

ON THE ORIGIN OF THE ENGLISH DIMINUTIVE SUFFIX *-y*, *-ie*

KENNETH SHIELDS, JR.

*Millersville University, Millersville, PA*

One of the etymological mysteries of contemporary English historical linguistics is the origin of the diminutive suffix *-y*, *-ie*, which first appeared during the Middle English Period. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the morpheme derives from English renderings of Old French names like *Davi*, *Mathé* (i.e., *Davy*, *Mathy*), “which have the appearance of being pet forms of *David*, *Mathou*” (OED, s.v. *-y* suffix<sup>6</sup>). However, as Marchand (1968: 298) objects, “‘For whom?’ we naturally ask. When there was no suffix and accordingly no possibility of hypocoristic interpretation of the final *-y*, the termination was hardly capable of being transferred to other names.” In his impressive study of the early use and evolution of the affix, Sundén (1910) hypothesizes that *-y*, *-ie* had its origin in personal names in Scots but did not at first have hypocoristic value – it was simply “a general onomastic suffix tending to increase its sphere of application according as weak final *-e* [with hypocoristic value] was dropped” and as it then assumed the hypocoristic value of the “dropped” *-e*, e.g., OE *Wulfsige* > *Wolsi* (Sundén 1910: 162-163). But, once more, Marchand (1968: 298) points out: “... the argument we have raised against the explanations of the OED comes up again. It is difficult to conceive of extension from words which were not analyzable as two-morpheme words. Reinterpretation usually presupposes bi-morphemic character of a pattern.” Jespersen (1922: 402, cf. 1933a: 294-299) ascribes the origin of *-y*, *-ie* to the fact that “the vowel [i], especially in its narrow or thin variety, is particularly appropriate to express what is small, weak, insignificant, or, on the other hand, refined or dainty” as a result of its inherent “symbolism”. He implies that this “vowel symbolism” may be related to the tendency of children to “add an *-i* at the end of words” and of “traits like these [being] imitated by nurses and fond mothers ... [A]s this linguistic trick is thus associated with children and nurser-

ies, it will naturally acquire a hypocoristic or diminutive force" (1933a: 297-298). This same position is espoused by Marchand (1968: 298), although he does acknowledge difficulty in answering the question "why the symbolic value of *i* came to life so late (not before 1400)." In this brief paper, I wish to provide still another theory about the origin of this perplexing morpheme – a theory based on recent research into "panchronic laws" of linguistic change and universals involving child language acquisition.

Of course, a "panchronic law" constitutes a principle regarding "the overall direction of linguistic change" (Fox 1995: 194). In a recent impressive study of such directionality of linguistic change, Jurafsky (1996) provides compelling linguistic and cognitive evidence about the evolution of diminutive affixes. Specifically, he maintains that "the origin of the morphological diminutive is the sense 'child'", that is, "the source was either semantically related to 'child' (e.g., a word meaning 'child' or 'son'), or pragmatically related to 'child' (e.g., a hypocoristic suffix on names)" (1996: 562). He also demonstrates that the diminutive from 'child' "lies at the heart of many pragmatic uses of diminutive suffixes", including "hypocorism, patronymics, names of tribes, countries, and languages, various kinds of nominalizations and assorted metaphorical formations [e.g., contempt or affection], words of approximation, and often as a general method of producing new adjectives or nouns" (1996: 565).

In addition to Jurafsky's typological findings, I believe that contemporary descriptions of the nature of "caretaker speech" also provide insight into the etymology of *-y*, *-ie*. Caretaker speech represents "a distinct speech register" by means of which "caretakers systematically modify the child's environment, making the task of language acquisition easier" (Moskowitz 1981: 50). It is well known that caretaker speech "seem[s] to mimic the phonological structure of an infant's own vocabulary" (Moskowitz 1981: 51, cf. James 1990: 180-181). One of the most salient features of the vocalic system of children in the early stages of language acquisition is its tripartite structure, consisting of the vowels /a, i, u/. According to Parker and Riley (1999: 179), such a state of affairs results from two tendencies: "first, extreme values in the vowel system tend to be acquired before intermediate values ... [and] second, children typically acquire segments common among the world's languages before they acquire those that are relatively rare." In any event, the prevalence of /i/ in child language brings about its prevalence in caretaker speech. This observation lends some credence to Jespersen's contention that /i/ has a natural association with "notions of smallness or weakness and of femininity" (1933a: 298).

Now it is widely recognized in regard to the appearance of *-y*, *-ie* that "the first word recorded is *baby* 1377 (f[rom] *babe*)" (Marchand 1968: 299, cf. Sundén 1910: 136).<sup>1</sup> In my view, *baby* was simply a caretaker speech (or nursery speech) variant of *babe*, the older of the two variants. Of course, it is not uncommon for nursery words to become eventually standard words (cf. Goth. *atta* 'father' < 'daddy' (Lehmann 1986: 46)), but prior to the widespread replacement of *babe* by *baby*,<sup>2</sup> the existence of the former led to a morphological resegmentation of the latter as *bab(e)-y*. Because of the panchronic law identified by Jurafsky, the suffix *-y*, *-ie* as a part of a word for 'child' naturally came to adopt diminutive signification and was subsequently and gradually generalized to other word forms (apparently first to personal proper names and then to other common nouns, cf. Marchand 1968: 298) and to related meanings.<sup>3</sup> I find it significant that even the common nursery words *mammy* (*mommy*) and *daddy* are "not earlier than the 16<sup>th</sup> century" (OED, s.v. *-y* suffix<sup>6</sup>), implying, as expected, the primacy of *baby* in the origin and generalization of the ending. Of course, pre-extant forms terminating in *-y*, *-ie* were either unaffected by the appearance of the new suffix (e.g., *berry* < OE *berige*; *honey* < OE *hunig*) or were subject to morphological reinterpretation under its influence if semantic circumstances warranted (e.g., *Davy* 'dimin. of *David*' < OF *Davi*; *Mathy* 'dimin. of *Matthew*' < OF *Mathé*).

Although the etymology of the diminutive suffix *-y*, *-ie* most certainly will remain controversial, the plausibility of the hypothesis presented here is enhanced because of its basis in contemporary typological and psycholinguistic investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> Sundén (1910: 136), after asserting "that the hypocoristic function of the suffix *-y* is earlier than the slangy or the purely diminutive function and that it originated as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> c.," is forced to note that "the only instance indicative of an earlier origin is *baby* recorded in 1377 (Langland, Piers Plowman B.)." His *ad hoc* attempt to derive *baby* from a contraction of *baban* "(of Celtic origin) recorded c.1230 (Ancren Riwe)" is motivated by a desire to explain away an early diminutive use of *-y* which does not fit his chronology.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, *babe* "remained as the dignified word (e.g., in Scripture) and is now chiefly poetic."

<sup>3</sup> Because of the close typological affinity of the diminutive and hypocoristic functions, it is not surprising that these two uses are inextricably bound in the evolution of the suffix (cf. Sundén 1910: 135-66; Jurafsky 1996: 562).

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