

VOCATIVE FUNCTIONS OF DIMINUTIVES IN ENGLISH PROSE LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

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The current article deals with English diminutives from the perspective of Speech Act Theory formulated by J. Searle and supplemented by other scholars (e.g. D. Wunderlich). In the focus of the research are the diminutive-related vocative speech acts which are used in addressing the participants of speech situations and contribute to establishing the addressee. In the arrangement of relations and interactions between participants of communication, there have been found only two components: the addresser and the addressee. The empirical material for the study is based on popular works by modern writers of English prose literature for children such as A. Ahlberg, R. Dahl, E. Nesbit, J. Wilson. The choice of the target texts results from their antropocentricity and child-centeredness. Vocative speech acts perform two communicative functions: a) calls are aimed at catching the addressee's attention; b) addresses are aimed at maintaining or emphasizing the contact between speaker and addressee. Among the diminutives used in vocative functions there have been found first names, family names, terms of kinship and descriptors. First-names diminutive forms are most recurrent in the vocative speech acts. It results from the fact that the addressee in juvenile prose literature is a child. Most of the first names in the diminutive form are used to express a positive attitude to the addressee. There has been found only one example of a family-name diminutive in the vocative function, whose purpose is to express a negative attitude to the addressee. Besides, diminutives in the vocative function complement other speech acts such as directives, commissives and representatives. Diminutive vocatives either intensify or weaken the illocution of the speech act they complement, and express positive or negative attitude to the addressee.

ВОКАТИВНА ФУНКЦІЯ ДЕМІНУТИВІВ В АНГЛОМОВНІЙ ДИТЯЧІЙ ПРОЗІ

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Ключові слова: *демінутив, локатив, мовленнєвий акт, адресант, адресат.*

У запропонованій статті розглядаються англійські демінутиви з погляду теорії мовленнєвих актів, запропонованої Дж. Серлем і розширеної Д. Вундерліхом та іншими науковцями. У центрі уваги дослідження є демінутиви у вокативних мовленнєвих актах, які застосовуються

у зверненнях до учасників мовної ситуації та сприяють визначенню адресата. У результаті аналізу знайдено лише два види учасників комунікації, а саме адресант і адресат. Матеріал дослідження включає художні твори відомих ювінальних англомовних письменників (напр.: Р. Дал, Е. Несбіт, Дж. Уілсон). Вибір текстів пояснюється тим, що вони є антропоцентричні, про дітей та спрямовані на дитячу читацьку аудиторію. Цілком передбачувано, що вокативні мовленнєві акти виконують дві комунікативні функції: а) оклики, які слугують для привернення уваги адресата; б) звернення, які сигналізують контакт між мовцем і адресатом. Визначено такі типи демінутивів у вокативній функції: імена, прізвища, терміни спорідненості та дескриптори. Аналіз нашого корпусу матеріалу засвідчив, що демінутиви-імена використовуються найчастіше і переважно для вираження позитивного ставлення до адресата. Це пояснюється тим, що адресатом у художній дитячій прозі є дитина. У деяких мовленнєвих ситуаціях трапляються інші типи демінутивів у вокативній функції, але вони є менш поширеними. І знайдено лише один приклад демінутива-прізвища у вокативній функції, який застосований для вираження негативного ставлення до адресата. Виявлено, що демінутиви у вокативній функції доповнюють інші мовленнєві акти (напр.: директиви, комісиви, репрезентативи). У цьому разі вони підсилюють чи послаблюють іллокуцію мовленнєвого акту, який вони супроводжують, та виражають позитивне чи негативне ставлення до адресата.

