

# Diminutives in Southern Hemisphere Englishes<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This article deals with the differences in diminutive formation and usage in Australian (AusE), New Zealand (NZE), and South African (SAE) Englishes (Southern Hemisphere Englishes; SHEs). Diminutives in -ie characteristic for all three varieties have been analyzed. The study shows that South African English contains a lot of diminutives borrowed from Afrikaans and is therefore different from Australian and New Zealand varieties where almost all diminutives are formed from English bases. Other differences in the composition of diminutives in each SHEs variety reflect the distinguishing features of local flora and fauna, as well as phenomena characteristic of the local social environment.*

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## 1 Introduction

English diminutives are a productive language phenomenon. They can potentially be derived from many words; however, this potential is limited by some restrictions. The formation and functioning of diminutive items is determined by both structural characteristics of the language, which imply some restrictions on the ways of diminutive formation, and the context of diminutive usage. This makes diminutives useful material for studying language variation, as well as the factors that cause this variation.

According to Schneider (2003), diminutives are words that express smallness and/or some kind of attitude. In this work I deal with diminutives in SHEs – Australian, New Zealand and South African Englishes that are considered a separate group of English varieties due to some common linguistic traits, as well as the geographical position of the countries, and the way English spread there (Watts/Trudgill 2002, Schneider 2011, etc.).

Of all English varieties, New Zealand and Australian Englishes are thought to be most prone to diminutive formation, which is confirmed by a great number of works on the topic (Wierzbicka 1984; Sussex 2004; Bardsley/Simpson 2009; Kidd/Kemp/Quinn 2011, etc.). The extent of diminutive “richness” of South African English, and the specific features of its diminutives are still to be analyzed. Therefore the main aim of this paper is to find the diminutives characteristic of each of the three varieties of SHEs, as well as the diminutives that are not shared by the varieties, and to find some explanation for the identified similarities and differences.

## 2 Data

The source of research material for this study is the Corpus of Global Web-Based English (GloWbE)<sup>2</sup>. I have chosen GloWbE, because it provides the possibility of studying regional variation – it includes texts from 20 varieties of English and allows analysis and comparison of data in all varieties.

This corpus is one of the largest (1.9 bln words) web-based corpora; it allows a wide range of studies on morphological, syntactic and semantic variation among different varieties of

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<sup>2</sup> <https://corpus.byu.edu/glowbe/>

English. As for the composition/content of the corpus, about 60 % of texts are taken from informal blogs, the other 40 % come from other web-based materials (newspapers, company web-sites, etc.; Davies/Fuchs 2015). Moreover, it is a web-based corpus, which means that the language of texts included in the corpus represents informal communication and presumably gives an opportunity for a better search for diminutives.

There is one more reason to use corpora for studying diminutives: a lot of words in English can form the base for a diminutive, which is why it is quite difficult to make a comprehensive list of diminutives. In this case, a corpus-driven study (used in this work) can be applied, as it may allow a productive search for diminutives with different frequencies characteristic of a particular variety of English.

### 3 What is a diminutive?

Diminutives can generally be described as lexical units that denote smallness and/or express some kind of attitude (Schneider 2003: 4). Thus, there are two main criteria that can be used to categorize a lexical unit as a diminutive. The first is a formal one; it suggests that to be defined as a diminutive, a lexical unit should be a derivative formed with the help of a diminutive marker (most commonly, a suffix; Crystal 1991: 104; McArthur 1992: 314). The majority of scholars though point to the fact that the meaning of the derivative should be taken into account first (Jurafsky 1996; Schneider 2003; Carter/McCarthy 2006; Tagabileva 2016, etc.).

