

REDUNDANCY AND RIVALRY IN LANGUAGE. A CASE STUDY OF RUSSIAN DIMINUTIVES

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Abstract: In the present study of Russian diminutive constructions, I follow Goldberg's idea about sematic or pragmatic differences that always accompany syntactic differences (Goldberg 1995, p. 67). My manually checked database comprises almost 1000 examples culled from the Russian National corpus (www.ruscorpora.ru) and includes three types of diminutive constructions: 1) morphological diminutives of the type *dom-ik* 'house_{DIM}', 2) analytical diminutives such as *malen'kij dom* 'small house' and *milyj dom* 'nice house' and 3) a mixed type where morphological diminutives occur with adjectives, such as *malen'kij dom-ik* 'small house_{DIM}'. My analysis reveals differences between morphological and analytical diminutives, which are not freely distributed across the examples. While morphological diminutives rarely refer to size only, adjectives are often used for further specification and in order to avoid ambiguity. The variation in Russian diminutives sheds light on an important theoretical question of redundancy and its role in language. The results of the present study indicate that redundancy is motivated, has a function and helps language users avoid ambiguity.

Keywords: synonymy, diminutives, redundancy, Russian.

Highlights:

- The study deals with three types of diminutive constructions in Russian, namely morphological, analytical and mixed types of diminutives.
- The study demonstrates that seemingly redundant elements in diminutive constructions are in fact playing an important role in reducing ambiguity.
- The study shows that, contrary to traditional understanding, diminutives are actually rarely referring to the size of an object.

1. INTRODUCTION

While diminutives¹ can “express a bewildering variety of meanings” (Jurafsky 1996, p. 534), it is clearly the reference to size that is prototypical for diminutives,

¹ Slavic languages in general and Russian in particular are famous for having a notoriously varied system of diminutives. Diminutives represent an exciting object of linguistic scrutiny, they can be expressed by a number of suffixes and suffixal combinations, can have positive and negative connotations and can introduce various pragmatic effects (e.g. *diminutivum modestum*, see Staverman 1953). The present study focuses only on one aspect of the use of diminutives. The reader is otherwise referred to the existing ample literature on diminutives (recent works on Russian diminutives include Fufaeva (2020), Voejkova (2020) and references therein).

and most speakers of Russian will agree that the diminutive *zaborčik*², where the diminutive suffix *-čik* is added to a non-diminutive noun *zabor* ‘fence’ in (1) refers to a small fence:

- (1) *On podnjaj vorotnik kurtki, kivnul Mire i, pereprygnuv čerez zaborčik, dvinul prjamo skvoz' golye kusty.* [Akunin 2003]³
 ‘He put up the collar of his jacket, nodded to Mira, and after having jumped over the fence_{DIM}, made his way through the leafless bushes.’

The fence in (1) is clearly small, since, as follows from the context, it is easy to jump over. Had it been a large fence, it would have been impossible for an ordinary human being to jump over it, and climbing up the fence would have been a more suitable lexical choice.

Ever since Wierzbicka’s 1984 analysis of diminutives, it has been common knowledge that diminutives are words that describe not only small, but also nice objects, so not only is the fence small, it is most likely also nice and looking at it triggers positive emotions⁴. The ‘small’ and ‘nice’ meanings are closely related: our affectionate attitude towards children who are small and cute at the same time motivates the CUTE IS SMALL metaphor. In addition to the metaphor, it is also possible to identify metonymy involved in diminutives, since objects and our attitudes towards these objects are related metonymically. In a nutshell, in the domain of size, diminutives refer to objects smaller than some standard, while in the domain of emotions, diminutives refer to entities that are nicer, more cute than usual (Makarova 2014). While all this seems uncontroversial, the use of diminutives is not completely unproblematic. The problem is that there are several ways to express the same meaning. Instead of *zaborčik* in (1), one could have simply used an analytical construction with an adjective meaning ‘small’ and said *malen'kij zabor* ‘small fence’. Such constructions are attested in the corpus, see (2):

- (2) *Za malen'kimi zaborami vidnelis' kloki travy, doedaemye telënkom [...]*
 [Uspenskij 1877]
 ‘Behind the small fences one could see patches of grass eaten by the calf.’

