

## SOME NOTES ON THE GRAMMATICAL STATUS OF THE SPANISH *-ITO/-ILLO* DIMINUTIVES AND THEIR TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>

Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez, Francisco José

Universidad de La Rioja, Departamento de Filologías Modernas, C/  
Cigueña 60, 26004 Logroño. La Rioja, Tlfno : (941) 299430/433, Fax :  
(941) 299419, e-mail: franruiz@sur.unirioja.es

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### Resumen

El diminutivo español se ha definido con frecuencia como una categoría gramatical versátil e incluso caprichosa, difícil de sistematizar y de traducir al inglés sin incurrir en serias pérdidas de significado. En este artículo se pretende sistematizar algunos de los principios que subyacen a los diferentes usos y valores de los diminutivos en *-ito* e *-illo* del español, así como de sus equivalentes más cercanos en inglés. Para poder hacerlo, haremos uso de algunas herramientas conceptuales que nos proporcionan los enfoques cognitivo y funcional del lenguaje. Esto nos proporcionará una descripción en la que resaltan los valores que comparten el español y el inglés para dicha categoría. Finalmente se propondrán algunas opciones de traducción fundamentadas en dicha descripción.

**Palabras clave:** diminutivo, traducción, funcional, cognitivo, pragmática.

### Abstract

Spanish diminutives have often been described as versatile and even capricious grammatical categories, difficult to systematize and to translate into English without considerable loss of meaning. This paper is an attempt to systematize some of the principles that underlie the different uses and values of the Spanish *-ito/-illo* diminutives and their nearest English counterparts. In order to do so, we shall make use of some of the conceptual tools provided by functional and cognitive accounts of language. This will provide us with a description where emphasis is made on the common core of values shared by both Spanish and English for the category. Then, we shall explore a number of translation possibilities based on the previous description.

**Key words:** diminutive, translation, functional, cognitive, pragmatics.

### Résumé

Le diminutif espagnol a été souvent défini comme une catégorie grammaticale versatile et même capricieuse, difficile à systématiser et traduire à l'anglais sans subir des pertes de signification considérables. Dans l'article on prétend à systématiser quelques principes sous-jacents aux différents usages et valeurs des diminutifs en "ito" et "illo" de l'espagnol, et aussi leurs équivalents plus proches en anglais. Pour le pouvoir faire, nous emploierons quelques outils conceptuels qui nous proportionnent les perspectives cognitive et fonctionnelle du langage. Cela nous proportionnera une description dans laquelle dominent les valeurs qui partagent l'espagnol et l'anglais pour cette catégorie. Finalement, on proposera quelques options de traduction fondées sur cette description.

**Mots clés:** diminutif, traduction, fonctionnelle, cognitive, pragmatique

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## Sumario

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## 0. Introduction

Spanish diminutives usually pose a problem for translation into English. The Spanish diminutive has usually been seen as versatile and even capricious<sup>2</sup>. Thus, while *-ito* and *-illo* seem to have affectionate and pejorative values respectively (eg. *un regalito* = 'nice little gift', versus *un regalillo* = 'a modest or wretched little gift'), the reverse can also be the case (eg. *eres un granujilla* = 'you are a nice little rogue'; *menudo año* = 'what a really horrible year'). Since these values are expressed synthetically by means of affixation, the translator needs to resort to what may be felt as clumsy paraphrases of the intended meaning that do not always seem to convey the same nuances of meaning as the original.

In this paper, it is my purpose to systematize some of the principles that underlie the different uses and values of the Spanish *-ito/-illo* diminutives<sup>3</sup> and of their nearest English counterparts. In order to do so, we shall take advantage of the explanatory power of a combination of cognitive and functional accounts of language. Finally, we shall address the translation issue from the vantage point provided by the previous theoretical discussion.

## 1. Analytic versus synthetic expressions

First of all, we need a theoretical apparatus capable of dealing systematically with all aspects of the expression and value of the diminutive. The Spanish diminutive is typically expressed synthetically; that is, it is a matter of word-internal structure. The English diminutive is typically expressed analytically; that is, it is a matter of word-external structure. Thus we are faced with an initial problem. Traditional morphology can account for the Spanish diminutive but cannot give us any clue as to its relation with the English translation equivalents, since this is a matter of syntax. We need a theory where word-internal structure and word-external structure are related systematically. One such theory is Dik's Functional Grammar (FG; see Dik, 1989). In it, there is no unified morphological component. The semantic aspect of traditional morphological constituents is dealt with in

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2 This is particularly the case with the classical treatments in Alonso (1951), Montes (1972), and Lázaro (1976). All these authors agree that the diminutive is a basically affective category with an evident social value and that different strands of meaning are intimately interwoven in it. In this paper, I shall attempt to account for these insights in a theoretically plausible way.

3 For practical purposes we shall restrict our account to the *-ito/-illo* distinction, since this is the most productive one. However, there are other diminutive suffixes: *-ico*, *-in* usually have the same affective implications as *-ito*, *-ejo*, *-uelo* are related to *-illo*, and are basically pejorative; *-ete* is used in a humorous fashion. The uses also vary with local talks. In this paper, native speaker judgements for Spanish are primarily drawn from my own Spanish standard. All references to English standard usage have been reviewed by native English-speaking colleagues.

underlying clause structure in terms of predicates (including predicate formation rules) and predicate operators. The formal aspect, on the other hand, is a matter of expression rules which establish the form and order of constituents in the linguistic expressions.

