

# THE DIMINUTIVE SUFFIX “-ET/-ETTE”: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN ITS STUDY

Begoña García Bravo  
Universidad de La Laguna

## ABSTRACT

The English language is usually said to be poor in diminutive resources and its apparently few diminutive expressions are considered unproductive. However, these are assumptions not normally supported with real data. Indeed, Schneider's seems to be the only systematic work on the diminutive in English, although it does not make use of modern electronic corpora. This paper analyses the behaviour of the English diminutive suffix “-et/-ette” by using different sources: grammars, dictionaries, monographs, the British National Corpus and the Internet. Searches on the net have been responsible for the most interesting discoveries, some of which contradict previous studies about this suffix.

KEY WORDS: Linguistics, English, diminutive, internet, British National Corpus, suffix, “-et/-ette.”

## RESUMEN

Se suele decir que la lengua inglesa es pobre en recursos diminutivos y sus aparentemente pocas expresiones diminutivas se consideran improductivas. Sin embargo, estas suposiciones no suelen ir acompañadas de datos reales. De hecho, el estudio de Schneider parece ser el único trabajo sistemático sobre el diminutivo en inglés, aunque no hace uso de corpus electrónicos modernos. Este artículo analiza el comportamiento del sufijo diminutivo “-et/-ette” en inglés, partiendo de distintas fuentes: gramáticas, diccionarios, monografías, el British National Corpus e Internet. Las búsquedas en la red han sido responsables de los descubrimientos más interesantes; algunos de ellos contradicen estudios previos sobre este sufijo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: lingüística, inglés, diminutivo, internet, British National Corpus, sufijo, “-et/-ette.”

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The English language is often said to have a limited group of diminutive expressions and some of them are regarded as unproductive: “It is a feature of many other European languages as well, including English, where relatively few diminutive suffixes are available, and where even these are being used with decreasing

frequency” (Sifianou 157). Likewise, it is assumed that the variety of values which the diminutive is able to express in the romance languages does not seem to be found in those of Germanic origin, such as English (Soler 28).

Statements like these are normally based on a narrow or biased understanding of the concept of the diminutive and are not usually supported by a systematic analysis of the English diminutive behaviour. Indeed, there are few studies about the diminutive in the English language and none, for the time being, that draws its data from large electronic corpora.

There is a tendency among dictionaries, grammars and pragmatic or typological studies about English to understand the diminutive as a suffix or suffixed word which indicates mainly smallness and often attitude as well. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter abbreviated *OED*) defines it as follows:

1. Gram. Expressing diminution; denoting something little: usually applied to derivatives or affixes expressing something small of the kind denoted by the primitive word.
2. Gram. A diminutive word or term (see A.1); a derivative denoting something small of the kind.

As in the *OED* definition, Hornby (s.v.) does not mention the diminutive capacity to express attitude but he focuses only on diminution: “(gram, of a suff.) indicating smallness; n. word formed by the use of a suff. of this kind, e.g. *streamlet*, a small stream, *lambkin*, a small lamb”. A similar definition is given by the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*: “a word formed by adding a diminutive suffix: the word *duckling* is a diminutive, formed from *duck*”; below it explains that a diminutive suffix is “an ending which is added to a word to express smallness”. A more recent dictionary, the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, shares the same idea: “a word or an ending of a word that shows that sb/sth is small, for example *piglet* (=a young pig), *kitchenette* (=a small kitchen).”

Some other dictionaries include the attitudinal meaning of the diminutive in their definitions. That is the case of Fowler and Fowler (s.v.): “Gram. (of a word or suffix) implying smallness, either actual or imputed in token of affection, scorn, etc. (e.g. -let, -kins) —n. Gram. a diminutive word or suffix”. Trask (s.v.), for his part, mentions the attitudinal meaning more clearly in the entry of the word diminutive:

- 1 A derivational affix which may be added to a word to express a notion of small size, often additionally (or even instead) a notion of warmth or affection.
- 2 a word formed by the use of such an affix.

