

## **The tacit function of the Hungarian diminutive**

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I live on Earth at present and I don't  
know what I am.  
I know that I am not a category. I am  
not a thing – a noun.  
I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary  
process –  
an integral function of the universe.  
R. Buckminster Fuller, 1970

### **Introduction**

In my article I intend to disclose a supposedly less known feature and function of Hungarian diminutive usage. First, I will take a closer look at the derivation of three suffixes out of the numerous Hungarian derivational endings Rita Hegedűs presents in her *Hungarian Grammar*.<sup>1</sup> These three (-ka/-ke, -cska/-cske and -i) apparently seem to have a function of somewhat less importance than the rest of the derivational suffixes. In the second part of my paper my scrutiny is aimed at the exploration of a hidden function of these diminutive endings that becomes relevant only in the ontogenetic language development of Hungarian language acquisition. Hopefully, my examination also uncovers that linguistic functions are deeply rooted in human cognitive processes, and in this special sense all are truly polyfunctional.<sup>2</sup>

### **The function of diminutives**

Hegedűs lists three derivational suffixes (-ka/-ke, -cska/-cske, -i) that have an almost identical diminutive function. These endings are

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<sup>1</sup> Hegedűs 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 16.

mostly attached to nouns, and as she puts it, the function of diminutivization is to make things smaller in size.<sup>3</sup> The application of diminutive suffixes to adjective is not prototypical, though it is not impossible. Let us demonstrate the use of diminutives with a few Hungarian nursery rhyme lines:

Kerekecske, dombocska,  
itt szalad a nyulacska.

As seen here, these diminutive forms often create a child-centred, fairytale-like world with animals, things, places and even features “smaller” in size. As a result these endings presumably convey an additional emotional feature of a tinier world fitting to kids. This may as well account for the prevalent presence of these diminutives in nursery rhymes meant for mothers, caretakers and children. Surprisingly redundantly, the function of the *-ka/-ke* ending is completely similar to the previously mentioned suffixes,<sup>4</sup> and this obvious redundancy is even more evident when diminutives are cumulated within one word string (e.g. *Pann-i-ka*):

Cicuska, macuska,  
mit főztél, Pannika?  
Kevertem kását,  
sütöttem pampuskát,  
ide tettem, oda tettem,  
utoljára mind megettem,  
hamm-hamm!

Naturally, the name *Pannika* can be replaced by the name of the infant sitting in the lap of the mother or caretaker. The diminutivized name of the infant must be a three-syllable word (this claim may explain the cumulation of diminutives). In accordance with linguistic descriptions, the ending *-i* is also assigned to the very same function that we have seen in the case of *-ka/-ke* and *-cska/-cske*: it creates a smaller, kinder version of an entity which is not necessarily a proper noun:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Kicsi kocsi, három csacsi,  
döcögő, döcögő.

Why then are there three diminutives instead of one if they have no crucial semantic function, in contrast with the one of derivational suffixes' significantly altering the word meaning?

### Derivation

First of all, an evident question may arise: why this variety? Due to this variety of Hungarian diminutives each Hungarian word, no matter what sound quality the word's ending has, can be diminutivized. In certain cases the diminutive derivational ending can be added to the basic form of the word without a linking vowel (e.g. *tányérka*, *Jánoska*, *picike*, *lányka*, or *nyalóka*, *dédike*), whereas in other cases a linking vowel (in line with vowel harmony) needs to precede the derivational ending (e.g. *gyerekecske*). The ending *-i* is somewhat exceptional inasmuch it is attached to truncated nouns, and this extremely productive diminutive ending is frequently applied to human names in colloquial Hungarian: e.g. *Ferenc*→*Feri*, *Mária*→*Mari*.

In the volume of *Structural Hungarian Grammar 3. Morphology*<sup>5</sup> these suffixes are listed under the title of 'Morphosyntactically neutral derivations', as these diminutives do not affect the syntax of the sentence (for instance they do not modify the word class of the word: noun→verb). According to the authors, the endings *-ka* and *-(V)cska* are productive with noun base words. It is *-(V)cska* which appears to be more productive nowadays (this claim is not substantiated by corpus data) and can be used without any restrictions.<sup>6</sup> The ending *-ka* is allowed to be used only under certain phonological circumstances. It is not used with one-syllable or multi-syllable consonant-final words in which the consonant is a plosive. For instance, instead of *\*lábka* it is *lábacska* which is the regularly used diminutivized word. In some cases both optional derivational suffixes are allowed to be used: *levélke*, *levelecske*. In the case of vowel-final nouns we

