

Diminutive Contronyms in Ukrainian

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ANNOTATION

In the paper, the phenomenon of diminutive contronymy in the Ukrainian language is investigated. Being a type of polysemy, the contronymy is assumed as a universal semantic category with peculiarities in expressive means and in pragmatic functioning across languages. Contronymy is a defining attribute of diminutives in numerous languages.

The present paper highlights the main causes for the occurrence of opposite meanings in the semantic structure of Ukrainian diminutives and reveals the range of potential 'positive' / 'negative' connotative senses within a single diminutivized word.

Axiological ambiguity of the concept 'smallness' is considered to be the main cause for the occurrence of diminutive contronymy. The phenomenon of contradictory meanings within the category of diminutiveness is explained first of all by the fact that the notion 'smallness' potentially may be regarded with endearment, affection, tenderness, etc., on the one hand, and with disrespect, derogation, depreciation, etc., on the other hand. Other factors of the occurrence of opposite meanings in the semantics of Ukrainian diminutives are determined as well: a) contextual pejorization or meliorization of the meaning of the diminutive, b) euphemization, c) social inconsistency in the assessment of an object marked with a certain diminutive, d) pragmatic goals of the addresser.

The text-based analysis has testified that in the Ukrainian language, diminutives with usually positive connotations occasionally may undergo semantic changes depending on the context. Often enough, contextual contronymy of the noun is caused by the adjective.

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Diminutives denoting unfavourable, difficult, frightful objects and phenomena are considered as cononyms which are culture-specific for the Ukrainian language. In the paper, euphemization is regarded to be the main factor for the emergence of this type of cononyms.

Both types of Ukrainian diminutive cononyms (with denotative semantic polarity 'small' / 'large' and with connotative semantic polarity 'positive' / 'negative') are analyzed in the work, drawing on Ukrainian literary texts. The pragmatics of diminutive cononymy in the Ukrainian language is outlined as well. The pragmatic use of diminutive cononyms is connected with the expression of positive or negative attitudes, mitigating, irony, sarcasm, etc.

The study has manifested that the phenomenon of cononymy in the Ukrainian language is observed not only in the semantics of diminutivized nouns but also in diminutivized adjectives and, consequently, in diminutivized adverbs as well. The cononymy of the diminutivized adjectives and adverbs relates to formal means (simple or cumulated suffixes and reduplication) and is identified as a potential to express both decreasing and increasing in the gradation of quality.

KEYWORDS

cononymy, diminutives, diminutiveness, denotation, connotation, pragmatics, positive / negative evaluation, emotional attitude

Cononymy, i.e. the phenomenon of two opposite senses concealed under one lexical unit (DZIEDZIUL 2018) belongs to universal semantic categories but studied not enough in respect of its causes, semantic nature and particularities of representation, and pragmatic functioning in languages. The phenomenon of cononymy in peculiar aspects on the data of different languages has been studied by S. Dubois, B. I. Kamaran, S. Kiyko, F. Popescu, P. Dzedziul, G. W. Sasoon, J. Taylor, V. Ozyumenko, N. Murodova, J. Džumabaeva, A. Šmelev, G. Mansurova, V. Ivaščenko, T. Fedorenko, and others. In the present work, we will focus on the phenomenon of cononymy of diminutives in the Ukrainian language. The object of the research is Ukrainian diminutives, the semantic structure of which contains antonymous meanings. The main tasks of the research are: a) to determine the causes for the occurrence of opposite meanings in the semantic structure of diminutives in Ukrainian, b) to investigate the contextual performance of diminutive cononymy, c) to analyze the functional peculiarities of diminutive cononyms in Ukrainian.

The category of diminutiveness being a language universal has a polysemantic nature since beside the meaning of denotational diminution, it expresses the wide spectrum of evaluative-emotional connotations. Numerous researchers have noticed such universal feature of diminutives in different languages as the ability to express both positive (e.g., tenderness, benevolence, kindness, etc.) and negative (e.g., sarcasm, contempt, arrogance, neglect, etc.) connotative meanings. This semantic antonymy can be explained by the fact that in the cognitive process of conceptualization, the notion 'smallness' is associated, on the one hand, with defencelessness, powerlessness, non-aggression, etc., evokes trust and friendly attitude (especially when the animate creatures are denoted) but, on the other hand, it is bonded with senses of low cost, insignificance, unimportance, which generates the number of negative assessments. "Small things can be regarded with affection or contempt, they can be dismissed as unimportant, or prized because of their essentiality" (TAYLOR 1995: 147).