In FG suffixes are merely expression devices for a number of underlying distinctions. They can be either derivational or inflectional. They are derivational when they are part of productive predicate formation rules. For example, we derive *driver* from *drive* by means of an *Agent Noun Formation* rule. This introduces an important regularity in the description and increases the generalizing power of the grammar since derived forms are not listed in the lexicon but predicted by rule. On the other hand, suffixation is inflectional when it is handled by expression rules. This is the case with plural endings, both in English and in Spanish, which are the expression of the plural number term operator, or of tense endings, which are the expression of tense and aspect operators.

Since different languages can have different ways of expressing similar underlying concepts we may expect this to affect suffixation. Consider, for example, the productive English suffix *-less* in words like *treeless*, *meaningless*, *childless*, *countless*, etc. This ending is usually added to nouns to form adjectives indicating the absence of the thing denoted by the noun. There is no exact Spanish equivalent for this suffix so that the examples given here need to be translated in a variety of ways, some of them analytic, some synthetic (eg. *treeless* = *sin árboles/ despoblado de árboles*; *meaningless* = *absurdo/ poco significativo/ sin sentido*; *childless* = *estéril/ sin hijos*; *countless* = *innumerable/ incontable/ sin número*). In much the same way, diminutive suffixes are very frequent in Spanish, but not so in English where these are restricted to a small unproductive set<sup>4</sup> and the expression of the wide range of values traditionally attributed to the Spanish diminutive is primarily analytic.

## 2. Predicate frames and term structure

In FG linguistic expressions are constructed in a bottom-up fashion starting from predicate frames. A predicate frame is a specification of argument structure where semantic functions and selection restrictions are taken into account. For example, the verb *give* is described as having three argument positions where the first argument is an animate agent, the second a goal, and the third an animate recipient. A predicate frame provides the blueprint for the construction of predications by means of the insertion of terms to fill the argument positions. Terms usually designate entities in some world, while predicates designate properties or relations. By way of illustration of the way predications are constructed, consider the predicate frame for *give* in (1) and the partial underlying

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<sup>4</sup> English makes a highly restricted use of diminutive endings like *-ette* in *statuette* *kitchenette*, *-let* in *piglet*, *booklet*, *-ling* in *duckling* and *y* (also *-ie*) in *piggy*, *daddy*, *doggie*, *Susie*. Unlike their Spanish counterparts they do not convey any value other than that of smallness, except perhaps for *piggy* and *daddy* which are typically used by children in an affective way.

specification of the sentence *John gave the book to Mary* in (2) (see Dik, 1989: 54)<sup>5</sup>:

- (1) give<sub>v</sub> (x<sub>1</sub>: <anim>(x<sub>1</sub>))<sub>Ag</sub>(x<sub>2</sub>)<sub>Go</sub>(x<sub>3</sub>: <anim>(x<sub>3</sub>))<sub>Rec</sub>  
 (2) give<sub>v</sub> (d1x<sub>1</sub>: John<sub>N</sub>(x<sub>1</sub>))<sub>Ag</sub>(d1x<sub>2</sub>: book<sub>N</sub>(x<sub>2</sub>))<sub>Go</sub>(d1x<sub>3</sub>: Mary<sub>N</sub>(x<sub>3</sub>))<sub>Rec</sub>

While we can have verbal, adjectival, and nominal predicates, in English and in Spanish nouns are mostly found in term structures. Any predicate can become a term provided that it is sensitive to a term formation rule. For example, the predicate *book* in (2) can take grammatical operators of number and definiteness, thereby conforming to the general schema for term structures (Dik, 1989:115):

- (3)  $\Omega(x_i; \Phi_1(x_i); \Phi_2(x_i); \dots : \Phi_n(x_i))$

In this schema  $\Omega$  stands for one or more term operators,  $x_i$  for the intended referent, and each  $\Phi(x_i)$  is a "predication open in  $x_i$ " (ie. a predicate frame whose argument structure has been filled by term structures in all positions except that occupied by  $x_i$ ). Consider the following example of term structure:

- (4) an expensive gift  
 (i1x<sub>1</sub>: gift<sub>N</sub>(x<sub>1</sub>): expensive<sub>A</sub>(x<sub>1</sub>))  
 This can be read as:

- (5)  
 Indefinite (i) singular (1) entity  $x_1$  such that (:)  $x_1$  has the property "gift", such that  $x_1$  has the property "expensive".

In term structure each of the predicates is a restrictor whose function is, in principle, to narrow down the set of potential referents of the term. Thus, in (4) only those gifts which satisfy the property "expensive" are considered.

It is interesting to note -as will be all the more evident as we proceed with our discussion- that in FG the entities denoted by term structures are mental constructs, and that the operations on terms specified by term operators have both pragmatic and cognitive import. For example, contrast the use of the expressions *a book* and *the book*. In the former the speaker instructs the hearer to construe a referent for the term, whereas in the latter the hearer is required to identify a referent which is presumed to be already available in his knowledge store. The book is in both cases a mental referent, and the operations of construal and identification have mental status<sup>6</sup>.

