

The use of diminutive constructions in French, English, Dutch and German

A corpus-based study of the crosslinguistic differences¹

This study falls within the framework of a PhD project on the acquisition of Germanic (English, Dutch and German) diminutive constructions (DCs) by Belgian French-speaking additional language (AL) learners. DCs are defined here to include the entire range of diminishing and downtoning linguistic structures that reduce the force of linguistic items (e.g. *sort of pretty* [EN], *feestje* [NL] ‘little party’, *kleiner Tisch* [DE] ‘small table’). The aim of the PhD project is to investigate the effects of two variables on the acquisition process of diminutive constructions: (1) the crosslinguistic differences between the L1 and the AL; (2) the type, amount and quality of exposure needed to target-like acquisition. The present study concentrates on the first variable, i.e. the crosslinguistic differences between the L1 and the AL regarding the formation and the semantic-pragmatic functions of DCs.

To this end, a contrastive corpus study is performed on native data of the four languages under study, i.e. French, English, Dutch and German. This study partly draws on data from the ‘Multilingual Traditional, Immersion and Native Corpus’ (MULTINCo) database, which contains written productions from fifth grade secondary school students in Belgium and the Netherlands, and university students in the U.S. [2]. Since MULTINCo only covers French, English and Dutch native data, new comparable German native data have also been collected for the purpose of this project.

All occurrences of the DCs are extracted semi-automatically from the native datasets. Subsequently, manual analysis is conducted to select the relevant DCs. Finally, the results are crosschecked with and classified on the basis of an up-to-date inventory of the DCs, based on the relevant literature [cf. 2-5].

We expect important variations regarding the (morpho-syntactic) form and the (semantic-pragmatic) function of the DCs between the four languages under study. With respect to the form, we assume that, since French is considered to be typologically closer to English than to German and Dutch, due to a shared analytical language structure [6], French and English will show fewer cross-linguistic differences regarding the formation of the DCs (e.g. *un petit coeur* [FR] / *a little heart* [EN]) than French and German or French and Dutch. Indeed, German and Dutch are more synthetic languages, so we expect to find, in contrast, predominantly morphologically formed DCs in these Germanic languages (e.g. *een hartje* [NL] / *ein Herzchen* [DE]) [6]. Moreover, since DCs may yield a multitude of semantic-pragmatic functions (such as mitigation in *een foutje* [NL] ‘a mistake-DIM; a minor mistake’) [7], we also expect to find crosslinguistic differences in the functions expressed by the DCs in the four languages under study. Ultimately, the results of the cross-linguistic native corpus study will allow us to formulate research hypotheses about the consequences for the acquisition of Germanic DCs by French-speaking learners.

References

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¹ Poster presentation

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