Why is it then that in some cases speakers use diminutives, while in other prefer analytical constructions? Is the expressed meaning identical? The situation is further

² Cyrillic script in the examples is romanized using the scientific standard.^[1]

³ All examples in the article come from the Russian National Corpus^[2], RNC. For literary texts, the author’s name and publication date are provided, for newspapers the name of the newspaper and the publication year. The database collected in the Spring 2017, is publicly available via TROLLing (Makarova 2025).

⁴ The reader is referred to a more recent analysis of diminutives in Taylor (2003, p. 172 ff.) where it is demonstrated how smallness is related to other meanings via metaphors and metonymies.

complicated by another possibility, namely a combination of diminutives with adjectives meaning ‘small’. Consider the analytical construction with a diminutive in (3):

- (3) *Žili dostatočno skromno, byli malen'kie zaborčiki mežu učastkami.*
[Ginzburg 2001]
‘We lived quite modestly, there were small fences_{DIM} between the pieces of land.’

Is it the case that *malen'kie zaborčiki* in (3) are smaller than just *zaborčiki* and adjectives meaning ‘small’ in such contexts express additional smallness of the already small entities referred to by diminutives? And are *zaborčik* and *malen'kij zabor* the same size? What is the semantic contribution of the adjective and the diminutive suffix, or are they simply redundant? In the following, I handle the three types of expressions as constructions:

- (4) A. morphological construction: noun with a diminutive suffix, as *zaborčik*;
B. analytical construction: non-diminutive noun and an adjective meaning ‘small’, as *malen'kij zabor*;
C. analytical construction with diminutive: noun with a diminutive suffix and an adjective meaning ‘small’, as *malen'kij zaborčik*.

The main question of the present study pertains to the relationship between the constructions in (4). Whether or not and to which extent are they synonymous? The answer to this question largely depends on the definition of synonymy. A note on terminology is in order here. The concept of synonymy is problematic, insofar as it covers phenomena ranging from close synonyms, i.e. expressions that are nearly the same in meaning, to partial synonyms, i.e. expressions that share their meaning only to some extent. While absolute synonyms⁵, i.e. expressions that vary in form, but not in meaning or environment they are attested in, probably do not exist, synonymy is a gradient phenomenon. Much in the spirit of Baayen et al. 2013, I prefer thinking of synonyms as rival forms. Rival forms have been discussed in the literature and various terms have been proposed, most of the researchers, however, agree that absolute synonymy does not exist (cf. Carstairs-McCarthy 1994, Clark 1993, Croft 2001, Haiman 1980, Laporte et al. 2021, and Leclercq and Morin 2023, Uhrig 2015). The diminutive constructions that are addressed in the present study, are clearly rival forms (or “seemingly synonymous”): they are close in meaning and occur in similar

⁵ In the case of absolute synonyms one can already consider to use the other term, namely (semantic) equivalence. In the present study, this is hardly a viable solution since, as will be shown, the constructions under scrutiny are clearly not equivalents.

environments. To which extent they are synonyms in the narrower sense of the term, is investigated in the present study. I take Goldberg (1995, p. 67)’s idea “[i]f two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct” as my point of departure and investigate the seeming redundancy of Russian diminutives by looking at corpus data. The article is structured as follows. In section 2, I provide the overview of the data used in the study. Section 3 addresses the contrasts between the morphological and analytic diminutive constructions. In section 4, I discuss the role of the adjective meaning ‘small’ in diminutive constructions. Section 5 shortly describes the various adjectives meaning ‘small’ and touches upon the notion of semantic overlap. In section 6, I show that diminutives thrive in contexts with other diminutives. In section 7 I consider mass nouns and argue that diminutives are in fact almost never about size. The main findings of the study are summarized in section 8. While the study focuses on Russian diminutives, it is relevant for other Slavic languages and has implications for linguistics in general since it contributes to the discussion of redundancy and its role in language (see Janda & Reynolds 2019, Levshina 2020 and 2021, as well as Tal & Arnon 2022).