Introduction

In recent years views on diminutives in the English language have become less controversial and their role in English is no longer downgraded. For example, Dorothy Lockyer claims that “without diminutives, the English language would lose a vital linguistic meaning of conveying emotion, attitude, evaluation, and also warmth. Diminutives provide a way to show affection towards people or things; they are expressive and contribute to emotional expression of language” (Lockyer, 2012: 13-14). Wolfgang Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi state that “the diminutive meaning is contextual, picked up from the pragmatic situations of use <...>” (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi, 1994: 173). Therefore, it is reasonable to discuss diminutives in greater detail with regard to speech act theory, “which considers speech activity as a target-based application of a language means by speakers according to certain rules with a view to communication” (Bystrov, Mintsyts & Mintsyts, 2020: 79). Thus, in some studies the communicative functions of diminutives in the directive, representative and other speech acts occurring in child-directed speech have been analyzed (e.g. Bystrov, Mintsyts & Mintsyts, 2020; Mintsyts & Kulchytska, 2022). The present study lays emphasis on the communicative functions of diminutive formations in the vocative speech acts (SA henceforth) in juvenile prose literature.

As it is mentioned by Ján Horecký (1996: 66), in speech act theory J. Searle formulated the following classification of illocutionary acts: the assertives, the commissives, the directives the declaratives,

and the expressives. D. Wunderlich added to the above mentioned types illocutionary satisfactive acts, retroactive and vocative (addressing) acts. Consequently, the present research is focused on the latter type of SAs.

Illocution of vocative SAs focuses on catching interlocutors' attention. In other words, they serve for directing the attention of the participant of the speech situation in the course of interaction (Wunderlich, 1980). Gerhard Schaden assumes that “a vocative is a nominal element referring to the addressee(s) of a sentence”. The scholar maintains that traditionally, there have been distinguished two functions of vocatives: calls and addresses. They perform different communicative functions. The former “are designed to catch the addressee's attention” while the latter are aimed at maintaining or emphasizing the contact between speaker and addressee (Schaden, 2010). Moreover, vocative addresses not only name the addressee but also become peculiar nuclei of the utterance accumulating various semantic shades (Шульжук, 2005).

There have been a number of studies devoted to vocative SAs in which they are viewed from different perspectives. For example, Gerhard Schaden (2010) considers them from the point of view of their semantics. Esther Asprey and Caroline Tagg (2019) analyze the pragmatic use of vocatives in digital communication. Elizabeth Ritter and Martina Wiltschko (2020) explore the grammar of the vocative SAs. There have also been a number of syntactic analyses of certain peculiarities of vocatives (d'Hulst et al., 2007). However, those SAs still “remain

a poorly understood category” (Schaden, 2010: 177), moreover, they have not been discussed with reference to diminutivity. This fact accounts for **the topicality** of the current study, whose **objective** is to examine the discourse function of diminutives in vocative speech acts occurring in English prose literature for children.

Materials and methods

The empirical material on which the present study is based originates from the works written by popular children’s authors A. Ahlberg, R. Dahl, E. Nesbit and J. Wilson. The corpus comprises one hundred and twenty-six vocative SAs containing analytic and synthetic diminutives. The examples are selected by means of manual selection procedure. The total number of pages of the excerpted texts is more than one thousand six hundred. The choice of the literary works which constitute the empirical material of the article boils down to the fact that they all were created by famous prize-winning authors (A. Ahlberg won the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize; R. Dahl – the Edgar Award and the World Fantasy Award; E. Nesbit – Rubery Non-Fiction Prize, and J. Wilson – the Carnegie Medal, the Smarties Prize). Children’s prose literature has its peculiarities which appear on different levels of perception. This kind of literature is the context in which emotiveness of language is realized to the highest degree. Diminutivity which is realized in children’s prose, in most cases, is aimed at expressing positive emotions and affection, and contributes to slackening emotional tension. It is notable that all the cited examples are taken exclusively from fictional texts and “do not refer to real-life situations” (Bystrov, Mintsyts & Mintsyts, 2020: 80).