Among the definitions given in pragmatic studies, it is worth mentioning Sifianou’s (157) and Dressler and Merlini’s (144) since they both agree that the diminutive is a derivative word that expresses mainly smallness but they explain that it also has a connotative meaning. As an example of a typological work, Jurafsky defines the diminutive as “a morphological device which means at least ‘small’” (“Universals” 534).

However, it is important to realise that suffixation is not the only means to express the diminutive linguistically. Recent research points out that the diminu-

tive is a universal concept (Schneider 5), therefore, those languages with no or few suffixes must also be able to express diminution. Thus, an appropriate definition should not be based on the linguistic form but the semantics of the diminutive. After examining the already mentioned and other definitions<sup>1</sup>, I consider Schneider's (1)<sup>2</sup> the most suitable to base any study about the diminutive on, particularly the English one.

His definition allows different kinds of linguistic structures to be considered diminutives. This is of paramount importance for languages, such as English, in which the diminutive concept tends to be expressed through analytic constructions. This does not mean that the English language lacks diminutive suffixes. In fact, the most recently published study about the English diminutive offers a list of fifteen different diminutive suffixes, in which their spelling variants are not included (Schneider 79).

The study which is presented in this paper attempts to cover some of the gaps that exist in relation to the diminutive in English, such as the assumed unproductiveness of the English diminutive suffixes, the apparently reduced scope of diminutive meanings in English, the lack of studies about the diminutive based on electronic corpora and the inexistence of a deep analysis of concrete English diminutive suffixes. In order to select the corpus, I have taken Schneider's definition (1), "a term which refers to all expressions of diminution", as the point of reference. Due to space reasons, this paper only deals with the behaviour of the English diminutive suffix "-et/-ette." The corpus selected in my research has been taken from different sources, the most important being the *British National Corpus* (hereafter abbreviated *BNC*) and the Internet.

## 2. THE DIMINUTIVE SUFFIX "-ET/-ETTE"

Of French origin, the suffix "-et/-ette" was introduced into the English language during the Middle English period as a diminutive and feminine suffix. The variant *-et* was originally masculine, while *-ette* indicated feminine. However, confusion between these two variants started in the 15th century and has remained in some words even today. Although it seems to be true that "-Et is of little use as an English formative" (*OED*), a new derivative with such an ending

---

<sup>1</sup> The extension of this article does not allow the inclusion of all the definitions that have been consulted. Those already mentioned may serve as examples of the tendency to understand the diminutive as a suffix or derivative word meaning smallness and attitude. However, there are some dictionaries and grammars which regard the diminutive differently. For instance, the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (s.v.) understands it as an adjective indicating smallness, while Peters (s.v.) defines it as an affix implying small size.

<sup>2</sup> Schneider (1, 4) defines the diminutive as "a term which refers to all expressions of diminution," which he understands as a bridge between the concepts of quantification and qualification because it combines both size and attitude.





may still be admissible in English. The evidence I have found points out that the English preference for “-ette” is not only due to linguistic reasons but to the social phenomenon of “frenchification”<sup>3</sup> (Peters s.v.). That is why I consider “-et/-ette” spelling variants of the same diminutive suffix.

The suffix “-et/ette” has developed three meanings in English: “small,” “female” and “imitation” (Marchand 290; Peters s.v.; Zandvoort 303). While the first two were derived from French, Marchand (290) claims that “imitation” is an exclusive development of the English language. Apparently unrelated, these three meanings are intimately connected through cognitive mechanisms. Thus, Jurafsky points out that “small” is the central meaning within the diminutive concept and that “female” derives from it through the metaphor “women are children/small things” (“Universal” 546). He maintains that this can be explained because women are generally considered marginal members of the society and the weakest people both physically and socially in many cultures (“Universals” 427).

“Female” has been well accepted since the first French loans expressing that meaning appeared in English in the 17th century. Indeed, the words “suffragette” and “majorette,” from the French loans “suffrage” and “major,” were coined in the English language in 1906 and 1941 respectively and, since then, new words have been created, such as the most recent “gothette.” The English “suffragette” and “majorette” were taken in 1907 and 1955 as loans by the French language (Dubois s.v.), contributing then to the use of this meaning in French as Hasselrot (71) assures: “a servi de modèle à plusieurs néologismes”. However, several authors regard the meaning ‘female’ as chauvinistic and affirm that it has become obsolete (Quirk et al. 1549; Schneider 96; Peters s.v.). On the other hand, Jurafsky states that ‘imitation’ was created through generalization from “small type-of,” another meaning that he considers part of the concept of the diminutive. It refers to words in which the diminutive suffix indicates a small but different object from its base (“Universal” 553).

