

USE OF DIMINUTIVES BY CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN SPANISH. A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with some quantitative data obtained after analysing the use of diminutives in three different groups of speakers: children, adults talking to children (child-directed-speech: CDS) and adults in adult-conversation. Our main interest is the language acquisition by children, for which reason the speech between adults has a simply contrastive purpose.

The diminutive derivation is a quite productive process in Spanish, made by suffixation, mainly with the allomorphs *-ito/a/os/as* and *-illo/a/os/as* (but also *-ico; -ín; -uelo; -ajo*). Under certain conditions, thoroughly studied in the literature (Crowhurst, 1992; Prieto, 1992; Ambadiang, 1996, etc.) some particles¹ (*-c-* and *-ec-*) are added between the rote and the suffix:

buen-o > buen-ec-ito *calor > calor-c-ito* but *mano > man-ita ~ man-ec-ita*

This suffixes can also be duplicate: *poco > poqu-ito > poqu-it-ito*.

The morphological basis for the diminutive formation are mostly nouns -included proper nouns- and adjectives; adverbs are derived in a more restricted way, gerunds and participles only exceptionally². The diminutive does not change the grammatical category of the basis, but forces a gender mark, in the case of neuters:

cielo azul > cielo azul-it-o

caja azul > caja azul-it-a

It also can imply an stress change, because all the diminutives are accented on the penult:

/ka'skara/ > /kaskari'ta/

Concerning its semantics, from the first grammars in XV century, the main meaning has been considered 'smallness', but since the important study of Amado Alonso (1954), the diminutive has been considered an expressive, stylistic device³.

¹ There is a great controversy about the nature, functioning and hierarchy of these elements, mostly considered a set of allomorphs (*-ito; -cito; -ecito*), but also infixes: *-c-ito; -ec-ito* (Dressler, 1986).

² Dialectal variations of American Spanish are characterised by the use of diminutives with less restrictions.

³ In a study of 1962, concerning the Spanish of Bogotá, Fontanella quantifies the different meanings of the diminutive formation: "the diminishing function is, in fact, the least frequent in the total of the collected examples, since it reach just the 9% of the whole". An interesting observation coming from dialectal studies: "some times, diminutive smooth the orders, making them affective advices, as in the cases of *fueracito!*, *ahoracito!*" Vaquero, 1998: 27

The productivity of this morphological mechanism, and the frequency of use for each allomorph has changed with the time, the geography and the sociocultural levels: *-ico* and *-illo* were the most frequent until the XVII century (Náñez Fernández, 1973); later, *-ito* has occupied the place of *-ico*⁴, together with *-illo*.

The frequency of diminutives is one of the most notorious characteristic of the child language. In the last years, many crosslinguistic studies has shown quantitative and qualitative data about its use in child-directed-speech and its development in child language (Gillis, 1997; Stephany, 1997; Ceccherini, Bonifacio and Zocconi, 1997; Voeykova, 1998; Savickiene, 1998; Laalo, 1998; Ravid, 1998; de Marco, 1998). This analysis follow the same line.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects:

1. Children	Age at recording date	Words (total)
Subject C1	2:6 3:8 4:10 5:4 6:6	10.471
Subject C2	1:9 3:0 3:4 3:7 4:7	5.828

2. Child-directed-speech	Words (total)
Subject M1 (dialog with C1):	12.690
Subject M2 (dialog with C2):	6.545

3. Adult speech:	Words (total)
Subject A1:	12.176
Subject A2:	1.875

The data of child-directed and child speech have been transcribed according to CHILDES (Child Language Data Exchange System) format (MacWhinney, 1992). The morphological analysis has been done by means of AyDA tools⁵.

Sociocultural variation:

Subjects C1 and M1 use Castillian Spanish (standard Spanish); subjects C2 and M2 use Canarian dialect. Adult subject A1 is Castillian, high sociocultural level; subject A2 is Andalusian, medium sociocultural level.

Measures:

A) Statistics

- Mean Length of Utterances (MLU).

⁴ With geographical exceptions, like Aragón: Uritani & Uritani: 1985

⁵ Developed between the C.S.I.C., UNED and Universidad de Málaga (Spain) and C.N.R. (Italy).

- Type/token ratio for the total of each sample.
- Percentage of diminutives.
- Type/token ratio for the whole set of diminutives.