Discussion

Vocatives can take different forms (Asprey & Tagg, 2019): endearments (honey, darling, sweetie pie, dear); kinship terms (Daddy); familiarisers (guys, dude, bud, bro); first name familiarised (Johnny); first name full form (John); title and surname (Mr. Smith); honorific (Sir); nickname (Speedy); impersonal vocatives (Someone get that phone, will you!), and even elaborated nominal structures such as: “those of you who want to bring your pets along.” According to K. Schneider, four classes of lexemes (titles, proper names, i.e. first names and family names, terms of kinship and descriptors, i.e. common names), can be used in the function of address (Schneider, 2003: 130). These types of vocatives in which addresses occur in their diminutivized form have been found in the analyzed texts of juvenile prose literature. The most frequent among them are diminutives of first names and terms of kinship, whereas diminutives of surnames and titles are rare. It is generally accepted that full forms are used in addressing adults and short forms in addressing children. Therefore, in children’s

prose names-vocatives often occur in a diminutive form. It results from the fact that the plot of prose for children is focused on a child as one of its main characters.

The research shows that diminutive **first names** in vocative SAs have a standard form (*Anny, Lizzie*), usually ending in *-y/ie*, which is not changed throughout the whole book. In descriptions of certain strong emotional experiences, proper names can occur in a non-standard form, e.g. *Paulikins, Rosiepops, Albertipoo, Curlybonce*, etc. As a rule, such names can occur only once or twice in one text. Diminutivized **terms of kinship** are used in both typical forms (*Mummy, Daddy, Sonny, Granny, Auntie*) and less standard ones (*Uncie, Unc, Dad-Dad*). **Descriptors** in their diminutive form are amply used in vocative SAs. Their majority found in addressing children has a more or less conventional form and positive emotional colouring (*sweetie, lovie, dearie; sweetiepops*). **Surnames** have hardly ever been found in the empirical corpus of the present study as they are more typical of literature for and about adults, and the discourse of children’s literature implies the use of first names only. It has been discovered that the only vocative-surname aims at expressing negative attitude to the addressee (*stupid old fat Beany Baby*). Among vocatives with **nominations of titles** there has been found only one diminutive *Miss* (*Missy, Little Miss, Little Missy*) in order to express a positive attitude to and display respect for a child.

Another aim of diminutives in the vocative SA is to help other SAs in performing their illocutionary function by means of serving as secondary to them in the process of communication (Карабан, 1989). Thus, used in SAs which can threaten the addressee’s “face”, diminutives can serve as a means of illocutionary force’s weakening of those SAs. For example, in **directives**, which express an order to perform an action, diminutives in the vocative function can diminish the straightforwardness and bluntness of the order:

(1) “*Hands off, little child*” (A. Ahlberg: *Ten in a Bed*, p. 43).

Example (1) shows that the order realized by means of the directive SA would have a more decisive ring if there were no diminutive in the vocative function.

Frequently, to ensure that the order will be carried out successfully, especially if the addresser thinks that it is done for the benefit of the addressee, diminutives express a positive attitude to the latter. In this case, the illocution of the directive SA is intensified:

(2) “*Watch out now, sonny! Don’t tear it as you unwrap it! That thing is precious!*” (R. Dahl: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, p. 64).

In (2), the addresser orders the addressee who won a lucky ticket, to be careful with it and not to tear it.

If the speaker uses a diminutive in the address, it does not mean that he decreases the illocutionary force (i.e. less directly and decisively orders the addressee to be careful). On the contrary, by addressing the interlocutor in such a way, he aims at boosting his order. Obviously, it happens when the order is given for the addressee's benefit.

Moreover, diminutives in the vocative function can be used in the directive SAs to motivate the addressee to action when the addresser is a negative character and the addressee is a positive one (a child). The diminutive is used for distracting the child's attention and apparently demonstrating a positive attitude to the addresser's kindness and goodness. A diminutive in such cases serves as a "bait":

(3) "Come closer to me, **little boy**," she said, beckoning to him with a horny finger. "Come closer to me and I will tell you secrets" (R. Dahl: *George's Marvellous Medicine*, p. 8)

As is seen from (3), with the help of the diminutive **little boy** the addresser (a wicked granny-witch) is trying to show her positive attitude to the addressee (a child) and have the latter do what she demands (i.e. come closer).