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<sup>5</sup> Kiefer/Ladányi 2000, 168–172.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 168.

usually use *-cska* (e.g. *fa*→*fácska*, and not: *\*fáka*).<sup>7</sup> Although *-(V)cska* is more productive, but if Hungarian *usus* has conventionalized one of the two applicable diminutive forms, speakers tend to use the other alternative diminutivized form less frequently, preferring e.g. *kenyérke* to *kenyerecske*. The above mentioned volume (*Structural Hungarian Grammar 3. Morphology*) describes the meaning of diminutivization as follows: “The meaning of diminutives is semantically identical with the meaning of *kis*, *kicsiny* [‘small’, ‘tiny’], that is, *láb-a-cska* is ‘kicsi láb’, *lámpá-cska* is ‘kis lámpa’, *kocsi* is ‘kis kocsi’.”<sup>8</sup> Also

...the diminutive ending might be assigned to a more abstract meaning: the meaning of the suffix is Dim (= diminutivum), which makes of a noun N another noun meaning ‘small N’. The semantic content can be modified by pragmatics, in the meaning of ‘kicsi’ the original meaning might be bleached out in certain contexts, and may carry pragmatic functions.<sup>9</sup>

The suffix *-i* diminutivizes nouns, it is productive, and in terms of morphology this diminutive formation differs from other (non-diminutive) derivations because *-i* is attached to the truncated word: *Mária*→*Mari*, *mackó*→*maci*, *mama*→*mami*. The attachment to the truncated stem, as the authors put it, makes the *-i* diminutive unusual among other morphological patterns.<sup>10</sup>

### **Cross-linguistic studies**

Let me take a closer look at the major area where diminutives are prevalently used. Diminutives are a pervasive feature of both child-directed speech and child speech. In several languages diminutives are frequently used (often cumulatively, with other diminutives) without any obvious grammatical function, and they convey only the semantic function of indicating the smaller size of entities, places, or simply adding some emotional (rarely ironic) connotation to the

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<sup>7</sup> For further explanation cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

word. In these cases diminutives seem to have no broader grammatical effect. For example, in Polish, when speakers apply diminutive derivation, the ending does not even alternate the gender of the word: *nos*→*nosek* (the original and the derived word are both masculine), *ściana*→*ścianka* (both are feminine), *mięso*→*mięsko* (both are neutral).

In the cross-linguistic study of diminutives it is widely shared that the diminutivized form is primarily used in child speech and child-directed speech; therefore recently an extensive body of research into diminutives has used qualitative data gained from child-directed speech or baby talk of several languages to support this claim.<sup>11</sup> General linguists unanimously view the diminutive form as a category expressing 'smallness' with emotional connotations conveying a sense of intimacy, rarely implying vaguely ironic or pejorative meaning. On the other hand, cross-linguistic investigation of diminutives exploring the emergence of this category at an early stage of language acquisition across languages has assumed diminutives to have an additional hidden function, which might account for its relatively early appearance in children's speech.

In a similar fashion as demonstrated in international research, Hungarian language acquisition literature has reported the early appearance of the diminutive in the child's speech, more precisely before the second birthday of the infant.<sup>12</sup> Research into Lithuanian baby talk has noted that diminutives are more frequently used in baby talk than in adult-directed speech, and presumably it might also play an essential role in the development of the child's grammar by restricting the number of paradigm patterns, which may account for its early emergence in child speech.<sup>13</sup> Research into the usage of Polish diminutives used by young children has also confirmed that, for diminutives may have a facilitating role in the appropriate use of noun inflection, which is often complicated in many languages inclu-

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<sup>11</sup> Savickienė-Dressler 2007.

<sup>12</sup> MacWhinney 1985, 1147; S. Meggyes 1971, 54; Wéber 2011, 160.

<sup>13</sup> Savickienė 2007, 13.

ding Polish, and that the use of diminutives does promote the extraction of morphophonological regularities by the child.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, assuming that this facilitating role of diminutives stands for Hungarian as well, we had better throw light upon on Hungarian noun inflection and the extent of the difficulty that may arise during the learning process of Hungarian in order to reveal what simplifying role diminutives might have for Hungarian children when acquiring Hungarian.