B) Distributions

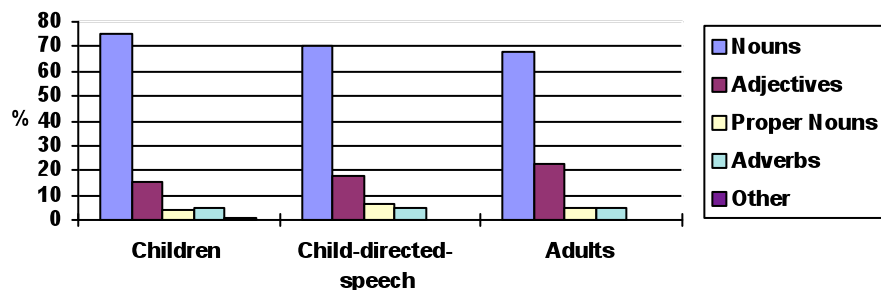
- Distribution of diminutives among grammatical categories (word classes).
- Distribution of suffixes.
- Spontaneous vs. imitative use of diminutives

C) Evolution of diminutives in child language

RESULTS

	Children	Child Directed Speech	Adults
% diminutives	1.795	2.525	0.140
MLU	3.560	4.345	34.715
Gral Type/Token	0.191	0.149	0.215
Dim.Type/Token	0.403	0.412	0.818

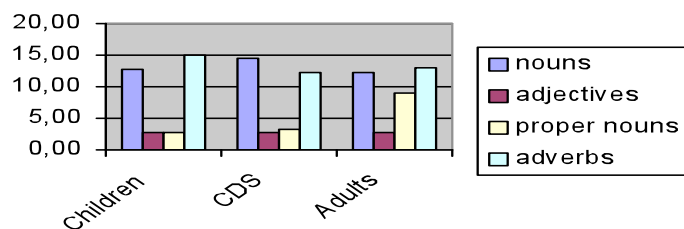
1. There are important quantitative differences in the use of diminutives among the three groups analysed: diminutives are used by children almost 13 more times than adults; but when the adults talk to children (child-centred speech situations), their use of diminutives approaches considerably that made by children or even exceeds it.
2. **MLU**, a general measure of linguistic development, shows also the proximity between child-directed-speech and children speech, opposed to the distance between child-directed-speech and adult speech (the proportion is 1 to 10); these results are not affected by sociolinguistic variation.
3. As regards the general **type-token ratio**, we have not found significant differences among the three groups of subjects.
4. On the other hand, a significant increase in the type-token relation can be observed for the subset of diminutives, which should indicate that diminutive-formation is, in our subjects, a highly productive morphological process: the same items are not used several times, instead, the suffix are applied to several lexical units.
5. As regards the distribution per **word classes**, we have observed that the predominant position of nouns over adjectives is higher in children than in adult speech; but in the child-directed-speech there is a tendency to approach to the values of children speech:



In proper nouns, only the hypocoristics following the general rule of diminutive derivation have been analysed.

Let us compare the preceding values with the general distribution of these word classes on the whole data of children, child-directed-speech and adults:

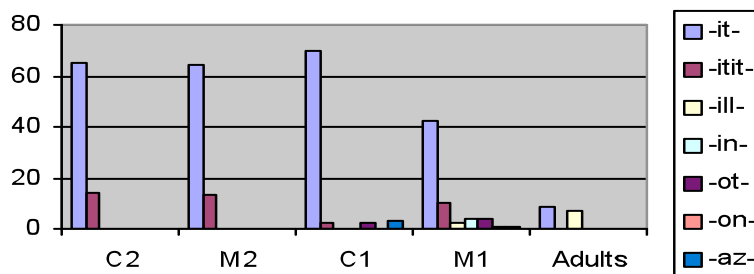
Obviously, the presence of adverbs is much more frequent in general speech than in diminutives, considered mostly a nominal derivation; but, inside the nominal class, the rate of substantives vs. adjectives is interesting. The former are more frequent than the latter, both in diminutives and in general; nevertheless, the proportion between them remains more or less similar in both graphs⁶, indicating that the difference of occurrences is due to the general distribution of these classes, and not to the use of diminutive:



	Diminutives	General
- children	5 nouns / 1 adj.	4.7 nouns / 1 adj.
- C.D.S.	4.1 nouns / 1 adj.	5.5 nouns / 1 adj.