The second criterion is therefore a semantic one. Káňa (2018) singles out two main diminutive meanings – smallness and evaluation (e.g. endearment or irony). He states that “real” diminutives have a (potentially) evaluative meaning. If an evaluative meaning is absent, the lexical unit is treated as a “quasi” diminutive (this is the case with the majority of technical terms in Czech he considers in his work – e.g. *lékárnička* [pharmacy<sup>DIM</sup>] ‘first-aid kit’ or *pusinka* [mouth<sup>DIM</sup>, kiss<sup>DIM</sup> ‘meringue’]). Other linguists (Heltberg 1964; Strang 1968) support the idea that the “realness” of the diminutive is in its ability to express evaluation.

Some scholars, on the contrary, state that “real” diminutives are those only in which “the idea of smallness is still present” (Hasselrot/Politzer 1959: 334), at least to some extent. Torrend (1891) and Petersen (1910) support this view. Heltberg (1964: 95-96) also calls them “pure” diminutives, while Siatkowska (1967) gives them the name “proper” diminutives.

For this article, I will define diminutiveness in a broad sense and therefore include into the research material both diminutives denoting smallness and those that express some kind of attitude, e.g. *cutties* ‘small cuts’, *thickie* ‘a person lacking in intelligence’.

### 4 Southern Hemisphere Englishes: history and linguistic peculiarities

In this work, I consider diminutives in inner circle varieties, according to the model of concentric circles introduced by Kachru (1992). The inner circle includes such countries as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand, where English is the first (native) language of a large proportion of the population. Following Bolton (2009), Melchers and Shaw (2013), I also include South Africa into the inner circle, though this is a debatable issue that requires further consideration (Bauer 2002, Cichocka 2006).

The formation of SHEs started later than the formation of the Northern Hemisphere varieties (e.g. Irish, Scottish, American and Canadian Englishes) as part of the second wave of British

colonization that began at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the time of formation and the geographical position, SHEs share a lot of structural similarities which are most probably due to the similarity in British settlers moving to the new territories. As Trudgill (2000: 302) notes:

“These similarities, we maintain, are due to the fact that South African and Australian English are also the result of dialect mixture and that, furthermore, they arose from similar mixtures of similar dialects in roughly similar proportions occurring at a similar period in history.”

Speaking of the mixture of similar dialects, all three SHEs varieties developed, first of all, due to British migrants (primarily from south and south-east of Britain; largely working-class people, including convicts), as well as those coming from Scotland and Ireland. The majority of them were people from lower or middle social class, in some cases they came from rural areas. Diagram 1 (based on the data from Trudgill 2000) represents the proportion of settlers coming from different anglophone areas in 1800–1876 to the territories of SHEs.

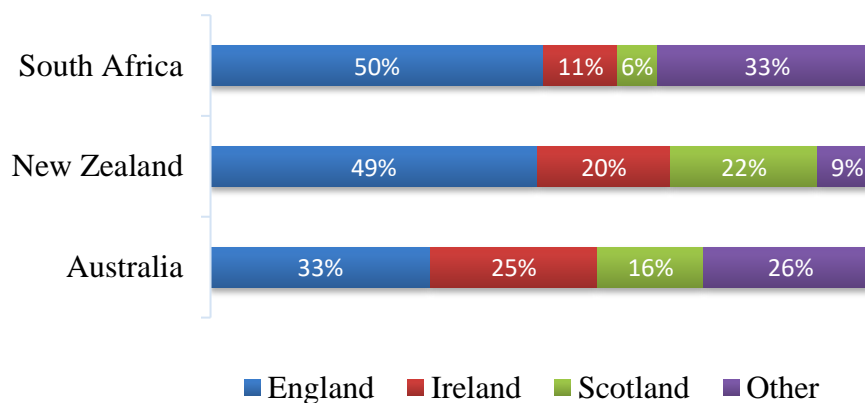


Diagram 1: The proportion of settlers coming from different Anglophone areas in 1800–1876

As for the common linguistic traits of the SHEs varieties, very often scholars mention their phonetic similarity (non-rhotic; short front vowel shift; Trudgill 2004; Watson, Harrington/Evans 2008; Millar 2012, etc.). There are almost no distinctive features of SHE grammar, as compared to British English; speaking of the rare differences, Brandford (1994) notes that it is difficult to say whether they are unique of the variety or just characteristic of spoken English in general.