5 V= verb, N= noun; Ag= agent; Go= goal, Rec= recipient; d= definite; l= singular

6 For a thorough discussion of the implications of this view of term structure, see Ruiz de Mendoza (1993, 1994)

### 3. The treatment of diminutives in FG

Consider now the following expressions of which (7) can be taken as a rough English equivalent of (6):

(6) Ten un regalito para ti

(7) Here's a nice little gift for you

Our first impression, upon comparing the use of the diminutive in these two sentences, would be that in English diminutive expressions have to be explained as a matter of term structure, while in Spanish they have to do with predicate formation. This is in perfect agreement with our previous observation that diminutives are predominantly expressed analytically in English but synthetically in Spanish. However, this is but a naïve view of the comparison between both languages. To begin with, *a (nice) little gift* has, strictly speaking, the same set of potential referents as *a gift*. The adjectives *nice* and *little* do not specify properties that the speaker assigns to the thing denoted. Rather, they are evidence of the speaker's attitude to it, although each in a different way, as will be seen below. In the same way, there is no modification of the denotational value of Spanish *regalito* with respect to *regalo*. This is not what happens when we form different lexical items by means of productive derivation rules. For example, *driver* and *drive* do have different denotata. This leads us to introduce minor modifications in the standard FG accounts of term structure and of predicate formation on the basis of derivational suffixes. In what follows, we shall argue that the most effective way to carry out these revisions is by introducing into the FG framework considerations coming from the interrelation between cognitive semantics and pragmatic theory. This procedure will have the advantage of enhancing the generalizing power of the account even more. In fact, we shall be able to actually work out an important aspect of the expected systematic relationship between word-internal and word-external structure, which shall in turn allow for the systematization of translation regularities.

Let us start with the term structure problem. In spite of the obvious structural similarity between expressions like *an expensive gift* and *a (nice) little gift*, we need to account for them differently. Consider the following expressions:

(8) This gift is expensive/ I consider this gift expensive

(9) This gift is even more expensive

(10) That's a more expensive gift

(11) \*This gift is little/\*I consider this gift little

(12) \*Here's a more little gift for you

Adjectives can typically fill both attributive (ie. premodifying) and predicative (ie. postmodifying) positions. *Little* cannot appear in predicative position, as is evident from the examples in (11) (compare with (8)). Nor does it have comparative and superlative forms, unlike most adjectives, as can be seen from example (12) (compare with (9) and (10)). There are other adjectives in English which can only function attributively (eg. *utter*, *downright*, *old* in *an old friend*, where not the person but the friendship is old). Unlike those adjectives which can function either attributively or predicatively (eg. *expensive* above), adjectives which are restricted to attributive position do not specify a property of the referent, but the speaker's attitude to it.

To the extent that attributive adjectives are not content words we can think of them as akin to grammatical operators. For example, *utter* and *downright* give emphasis to some relevant aspect of the noun that follows; *old* and *little* highlight some aspect of the relationship between the speaker and the referent. They do not add any feature of meaning but rather serve as instructions for the addressee to perform a mental operation on some feature already belonging to the semantic specification of the noun. If this is correct, then attributive adjectives in general, and *little* in particular, are the expression of attitudinal term operators. In this sense, we would be entitled to speak of an attitudinal 'diminution' operator (or "dim") for English. The fact that *little* retains its position immediately to the left of the head of the noun phrase is more a matter of its syntactic expression than of its function, a problem which in FG is resolved by means of placement rules (see Dik. 1989: 332 ff.). But, as with other term operators, the scope of "dim" in underlying term structure is the whole term on which it operates<sup>7</sup>.

Since the function of the "dim" operator is a rather abstract operation (ie. highlighting some aspect of the speaker-referent relationship), it is not unusual to find it associated with other attitudinal adjectives (used in attributive function) which make explicit whatever aspect of the speaker-referent relationship is to be brought to bear. Consider these sentences:

(13) ?What a little child!

(14) What a nice little child!

(15) What a nasty little child!

The speaker's attitude is by no means evident from the information provided by the semantic specification of *child*, which explains the strangeness of (13) and, conversely, the

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<sup>7</sup> Note that in the actual expression each type of term operator takes different positions. For example, in the first two problems, the definiteness operator precedes the ordinator which is followed by the numerator. Dik (1989: 137) seems to assume that this position relations are not arbitrary but motivated by scope relations between operators in underlying structure

aptness of (14) and (15)<sup>8</sup>.

Now, let us turn our attention to the question of the nature of the Spanish *-ito/-illo* diminutive suffixes. The first point we need to elucidate is whether these suffixes are the formal expression of some underlying operator, in the same way as *little* is in English. If this were so, then we would need to know if there is more than one diminutive operator for Spanish or if both suffixes (and other suffixes which will not be considered herein) are dealt with as different ways of expressing the same underlying meaning. In this connection, it would also be necessary to determine whether or to what extent diminutive suffixes in Spanish are a matter of predicate formation. This is a most relevant point since it might question the apparently neat division drawn in FG (an in traditional morphology) between derivational and inflectional processes, on the one hand, and the nature of the relationship between basic and derived predicates, on the other.