In the Ukrainian language, negative evaluation usually is expressed by augmentatives and positive evaluation is indicated by diminutives (Slovotvir 1979: 101). This distribution or, at least, association of smallness with positive connotations seems to be common for many languages as it is evidenced by the following works:

...the expression of endearment seems to intersect with the designatum of smallness; even if this is not a semantic universal it is quite typical although theoretically it could have been the other way round (WEINREICH 1961: 122).

Human beings have a natural suspicion of large creatures; small animals and small children on the other hand can be cuddled and caressed without embarrassment or fear. The association of smallness with affection is thus grounded in the co-occurrence of elements within an experiential frame (TAYLOR 1995: 145–146).

But simultaneously,

...if smallness is experientially associated with an attitude of affection, smallness [especially when it comes to unanimated objects – N. R.] also goes with lack of worth. The experiential base is obvious: superior worth correlates with increased size, decreased size – with diminished worth. Hence, the diminutive can express not only affection but also an attitude of depreciation. Thus, in referring to a person's thesis as *tesina*, a speaker would probably be conveying by the diminutive his low opinion of the work in question. Sometimes one and the same expression can be ambiguous between the two interpretations. (The metonymic extension of the diminutive can thus give rise to such phenomenon as accommodation of incompatible, even contradictory meanings within a single category.) In Italian, *alberello* < *albero* 'tree' could mean both 'nice little tree' or 'stunted little tree'. The same ambiguity may be found in other languages. Zulu *indodakazana* < *indodakazi* 'daughter' can be used both in an affectionate and a derogatory sense: *lendodakazana yakho* 'this (nice) daughter of yours' or 'this (horrible) daughter of yours' (TAYLOR 1995: 146).

Similar opinions may be seen in other works. Charles F. Hockett has pointed out that Potawatomi is actually a language with two productive diminutives – one of endearment on occasion, the other pejorative (cit. from WEINREICH 1961: 156). Klaus Schneider claims the English diminutives (especially with the suffix *-ie*) may express appreciation or depreciation, depending on the respective context, i.e. particularly the base word and the situation (SCHNEIDER 2003: 87). Thus, as it is evident, the concept of smallness connects different, sometimes diametrically opposed connotative meanings, which often leads to the emergence of contronymy (i.e. self-antonymy), when only the context is able to interpret the evaluative and emotional content. This fact is common for many languages, especially for Slavic and Romance, where an expansion of diminutive forms is notable.

In the Ukrainian language, diminutives are classified by their meanings into the following groups:

1) Denotative diminutives indicating objective diminution in quantity or quality and young age. Although sometimes the semantics of the diminutives of this group contains some emotional tinge, the meaning of smallness is prevalent.



- 2) Diminutives expressing positive connotations (e.g., affection, tenderness, endearment, etc.).
- 3) Diminutives expressing negative connotations (e.g., sarcastic irony, disrespect, derogation, insult, etc.).
- 4) Diminutives which are used with pragmatic purposes (e.g. to express playfulness, for mitigating, for emphasis, to come up with familiarity, etc.) (RUDA 2017: 420–421).