2. DATA

In order to shed light on the distribution of diminutives expressed solely by diminutive suffixes (morphological diminutive construction), analytical constructions with adjectives meaning ‘small’ and combinations of diminutives with adjectives meaning ‘small’, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of actual language data is required. A comprehensive analysis of all substantival diminutives in the corpus with all possible analytical synonymous constructions is not a feasible task; and before one can address a larger dataset, it is meaningful to have a case study of a manageable size that will enable a detailed qualitative analysis of examples. For such a case study the word *dom* ‘house’ was chosen. *Dom* is a concrete noun referring to a sizeable object of reality. As follows from the information in the RNC⁶, *dom* is a common word with ipm 865.893, it is well attested in both fiction and non-fiction texts, and has a stable distribution over the years without any significant peaks. For the study, a database with all attestations of *domik* ‘house_{DIM}’, *malen’kij dom* ‘small house’ and *malen’kij domik* ‘small house_{DIM}’ were culled from the RNC (a total of 2295 examples). In order to avoid personal preferences of the language users, only one example per author was included in the final database, leaving us with 978 examples. Each example in the dataset was tagged for the following properties: adjectives describing small size in the context (e.g. *malen’kij* ‘small’, *miniatjurnyj* ‘tiny as a miniature’, *krošečnyj* ‘tiny’), adjectives of affection in the context (e.g.

⁶ See “portrait of the word”^[3].

simpatičnyj ‘nice’), other diminutives in the context, whether or not the diminutive is part of a lexicalized unit (e.g. *kartočnyj domik* ‘house of cards’). Lexicalized units amount to 217 attestations (30% of examples). The distribution of the examples is presented in Table 1. Note that the numbers for *malen’kij domik* are not included in *domik*, but calculated separately.

Table 1: Overview of the data from the Russian national corpus. One example per author.

Diminutive construction	Number of examples
<i>domik</i>	745 (76%)
<i>‘malen’kij’ dom</i>	84 (9%)
<i>‘malen’kij’ domik</i>	149 (15%)
	978 (100%)

As we can see from the numbers in Table 1, all the three options are attested in the corpus, but not evenly distributed in the data. The diminutive *domik* is the most frequent diminutive construction with 76% of the examples. The redundant construction with both an adjective meaning ‘small’ and the diminutive *domik* covers 15% of the data, while the least represented option is the combination of the adjective meaning ‘small’ and the non-diminutive noun *dom* ‘house’ (9% of the data). The dataset is small enough to enable a detailed qualitative analysis and large enough to make basic generalizations.

3. DO DOMIK, MALEN’KIJ DOM AND MALEN’KIJ DOMIK ALL MEAN ‘SMALL HOUSE’?

In the present section, I provide an analysis of diminutives and analytical constructions with the adjectives meaning ‘small’ and diminutive and non-diminutive nouns, and argue that the three diminutive constructions, while they are characterized by some semantic proximity, are not close synonyms.

Diminutives refer to entities smaller than some standard. In this way, *domik* refers to a house smaller than a usual, normal, standard house. In order to pinpoint the possible semantic nuances between the constructions, I carry out a substitution test. If the diminutive *domik* and the analytical constructions with an adjective meaning ‘small’, such as *malen’kij dom*, are near-synonyms, one would expect them to be mutually interchangeable in the actual linguistic contexts without introducing any significant differences in meaning. Consider example (5):

- (5) *Sejčas vse vlastnye graždanskije struktury Čečni obitajut v četyrëxëtažnom domike s pristrojkoj i gostinicej dlja VIPov.* [Izvestija 2001]
‘Now all Chechen governmental structures live in a four-storey house_{DIM} with an annex and a hotel for VIPs.’