(4) Ernie barked, waving the barrel of the gun gently from side to side the way he had seen it done by gangsters on television. "Go on, **laddie**, reach!" (R. Dahl: *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More*, p. 80).

Example (4) illustrates teenagers' communication in a bullying-related situation. The diminutive in this vocative SA is aimed at weakening the illocution of the directive by means of simulating a positive attitude to the addressee.

In *requesting* and *begging*, diminutives in vocatives can contribute to the intensification of the illocutionary force of these SAs:

(5) "**Pelly**, my dear, be so good as to fly down and bring that small person up here to talk to us" (R. Dahl: *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*, p. 13).

In (5), the diminutive *Pelly* (*Pelican*), used in a vocative function in the SA of *request* amplifies the illocution of requesting by expressing a positive attitude of the addresser to the addressee.

In the *commissive SA* of *offer*, vocatives with diminutive formations contribute to expressing a positive attitude to the listener. The speaker deliberately creates such a situation with the help of a diminutivized vocative so that the listener could not reject the offer without threatening the speaker's "face":

(6) "Oh, you just walk out. You, my boy, can disguise yourself in your dressing-gown which I see has been placed on yonder chair; and I will leave my cloak for you, **little girl**." They both said "Thank you" (E. Nesbit: *The Magic City*).

In (6), for the offer to be accepted more willingly, the analytic diminutive **little girl** is used. It displays

a positive attitude to the addressee, preventing her from rejecting the offer.

In the SA *suggestion*, when the action is performed by two interlocutors, on the one hand, a diminutive in a vocative function serves for intensifying the illocution of suggestion, especially when the speaker is highly interested in it, and, on the other hand, like in case of offer, the speaker is eager to deprive the listener of the "ways of withdrawal", demonstrating his positive attitude to the latter:

(7) "Quite. I told you where I put them. Come on, **Jimmy**; let's help lay the table. We'll get Eliza to put out the best china" (E. Nesbit: *The Magic City*).

In *suggestions* diminutives can sometimes be used for producing an ironic effect:

(8) "The third one said, 'Blessed or not, a drink's a drink. Blue ribbon, though, by –' (a word you ought not to say, though it is in the Bible and the catechism as well). Let's have a liquor, **little missy**'" (E. Nesbit: *The Wouldbegoods*).

The participants of the speech situation in (8) are adults, and, consequently, suggestion is made to an adult man. However, the diminutive vocative **little missy** is generally related to a young female. Thus, in this SA the addresser approaches the realization of suggestion with humour and irony.

In the SA *promise* diminutives boost the illocution of this SA in case of their use in a vocative function, by means of which they express a positive attitude to the hearer. Explicitly it can be expressed in the following way: "I promise something to you, and as I am favourably disposed toward you, I will keep my promise by all means":

(9) "This daft, fat lady said, Oooh, never mind, April, **little diddums**, we will make Pearl be your friend" (J. Wilson: *Dustbin Baby*, p.91).

In (9), the addresser promises to help the addressee find friends. The diminutive expresses affection for the latter and makes the *promise* SA more real.

In the SA *threat* a diminutive in a vocative function can be realized for mitigating the illocution of this SA. As the listener does not benefit from threat, this SA threatens his/her "face", and the diminutive is aimed at partially decreasing threat by means of displaying a positive attitude. Such cases are more typical of communicating with children, and the hearer-speaker animosity should be temporary. The explicit form of such a SA can be presented like this: "I announce that I can hurt you but I am favourably disposed toward you, therefore my threat is not very serious." This discrepancy between interests testifies to the fact that the speaker is not determined enough:

(10) "You'd better mind your manners, **little lady**. I could turn you into a tin of beans" (A. Ahlberg: *Ten in a Bed*, p. 19).

However, when antagonism is permanent, i.e. when threats are possible to be realized, a diminutive

in a vocative function amplifies the speaker's negative attitude to the listener:

(11) *"Then she started swinging her round and round her head, faster and faster and Amanda was screaming blue murder and the Trunchbull was yelling 'I'll give you pigtails, you little rat!'"* (R. Dahl: *Matilda*, p. 114).