### **Learning Hungarian as a foreign language**

Considering the challenges of learning Hungarian, we might take the example of learning Hungarian noun suffixes through rules by mature learners. One of the greatest problems and challenges nouns pose for such learners is the variety of the applicable noun endings. A case marker in itself is not as complicated for learners; however, the variability of the so-called linking vowels is often baffling. Probably one of the earliest endings, the accusative case has at least four (in reality more) ways in which the accusative suffix is linked to the base word (and these ways highly depend on the word). How then is *-t*, the accusative marker, added to Hungarian nouns? It depends on the quality of the last sound of the noun stem:

- 1) to vowel-final nouns: *-t* can simply be added without a linking vowel as in *hajó-t*
- 2) to some consonant-final nouns (*s, j, ny, sz, ly, l, zs, r, z, n*) the *-t* marker is again simply added, e.g. *lány-t, hús-t*, though it is hard to explore and memorize this group of words having the above consonants in their stem.
- 3) to the members of a closed set of (mostly one-syllable) consonant-final (ancient) words the accusative marker is applied with one of two linking vowels (*-a, -e*) giving *-at/-et*, e.g. *vaj-at/hely-et*. (*The use of -at/-et in this set is not productive.*)
- 4) to the rest of the consonant-final words *-ot/-et* or *-öt* are added, as in *patak-ot, élet-et, gyümölcs-öt*. *-öt* is used in most cases when the penultimate syllable contains a rounded vowel, and it

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<sup>14</sup> Dąbrowska 2006.

is even more difficult for learners to remember when *-ot* is applied and not *-at* (cf. 3. above). (*The use of -et in this group is productive.*)

- 5) to some alternating stems *-at/-ot* are added, but one vowel of the stem is either omitted, or shortened: e.g. *bokr-ot* or *madar-at*.

What is striking from the simplified picture above is the issue of the variety of alternative accusative endings to be used by Hungarian speakers. The major problem (for a Hungarian language learner) is which linking vowel to select. The accusative of the vowel-final nouns is the easiest for the learners to apply. In other cases vowel harmony partially helps to select the appropriate pattern. However, only an extensive body of verbal experience of the learner facilitates the memorization of the accusative case of that closed set of ca. 100 nouns (3.) as well as the nouns with an alternating stem (5.). All in all, learners are advised to look up the appropriate accusative form in the dictionary.

### **Language acquisition process**

How can a child, a less experienced user of Hungarian, tackle this variety of case endings? Furthermore, how can they identify the function of the accusative, having first faced such diverse accusative patterns?

In the data provided by Hungarian language acquisition accounts the early emergence of diminutives is confirmed.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is plausible to assume it may have an assisting role in child's speech. Wéber also reported its appearance in Hungarian maternal speech,<sup>16</sup> but Hungarian nursery rhymes recited by mothers and caretakers also prove the frequency of this form in child-directed speech, and consequently in baby talk.

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<sup>15</sup> S. Meggyes 1974, 54; Wéber 2011, 54.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

According to assumptions in research on a usage-based model of language acquisition, the associative mechanism of the learning process plays a key role.<sup>17</sup> Babies recognize frequent salient schemas extracted from the child-directed speech. Obviously, the higher frequency related to a certain pattern the baby can track, the more salient the form can become for her due to its repeated perception and use. At this point the frequent use of diminutives by mothers and other caretakers can come into play. If Hungarian noun diminutives are overrepresented, and consequently kids at an early stage of the language acquisition process detect them in the speech directed to them (which is reflected in and confirmed by the fact that children use diminutives productively), diminutives might have a more underlying function.

All the three Hungarian diminutive endings are vowel-final. This is the most simple, so to speak default case in the use of the accusative marker. This simplified vowel-final acoustic pattern of diminutivized noun designations can be more easily recognized by the child and matched with their noun entity references. In this way the seemingly frequent diminutive can be conceived as help for the baby through its regularity in the segmentation of the incoming stream of continuous speech around her. Besides, noun-final diminutives offer a more audible, more identifiable and salient recurring pattern in Hungarian child-directed speech for the baby to identify noun designations from. These, due to the associative process, serve as cues for them to link the designation to noun entities because diminutivized endings have constant vowel-final, easy-to-hear sound properties: *-ka/-ke, -cska/-cske*.