The use of the diminutive *domik* in (5) is ironic: a house with four floors that houses all the governmental institutions of a whole republic, as well as an annex and a hotel can hardly qualify as a small house, and substituting *domik* with *malen'kij dom* in (5) is infelicitous. The reason why the use of the diminutive *domik* is possible, lies in the ambiguous nature of diminutives. As pointed out in section 1, diminutives not only refer to the size, but also attitude. The analytical constructions with the adjectives of small size and non-diminutive nouns, on the contrary, only refer to the size and are, therefore, more restricted in their use. It is the morphological diminutives, but not analytical constructions as in (4B), that involve ambiguity and can introduce various pragmatic effects. It should be noted that the ironic attitude in (5) does not need to refer to object described by the diminutive, i.e. the house itself; rather, it refers to the whole message. Such a transfer of the ironic attitude can be captured in terms of part - whole metonymy: while the diminutive only marks part of the message (one word), it actually introduces a pragmatic effect to the message as a whole. Let us now consider the substitution of the diminutive *domik* in (5) with the third type of diminutive constructions, namely adjectives meaning 'small' and diminutive nouns. Interestingly, just adding an adjective meaning 'small' to the context in (5) is not impossible; however, it does contribute with additional pragmatic effects. Using *malen'kij domik* instead of just *domik* in (5) seems to enhance the ironic effect of the text.

As demonstrated above, substituting morphological diminutives with analytical diminutive constructions comes with semantic or pragmatic changes. How about the other way around, can we freely substitute analytical diminutive constructions with morphological diminutives?

- (6) *Lejla prišla v moj malen'kij dom s veščami i reběnkom.* [Sadulaev 2009]
 'Lejla came into my small house with her things and a child.'

In (6), the diminutive construction *malen'kij dom* should be understood literally, the person is referring to a small house, and it is the small size of the house that is important. We know from the wider context that the protagonist used to live alone in the house and suddenly the house became crowded when two more people with more things moved in. Substitution of *malen'kij dom* in (6) with *domik* is possible, however, we are running the risk of adding meanings that are not there. Since diminutives are ambiguous, using a diminutive in (6) would enable a different reading of the whole context where the focus would no longer be on the size of the house, but on the attitude towards the house. This risk is even bigger if we substitute *malen'kij dom* in (6) with *malen'kij domik*.

The substitution tests discussed above suggest that, while close in meaning, the three types of diminutive constructions are not mutually interchangeable. Substitution

tests demonstrate that replacing one type of diminutives with another comes with meaning differences. Analytical diminutive constructions focus primarily on size, while morphological diminutives open up for wider interpretations. While we see that the analytical constructions with adjectives meaning ‘small’ and diminutive nouns as in *malen’kij domik* is more similar to morphological diminutives than analytical constructions with non-diminutive nouns, the role of the adjectives meaning ‘small’ in combination with morphological diminutives calls for further investigation.

4. THE ROLE OF THE ADJECTIVE ‘SMALL’ IN ANALYTICAL CONSTRUCTIONS WITH DIMINUTIVES

What is the semantic contribution of the adjective in diminutive constructions with morphological diminutives and adjectives meaning ‘small’? If *domik* already means ‘small house’, why do we need to add an adjective meaning ‘small’? Is it the case that *malen’kij domik* is an even smaller house than just *domik*? In order to pinpoint the role of the adjectives in diminutive constructions with morphological diminutives, one would need to find diminutives that refer to size only, otherwise one could argue that the diminutive has the attitude reading while the adjective focuses on the size. Finding diminutives that only refer to size is far from a trivial task. With the dataset at hand, the only plausible solution is to analyze lexicalized diminutives that clearly refer to small entities, such as *kartočnyj domik* ‘house of cards’ or *prjaničnyj domik* ‘gingerbread house’; the houses in these two examples are undoubtedly smaller than standard houses where people live. If it is the case that adding adjectives meaning ‘small’ to such lexicalized uses of *domik* results in even smaller houses, we can conclude that adding ‘small’ adjectives to morphological diminutives is used to refer to even smaller entities than those described by diminutives only.