That is, the diminutive derivation is applied by our subjects to substantives and adjectives in the same approximate proportion.

6. Finally, the **suffixes** used by our subjects are summarised in the next graph: we can observe the predominance of *-it-* (including its reduplicative form, *-itit-*, appearing mostly in the quasi-lexicalized form *chiquitit-*). It is important to note again the similarities between child-speech and child-directed-speech in the different dialects: C2 and M2 present similar results, with a single suffix; C1 and M1, in spite of quantitative differences, offer more variability, due to the presence of augmentative forms and the suffix *-ill-*.



⁶ We do not consider the adult data because the occurrences of diminutives are very few.

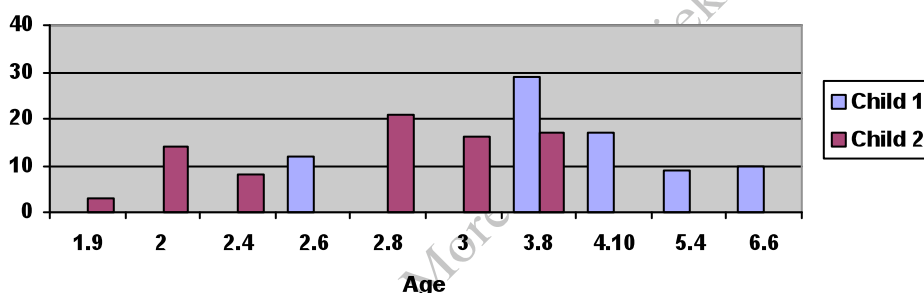
7. **Spontaneous vs. imitative** use of diminutives.

	C1	C2	M1	M2
SPONTANEOUS	85.1%	97.7%	84.3%	74%
NON SPONTANEOUS	14.9%	2.3%	15.6%	25.9%

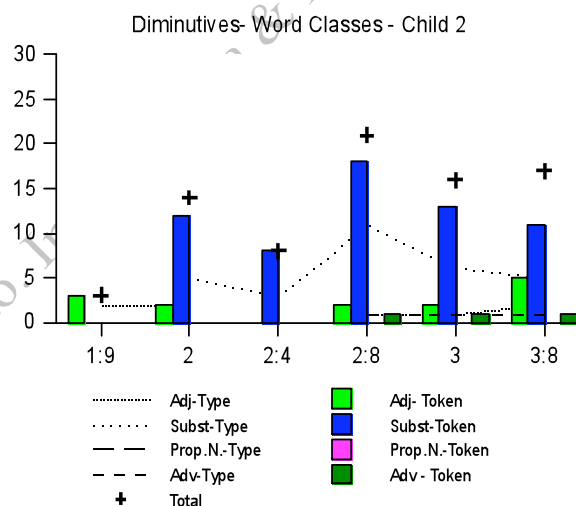
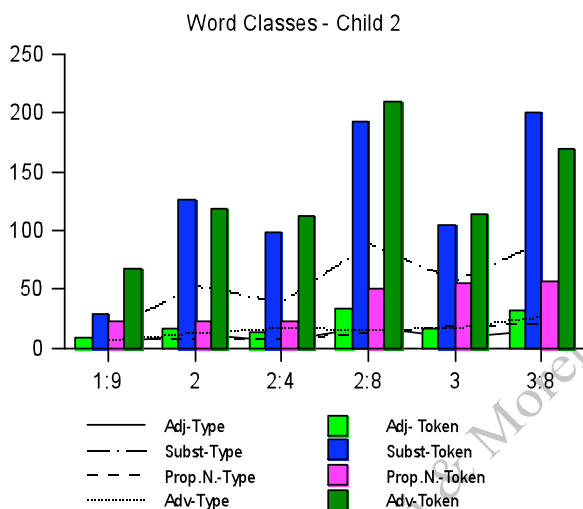
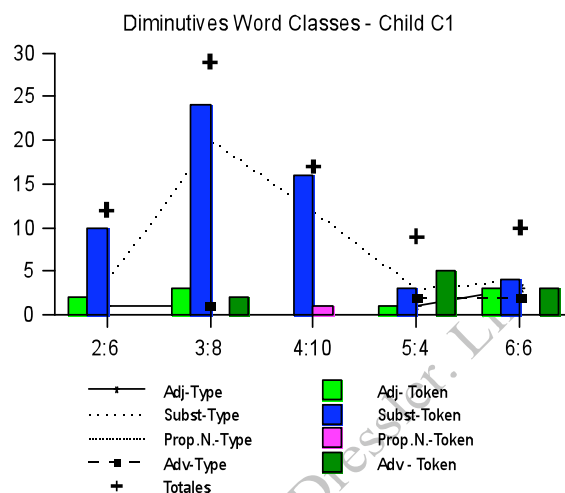
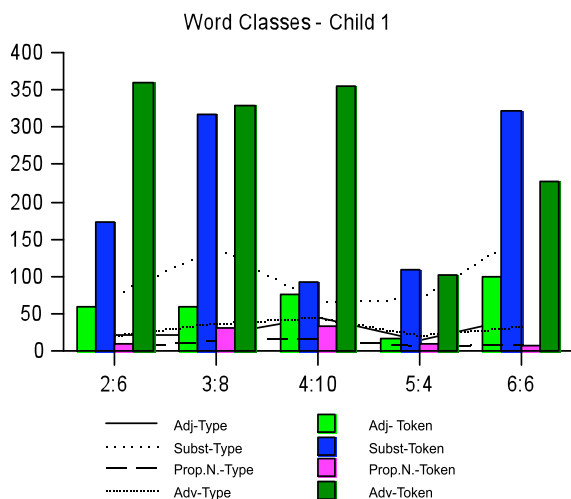
The spontaneous use of diminutives predominates clearly in all subjects, although we register the largest proportion in child speech, particularly C-2. Adults addressing them sometimes repeat the diminutives employed by the child (mostly M-2). There is a curious inverse relation at this respect: the lower the imitation rate by the children, the higher its proportion in adult speech.