We shall consider the first of the points above by contrasting the values of the *-ito/-illo* suffixes. Generally speaking, *-ito* is a basically affective category, while *-illo* seems to be essentially derogatory. It is for this reason, for example, that *Tómese un pastelito* ('Have a nice little cake') is more of an offer than *?Tómese un pastelillo* ('Have a modest little cake'). The diminutive in the latter sentence suggests that what the speaker offers is virtually worthless<sup>9</sup>. The Spanish diminutives seem to share with the English "dim" operator its value as an indication to the addressee that some aspect of the speaker's relationship with the referent is being considered. But they also code the axiological value of that aspect. If we consider the more abstract value as a semantic domain, the distinctions within this domain can be thought of as operators in the same way as we have operators in the domains of definiteness, genericity, deixis, tense, number, aspect, and others<sup>10</sup>. This would point to a treatment of the Spanish *-ito/-illo* diminutive suffixes as the expression of two distinct diminution operators. We can refer to them as "dim1" and "dim2" respectively.

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The use of *little* may indicate a reduction in real size, as is apparent from these examples. However, this need not be the case. Consider the sentence *That fiddling little key you gave won't get into the lock*, where the real size of the key referred to is irrelevant, or this other example borrowed from the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (CCELD) in the entry for *nasty*: *It's a tacky, nasty little movie, frankly*, where it is evident that the "dim" operator serves only to emphasize the speaker's attitude to the film as expressed by the adjective *nasty*. The same holds true of Spanish diminutives: Consider this conversation quoted in Gooch (1970:7) in which a customer is asking for a tube of *Nivea* hand lotion

Assistant: ¿Qué desea? ('Can I help you?')  
Customer: Crema Nivea, por favor ('Nivea hand lotion, please')  
Assistant: ¿En caja o en tubo? ('Would you like it in a box or in a tube?')  
Customer: Deme un tubito. ('Just a tube')  
Assistant: ¿Grande o pequeño? ('Large or small?')

The assistant has only grasped the attitudinal value of the diminutive which explains her final question

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In English these two values are often covered, as we have seen, by the combination of an attributive attitudinal adjective plus the word *little* (eg. *a nice/modest/wretched little car*, *a sweet/nasty little kiss*, *a charming/nasty little boy*, *a nice/revolting little creature*). It is evident that, while keeping a strand of meaning in common with the English "dim" operator, Spanish diminutive suffixes code more information

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In FG, there are operators for terms, predicates, predications, propositions, and illocutions.

There seem to be problems with this view, however. One would be that diminutive suffixes in Spanish are not confined to the class of nouns. In fact, they can be applied to adjectives (eg. *guapito*, 'quite handsome'; *feillo*, 'rather ugly'), adverbs (eg. *prontito*, 'double-quick'; *tardecillo*, 'pretty latish'), participles (eg. *calladito*, 'nice and quiet'; *sentadito*, 'quietly sitting'), and gerunds (eg. *callandito*, 'very quietly'; *lloviznandillo*, 'gently drizzling'). Perhaps, this would call for a treatment of diminutive suffixes in terms of predicate formation. However, the problem now is different. First, diminutive suffixes cannot be derivational in the same sense as other suffixes since they do not alter either the grammatical category of the base or the type of referent. Second, the semantic value of diminutives differs from the one identified above for "dim1" and "dim2" when applied to grammatical categories other than nouns. In these other cases, while they still signal the speaker's positive or negative attitude to whatever is designated (which now is not an entity but a property, a relation, or a state of affairs) the semantic dimension involved is different. These diminutives tend to specify the intensity (along the high-low continuum) with which a property, relation or state of affairs is felt to occur by the speaker. In this sense, they are different types of operator working on levels of grammatical specification other than the term (ie. predicates and predications).

So we conclude, first, that diminutives in Spanish are best handled in terms of operations on various levels of underlying predication structure rather than in terms of productive predicate formation; and second, that there are (among others) two basic diminutive operators in Spanish (one affective, corresponding to *-ito*, and the other pejorative, corresponding to *-illo*) while English only has a more abstract diminutive category<sup>11</sup>. Other diminutives in Spanish seem to share either of these two values to some extent. Thus *-ete* is affective (though slightly less so than *-ito* and perhaps indicating a more playful attitude of the speaker), *-uelo* is somewhat more pejorative than *-illo*, and *-in*, *-ico* are dialectally marked (see Lang, 1992, for details). So, while we shall refer to the two Spanish operators as "dim1" (affective), and "dim2" (pejorative), we shall reserve the label "dim" for the more abstract category as coded in English.

We have been able to shed some light on the contrast between the Spanish and English diminutive categories. However, there seem to be important exceptions to this account as presented here. These will be discussed in the next section, which will allow us to introduce some minor modifications in our definitions of the various "dim" operators.

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<sup>11</sup> The number of operator distinctions varies considerably across languages, although there is often a common core of values. Take demonstratives, for example. It has been observed (Dik, 1989: 148) that demonstrative systems range from a minimum of two to a maximum of well over twenty distinct demonstratives. What remains constant is the existence of a "deictic" centre (consisting of a definite time and place in relation to the speaker and addressee) and of relative relationships to the deictic centre. However, the fact that a relative relationship is not coded in a language does not mean that the idea is not communicable by other means.