Furthermore, the diminutive ending (*-ka, -cska, -i*) augments the base word in terms of its acoustic duration (it makes strings one syllable longer, and due to the vowel, more audible), which as a result becomes more traceable and more salient for the child. Diminutives (exhibiting vowel harmony) are also obvious demonstrations of the two types of vowel harmony patterns in Hungarian (for front and back vowel strings: e.g. *egérke, malacka*). The Hungarian accusative marker (*-t*) is voiceless and as such hardly audible, whereas the accusative morpheme with the diminutive ending is more sonorant

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<sup>17</sup> Tomasello 2003.



and audible. Consequently, we may claim diminutives become more easily accessible clues for the infant and thus earlier than more complex, syntactically relevant frequent suffixes. For instance, the verbal inflections (e.g. *-om*, *-od* endings, which entail far-reaching syntactic consequences) are apparently more complex and difficult for the baby to decipher and acquire in the beginning than the syntactically also relevant but less complex noun case endings backed up by the recurring diminutives.

The derivational ending of *-i* cannot strictly be interpreted within vowel harmony as it is considered a neutral vowel in terms of vowel harmony. As a matter of fact, it seems to be plausible to hypothesize that despite the fact that *-i* is a seemingly redundant alternative to other Hungarian diminutives, its function lies in its neutrality. We might well claim that a string with back vowels to which *-i* is added (e.g. *maci*) may serve as a template for mixed-vowel words consisting of back and neutral vowels, which mostly take back vowel endings. It does appear to be easier for the infant to “digest” Hungarian vowel harmony through the use of diminutives with no further complexities implied than it is in the case of other morphosyntactically non-neutral inflections. The applicability of *-i* to truncated proper nouns, particularly names of people, demonstrates that the ultimate meaning of the diminutivized human name has nothing to do with the notion of “smaller size”. This ending adds positive emotional connotations to the word, an atmosphere of kindness, intimacy and familiarity. Therefore, in the case of the *-i* diminutive ending in child-directed speech, the additional one-vowel-long syllable may aid to highlight people’s and other entities’ names (that happen to be in the joint attention scene of the mother–child dyad) in the stream of maternal speech for the immature language user (the baby, the infant).

Finally, the vowel-final diminutives transform the original ending of nouns, thus drastically simplifying the ending, and offer a uniform, easily accessible vowel-final stem for further morphological schemas for the infant speakers. In terms of the accusative ending, such a diminutivized vowel-final stem (*-a*, *-e*) remains nearly invariable to inflectional changes needed in the case of other non-vowel-final stems. (As a matter of fact the final *-a/-e* become slightly alternated to *-á/-é*, but this is again a fundamental regular pattern change in

noun case inflection worth acquiring). Diminutivization improves the transparency of the inflected forms in child-directed speech and aids morphology acquisition for the child, which seems to be a key issue in Hungarian language acquisition.

This facilitating function of Hungarian diminutives appears in the socially supportive context of the maternal (or caretaker's) speech, in the mother-child interaction. The mother develops a close emotional attachment to the child, and her register conveys aiding, *metalinguistic* functions for the child in the cognition of the world and its accompanying verbal speech flow. Truly speaking, on the one hand, the notion of smallness does create a more graspable world for the kid from the language learners' point of view, but on the other hand, more crucially, it offers far more transparent and helpfully transformable endings for the immature language user.

In Hungarian nursery rhymes, which on the surface depict a smaller-sized world and stress the prosodic patterns of Hungarian words among which we may find diminutivized words abundantly, one may evidently trace the socially, traditionally shared, symbolic nature of maternal speech and baby-talk, which thus convey beneficial metalinguistic functions for the child both in her cognition and her language acquisition. Maternal speech using diminutives can be thus conceived as a useful register of Hungarian instinctively used by Hungarian mothers and caretakers. When applying these beneficial and assisting patterns of diminutives, mothers facilitate the acquisition of the mother tongue for the child. This register is a linguistic heritage passed on by Hungarian mothers and caretakers without any deliberate didactic aim: they talk to their babies in this register because they were also talked to in this way in the hidden, overwritten (former) stages of their own language acquisition process. This register seems to be persistent across speakers regardless of their gender. The register survives language change because it has a substantial assisting function in Hungarian language acquisition.

## Conclusions

In view of the above, we may claim that the Hungarian diminutive form aids to highlight noun designations in the mother-child interaction and creates a segmentable and less variable ending of nouns prior to the language acquisition stage when a wide range of patterns of the rich Hungarian morphology appears. Its metalinguistic function reaches far beyond its emotional or pragmatic effects signifying a smaller, friendlier and a more graspable world for the child. It is a clear and apparent proof of cultural heritage hidden in human speech as a socially shared way of cognition and existence.

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