So far as each linguocultural community has some special ideas about the properties, usefulness of certain objects, phenomena, and situations, we may assume the existence of corresponding norms in the linguistic expression of their positive or negative assessment. Thus, in the Ukrainian language, diminutives with positive and with negative meanings are distinguished. Usual connotations are determined from the meaning of the base. Therefore, diminutives with positive connotations are formed from nouns denoting a) people: e.g., *сусідонька* (SUM 9: 857) 'neighbour-DIM', *україночка* (SUM 10: 423) 'she-Ukrainian-DIM', *нянечка* (SUM 5: 459) 'nanny'; b) animals / birds / fishes / insects: *корівонька* (SUM 4: 292) 'cow-DIM', *бджілка* (SUM 1: 117) 'bee-DIM', *синичка* (SUM 9: 178) 'tit bird-DIM'; c) food / drinks: *горілочка* (SUM 2: 130) 'vodka-DIM', *сальце* (SUM 9: 22) 'lard-DIM', *сметанка* (SUM 9: 402) 'sour cream-DIM'; d) money: *долярлик* (colloq.) 'dollar-DIM', *єврики* (colloq.) 'euros-DIM', *грошенята* (SUM 2: 177) 'money-DIM'; e) nouns related to the worldview of the nation, spiritual life: *святечко* (SUM 9: 101) 'holiday-DIM', *доленька* (SUM 2: 358) 'destiny-DIM', *віронька* (SUM 1: 681) 'faith-DIM'; f) names of mythological or religious creatures: *янголяточко* (SUM 11: 646) 'angel-DIM', *душечка* (SUM 2: 447) 'soul-DIM', *русалонька* (SUM 8: 911) 'mermaid-DIM'; g) names of environmental objects: *сонечко* (SUM 9: 456) 'sun-DIM', *зірочка* (SUM 3: 578) 'star-DIM', *вітронько* (SUM 1: 689) 'wind-DIM'.

Usually, negative connotations are obtained in diminutives formed from nouns denoting people whose national, social, or personal characteristics have negative evaluation in Ukrainian society, due to certain historical or social experience: *панок* (SUM 6: 47) 'pan-DIM', *франтик* (SUM 10: 641) 'dandy-DIM', *брехунець* (SUM 1: 233) 'liar-DIM', and additionally, some abstract nouns denoting features which are condemned by people: *грішок* (SUM 2: 172) 'sin-DIM', *інтрижка* (SUM 4: 41) 'love affair-DIM'. In the Ukrainian language, the proportion of diminutives with negative meanings is much less than those with positive ones.

But despite distinguishing the denoted groups, there exists the class of diminutives which may be named "connotative contronyms" since they convey both positive and negative connotative meanings: *п'яничка* (SUM 8: 418) 'drunkard-DIM', *зятенько* (SUM 3: 744) 'son-in-low-DIM', *невісточка* (SUM 5: 267) 'daughter-in-low-DIM', *свекрівонька* (SUM 9: 67) 'mother-in-low-DIM', *грошики* (SUM 2: 177) 'money-DIM', *винце* (SUM 1: 444) 'wine-DIM', *дурачок* (SUM 2: 437) 'fool-DIM', *багачик* (SUM 1: 84) 'richie-DIM', *товстунець* (SUM 10: 168) 'fatty-DIM', *красунчик* (SUM 4: 329) 'pretty man-DIM', *кумаса* (SUM 4: 397) 'mother of godchild-DIM', *дамочка* (SUM 2: 210) 'dame-DIM', *провінціалочка* (SUM 8: 135) 'provincial-DIM', *простачок* (SUM 8: 294) 'simpleton-DIM'. Denoted objects get ambiguous evaluation in Ukrainian linguo-culture. For instance, drunkard evokes not only disdain but also compassion; relations between elder family members and young wives or husbands of sons or daughters often are complicated; money associates with good as well as with avarice and dishonesty; prettiness is good but it is not a characteristic feature for a prototypically reliable man, and so on.

As it can be seen in the first (1) of the next two examples, the noun *зятенько* 'son-in-low-DIM' reveals apparent negative connotations in contrast to the second one (2):



- (1) Ще й *зятенько* попався пияцюга (TARASIUK 1998).
 ‘But also, I got the *son-in-law*-DIM real drunkard’.
- (2) *Зятенько*, допоможи! – каже король (Kozak).
 ‘Dear *son-in-law*, help me!, said the king’.

In the next illustration (3), the diminutive *красавчик* ‘pretty man-DIM’ realizes latent negative connotations despite the positive meaning of the base:

- (3) *Красавчик* такий був!.. – у голосі мами проступає відсвіженням теж явно тодішній терпкий осуд (ЗАБУЖКО 2009).
 ‘Such a hottie! – Mom’s voice takes on a refreshed but clearly vintage tart disapproval’ (ЗАБУЖКО 2012).

