

UNIVERSAL DIMINUTIVE SYNTAX?

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Traditionally, the term “diminutive” has been used to refer to words that denote smallness and possibly also express the speaker’s attitude (Schneider 2003, p. 4). Jurafsky 1996 proposed a universal structure for the semantics of the diminutive that includes the meanings of affection, sympathy, intimacy, contempt, partitive, etc. (p. 542). Although a lot of literature has been devoted to the semantics of diminutives (Dressler & Barbaresi 1994, Fentslova 1985, Jurafsky 1996, Volek 1988, among others), there exists no formal (syntactic) definition of what a diminutive is. If there is a universal semantic category – diminutive, then the next question arises: is there a universal syntactic structure for diminutives as well? If diminutives are universal, we would expect them to be of the same syntactic type (head of modifier) across languages. We would also expect them to attach to the same syntactic category.

Wiltschko 2006 showed that not all diminutives are of the same syntactic type across languages. For example, German diminutives behave like classifiers and are associated with a functional head. Diminutives in Halkomelem Salish are modifiers and are not associated with a separate head.

This paper takes one step further and shows that diminutives can be of different syntactic types even within a single language.

Russian extensively uses so called expressive derivatives (Stankiewicz 1968, p. 97) that are formed with help of various expressive suffixes (*-ag, -an’, -ar, -aš, -c, -ec, -ic, -in, -išč’, -ok, -on, -k, -ug, -ul’, -un’, -ur, -us’, -uš, -ux, etc.*). The expressive suffixes convey the meanings of affection, contempt and familiarity, expressing the speaker’s emotive attitude. For example, *mam-ús’-a* “mother (affect)” expresses an affectionate attitude towards somebody’s mother (compare with the neutral form *mám-a* “mother”). The example *vor’-úg-a* “thief (derog)” illustrates a derogatory attitude towards a thief (compare with the neutral form *vór* “thief”).

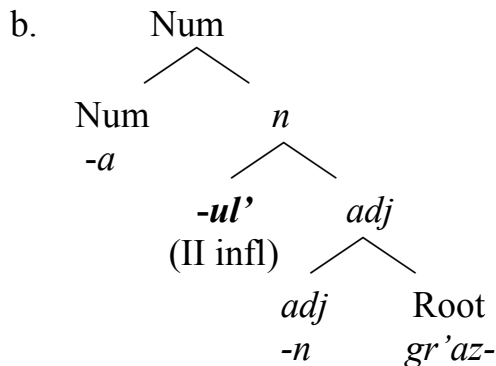
In this paper, I will argue that in Russian, expressive suffixes are of different syntactic types, some of them heads and others are modifiers. I will show that even suffixes with the same semantic meaning are of different syntactic types in Russian.

The expressive suffixes that convey the meaning of affection are *-an’, -aš, -ul’, -un’, -ur, -us’, -c, -ec, -ic, -ok, -on* and *-k*. These suffixes are productive and are used in colloquial language. The suffixes *-an’, -aš, -ul’, -un’, -ur, -us’* and *-uš* are syntactic heads, while the suffixes *-c, -ec, -ic, -ok, -on* and *-k* are modifiers. The syntactic heads change the inflectional class of a noun they attach to. For example, in the following data: *brát* “brother (I infl class)” – *brat-úš-a* “brother (affect) (II infl class)”, the inflectional class changes when the affectionate suffixes *-uš* is added. The syntactic heads can also change the syntactic category of the base. For example, in *gr’áz-n-ij* “dirty (adj)” – *gr’az-n-úl’-a* “dirty person (affect) (noun)”, the syntactic category changes from an adjective to a noun (structure 1 on the next page). On the other hand, the affectionate suffixes that are syntactic modifiers never change the inflectional class of the base-noun: *brát* “brother (I infl class)” – *brát’-ec* “brother (affect) (I infl class). These suffixes never change the syntactic category of the base (structure 2 on the next page).

Thus, this paper gives additional evidence to Wiltschko’s 2006 proposal that there is no universal diminutive syntax. On the example of Russian, I argue that even in a single language diminutives can belong to different syntactic types (head and modifier).

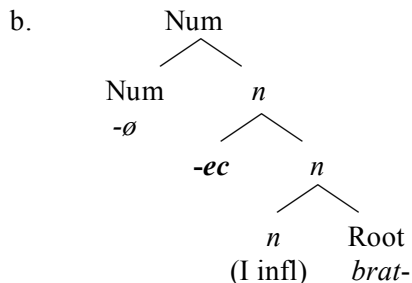
(1) a. *gr'áz-n-ij* “dirty”
dirty-adj-masc.sg

b. *gr'áz-n-úl'-a* “dirty person (affect)”
dirty-adj-affect-common gender (II infl class)



(2) a. *brát* “brother”
brother.noun.masc.sg(I infl class)

b. *brát'-ec* “brother (affect)”
brother-affect.masc.sg(I infl class)



References

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