In the dataset, there are 217 examples of lexicalized uses of the diminutive *domik*, however, there are only two examples of such diminutives with an adjective meaning ‘small’. One of them is (7):

- (7) *Tut vam i dereven’ka iz kroxotnyx prjaničnyx domikov, i vetrjanaja mel’nička, gordo vozvyšajuščajasja nad zarosljami anjutinyx glazok...*
 ‘Here you have a village_{DIM} with tiny gingerbread houses_{DIM}, and a windmill_{DIM}, proudly overlooking the thicket of pansies’

Gingerbread houses are normally quite small and definitely smaller than usual houses, however, to which extent the adjective *kroxotnyj* ‘tiny’ modifies the size of the gingerbread house is unclear. It is likely that in (7), *kroxotnyj prjaničnyj domik* ‘tiny gingerbread house’ is smaller than *prjaničnyj domik* ‘gingerbread house’, but

we do not have enough data in order to claim that adding a ‘small’ adjective to diminutives always results in even smaller objects than those referred to by diminutives without ‘small’ adjectives. Note that the context in (7) is full of diminutives, *dereven’ka* ‘village_{DIM}’, *domik* ‘house_{DIM}’, *mel’nička* ‘windmill_{DIM}’, *glazki* ‘eyes_{DIM}’, an issue we will return to in section 6.

5. MALEN’KIJ VS. OTHER ‘SMALL’ ADJECTIVES. SEMANTIC OVERLAP

There are several adjectives in the database with the meaning ‘small’, *malen’kij* ‘small’ being by far the most frequent one (90 attestations). The other ‘small’ adjectives attested in the dataset are: *nebol’šoj* (39) ‘small, lit. non-big’, *krošečnyj/kroxotnyj* (16) ‘tiny’, *malyj* (2) ‘small’, and *miniatjurnyj* (2) ‘tiny as a miniature’. All these adjectives apart from *malen’kij* are clearly about physical size. The adjective *malen’kij* is special, since etymologically it is a diminutive itself. *Malen’kij* has practically replaced its non-diminutive base *malyj*, which is barely used in standard modern Russian. Being a diminutive, *malen’kij* is ambiguous per definition, and can either mean just ‘small’ or ‘small and/or nice’ (Rusakova 2012). Therefore, one can argue that in *malen’kij dom* we are dealing with a double reduplication: the small size is expressed twice, once in *malen’kij* and once in the diminutive *domik*, but also the positive attitude is expressed twice, both in the diminutive adjective and the diminutive noun. The other ‘small’ adjectives enable us to reduce the ambiguity somewhat. A case in point is *nebol’šoj domik* in (8):

- (8) *Vdova svjašennika Goljakova s det’mi živět v nebol’šom zelěnom domike rjadom s cerkov’ju.* [Sokolov-Dmitrič 2007]
 ‘The widow of the priest Goljakov with kids lives in a small green house_{DIM} next to the church.’

The smallness of the house is expressed twice, with the adjective *nebol’šoj* and the diminutive *domik*, the attitude, however, can only be expressed by the diminutive noun. We are therefore dealing with an overlap in reference to size, but no overlap in reference to attitude. While it is impossible in contexts with substantival diminutives to avoid ambiguity completely, it is indeed possible to reduce this ambiguity by selecting other adjectives meaning ‘small’ than *malen’kij*.