#### 4. The cognitive approach

Consider:

(16) ¡Qué granujilla tan simpático! ('What a nice little rogue!')

(17) ?¡Qué granujita tan simpático!

(18) ¡Qué año! ('What a terrible year!')

(19) ¿Me dices cuántos años tienes, bonito? ('Can you show me how old you are, little boy?')

(20) ¡Ay Emiliano! Qué cintillos tan preciosos llevas!<sup>12</sup> ('My good Emiliano! What really beautiful little straps you're wearing!')

(21) A lo lejos se oía la cancioncilla de un pastor ('In the distance one could hear a shepherd's sweet little song')

(22) ¡Cuándo parará la cancioncita! ('When will that nasty little song end!').

Following traditional accounts, we have posited an affective value for the *-ito* suffix, and a pejorative one for *-illo*. However, the uses we observe in examples (16)-(22) seem to counter this claim. Thus, *granujilla* in (16) has a positive affective connotation (curiously enough, note the strangeness of (17)), while *año*(s) can have diametrically opposed values, as shown in (18) and (19); again the *-illo* ending has a positive effect in *cintillos* (example (20)) and in *cancioncillas* (example (21)), while *cancioncita* in (22) is surprisingly negative.

It is interesting to note that in some of these examples it is not possible to substitute one suffix for the other without creating an important oddity. In others the substitution involves a difference in meaning. This suggests a regularity in the apparently deviant uses of these suffixes, which leads us to think that there is no reason, in principle, why we should attempt to account for these examples separately from the non-deviant uses. But before we attempt to pin down the possible regularities, we shall give a characterization of the two "dim" values from a cognitive perspective.

The cognitive perspective is based on the well-known notion of *idealized cognitive model* (or ICM) as expounded by Lakoff (1987, 1989). ICMs are cognitive structures which do not necessarily mirror reality faithfully, but which attempt to represent it from a certain perspective; that is, they are idealizations and/or abstractions. The origin of the use of

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Federico García Lorca, *La Zapatera Prodigiosa*, 3rd ed. Madrid: Austral, 1976, p. 150.

diminutives to highlight the relationship (with an affective or a pejorative bias) between speaker and referent can be traced to our experiential knowledge about how people interact differently with objects depending on their size. So we can ultimately relate diminutives to the ICM of 'size'. The part of this ICM which is relevant for our discussion may be spelled out as follows:

- (a) Entities range in size from very small ones to very large ones.
- (b) A small entity is often more manageable than a bigger one.
- (c) A small entity is often less harmful than a bigger one.

From (b) and (c), we derive, as corollaries, two opposed emotional reactions:

- (d) Small entities are likeable.
- (e) Small entities are unimportant.

Since small entities can presumably do us no harm, they can be ignored. Alternatively, and for the same reason, we can comfortably be side by side with them to such an extent that they may become attractive for us: people tend to develop feelings of fondness for people and things under their control. Both the various combinations of attributive adjective plus *little* in English and the Spanish *-ito/-illo* suffixes derive their affective or derogatory values from the corollaries (d) and (e).

By way of illustration of the application of (d) and (e) we can think of offers like *Tómese otra tacita de té* ('Do have another little cup of tea'), where the use of the *-illo* ending would render the utterance rather inappropriate. The idea here is that *tacita* is more likeable than simply *taza*, which reinforces the positive quality of the offer<sup>13</sup>. In using the *-ito* suffix we call upon corollary (d) of the ICM of size. On the other hand, in an expression like *Tengo un sueldecillo que apenas me permite vivir* ('I earn a modest little income, barely enough for a living'), the *-illo* diminutive draws upon corollary (e) with the effect that the speaker presents his income as a rather unimportant one.

It is interesting to note that the account given here is able to explain cases in which

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13 Of course, we are not using the diminutive at all in the sense of size reduction provided by part (a) of the ICM but only on the basis of corollary (d). This is the unmarked value coded by "dim1" in Spanish. That it is only this value that has been coded in Spanish is evident from the versatility of the suffix, which can be applied to other word classes, as we pointed out before, with a closely related meaning effect. For example, consider

(i) Tiene ud un niño muy guapito ('You have a pretty handsome little boy', note the slight oddity of ?Tiene ud un niño muy guapillo)  
(ii) Hombre, tan feo no es, es bastante guapillo ('Well, he isn't that ugly, he's rather handsomish')

The adjective *guapo* has obvious positive connotations which can be intensified by the *-ito* suffix or downgraded by *-illo*. Handsomeness is pleasant; likeable handsomeness is even more pleasant. Unimportant handsomeness, in contrast, is not just as pleasant. Also, note that *guapillo* has positive non-pejorative overtones only because of the overpowering positive value of the root word

there is no obvious difference between using the *-ito* or the *-illo* ending. Take these two sentences, to be interpreted as mitigated requests:

(23) ¡Venga, dame un pastelito ...! ('Come on, give me a nice little cake!').

(24) ¡Venga, dame un pastelillo ...! ('Come on, just give me a little cake!').