Example (11) implies that the addresser does not intend to cooperate with the addressee, and the use of the diminutive *little rat* does not contribute to settling the conflict, it intensifies a negative attitude of the speaker to the listener, instead.

Diminutives in vocatives can also be used in the *expressive* SAs. In the SA *greeting* a diminutive intensifies illocution by means of expressing a positive attitude to the listener:

(12) *"Hello, Carly! Little girly Carly. Curlybonce!"* (J. Wilson: *The Suitcase Kid*, p. 131).

In the SA *offence* diminutives perform a role which is similar to the one in the SA *threat*. If the participant of the speech situation is a child or an interlocutor who is treated with affection (during a temporary conflict), the diminutive serves for downgrading the illocutionary force of such an offence:

(13) *I tried to hide but it was no use. "Found you!" Said Big Mo, and she'd haul me out from under the bed and give me a little shake. "You're as bad as boys, sweetiepops. They don't like baths either"* (J. Wilson: *Dustin Baby*, p.92).

In (13), the addresser-adult expresses a negative attitude in her SA only within the limits of the definite situation. In general, one can claim that the interlocutors act on condition of cooperation, therefore, the diminutive is used for mitigating the SA illocution and for expressing affection for the addressee.

If antagonism has a more general character, the diminutive in such SAs will express the speaker's negative and contemptuous attitude to the hearer:

(14) *"Maybe you should just shut up and mind your own business," I said. "What do you know anyway, Alexander-the-totally-teeny-tiny-gherkin"* (J. Wilson: *The Suitcase Kid*, p. 142).

In (14), the interlocutors are of the same age that is why the diminutive in the conflict cannot express affection and mitigate illocution. On the contrary, the addresser downgrades the importance and size of the addressee by means of the diminutive.

Vocatives with diminutives in the *representative* SAs help to express attitude or downgrade the illocutionary force of the SA:

(15) *"Oh, my dears!" they heard Brenda say in a softly shrill excited voice, "oh, my dearie dears! We are so pleased to see you. I'm only a poor little faithful doggy; I'm not clever, you know, but my affectionate nature makes me almost mad with joy to see my dear master and mistress again"* (E. Nesbit: *The Magic City*).

In (15), the diminutive in a vocative function is aimed at arousing the addressee's sympathy for the addresser. The vocative in this case is a secondary SA, which creates a certain emotional "background" – expressing a positive attitude to the addresser. It is notable that it takes the latter great communicative effort to produce a perlocutionary effect. Therefore, she uses several diminutives in a row in different SAs. However, in the representative SA, irrespective of the diminutive in a vocative function, analytic and synthetic diminutives are used simultaneously.

Results

Children's prose literature is child-directed and anthropocentric. It results in abundance of diminutives in its discourse. The present paper presents analysis of diminutives in vocative speech acts. In the texts created by A. Ahlberg, R. Dahl, E. Nesbit, J. Wilson diminutives performing a vocative function have been found in such forms: first names, descriptors, family names, and terms of kinship. The former two present the most numerous types due to the fact that as a rule the addressee in juvenile prose literature is a child, therefore it is natural that the vocative should comprise the child's name in a diminutivized form (e.g. *Siggy, Charlie, Tibby, Di, Emmy, Reggie*, etc.) or a descriptor with connotation of endearment (e.g. *honey, chuck, dearie, kiddo, queen, darling, little goose, ect.*).

The analysis of vocative speech acts that contain diminutive formations in the texts of the above mentioned authors shows that diminutives perform several functions. Firstly, they characterize the relations between the addresser and the addressee. Secondly, they serve as means of influencing the addressee or motivating them to action. Thirdly, diminutives in the vocative function complement other speech acts (directives, commissives and representatives). In this case they either boost or weaken the illocution of the speech act they complement, and can express positive or negative attitude to the addressee. In further research it is needed to analyze the use of diminutives in other speech acts (e.g. expressives).

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