The Use of the Diminutive in English and Arabic

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Abstract

The present study concentrates on the use of diminutive in English and Arabic. It states that every language has its devices of forming diminutives and defining them. It also shows that the use of the diminutives may be attributed to psychological reasons. The study aims at pointing areas of similarity and difference between English and Arabic. It also refers to the heavy reliance of English on suffixes when forming diminutives; that is, it tackles the suffixes that have diminutive force. It discusses the use of the diminutives in various realms, especially in literary and scientific texts. Also, the diminutives may be used as a satiric device. The study shows the difference between "little" and "small" and other adjectives used to denote diminutives. It also discusses problems such as the repetition of diminutive elements for emphatic purposes and types of

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smallness such as the implied smallness and the smallness which is left unexpressed. In fact, it discusses other diminutive problems.

The study also tackles the use of diminutive in Arabic. It deals with the heavy reliance of Arabic on morphological changes when forming diminutives, the purposes of using diminutives, the forming of diminutives from nouns, certain relative pronouns, certain demonstratives, some triliteral prepositions, the curtailed diminutives, and irregular diminutives. Also, it refers to the problem of forming diminutives from plurals of paucity and mixed compounds. It states that diminutives cannot be formed from most verbs, plurals of abundance, predicative and interrogative particles, and so on. It also states that smallness in Arabic may be implied. Finally, it tackles the use of diminutives in modern literary Arabic. The use tackled may be attributed to the influence of English on modern Arabic writers.

Finally, this study comes up with the conclusions which point out the common and divergent aspects as far as the use of the diminutive is concerned in the two languages on the semantic and morphological levels.

1. Introduction

In this study a special area of grammar which is often discussed under the term the diminutive is tackled. Every language has its own devices of forming diminutives and defining them. Some languages depend heavily on internal changes in words to show morphological relationships and meanings ; they can group several units of meaning within a single word. Other languages make a great deal of use of derivational affixes to make new words from existing base. However, people in all walks of life form diminutives to show smallness of a small amount of dignity, power, importance, status, insignificance, and the like. On the other hand, diminutives are frequently used lovingly to show approval. Thus, having recourse to diminutives may be attributed to psychological reasons. In fact, linguistics and psychology have clearly common interests. It is possible that linguistic phenomena can be described in terms of what may be called their psychological motivation (cf. Carroll, 1964:29).

2. The Use of Diminutive in English

The diminutive, a word describing small specimen of the thing denoted by corresponding primitive, is a linguistic feature commonly used in English (cf. Zandvoort, 1962: 3 02). The users of English have recourse to diminutives to signify smallness,

familiarity, contempt, derision, insignificance, or endearment ; that is, the diminutives are affective, i.e., they express the feeling with which the person or the thing described is taken into consideration. However, diminutives are used in various fields. In particular, they are widely used in scientific and literary contexts, e.g.

1) "One molecule can influence another at an appreciable distance, and the trajectory of a molecule is deviated gradually as it approaches other molecules" (Sears, 1953: 266). Here the repetition of the diminutive "molecule" is purposeful; scientific language requires repetition because it is bound constraints which demand a high level of clarity and intelligibility.

2) "His belief in the life to come would pale to a hope, vanish, reappear, all in a single sentence or a dozen heart-beats, so that the corpuscles of his blood rather than he seemed to decide which opinion he should hold" (Forster, 1924:55).

However, intensive use of diminutives in prose-writing may be looked upon as a sarcastic device. For example, in Gulliver's Travels one often comes across little fields, houses, birds, and trees, the diminutive people, the tiny cows and sheep of the one realm. Through the use of diminutives Swift ridicules everything from the king to all mankind to poke fun at human vanities.

It is important to note that English relies heavily on the use of suffixes when forming diminutives. In most cases the suffixes are added to nouns. In fact, English is poor in its diminutive suffixes. However, the suffix "-ling" has diminutive force, especially in some names of young animals as in "catling" and "sapling". This suffix may be added to words denoting persons as in "Lordling". Here the suffix is productively used, especially when it expresses contempt. The suffix may suggest insignificance, especially when it is added to words indicating persons of royal or noble rank as in "princeling". Also, it expresses disapproval as in "worldling". The suffix can be added to certain adjectives as in "weakling", to certain prepositions or adverbs as in "underling", or it may be added to verbs as in "nursling".

The suffix "-let" can be added to names of things as in "booklet", and to names of animals as in "piglet". It may be added to names of persons, and hence it has a derogatory sense as in "Kinglet".

The suffix "-ette" forms pure diminutive indicating things as in "kitchenette". The suffix may be spelt differently (-et) as in "owlet" (Zandvoort, 1962: 303).

The diminutive suffix "-kin" can be added to names of animals or persons as in "Lambkin" and "princekin".

The diminutive suffix "-y" (sometimes also spelled -ie) is common. It implies smallness, affection, fondness, or familiarity. It can be used to form pet names of persons or animals as in "Jeanie", "Billy", "doggy", "piggy", and "birdie". It is occasionally added to adjectives as in "darkey" (Gaeny, 1971; 109-110).

The suffixes "-ock" (hillock, bullock, etc.), "-cule" (molecule), "-ule" (globule), "-le" (sparkle), "cle" (corpuscle), and "-en" (chicken) have diminutive force (new Webster's Dictionary: 1975, xxix-xxxi).