Even though both sentences are similar in terms of their illocutionary force, this should not mislead us into thinking that *pastelito* and *pastelillo* have the same affective value. *Pastelillo* is essentially pejorative, while *pastelito* is affective<sup>14</sup>. What we have in (23) and (24) is simply two different ways of creating the same meaning effect from the point of view of the pragmatics of the message. The two alternatives hinge on what Leech (1983) has aptly called the *cost-benefit scale* in his treatment of politeness phenomena. The idea here is that polite behaviour tends to maximize the benefit to others and to minimize the benefit to oneself or, from a complementary perspective, to minimize the cost to others and to maximize the cost to oneself. In (23) the use of affective *-ito* implies that the speaker finds the referent all the more desirable and therefore highly beneficial to him; if the hearer wants to be polite, in accordance with the first part of the cost-benefit scale, he should do his best to cater for the speaker's desires. In (24), on the other hand, the use of *-illo* suggests that the referent is really not very valuable, with the implication that providing the speaker with it should represent little, if any, cost to the addressee. Obviously, this implication is based on the second part of the cost-benefit scale.

This confluence of values is frequent enough to produce a feeling of uncertainty in many speakers as to the real value of each diminutive suffix. To this problem contribute other non-semantic factors which have been thoroughly investigated by other authors (see Lázaro, 1976; Lang, 1992). For example, some words do not take a diminutive suffix simply to avoid an ill-sounding phonetic effect (eg. *año*, 'year' > \**añillo*; *cuchillo*, 'knife' > \**cuchillillo*; *silla*, 'chair' > \**sillilla*). In other cases, one diminutive form has been lexicalized (eg. *bomba*, 'bomb' > *bombilla*, 'light bulb'; *cola*, 'tail' > *colilla*, 'cigarette end'; but note *coche*, 'car' > *cohecito*, 'pram' or 'nice little car'). These and other cases<sup>15</sup> are the cause of important asymmetries in the system and tend to favour indeterminacy.

Now we are in a position to analyse the rest of the apparently problematic examples at the beginning of this section. First, we have the positive value of *granujilla* in (16). This is explained with reference to corollary (e) of the ICM of size. The root word *granuja*

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Imagine a husband who is caught red-handed by his wife as he breaks his diet by eating a cake, and says, '¡Solo ha sido un pastelillo de nada!' ('That was just a wretched little cake!'). The husband's use of the *-illo* diminutive serves to belittle the significance of his misbehaviour. Now, contrast the positive use of the *-ito* diminutive in a complimentary utterance like *Que pastelitos mas buenos vende ud!* ('You really sell some tasty little cakes!')

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There are more irregularities. Lázaro (1976) has pointed out that abstract nouns (like *gravedad*, 'gravity') do not usually take diminutive suffixes. But abstract nouns ending in *-ura* (eg. *ternura* 'tenderness') are an exception, perhaps by analogy with concrete nouns with the same ending (eg. *cintura* 'waist'). Action nouns (eg. *alabanza*, 'praise') are not found in the diminutive form unless they are recategorized as concrete nouns (*licencia*, 'licence' > *licencita*) or end in *-ción/-sión*, or *-ida* (eg. *invasión*, 'invasion', *acogida* 'welcome'). Concrete nouns, on the other hand, always take the diminutive ending except in cases of semantic or phonetic incompatibility (eg. those ending in *-s* as in *caries*, 'cavity', *lunes*, 'Monday')

('rogue') has negative connotations: a rogue may do you harm. But the *-illo* suffix conveys the idea that, by being reduced in size, the rogue becomes unimportant, therefore harmless, therefore even likeable. Note that this logic does not hold for the *-illo* suffix when the overall meaning of the utterance is positive. In such cases, diminishing the importance of the entity denoted by the noun only serves to take away from its positive value (remember *tacilla* and *sueldecillo* above). Note also that *-ito* cannot achieve the same positive effect as *-illo* when applied to negative situations, simply because *-ito* works primarily on the basis of corollary (d) of the ICM of size. The idea would be that a negative entity or situation is directly likeable, which is not. To be likeable it needs, first of all, to become unimportant and therefore harmless.

*Añito* -as in (18) and (19)- can have either a positive or negative bias since the form \**añillo* is impossible, as we have just observed. *Cintillos* and *cancioncillas* have both affective overtones, although for different reasons. *Cintillos* (but not so *cintitos*) might as well have been used in a negative way, as in:

- (25) ¡Pero qué son esos cintillos que llevas! ('What's those wretched little straps you're wearing!').

In (20) *cintitos* would have served basically the same purpose. The positive value of *cintillos* in (20) is derived from the general positive connotation of the context rather than from the diminutive itself.

Finally, we have the contrast between *cancioncilla* and *cancioncita* as used in examples (21) and (22) respectively. As we have seen, the *-illo* suffix is often used with affective value in spite of its predominantly pejorative implications. We gave an explanation for this on the basis of corollary (e) of the ICM of size. However, this explanation is only valid in cases of situations felt to be negative by the speaker. In other cases, the affective shade of meaning is a consequence of the possible contrast with other more pejorative suffixes, like *-ejo* and *-ucho*, which are rarely associated with the idea of smallness and therefore cannot be reinterpreted in a positive way, as was the case with (20) and (24) above. Thus, *cancionzucha* ('rotten old song') would be truly and inescapably pejorative, while there is ambivalence in *cancioncilla*, which can be used either in an affective or in a derogatory way (cf. *No era más que una cancioncilla de nada; no podía ganar*; 'it was but a modest little song; it couldn't possibly win'). The affective connotation which is often associated with the *-illo* diminutive is derived from the idea of unimportance, and in fact, even when its use is unmistakably pejorative, there is still some affective ring to it. This is particularly noticeable when *-illo* is contrasted with a distinctly pejorative suffix like *-ucho*:

- (26) Tengo un papelillo en una obra de teatro ('I have a modest minor role in a play').