Semantic overlap is a well-attested phenomenon in language. More often than we might notice ourselves, we express the same meaning several times in one and the same utterance. The plural meaning in *many apples* is expressed both by the word *many* and the plural form *apples*. Semantic overlap in Russian diminutives is therefore only natural. As illustrated above, we find semantic overlap in phrases where diminutives are used along with adjectives meaning ‘small’ as in *malen’kij*

domik. Not surprisingly, the adjectives describing attitude can also combine with diminutives. We find examples like *simpatičnyj domik* ‘nice house_{DIM}’ where the attitude is expressed both in the adjective *simpatičnyj* ‘nice’ and in the diminutive noun. In cases of semantic overlap between the adjectives and the nouns, the adjectives focus on one of the properties expressed by the diminutives, in this way helping to adjust the relative strength of the semantic components in diminutives. The fairly high number of examples (149 out of 894, i.e. 17%) where the diminutive *domik* is used with an adjective meaning ‘small’ suggests that speakers relatively often feel the need to disambiguate the diminutives by using adjectives. Using diminutives alone would arguably not have enough focus on the size of the house.

6. DIMINUTIVE CHAIN REACTION

As follows from (7), diminutives can be used in contexts with other diminutives. In example (7), four out of five nouns in the sentence are diminutives. This is by no means an exception. Diminutives are typical for child-directed speech, as well as for speech about children. In other words, either the communication partner (child) triggers positive attitude and hence the use of diminutives, or the topic of communication (child) motivates the use of diminutives (cf. Jurafsky 1996, Gillis 1997, Stephany 1997, Voeykova 1998, Voejkova 2020, Makarova 2014). Although primarily associated with children, the use of diminutives is not limited to child-related contexts. The use of diminutives extends to other (primarily) informal settings, marks affection, politeness, irony, etc. Crucially, affectionate and otherwise emotional contexts are the natural sphere of use of diminutives. In such contexts, diminutives attract other diminutives in this way marking the affectionateness of the whole context. Diminutives thrive in contexts with other diminutives. In the database, we find that all the three types of diminutive constructions are attested in contexts with other diminutives, often several in one and the same sentence. The numbers are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2: The number of examples where other diminutives are attested with diminutive constructions.

Diminutive construction	Number of examples with other diminutives
<i>domik</i> (not lexicalized)	25%
<i>‘malen’kij’ dom</i>	14,3%
<i>‘malen’kij’ domik</i>	21%
	978 (100%)

We see from Table 2 that the lowest amount of other diminutives (14,3% of the contexts) has been attested in contexts with the analytical construction with the non-diminutive noun of the *malen’kij dom* type. More diminutives are attested in contexts

with diminutives and adjectives meaning ‘small’ (21% of cases), and most frequently (25% of the contexts) the other diminutives co-occur with diminutives without any adjectives. These numbers are in fact not unexpected and can be explained by semantic factors. *Malen’kij dom* is the diminutive construction where affection is barely expressed (on the adjective, if at all), and consequently it attracts the lowest number of other diminutives in the context. *Malen’kij domik* is clearly more affectionate, however, *malen’kij* can emphasize the size semantics and, consequently, does not attract as many other diminutives. It is *domik* that is at least as much about attitude as size (or even more so), and it is the overall affectionate context of *domik* that attracts other diminutives. Once again, we see that it is the other semantic components in diminutives than size that play a crucial role. A question then arises to what extent is size at all expressed in diminutives. This question is addressed in the following section.

7. ARE DIMINUTIVES ABOUT SIZE AT ALL? THE CASE OF MASS NOUNS

If diminutives are primarily about size, we should only expect to find diminutives that refer to physical objects that have measurable size, i.e. count nouns like *domik* ‘house_{DIM}’ or *sobačka* ‘dog_{DIM}’. However, as the analysis presented above suggests, the diminutives of count nouns do not always refer to size. While this is hardly any new idea, I would like to provide an additional illustration of the fact that diminutives do not need to refer to size at all. A case in point are Russian mass nouns, which also form diminutives, e.g. *pesoček* ‘sand_{DIM}’ or *vodička* ‘water_{DIM}’. Moreover, Russian abstract nouns allow the formation of diminutives, and we find examples like *pravdočka* ‘truth_{DIM}’ or *znan’ice* ‘knowledge_{DIM}’. In fact, diminutives are not limited to nouns and can be formed from adjectives, adverbs and even verbs, i.e. words that refer to entities that are not characterized by size at all (Makarova 2014, Makarova 2015). Diminutives from count nouns can refer to size and/or attitude. However, diminutives from other types of nouns as well as other word classes cannot refer to size since size is not available, instead, they serve expressive purposes and refer to metaphorically and metonymically related properties (as is well described in the literature, cf., for example, Jurafsky 1996, Taylor 2003, or, specifically for Russian, Makarova 2014). Taken to the extreme, one could suggest that diminutives do not need to refer to size at all. In order to get a better understanding of the use of diminutives, let us zoom in on mass nouns.