8. **Acquisition and development** of diminutives (related to morphological general development).

The peak of use of diminutives takes place between 2:8 (C-1) and 3:8 years old (C-2), but we can consider it as a high productivity procedure from two until four years old; after that (C-1) its use decays.



With regard to word classes, the first uses of diminutives appear in nominal category: nouns and adjectives. The adverbial bases arise only around three years old, in spite of the use of adverbs from the first samples.



The diminutive formation within the framework of morphological development.

Diminutivization has been considered one of the earliest morphological procedures in child language:

“Diminutive formation is the first morphological rule that small children acquire ([...] Karpf 1990:128, 133), that is, it is acquired at a time when there is no distinction yet between extragrammatical morphological operations [...] and grammatical rules. Moreover, the distinction between inflection and derivation has not yet been developed, nor are the regularities of headedness and morpheme order yet acquired. And word classes are not yet clearly differentiated.” Dressler & Merlini-Berbares (1994:408)

In our data, the first sample of C-2 could correspond with this initial moment (1:9 years old): she uses only one diminutive form (*chiquitito*, with double suffix); we consider it as a lexicalized form, because it does not alternate either with its base (*chico*) nor with the simple

diminutive form (*chiquito*). So then, this phase can be considered previous to the diminutive arising⁷.

What happens with the rest of the morphological development?

1) Differences among word classes, by frequency:

Verbs	Adverbs	Pronouns	Nouns	Prepositions	Articles	Adjectives
29.5%	17.7%	12.2%	7.9%	6.9%	4.2%	1.8%

2) Inflection and derivation:

Derivation	No presence
Inflection	Nominal
	→ Gender morphemes (in grammatical words): Masc. = 74.4%; fem. = 23.2% neutr. = 2.3%
	→ Number morphemes: Singular: 99.1%
	Verbal
Inflection	→ Tense: Indicative – Present: 35.7%; Simple Past: 9.8% Imperative: 32.1%; Participle, Gerund and Infinitive: 21.4%
	→ Person: First: 2.2%; Second: 40.9% (always imperative); Third: 56.8%
	→ Number: Singular: 100%

The next samples show the concordance and gender shift:

*CHI: sí, ¡cógela!
 *ADU: ¿cógelo?
 *CHI: ¡cógela!
 [...]
 *CHI: no, e [=es] mía, e [=el] hrojo e [=es] mía!
 *ADU: ¿quieres hablar con Silvia?
 *CHI: no, e [=el] hrojo e [=es] mío, mame [=dame].

