

Size and (inter)subjectification

The case of Portuguese diminutive and augmentative

Augusto Soares da Silva (Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Braga)

Diminutive and augmentative suffixes are quite productive and polysemous in Portuguese. There are a large number of them, but the most frequent are *-inho* (diminutive) and *-ão* (augmentative). The diminutive suffix is more pervasive than the augmentative one, the latter being more used in Brazilian Portuguese than in European Portuguese. Among the southern Romance languages, rich in diminutive suffixes, Portuguese is probably the language which makes the most use of them (Skorge 1956). In this study, we will describe the re-grammaticalization and *(inter)subjectification* processes (Traugott 1989, Langacker 1990, Traugott & Dasher 2002), which led to evaluative and interactional uses of the diminutive and augmentative suffixes in Portuguese and, secondarily, of adjectives with equivalent meaning. We will start the analysis with a description of the conceptual motivation in these processes, in which is part of an ICM of size (Ruiz de Mendoza 2000), and end it with some considerations about the diminutive and augmentative as manifestations of the Portuguese and Brazilian cultures and as contributions to subjectification theory.

Human beings associate to small and large entities various meanings related to their individual and collective experience. The size of objects may be seen relatively to our capacity or non-capacity to exert some control over them: a small object is usually more controllable than a large one and, therefore, the first will be less harmful and more interactive than the second. The size of objects may also be seen in terms of the importance we attribute to them: we usually give more importance to large things than to small things. These two experiences make both small and large objects to cause opposing emotional reactions – positive and negative.

Based on this cognitive model of size, two overlapping lines of subjectification emerge in Portuguese diminutive and augmentative from the basic meanings of ‘smallness’ and ‘bigness’. The first leads to evaluative senses: appreciation (typically affection) and depreciation and (with the diminutive) approximation, relativization and intensification. Emotional senses are the most prominent. They emerge by means of opposing cultural metonymical inferences and conceptual metaphors: that which is small is either lovely, pleasant, or else, has no importance, is despicable; as for the large, it is either frightful and unpleasant or important and admirable. The second line, which includes the first one, is that of intersubjectification and leads to several pragmatic-discoursal uses: interaction strategies with and among children; strategies of psychological and social proximity and of informality; politeness strategies in requests (taken not so much as impositions but rather as rights and benefits), offers and compliments; strategies of persuasion and for selling products; irony, humor, hypocrisy and even offense.

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