When analyzing diminutive forms, one should take into account both the meanings of diminutives beyond the context, the functioning of diminutives within the context, and the pragmatic purposes of the addresser as well. Edward Stankiewicz asserts that each diminutive form has a “concomitant affectionate or pejorative meaning, which may become the prevailing one in a given linguistic context or situation” (cit. from BIAŁY 2017: 36). In Ukrainian colloquial language, diminutives with usually positive connotations occasionally may undergo semantic changes in context. In such cases, evaluative-emotional contronymy takes place, i.e. a typological variety of self-antonymy, when the word meaning, influenced by emotionally marked context, is expanded by adding meliorative or pejorative connotations (PONOMARENKO–LIACHOVA 2014: 29).

The next example (4) shows a connotative shift in the usually positive meaning of the diminutive *щастячко* ‘happiness-DIM’, which in this context has evident ironic connotation:

- (4) Близькість, що формується під тиском іззовні, як під пресом, який вплавлює двох у себе навзаєм – бо, опріч як одне в одного, більше їм подітися нема куди. Нічого собі *щастячко* (ЗАБУЖКО 2009).

‘It’s borne of a forced intimacy, when you’re being squashed into each other by outside forces, melded into a single mind because you’ve got nowhere else to go. *That’s some kind of marital bliss*, right there (ЗАБУЖКО 2012).

Quite often, the adjective generates a contextual contronymy in the noun it modifies. For instance, *наша держава* ‘our country’ has usually positive connotations in Ukrainian but in the sentence (5), it is self-evident that the word combination *бандючна* + *держава*-DIM does express bitter sarcasm:

- (5) Просто це, звичайно ж, не буде, в нашій *бандючній державоньці* нічого не робиться просто... (ЗАБУЖКО 2009).
 ‘Nothing’s easy in this *ghetto country* of ours’ (ЗАБУЖКО 2012).

The peculiarity of the Ukrainian language is its possibility to form diminutives from abstract nouns denoting objects and phenomena which are unfavourable, difficult, frightful, etc. for people. Such Ukrainian diminutives belong to the non-equivalent lexis (in Russian, such forms



do exist but are less frequent): *вoрiженьки* (SUM 1: 738) ‘enemies-DIM’, *недоленька* (SUM 5: 293) ‘misfortune-DIM’, *горенько* (SUM 2: 129) ‘grief-DIM’, *безголов’ячко* (SUM 1: 123) ‘distress-DIM’, *наругонька* (SUM 5: 179) ‘outrage-DIM’, *бiдонька* (SUM 1: 178) ‘calamity-DIM’, *журбонька* (SUM 2: 548) ‘sorrow-DIM’, *завадонька* (SUM 3: 35) ‘obstacle-DIM’, *лишенько* (SUM 4: 505) ‘evil-DIM’, *негодонька* (SUM 5: 278) ‘bad times-DIM’, *незгодонька* (SUM 5: 315) ‘disagreement-DIM’, *смертонька* (SUM 9: 400) ‘death-DIM’, *смуточок* (SUM 9: 421) ‘sadness-DIM’, *тугонька* (SUM 10: 311) ‘anguish-DIM’, *чужинька* (SUM 11: 379) ‘foreign land-DIM’. The forms like these are considered as contronyms since diminutive suffixes giving bright lyricism and connotations of affection and endearment to derivated words are contraposed to the negative meaning of the base.

For example, let us observe the following sentences (6)–(8):

- (6) Найду жінку, почастую, / З вороженьків покепкую (Kobzar 2014: 42).
‘I shall find my wife, and stand a round, / And laugh, our *enemies* to confound!’ (Kobzar 2014: 46).
- (7) О горенько ж моє тяжкеє, о бо-женьку мій! Яка я нещаслива, що не вмiю й словечка прочитати!.. (КРОПУНУТСЬКІ 1882).
‘Oh, my *woe*-DIM is so heavy, oh, my goddess! How unhappy I am that I can’t even read a word!’
- (8) Ох, недобре мені, Трохиме, – шепоче Мотря, – смертонька моя... (ВУННУЄНКО 1927).
‘Oh, I’m feeling so bad, Trochym, – whispered Motrya, – *my death*-DIM...