- (27) Tengo un papelucho en una obra de teatro ('I have a wretched minor role in a play').
- (28) Es algo palidilla, pero, por lo demás, es bastante guapa ('She looks a bit pale, but otherwise she's quite good-looking') (note \**Está bien palidilla*)
- (29) Está (bien) paliducha (\*pero por lo demás es bastante guapa) ('She has a rather pallid look').

With respect to example (22), we have observed an overall negative impression: the speaker finds the referent definitely unpleasant, even irritating. However, we may find *cancioncita* in expressions with overall positive overtones, as in *Venga, ¡sólo una cancioncita más!* ('Come on, just another nice little song'). This permits us to stick to our proposal that *-ito* suffixes are primarily affective. The question now is how is the non-affective, negative bias of (22) arrived at? The key to the answer lies in the negative value of the whole expression, with independence of the diminutive type employed. The *-ito* suffix has the function of reinforcing the predominant axiological value conveyed by an expression. If this is positive, the primary result will be a reinforced positive bias; secondarily, the application of corollary (d) of the ICM of size will favour an affective emotional reaction on the part of the speaker. If the value is negative, the *-ito* diminutive will tend to reinforce it and, as a result, to promote what may be called *negative affection*, that is, a strong dislike of the entity or the situation involved. This is exactly the case with the diminutive in (22) and is also true of others like *¡Vaya películita más aburrida! Nunca termina* ('What a really boring little film! It goes on and on'), *¡Vaya con la sorpresita!* ('What a nasty little surprise!'), *¡Qué porquería de cochecito!* ('What a wretched little car!'), etc.

To further illustrate this point, consider these other examples:

- (30) ¡Qué deliciosos pastelitos! ('What really delicious little cakes!')
- (31) ¡Vaya pastelitos que me has vendido! ('What nasty little cakes you sold me!').

Read (30) as an expression of personal delight, and (31) as a complaint. Or, alternatively, read (30) in an ironical tone, and (31) as an expression of positive astonishment. The overtone does not depend as much on the use of the diminutive as of the other accompanying grammatical features. Thus, the *-ito* suffix only serves to intensify either the positive or the negative aspects already attributed to the referent by the rest of the expression. In (30) these are positive, whereas in (31) they are negative. So, *pastelitos* keeps its basically affective bias which is either confirmed or cancelled out by the rest of the communicative situation. If the latter is the case, the *-ito* suffix is only capable of retaining

its value as an intensifier.

From these observations we draw the following general conclusions:

-Both Spanish and English diminutive categories have operator status in underlying predication structure. The expression of the diminutive operators is analytic in English, but synthetic in Spanish.

-Even though apparently a derivational category, the Spanish diminutive shares many significant features with inflectional categories. For the sake of a unified treatment for Spanish and English we have postulated the existence in both languages of an underlying "dim" operator working on a specific cognitive dimension related to part of the natural logic of the ICM of size.

-The "dim" operator in English works exclusively on term structure. Its value is cognitively and pragmatically defined as an indication to the addressee that some aspect of the speaker's relationship with the referent is being considered. Through the application of pragmatic principles the diminutive may be used to create special illocutionary effects, like intensifying an offer or mitigating a request.

-In Spanish there is a larger number of diminution operators than in English. The *-ito/-illo* contrast is central for the definition of the semantic dimension from which such operators derive their values. Although they may operate on various levels of underlying predication structure, they are prototypically applied to non-abstract entity-denoting terms. They have in common their value as either downgraders or intensifiers. Then, their application to terms or situations produces various cognitive effects which can be systematized as follows:

For *-ito* or "dim1":

(i) If the underlying specification on which "dim1" operates is felt to be positive, this operator intensifies this value. As a result, the resulting expression is felt to have "affective" overtones.

(ii) If the underlying specification on which "dim1" operates is felt to be negative, this operator intensifies this value. As a result, we obtain an effect of "negative affection" or pejorative bias.

For *-illo* or "dim2":

(i) If the underlying specification on which "dim1" operates is felt to be positive, this operator downgrades this value. The overall resulting effect is pejorative.

(ii) If the underlying specification on which "dim1" operates is felt to be negative, this operator downgrades the importance of this value to such an extent that the overall resulting effect is positive.

For the rest, the Spanish diminutive categories may be used -just as their English counterparts- to produce essentially the same illocutionary effects. This is due to the fact that Spanish and English share, in all relevant respects, the same pragmatic scales of politeness as described by Leech (1983).