A typical mass noun is *voda* ‘water’. The diminutive *vodička* is attested 959 times in the RNC. In the database with only one example per author, which contains 323 diminutives, *vodička* is attested 63 times (20% of all attestations) with affectionate nouns and 189 times (59% of all examples) with other diminutives in the context, thus, showing a typical diminutive behavior. Example (9) illustrates the point:

- (9) *Sestrěnka, kofejku nam, vodički sladen 'koj!*
 'Sister_{DIM}, coffee_{DIM} for us, sweet_{DIM} water_{DIM} !'

The context in (9) is very informal, with notes of familiarity, and the overall attitude expressed is positive, both to the waitress, the anticipated coffee and the water. The use of the diminutive derived from a mass noun is by no means ungrammatical.

The important way in which mass nouns are different from count nouns, is that we do not find adjectives referring to size with mass nouns for a natural reason of mass nouns referring to entities without size. Thus, diminutives in such cases only mark the positive attitude ignoring the dimensions⁷.

If not very productive for mass nouns, mass nouns diminutives are definitely grammatically possible and attested in Russian. Simple searches in the RNC reveal that, for example, the noun *pesok* 'sand' is attested 25,993 times while the related diminutive *pesoček* has 628 attestations (2,3% of cases), *voda* 'water' is attested 219,775 times, and the diminutive *vodička* 959 (0,5% of cases). For comparison, the count noun *dom* 'house' is attested 337,257 times in the main corpus, while the diminutive *domik* has 19,235 attestations (5,4%). The three examples above suggest that diminutives might be more characteristic of count nouns than mass nouns, but they do not enable us to make any reliable generalizations. What is likely, however, is that diminutives are actually much more widespread for both count and mass nouns than what the numbers in the corpus suggest. As is well-known, diminutives are more associated with informal spontaneous communication, so the number of attestations in the RNC is probably lower than in the actual language use, since spontaneous informal communication is underrepresented in the RNC.

As shown above, mass nouns in Russian form diminutives and these diminutives are by no means marginal in the language. The fact that mass nouns refer to entities that lack size does not impede the formation and use of mass nouns diminutives indicating that size might not be as crucial for diminutives as both naïve language users and linguists tend to believe.

8. CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis of corpus examples from the Russian National Corpus, the present study addressed the distribution of three "rivals", three seemingly synonymous constructions: morphological diminutives (*domik* 'house_{DIM}'), analytical constructions with an adjective meaning 'small' and a non-diminutive noun (*malen'kij dom* 'small house'), and analytical constructions with an adjective

⁷ While it is possible that diminutive of mass nouns refer to small amounts, no such examples have been attested in the dataset. It should also be noted that attitude expressed by diminutives does not necessarily have to be positive. Diminutives can mark irony, and, via irony, even negative attitude. Such examples, however, have not been attested in our data.

meaning ‘small’ and a diminutive noun (*malen'kij domik* ‘small house_{DIM}’). The main results of the study can be summarized in five points.

First, the qualitative analysis of examples suggests that, while clearly close in meaning, the three constructions are not mutually interchangeable. Analytical diminutive constructions focus primarily on the size of the entity in question, while morphological diminutives open up for wider interpretations. It is the morphological diminutives that are ambiguous in that they refer to size and/or attitude; such diminutives can introduce ironic or other pragmatic effects, and these pragmatic effects are lost when morphological diminutives are substituted by analytical constructions with an adjective meaning ‘small’ and a non-diminutive noun. Substituting analytical constructions with an adjective meaning ‘small’ and a non-diminutive noun with diminutives, on the other hand, enables interpretations with various pragmatic effects that are not intended in the original context.