Along with phonetics and phonology, lexis is another often discussed part of the language system, if one speaks of SHEs. Concepts that denote the local flora and fauna, peculiarities of the local topography, as well as customs and specific features of the local people’s life – all of this had to be reflected in the lexis of settlers. As a result, words to express these features were borrowed from the indigenous languages into the developing varieties (Leitner/Sieloff 1998; Macalister 2006). In some cases, lexical units from British English acquired new meanings in the SHEs varieties, while some English words no longer used in their source varieties continued their functioning in SHEs (Trudgill 2004: 84).

Several linguists claim that one more distinctive feature of the SHEs is an extensive usage of diminutives (Bauer 2002; Trudgill 2004). Of all three varieties, Australian English is most prone to diminutive formation. Sussex (2004), for example, notes that this variety contains about 5000 diminutive items. There are several possible reasons for this.

Egalitarianism is often considered one of the main causes of the high frequency of diminutives in Australian English. Researchers (Fiske/Hodge/Turner 1987; Mcleay 1997, etc.) note that equality and anti-authoritarianism, which are part of the egalitarian society, are the authentic values of the Australian culture. As a result, informality and mateship are often emphasized, which is reflected in the local language varieties as well. One more reason for the abundance of diminutives is the ludic character (playfulness) of Australian English, which is due to the cultural value of not taking anything too seriously (Thornhill 1992: 133). To provide some evidence to this fact, scholars most often turn to the Australian vocabulary, as, following Collins and Blair (2001: 3), lexicon is “arguably, the most transparent reflection of speakers’ attitudes, values and self-perception”. Among such lexical means characteristic of Australian English linguists enumerate the tradition of creating nicknames, rhyming slang, etc., including diminutives. Apart from decreasing the formality of communication and making it non-serious, diminutives can serve as a group marker; in case of Australian English, they mark in-group membership of Australian society (Kidd et al. 2016).

Influence of other languages and their varieties is also often mentioned as predetermining such abundance of diminutives in Australian and other Englishes of the Southern Hemisphere. In this respect, scientists first of all refer to Cockney, the dialect of English that is traditionally spoken by working-class people in London. In the case of Australian English, the Yorta Yorta (Bangerang) language spoken by indigenous people could also have some impact on the development of the diminutives, because, as Curr (1887: 569) notes, diminutives were very common in this language. Regarding South African English, Donaldson (1993: 87) notes that a lot of diminutives in SAE are loanwords from Afrikaans.

## **5 Results**

The main aim of this study was to single out the diminutives characteristic of each SHEs variety. In what follows I will describe the application of a corpus-driven approach that addresses this objective. Section 5.1. will discuss diminutives that can be found in several of the SHEs varieties, their semantic groups and frequencies of the most common ones. Section 5.2 will deal with variety-specific diminutives.

### **5.1 Cross-varietal comparison**

Variation studies are one of the core possibilities provided by the web interface for GloWbE. One of its key features is that the interface allows the researcher to compare the frequency of items in instances per million (ipm) across the different varieties and thus to highlight those that are specific to a certain variety in comparison to the rest. As a result, the interface provides a list of most characteristic words for a particular variety. Moreover, there are other settings that can be modified according to the research task. For example, it is possible to set a minimum frequency for words included in the search results.

In my study, I contrasted the pairs of GloWbE subcorpora – a particular inner circle country (e.g. Australia) vs. other inner circle countries (excluding Australia). I carried out several queries with different minimum frequency (starting with 1) to find out which frequency provides the largest number of diminutives including both high-frequent ones as well as those that are not very widespread to get a more comprehensive picture of diminutive functioning in the varieties under discussion.