## 5. Translation strategies

Spanish and English share substantially the same ICM of 'size', with its two corollaries, as set out above. Also, both languages share the cost-benefit scale. This makes the Spanish diminutive all the more translatable into English with scarcely any loss in meaning. There are difficulties, however, in that Spanish has coded a larger number of diminutive values than English or, to be more precise, has coded them somewhat differently, as evidenced by our previous discussion of the "dim" and "dim1/dim2" operators. Another difficulty originates in the wider application potential of diminution operators across word classes in Spanish. This will require different translation strategies depending on the operator type we are dealing with. We list some of them below, without trying to be exhaustive. For the sake of clarity, we describe the strategies according to word class and operator type:

### (i) Nouns

"Dim1" and "dim2" are usually translatable as a combination of one of a fairly restricted set of attitudinal adjectives plus *little*. The adjective is often optional but, if used, it has the function of making explicit in what sense the speaker finds the designated entity either likeable or unpleasant. Examples of some of the most usual combinations are.

-With positive overtones: *nice little hotel* ('hotelito'), *delightful little cake* ('pastelito'), *charming little village* ('pueblecito'), *engaging little boy* ('niñito'), *cute little dog* ('perrito'), *dear little mouse* ('ratoncito'), *gentle little kiss* ('besito'), *dainty little dress* ('vestidito'), *sweet little bird* ('pajarito').

-With negative overtones: *nasty little film* ('peliculilla'), *disturbing little creature* ('criaturilla'), *wretched little car* ('cochecillo'), *miserable little bird* ('pajarillo'), *insignificant little man* ('hombrecillo').

There are other attitudinal adjectives that can translate diminutive values without appearing in combination with *little*. Consider: *petty (little) details* ('detallitos'), *a minor problem* ('un problemilla'), *a slight taste* ('un saborcillo'), *a fine young lad* ('un jovencito').

### (ii) Other word classes:

When the diminutive is applied to a word class other than a noun, it serves a purely intensifying purpose. The appropriate translation is consequently more context-dependent than when the diminutive operates on a noun. For example, *sentadito* may be translated variously as *properly sitting*, *quietly sitting*, *delicately sitting*, *daintily sitting*, *nicely sitting*, etc. The word *little* plays no role whatsoever in the translation of this type of diminutive, since it is only applicable to nouns. Instead, we may use other attitudinal expressions. Consider:

- (32) Your children look exactly alike ('Tus hijos son igualitos')
- (33) He's already quite grown-up ('Ya está crecídito')
- (34) Let's see if you keep nice and quiet ('A ver si te estás calladito')
- (35) They spoke very softly ('Hablaron muy bajito')
- (36) She feels just a bit tired ('Se nota algo cansadilla')
- (37) She's rather conceited ('Es una creidilla')

## 6. Final remarks

Before we end, let us consider what may be regarded as the main translation problem posed by the Spanish diminutive: the translator has to decide whether or not he will make explicit the full value provided by the category. For example, it would be fairly appropriate for us to translate *trajecito* as *nice little suit/dress*, making explicit by means of the adjective *nice* the positive connotations conveyed by the Spanish *-ito* suffix. However, observe -from the excerpts below- the way this diminutive is dealt with by the translator of Cela's *La Romería*<sup>16</sup>:

Encarnita decía que sí, que claro; sentada en una piedra un poco alta, con *s u*  
*trajecito* azulina y su gran lazo, la niña estaba muy mona, esa es la verdad [...]

Encarnita said that it was true, that it was obvious; sitting on a rather high  
boulder, with her *little* bluish dress and her large hair-band, the girl was very  
pretty, that is the truth [...]

It is clear that in this translation, the use of *nice* is unnecessary, since its positive value is easily derivable from the general tone of the text. In fact, an expression like *her nice little bluish dress* would be rather cumbersome, mainly because of the increase in the amount of premodifiers of the noun.

Part of the reason why we feel that the expression *her nice little bluish dress* is rather infelicitous derives from the fact that it puts the reader to some extra processing effort without any special gain in information. This is exactly the type of prediction that is made by the application of the two criteria of relevance in Sperber and Wilson's well-known Relevance Theory (see Sperber & Wilson, 1995). According to them, speakers are expected to produce utterances which aim to strike a balance for the addressee between

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<sup>16</sup> Cela C J., 1966, "La Romería", in Franco, J (ed.), *Spanish Short Stories 1 Cuentos Hispánicos 1*, Harmondsworth Penguin, pp 114-115, parallel text in English provided by Gordon Brotherston (Emphasis mine in both excerpts)

processing effort and contextual effects (these are the amount of information eventually obtained by the addressee) Such considerations of relevance enable us to determine when and to what extent it may be convenient to provide the addressee with explicit information<sup>17</sup>. For this reason, they are particularly relevant when dealing with the translation of Spanish diminutives. Thus, it will often be the case that there are enough clues in the message for the addressee to be able to work out, without much effort, the intended affective or pejorative values. In those cases, the use of attitudinal adjectives may be unnecessary.

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For a detailed treatment of translation theory from the point of view of Relevance Theory, see Gutt (1991). Gutt argues that translation is to be seen as a matter of "interlingual interpretive use". This imposes a sufficiently weak constraint on the translator, who will only be required to produce a receptor language text which interpretively resembles the original. On the other hand, the constraint is strong enough to avoid the derivation of unintended contextual implications by the addressee, since the translator will strive to guarantee that the receptor language text resembles the original in all relevant respects.

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