Second, the role of the seemingly redundant adjective in the constructions with morphological diminutives of the type *malen'kij domik* ‘small house_{DIM}’ has been investigated. While more data is needed in order to draw reliable conclusions, it is likely that adding an adjective meaning ‘small’ to a diminutive noun can refer to an even smaller object than the one described by the diminutive alone. Adding an adjective does not really result in redundancy, rather, adjectives adjust the relative strength of the semantic components of diminutives (size vs. affection).

Third, the adjectives meaning ‘small’ have been analyzed. It is the case that the most frequent ‘small’ adjective in Russian, *malen'kij*, is etymologically a diminutive itself and therefore carries a certain ambiguity. This ambiguity can be avoided if other ‘size’ adjectives are used instead of *malen'kij*. So, in order to avoid ambiguity of substantival diminutives, we need to use a ‘size’ adjective if we want to emphasize the small size of the object. Furthermore, this ‘size’ adjective should not be *malen'kij*.

Fourth, the analysis of corpus data suggests that diminutives thrive in context with other diminutives. The more affectionate the diminutive construction, the likelier it is to appear in context with other diminutives. The three types of diminutive constructions form a scale in terms of how much affection vs. how much size they are likely to express: *malen'kij dom* > *malen'kij domik* > *domik*, where *domik* is the most ambiguous one, arguably the most affectionate, and the one that is most frequently attested with other diminutives.

Taken together, these four points summarized above suggest that diminutives do not really need to pertain to the size at all. Mass nouns provide further support to this claim. Mass nouns describe entities without clear dimensions and nevertheless form diminutives in a completely unproblematic way. This is probably the major finding of the study. Contrary to what is believed about diminutives, namely that they refer to small objects, size is not at all central for diminutives.

While the present study is a small-scale, mostly qualitative, case study of one diminutive in Russian, and a larger study of more diminutives is required in order to make reliable generalizations, it does make its contribution both to our understanding of diminutives in Russian and beyond, as well as redundancy and competing forms in language in general. The present study suggests that there is no pure redundancy, and that seemingly synonymous expressions have semantic and/or pragmatic nuances.

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Redundancia a konkurencia v jazyku. Prípadová štúdia ruských deminutív

Resumé

Štúdia sa venuje analýze deminutív v ruštine, pričom z teoreticko-metodologického hľadiska nadväzuje na Goldbergovej myšlienku o sémantických alebo pragmatických rozdieloch, ktoré vždy sprevádzajú syntaktické rozdiely (Goldberg 1995, s. 67). Materiálovým východiskom analýzy je manuálne anotovaná databáza takmer 1000 jednotiek z Ruského národného korpusu (www.ruscorpora.ru). Predmetom analýzy sú tri typy deminutívnych konštrukcií: 1) morfológické zdrobneniny typu *dom-ik*, 2) analytické zdrobneniny typu *malen'kij dom* a *milij dom* a 3) zmiešaný typ, v ktorom sa morfológické zdrobneniny vyskytujú s adjektívami, napríklad *malen'kij dom-ik*. Analýza odhaľuje rozdiely medzi morfológickými a analytickými zdrobneninami. Kým morfológické zdrobneniny sa zriedkavo vzťahujú len na veľkosť, adjektíva sa často používajú na bližšiu špecifikáciu a s cieľom vyhnúť sa dvojznačnosti. Rozdiely v ruských deminutívach ilustrujú dôležitú teoretickú otázku redundancie a jej úlohy v jazyku. Výsledky tejto štúdie naznačujú, že redundancia je motivovaná, má svoju funkciu a pomáha používateľom jazyka vyhnúť sa dvojznačnosti.

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