As part of a larger research I am carrying out on the English and Spanish diminutives, I have studied the behaviour of the English diminutive suffix “-et/-ette” by consulting, first of all, several prestigious English grammars and dictionaries where this topic is mentioned (*OED*; Hornby; *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*; *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*; Peters; Quirk et al.), as well as monographs on the word formation in English (Marchand; Zandvoort). Muthmann’s *Reverse English Dictionary* has been especially useful to my purpose because words are arranged alphabetically from their endings. I drew up a list of English words ending in “-et/-ette” from all these sources. Likewise, the *BNC* provided part of the data for analysis in order to achieve reliable results.

Despite being one of the best corpora for linguistic research in English, the *BNC* presents important difficulties to look for affixes in general. The scientists responsible for the searching programme associated to the corpus (SARA) recog-

---

<sup>3</sup> This concept refers to the positive value and attractiveness that are added to expressions of French origin for the only reason of being French.

nise that it has some gaps regarding affixes: “This was not entirely successful, since several participants wanted to be able either to search by suffix [...] These are the very things that SARA finds difficult” (*BNC* “*BNC Workshop in Paris*”). Eventually, I discovered a laborious but effective means to find words ending in “-et/-ette”: the “pattern query.” It allows matching words of as many letters as dots have been written before the ending “-et/-ette.” So I added dots before the suffix until no words appeared in the corpus, checked that their meaning coincided with Schneider’s definition (1) and incorporated the new diminutive words to my primary list.

Every word of the final list was looked for in the *BNC* in order to contextualise it in specific examples belonging to different texts, and thus know if it had fallen into misuse. By doing so, I realised that the corpus was not enough to assure a word had been dropped from use in a language. Many of the words of my original list did not appear despite being in use, what can be partly explained because spoken language only represents a 10% of the *BNC* data (*BNC* “*What*”). Therefore, I decided to complement my study with searches on the Internet.

The use of the Internet could be questioned as presenting varieties of English different from those included in the *BNC* and, therefore, produce a heterogeneous result. Nevertheless, influences from non-British varieties appear in the mentioned corpus. In fact, the *BNC* authors recognise that “non-British English and foreign language words do occur in the corpus” (*BNC* “*What*”). Besides, the use of the Internet may enrich the research since it is a very powerful communication means where new words are constantly appearing. In my opinion, the spontaneity and creativity of the language on the Internet may be compared with those found in the spoken language.

Interesting changes in the behaviour of “-et/-ette” were detected through these searches<sup>4</sup> on the net. While some of my discoveries confirm some features that have been always attributed to the suffix, others on the contrary contradict what some authors have long affirmed; for instance, the facts that “-et/-ette” is not an especially productive diminutive suffix in English, that the meaning ‘female’ has become obsolete, that the suffix can only convey three meanings or that the meaning “small” is added only to words referring to objects.

### 3. WORDS IN “-ET/-ETTE”

After checking them both in the corpus and on the Internet, the words of the resulting list were classified into three groups: English creations, loans from French, and words that the *BNC* does not include in its database, in which creations and loans were also considered separately. The second group is also divided

---

<sup>4</sup> Searches on the Internet were carried out through Google by typing each diminutive word of my list. In order to contextualise the examples, I visited the web pages where the derivative appeared and thus verified the site content.



into loans whose bases exist in English and loans whose bases do not form part of the language at the moment.

These last loans (those for which there is not a separate base without “-et/-ette,” such as “cygnet” or “brunette”) may be on the way to becoming lexicalised, if we follow Huddleston and Pullum’s (1629) definition: “words that are or were earlier morphologically analysable but which could not be formed with their present meaning by the current rules of word-formation”. Nevertheless, I decided to include them as diminutives in my corpus because the suffix still determines both their belittling and affective values. These loans are no longer morphologically analysable in English but “-et/-ette” is still partly responsible for their diminutive meaning.