On the other hand, English uses certain adjectives to express smallness in addition to the use of suffixes. Mere smallness which is not inducing any feeling is usually indicated by using the adjective "small" as in "a small cup of tea". Also, smallness may be indicated by using the adjective "little" as in "a little child". It is to be noted that "small" refers only to size, whereas "little" often suggests an attitude to smallness, e.g.

3) "Poor little boy! He's lost" (cf. Edwards, 1985: 95).

Also, "little" may be used to express disapproval, e. g.

4) "He is a nasty little man" (cf. Edwards, 1985: 95).

The two adjectives "small" and "little" are widely used in prose-writing, e.g.

5) "We came into the little village and passed a small inn" (Dickens, 1971: 300).

The two adjectives may be repeated. Here repetition, when properly used, can be effective in gaining emphasis, e.g.

6) "He sent you dash-small, small dash" (Greene, 1948: 236).

7) "I curtsied to a little blue-eyed fair man of youthful appearance, with flaxen hair parted in the middle, and curling at the ends all round his head. He had a little fiddle, which we used to call at school a kit, under his left arm, and its little bow in the same hand. His little dancing-shoes were particularly diminutive, and he had a little innocent, feminine manner" (Dickens, 1971: 242).

Smallness can be expressed by using the adjectives "diminutive", "tiny", and "minute", e.g.

8) "She was a pretty, very diminutive, plump woman" (Dickens, 1971: 85).

9) "She seemed tall, but the pail was a small one, and the hedge diminutive (Hardy, 1971: 67).

10) "The father with a little boy in his arms, appeared at the door, and the crowded round him, clapping their tiny hands" (Dickens, 1972: 153).

11) He wrote a minute report (cf. New Webster's Dictionary, 1975: 955).

Smallness may be implied in English, e.g.

12) I found him in a cottage (a small simple house).

13) That is a brook (a small stream). Also, smallness may be left unexpressed, e.g.

14) They make a fire (cf. Zandvoort, 1962: 3 03)

3. The Use of the Diminutive in Arabic

The Arab grammarians mention complicated rules for forming

The   diminutive may be formed from a triliteral noun. In such

Diminutives can be formed from proper names; as "حَسَن"

On the other hand, Arabic permits another way of forming the

Diminutives may be formed not only from nouns but also form the demonstrative pronouns "ذا (ذيَّا)"، "تا (تيَّا)" and "أولى" or

1.   How good he is! "!ما أُحيسِنه" from "!ما أحْسَنه"

2.   How handsome he is! (Wright, "!ما أُمَيْلَـحه" from "ما أمْلَـحه"

Diminutives can be formed from plurals of paucity; as

It is important to note that Arabic has irregular diminutives; as

Smallness may be implied in Arabic as in "جدول streamlet"

Smallness, especially in modern Arabic writings may be denoted by the use of the adjective "صغير small". The extensive use of the adjective "صغير small" instead of having recourse to morphological changes may be attributed to the influence of English grammar, syntax, idiom, and style upon the modern Arabic writers, e.g.

3.   "ثم دس الشاب يده في جيبه وابرز لها قارورة صغيرة"

(Mahfūz, W.D: III, 1522).

4.   "دكان صغير يجلس في صدره شيخ عجوز وراء مكتب صغير"

(Mahfūz, W.D: IV, 42).

5.   "هذه الطفلة الصغيرة فقدت شيئاً صغيراً"

(Abdullah, W. D: 89).

6.   "تضع في صندوقها الحاجات الصغيرة"

(Abdullah, W.D: 17)

7.   "يداه الصغيرتان ترتجفان من الفرح ثم هرع الى رفاقِه الصغار لا يلوي

(Mahfūz, W.D: I, 212)

Although the diminutive is rarely used in Arabic, it has become
common in the modern writings, especially in modern literary
Arabic, e.g.

8.   "مسح عُمَر شعره الغزير الاسود الذي لا ترى شُعَيرات سوالفه البيضاء الا بحد البصر"

(Mahfūz, W.D: VII, 278)

9.   "وتمـشى بـين طرقاتهـا الملتويـة يـسرح بـصره بـين شـُجَيرَات الـورد واحصى

(Mahfūz, W.D: I, 183)

10.   "وقُبَيْلَ الغروب بدت عند منعطف الطريق طلائع موكب مكون من عربات ثلاث"

(Mahfūz, W.D: I, 129)

11.   "وكانت تجلس على نفس الكنبة على بعد ذراع منه وفيما بين أُوْيقَات"

(Mahfūz, W.D: I, 469)

4. Conclusions

The study shows that English and Arabic have their own devices of forming diminutives. Both languages demonstrate a semantic equivalence in their use of the diminutive ; that is, diminutives are used in both languages to achieve different purposes or to produce desired effects.

At the morphological level, there is no resemblance between English and Arabic. English depends heavily on adding suffixes when forming diminutive, whereas Arabic relies on internal changes. In English diminutive suffixes are added to nouns in most cases, while in Arabic diminutives are formed from nouns, certain relative pronouns and demonstratives, from certain triliteral prepositions, and from a few verbs of wonder or surprise. Unlike English, diminutives in Arabic can be formed from collective nouns and from plurals of paucity. It is important to note that English is poor in its diminutive suffixes, while Arabic is thoroughly rich in its morphological changes. The poorness of English concerning diminutive suffixes is compensated by using adjectives denoting smallness such as "little", "small", "tiny", "minute", and the like.

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ملخص

استخدام صيغة التصغير في اللغتين الانكليزية والعربية

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