As *-ie* suffix is thought to be most commonly used suffix for diminutive formation, and because its use is not restricted geographically (Bauer 2002), this paper will deal with *-ie* only.

For each variety, a list of 1000 words with *-ies* ending was extracted from the corpus. Then, with the help of online dictionaries (Oxford, Cambridge, Collins online dictionaries), all non-diminutives (such as full-form words, misspellings) were manually removed from the lists. After that, the lists of diminutives typical of each variety were made. The number of diminutives and the subcorpora size for each SHEs variety are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Subcorpora size and the number of diminutives found for each SHEs variety<sup>3</sup>.

	Australian English	New Zealand English	South African English
Number of different types of diminutives	149	176	169
Number of tokens of diminutives (normalized frequency of instances per million words)	8 455 (57.05 ipm)	3 480 (42.76 ipm)	1 997 (44.02 ipm)
Size of subcorpus (words)	148 208 169	81 390 476	45 364 498

The table demonstrates that though speaking about diminutives a lot of scholars consider primarily Australian English, other Southern Hemisphere varieties also support this “pro-diminutive” trend, as the number of diminutives is quite comparable for each variety, despite different subcorpora sizes.

As for the similarity of diminutives from SHEs, 81 items from my sample are similar for all three varieties or can be found in two of them. Table 2 presents these diminutives and lists them according to the varieties compared. For easier understanding, the diminutives are also organized according to their semantic properties. In case of polysemous diminutives (marked with \*), several meanings were found in the corpus, e.g. *grandies* for ‘grandchildren’ or ‘grandparents’; *catties* for ‘catfish’ (AusE) or ‘catapult’ (SAE); only the most common one was included in the table.

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<sup>3</sup> The first row of the table reflects the diversity of diminutives in SHEs; the second one shows the diminutive richness of texts in the varieties under consideration.

Table 2: Diminutives shared by SHEs varieties

	All 3 varieties (6)	Items shared by Australian English and New Zealand English (52)	Items shared by Australian English and South African English (13)	Items shared by New Zealand English and South African English (10)
People	Aussies, touchies	cockies*, Dutchies, grandies*, greenies, groundies*, kindies*, leaguies, littlies, loopies, Ozzies, polies*, pollies, premmies, rellies, sparkies, subbies, surfies, truckies, tradies, towies*, warmies, wharfies	livies*, newies*, pommies, tweeties*, twinnies*, windies	Ausies, loosies, noddies*, troopies
Animals	Flatties	fluffies*, freshies*, mossies, pippies, salties, sheepies*, spotties*, tunnies, youngies	catties*	
Food	Brekkies	bickies*, bikkies*, cuppies, lollies, middies*, mushies, stubbies*, tinnies*	nibblies	bubblies*, slushies
Clothes	Woolies	boardies, jarmies, trackies, undies	sunnies*, woollies	beanies
Other	Bommies	bombies, gollies, leafies, leggies, ouchies, pokies*, possies*, wedgies, whoopsies	headies, steelies, tanties	bivvies, blinkies*, quickies

The table shows that in terms of diminutives Australian and New Zealand Englishes are much closer to each other than to South African English, though there are some diminutives characteristic of all three varieties as well. New Zealand and South African Englishes share the smallest number of diminutives. This closeness of Australian and New Zealand varieties can be attributed first of all to the geographical proximity of the two countries and to the additional influence of Dutch via Afrikaans on the vocabulary of South African English, which led to more unique diminutives in this variety (see also section 5.2).

Corpora provide an opportunity not only to find diminutives characteristic of a variety, but also to identify the ones most specific (i.e. more frequent in comparison) to each of the three varieties. The most frequent diminutives found in more than one variety are included in Table 3.

Table 3: The most frequent diminutives characteristic of several varieties.