Still, there exists a point of view claiming such lexis testifies to some passivity of Ukrainian ethnic worldview (СНОЛУБОВСКА 2004: 69). However, we tend to agree with another opinion (FEDORENKO 2010: 66–67) considering the euphemization to be the main factor for the occurrence of this type of diminutive contronyms: it is caused by the speaker’s will to subjectively soften impressions of bad. Thus, such forms are some sort of names for taboo phenomena (BUBLEINYK 1996: 68), which may date back to ancient times when people tried to “please” the dark forces of nature. But it should be noticed that such forms belong to folklore and literary language predominantly, and in modern colloquial Ukrainian, they are missing and may appear chiefly as provincialisms.

Thus, Ukrainian diminutive contronyms also called “enantioconotonyms” (ІВАШЧЕНКО–FEDORENKO 2009: 54) have been analyzed since in one word, two polar conotems are combined: ‘positive’ and ‘negative’. And next, in sentences (9)–(10), diminutives with the denotative semantic polarity ‘small’ / ‘large’ are represented:

- (9) *Всенький вік* робив, а самого без хреста закопали... В одну обшу яму вкинули, та й вже... (ЗАБУЖКО 2009).
‘*All his life* he’d made crosses and they shovelled him in without one. Threw him into one big dump, and that’s that...’ (ЗАБУЖКО 2012).

Despite being a diminutive, *всенький* ‘total-DIM’ conveys intensification, it denotes someone’s life completely, totally. The usage of the diminutive has a pragmatic goal to evoke the addressee’s empathy.



- (10) ...нічогенькі батончики, десь, мабуть, четвертого розміру (ЗАВУЖКО 2009).
 ‘...some rack she’s got there, C-cup at least’ (ЗАВУЖКО 2012).

Нічогенькі батончики represents double conronymy since *нічогенькі* ‘nothing-DIM’ in the following context means ‘notable’ and *батончики* ‘boobs-DIM’ significates not the small breast size but a big one.

Furthermore, denotative conronymy occurs in cases when approximative diminutives indicating time are used for pragmatic purposes:

...it is as if the exact value is unimportant, and the speaker excuses himself for not being precise. Thus, the person who says that he’ll return in *un’oretta*, would not usually mean that he’ll be back in less than an hour. On the contrary! (TAYLOR 1995: 146).

For instance:

- (11) ...одну хвилиночку, дайте згадати (ЗАВУЖКО 2009).
 ‘...just a minute, if she recalls correctly’ (ЗАВУЖКО 2012).
- (12) Я йду, Адюська, секундочку, вже йду!.. Туш змиваю, щось мені в око впало... (ЗАВУЖКО 2015).
 ‘I’m coming, Aidy, just a second... I’m trying to wash my mascara off, got a clump in my eye’ (ЗАВУЖКО 2012).

The phenomenon of diminutive conronymy in the Ukrainian language is observed not only in the semantics of nouns but, moreover, in adjectives (and consequently, in adverbs), where two functionally diverse types of meanings are distinguished: 1) the gradation of the quality, 2) the emotional attitude of the speaker.

Considering conronymy in qualitative adjectives, it should be noticed that the gradation of the quality may occur both in the direction of decreasing and in the direction of increasing. If a simple suffix is used, the diminutivized adjective (or adverb) expresses decreased quality: *гарненький* (SUM 2: 33) ‘pretty enough but not much’, *темненький* (SUM 10: 67) ‘darkish’, *швиденький* (SUM 11: 429) ‘fast enough’, *тихенько* (SUM 10: 129) ‘quietly enough’. The meaning of such adjectives is nearly equivalent to the meaning of English adjectives with suffix *-ish*.