To sum up, we found, in this early stage of morphological development, some important absences, besides the lack of diminutives: no other derivation mechanisms, no plurals. However, the differences between word classes are considerable; and the gender shift, with the kind of errors that we have seen in the examples, seems to be in phase of stabilisation. In fact, the diminutive is the first *derivational* rule in our data.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

With these initial results we approach a field that has seen a great deal of research, as much in Spanish (from Alonso, 1954 until recent references in Ambadiang, 1996 and Lázaro Mora,

⁷ We can also consider the absence of diminutives as produced by chance; in this kind of naturalistic corpus, it is always a possible counter-argument.

1999); as in other languages, or crosslinguistically (and, specifically, in language acquisition research): the appreciatives or evaluatives.

The different types of speech presented allow us, on one hand, to obtain some data on the general behaviour of diminutives in Spanish, and, on the other hand, to find out something more about the relationship between child-directed-speech and children speech (Snow and Ferguson, 1977). But, particularly, permit us to deal with two different questions:

- a) Speech situations favouring the diminutive arising (child-centred-speech situation [Dressler & Merlini-Barbaresi, chp. 3.5.2]) vs. neutral speech situation, or even disfavouring for diminutives (conversation between adults, in an academic environment);
- b) The diminutive rule formation and use acquisition and development (child speech).

Concerning the general behaviour of Spanish diminutives, it has become a process used creatively, and not mechanically with the same units; instead it affects a wide variety of lexical items, revealing a high productivity.

The diminutive formation rule appears as typically nominal, acting in our data on substantives and adjectives in almost similar proportions (and to a lesser extent, on adverbs). The most frequent suffix is *-it-* for diminutive, in occasions as the only allomorph, and other times shifting with *-ill-*, in correspondence to the geographical and chronological characteristics of the sample (cfr. : Uritani & Uritani, 1985; and Nández Fernández, 1973).

With regard to the relationships between the child-directed-speech and the children speech, many of our data show a close relationship between both, as much in percentages of use of diminutives, as in MLU, or in distribution in word classes and allomorphs. Even if the three groups studied differ considerably, there is a bigger distance between adult talk and child-directed-speech than between child-directed-speech and child speech. Similar findings have been noticed in other languages (for Greek, see Stephany, 1997: 151; for Lithuanian, see Savickiene, 1998: 122-123; for Dutch, see Gillis, 1997: 171, etc.).

As concerns point a), this previous phase of quantitative analysis brings us to the conclusion that the derivation process used to create diminutives can be considered a typical characteristic both of children speech and child-directed-speech; in other words, the child-centred-speech situation clearly favours the presence of diminutives, and, eventually, augmentatives, in a proportion of 13/1. In later analysis we will approach the semantic and pragmatic aspects of the use of these diminutives.

Regarding the process of acquisition and development of the formation and use of diminutives we have seen a kind of explosion around three or three and a half years old; after that, its use begins to decay, reaching at 6 years old lower values than at 2 years old. Some relationship is possible between these results and the loss of prototypicality of the child as speaker mentioned by Dressler and Merlini-Barbaresi (1994: 174). In previous studies, the most frequent range of ages goes between 1:6 and 2:6 years old, but they show an increase in the use of diminutives after the second year (Ceccherini, Bonifacio and Zocconi, 1997: 159; Savickiene, 1998: 120; Gillis, 1997: 170).

As for the spontaneous vs. imitative uses of diminutives, we have seen that our children are clearly spontaneous. We wonder if this fact should indicate the more active role of the child in the conversational exchange.

Finally, in the earliest stages analysed, previous to the productive arising of diminutives, the morphological nominal flexion has shown in our study gender (but not number) variations. Verbal inflection presents person and tense alternations (although not number, again). In this sense, our subject seems to be in the same stage than Stephany 's children: "both children have a large inventory of inflectional forms at their disposal so that they clearly have entered the inflectional stage" (Stephany, 1997: 155).

Many important questions concerning diminutive acquisition in Spanish remain still unanalysed in this first approach: its semantic and / or pragmatic meaning, including the relation between simplicia and derived forms; a more detailed comparison between our results and the ones obtained for other languages, and the contributions of developmental data to the different hypothesis about the Spanish diminutive formation. They will constitute our next steps in this field.

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