Diminutive	Frequency in varieties (in ipm)
Aussies ‘australians’	15.70 (AusE); 5.87 (NZE); 7.72 (SAE)
woolies ‘woolen clothes’	2.17 (AusE); 0.18 (NZE); 2.65 (SAE)
pollies ‘politicians’	4.67 (AusE); 1.35 (NZE)
pokies ‘poker machine’ or ‘place with poker machines’	3.20 (AusE); 2.16 (NZE)
lollies ‘lollipops’	2.97 (AusE); 2.48 (NZE)
undies ‘underwear’	2.58 (AusE); 1.23 (NZE)
greenies ‘supporters of a green party’	2.02 (AusE); 1.27 (NZE)
tradies ‘tradesmen’	1.41 (AusE); 0.28 (NZE)

## 5.2 Zooming in on variety-specific items

In this section, I will turn to those diminutives that are present in one variety only<sup>4</sup>.

Language contacts and influence of other (first of all, local) languages is one of the main reasons that predetermine existence and usage of variety-specific diminutives (cf. section 4). In my sample it is primarily relevant for South African English – while almost all diminutives in Australian and New Zealand Englishes are derived from English bases, some diminutives in South African English are loanwords from Afrikaans:

Bakkies – bak – Eng. ‘container’	Eendjies – eend – Eng. ‘duck’
Bergies – berg – Eng. ‘mountain’	Koppies – kop – Eng. ‘head’
Boeries – boerewors – Eng. ‘sausage’	Maties – maat – Eng. ‘mate’
Bossies – bos – Eng. ‘bush’	Potjies – pot – Eng. ‘pot’
Broekies – broek – Eng. ‘trousers’	Vygies – vyg – Eng. ‘fig’
Dingetjies – ding – Eng. ‘thing’	Waterblommetjies – waterblom – Eng. ‘waterflower’
Dorpies – dorp – Eng. ‘town/village’	

I should note however the difficulty to state what exactly was borrowed from Afrikaans – the words already put into the diminutive form or just the words in their initial form that later became bases for diminutive formation in English. This is a result of English and Afrikaans being related languages with quite similar system of diminutive formation (Donaldson 1993).

Language contact is, however, not the only explanation for the differences in diminutives. The peculiarities of local environment, first of all, the names of the representatives of local flora and fauna, are also reflected in the sets of diminutives. Examples include:

<sup>4</sup> Differences in the sets of diminutives for the discussed varieties include i.a. differences in spelling, eg. *bombies* (AusE, 0.05) / *bommies* (NZE, 0.07) ‘bomboras’; *Aussies* (all SHEs, 24.1) / *Ausies* (SAE, 0.73) ‘Australians’; *sammies* (NZE, 0.06) / *sarmies* (SAE, 0.26) ‘sandwiches’ which, however, will not be discussed in this paper.

*Humpies* ‘humpback salmon’ (AusE)

*Jewies* ‘jewfish’ (AusE)

*Queenies* ‘queenfish’ (AusE)

*Blowies* ‘blowfish’ (AusE)

*Ellies* ‘elephants’ (SAE)

*Apies* ‘apes’ (SAE)

*Raggies* ‘ragged tooth sharks’ (SAE)

Another group includes names of local teams and organizations:

*Vinnies* ‘St Vincent de Paul Society’ (charity organization in Australia)

*Swannies* ‘Sydney Swans’ (sports team, Australia)

*Scarflies* ‘scarves’ (students of Otago University, New Zealand)

One more group consists of diminutives naming people characteristic of the location the variety is spoken in. These diminutives can be based on either some peculiarities of appearance or occupation:

*Darkies* ‘a person with brown or black skin’ (SAE)

*Whities* ‘a white person’ (SAE)

*Beachies* ‘a person who spends much time at the beach’ (AusE)

*Boaties* ‘boatsmen’ (NZE)

The total number of non-shared and shared diminutives for each SHEs variety is presented in the following table.