For instance:

- (13) Це звучить як турбота, і так ним і сприймається, за що вона відчуває легенький укол сумління (ЗАВУЖКО 2009).
 ‘The question sounds like she’s worried, and that’s how he interprets it, which makes her feel a little guilty’ (ЗАВУЖКО 2012).

But if reduplication takes place, the form vice versa signifies the quality increasing: *гарненький-гарненький* ‘very beautiful’, *темненький-темненький* ‘very dark’, *швиденький-швиденький* ‘very fast’, *тихенько-тихенько* ‘very quietly’.



For instance:

- (14) ...у темні їхніх грудей народжувався гойдливиий рух, спочатку такий *легенький-легенький*, що ніхто його й не помітив, але далі він набрав сили (VYNNYČUK 2003).
 ‘...in the darkness of their chests, the swaying movement was born, at first so *very-very light* as no one noticed it but then it gained strength’.

Furthermore, if the adjective (or the adverb) gets a cumulated suffix, the meaning changes conversely, i.e. the diminutivized adjective (or the adverb) means that quality is very intensified: *гарнюсінький* (SUM 2: 35) ‘very-very beautiful’, *темнісінький* (SUM 10: 69) ‘very-very dark’, *швидесенький* (SUM 11: 429) ‘very-very fast’, *тихесенько* (SUM 10: 129) ‘very-very quietly’.

For instance:

- (15) ...мною оволодівав незвичайний стан, – мені здавалось, що я став *легесенький*, немов хмаринка, і ось-ось зрину у височінь (DAŠKIEV 1967).
 ‘a weird condition was starting to possess me: it seemed to me that I had become *very-very light* as a cloud, and was about to soar to heights’.
- (16) *Маленький* шанс. *Мане-есенький* такий, *куцесенький* шансик, як заячий хвостик (ZABUŽKO 2009).
 ‘There was still *a small chance*. *A teensy-weensy little one*, a rabbit’s tail of a chance’ (ZABUŽKO 2012).

As for diminutivized adjectives which express emotional attitude, they regularly undergo contextual contronymy since the appropriate context is able to change the meaning of the adjective with the usually positive or negative semantics of the base to the opposite.

For instance, in the following illustration (17), the adjective *біднесенький* ‘poor-DIM’, which customarily expresses the empathy, is used for a pragmatic purpose to demonstrate rude sarcasm:

- (17) ...щодня, *біднесенький*, їсть лайно (ZABUŽKO 2009).
 ‘...ate shit, bless his soul, every day’ (ZABUŽKO 2012).

In the next dialogue (18), the diminutive *дуренький* ‘fool-DIM’, despite the negative meaning of the base (‘fool’), does express an attitude of love and endearment:

- (18) – Хочу бути твоїм мужчиною, і все. Чоловіком, а не посередником. Різницю розумієш, чи теж пояснювати?
 – *Дуренький* мій... Таж ти ним і є (ZABUŽKO 2009).
 ‘I want to be your man. Your husband, not a go-between. Do you see the difference, or do I have to explain that, too?’
 ‘*You goof*... that’s who you are’ (ZABUŽKO 2012).

Summarizing the results of this study, we can assert that:

1) The main causes for diminutive contronymy in the Ukrainian language are: a) the axiological ambivalence of the concept of smallness, b) the contextual pejorization or meliorization of



the meaning of the diminutive, c) euphemization, d) social inconsistency in the assessment of an object marked with a certain diminutive, e) the pragmatic goals of the addresser.

2) Ukrainian diminutive cononyms predominantly provide a lexical gap in cross-cultural communication processes. Thus, this phenomenon demands all-around study and precise re-search attention.

3) In the Ukrainian language, the emergence of cononymy is possible not only in the meaning of diminutivized nouns but furthermore, in the meaning of diminutivized adjectives and diminutivized adverbs. Semantic shifts concern the increasing or decreasing of the quality and the positive or negative attitude of the speaker.

4) In the cases of contextual cononymy, positive semantics changes to negative as a rule, and much less regularly vice versa.

5) Diminutive cononymy is a productive way for the development of the lexical and semantic system of the Ukrainian language.

The prospects for further research are seen in the study of the phenomenon of diminutive cononymy on the data of a larger number of languages.

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