

Shoitter leshmatro - grain of truth

Diminutive address forms

Amma (Mother) – Ammi

Baba (Father) – Bapi

Apa (Elder sister) – Api/Apu

Dada (Grandfather, Elder brother) – Da

Didi (Elder sister) – Di

Dadi (Grandmother) – Dida

Fufu (Sister of one's father) – Fupi

Adjectival diminutives

Shobuj – (Green) – Shobujavo (Greenish)

Holud (Yellow) – Holudavo (Yellowish)

Comparison between diminutiveness in English and Bangla

From the above discussion, we see that both English and Bangla follow morphological and syntactic processes in the construction of diminutives. Synthetic process is very popular in both the languages and the larger part of diminutives are formed morphologically i.e in the synthetic process. Even though outnumbered by the morphological process, the analytic process enjoys substantial frequency in the two languages concerned. Apart from the processes mentioned, on the other side of the continuum, both English and Bangla have their own, distinctive ways of diminutivization. For example, English employs reduplication at times to form diminutives (Jurafsky, 1996). 'Goody-goody' and 'John-John' are two instances of reduplicative diminutives from the English language. The language also has a tendency to form 'multi-word diminutives' – Tiny Tom, Little Dorrit, etc. Moreover, English also uses independent words to indicate diminution of size or status or age -

Dog - Puppy

Cat – Kitten

Sheep – lamb

Horse – foal.

From Albion's distant shores when we come to the linguistic landscape of Bangla, we see that semantic diminutives enjoy frequency of uses in Bangla. In Bangla, we have -

Nagar (City) – Shahar (Town)

Parbat (Mountain) – Thila (Hillock)

Rasta (Road) – Gali (Lane)

Goru (Cow) – Bachhur (Calf)

Moitree (2004) has mentioned the following examples of borrowed semantic diminutives used in Bangla –

Jama (Shirt) – Nima / Merjai/ Photua (kind of waistcoat)

Carpet – Dulicha (Small carpet)

From the obverse, let us have a look at the reverse of the coin. Bangla has its distinctive ways of

diminutivization apart from the major processes shared with the English language. Uses of enclitic definitives or numeral classifiers are unique ways of forming diminutives in Bangla. For example –

Jonakotek lok (a small number of people)

Gotadui payara (a small number of guavas)

Gutikoy bishoy (a small number of issues)

Limitations of the study

In this small-scale cross-linguistic study, we have discussed the mechanisms of diminutivization in English and Bangla. The pragmatic aspect of diminutivization has only peripherally been mentioned because of time and space constraints.

Moreover, study materials on evaluative morphology in Bangla is very scanty. Exhaustive and rigorous researches on this topic will aid learners of Bangla and English.

Implications for language teaching

Teaching and learning of a foreign language is greatly affected by the knowledge of the similarities and dissimilarities between the two languages concerned. The tempo of the acquisition of the target language is facilitated by the knowledge of similarities. The knowledge of dissimilarities, at the same time, helps students avoid the pitfalls. This study on the hitherto neglected area of comparative evaluative morphology will help English and Bangla language practitioners to identify and use identical elements of diminutivization in the two languages.

Concluding Remarks

English as an analytical language does not possess a wealth of diminutives (Jespersen, 1948). Yet through its plasticity, the language has developed an array of ways for diminutivization. The same observation applies to Bangla. Like her second cousin i.e. English (Hudson, 1965), Bangla has her distinctive diminutivizers. Apart from sharing affixation, compounding and truncation with English, Bangla makes uses of enclitic definitives and numeral classifiers to form diminutives. This diminutivizing process is unique to Bangla. Though both the languages use syntactic modification or periphrastic constructions, English has a more

perceivable tendency to use multi-word diminutives.

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