Table 4: The number of non-shared vs. shared diminutives for SHEs

	Australian English	New Zealand English	South African English
Shared	71 (47.7%)	68 (38.6%)	29 (17.2%)
Non-shared	78 (52.3%)	108 (61.4%)	140 (82.8%)
Total	149	176	169

According to the table above, the largest number of non-shared diminutives is found in South African English, which is in line with the previously discussed data suggesting more closeness of Australian and New Zealand Englishes to each other than to South African variety.



## 6 Discussion

Despite the fact that Australian, New Zealand and South African Englishes are united under one name of Southern Hemisphere Englishes and very often discussed together, the degree of their similarity varies significantly. Of all SHEs, Australian and New Zealand Englishes have a lot of similar features, which is described in studies on phonology (Bauer 1999; Schneider 2011), grammar (Smith 2009; Elness 2009), and lexis (Bardsley/Simpson 2009; Hay 2008). South African English, though sharing a lot of characteristics with two other SHEs varieties, still possesses of several traits at each level of language that make this variety distinctive to some extent.

The findings revealed in this study of diminutives are in line with previous research of the three varieties. First of all, this research confirms that diminutives are characteristic of all SHEs and that this is relevant for NZE or SAE no less than for AusE, as despite the different subcorpora sizes, the numbers of diminutives found for each SHE variety are quite comparable.

Secondly, speaking of the degree of similarity between the varieties, this study also supports the fact that there is more closeness between AusE and NZE than between these varieties and SAE. The majority of shared diminutives are shared exactly between AusE and NZE; there are as well diminutives common for AusE and SAE or NZE and SAE, and for all three varieties, but these numbers are much lower.

As for the non-shared diminutives, one can speak of several semantic domains these diminutives prevail in. These include words denoting the representatives of the local flora and fauna, elements of the local topography, items naming the distinctive features of the local social system. Some of these diminutives are borrowings from the local languages; some of them are diminutives derived from common English words, but present in one variety only. The reason why the non-shared diminutives prevail in these domains may be that the objects denoted by the words from these domains probably form the basis of the distinctiveness of the location in question.

In general, speaking of SHEs, linguists note that of all language levels, phonology of these three varieties has received much greater attention than the other ones. Studies of diminutives can thus contribute to the research into the peculiarities of SHEs lexical systems and into the lexical variation in the English language. On the one side, diminutives are a highly productive lexicon-grammar phenomenon, and their usage is determined by the structural characteristics of the language. On the other side, these linguistic items convey a wide array of pragmatic effects, and their functioning depends on some extralinguistic phenomena. As a result of such multifariousness, diminutives can be a good material for investigations into the linguistic and extralinguistic phenomena that predetermine variation on different levels of the language system.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper set out to explore similarities and differences in the diminutives found in each variety of the SHEs and to give some interpretation to the obtained results. The corpus-driven analysis has shown that of all three varieties, the highest number of diminutives is shared by Australian and New Zealand Englishes. Diminutives in South African English are, however, somewhat different. The main reason for it is the influence of Dutch-Afrikaans – while the bases of Australian and New Zealand English diminutives are mostly English, some diminutives in South African English are loanwords from Afrikaans.

Differences in the sets of diminutives for SHEs cannot be attributed only to language contact. In each variety, there are also variety-specific diminutives denoting features of the local environment, as well as the diminutives naming local teams and organizations or typical representatives of the local population.

At the same time, this study is subject to several limitations that could be addressed in future research. Firstly, this is a corpus-driven study that focused on the comparison of the sets of SHEs diminutives derived from the corpus; a future corpus-based study of diminutives (with the lists of diminutives retrieved from the dictionaries) could contribute to the sets of the non-shared items found in the three varieties. Secondly, a deeper analysis of the diminutive semantics may provide a more complex overview of the meanings included into the category. And thirdly, the studies of diminutive pragmatics are completely left outside the scope of this paper but could well be one of the future aspects of researching diminutives in SHEs providing more insights into the cross-varietal variation in SHEs.

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