In the following five tables, all the diminutive words of my corpus are recorded following a chronological order (from the earliest to the most recent words). The first one corresponds to those words ending in “-et/-ette” which have been created in English. The loans from French whose bases exist in the English language are grouped in the second table, while the third one presents the loans with no bases. The fourth table contains English creations that are not registered in the *BNC*. Finally, French loans which are not part of the *BNC* database are included in the fifth table.

Each table lists the following information: the derivative word, its diminutive meaning (i.e. ‘small’, ‘female’ or ‘imitation’, besides others that will be explained below), its register date, its base together with its date of register and origin. The information related to the base does not appear in the case of those French loans whose bases do not exist in the English language. These data have been drawn from the *OED* and several etymological dictionaries, such as Ayto’s and Hoad’s. The date of register for those words which do not appear in any dictionary has been taken from the earliest examples in either the *BNC* or the Internet.

Such a classification has been very useful to know that “-et/-ette” is a completely productive suffix in English. Indeed, forty of the sixty-one words selected in my study have been created in the English language, seventeen of them in the 20th and 21st centuries. It seems that this suffix got incorporated into the inventory of the English derivative suffixes quite easily, since there are English creations as early as the 14th and 15th centuries, such as “hogget” and “floweret” respectively.

The words selected in my analysis have corroborated the theory that, after the confusion between the two spelling variants in the 15th century, those first loans from French eventually ended up being written in “-et.” The only exception seems to be “bannerette,” which is in turn the oldest loan (1300). Such an ending predominates among the first derivatives coined in English, as for instance “hogget,” “floweret,” “owlet,” etc. On the other hand, the spelling variant “-ette” became very frequent in loans that entered the language within and after the 18th century, when the suffix began to be totally assimilated into English. This ending finally got established as the preferred variant by English speakers, since all the creations from the 19th century on (excluding “midget”) finish in “-ette.”

Although most of the included words have French bases, this suffix has also been used to form derivatives from words of different origins. Some examples are “owlet,” “winceyette,” “demonette,” “cashmerette” and “balconette,” whose bases



TABLE I. WORDS CREATED IN ENGLISH (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)

DERIVATIVE	MEANING	REGISTER DATE	BASE	BASE DATE	BASE ORIGIN
Hogget	“child”	1370	Hog	1350	English
Packet	“small”	1530	Pack	1225	Germanic
Owlet	“child”	1542	Owl	725	Germanic
Nymphet	“female”	1612	Nymph	1390	French
Snippet	“small”	1664	Snip	1558	Germanic
Sermonette	“small” “contempt”	1814	Sermon	1200	French
Novelette	“contempt”	1814	Novel	1639	French
Midget	“small”	1865	Midge	1796	English
Leatherette	“imitation”	1880	Leather	1225	Germanic
Flannelette	“imitation”	1882	Flannel	1503	Unknown
Suffragette	“female”	1906	Suffrage	1534	French
Kitchenette	“small”	1910	Kitchen	1000	Latin
Winceyette	“imitation”	1922	Wincey	1808	Scandinavian
Luncheonette	“small”	1924	Luncheon	1652	English
Usherette	“female”	1925	Usher	1386	French
Dinette	“small”	1930	Dining-room	1601	Germanic
Roomette	“small”	1938	Room	1000	Germanic
Superette	“small”	1938	Supermarket	1933	English
Majorette	“female”	1941	Major	1579	French
Leopardette	“imitation”	1975	Leopard	1490	French
Bottle-ette	“small”	1990	Bottle	1375	French
Flingette	“unimportant” “female”	1991	Fling	1827	Germanic
Hangarette	“small”	1992	Hangar	1852	French
Fibette	“unimportant”	1992	Fib	1611	Unknown

TABLE II. FRENCH LOANS WITH EXISTING BASES IN ENGLISH (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)

DERIVATIVE	MEANING	REGISTER DATE	BASE	BASE DATE	BASE ORIGIN
Circlet	“small”	1528	Circle	1305	French
Islet	“small”	1538	Isle	1290	French
Cabinet	“small”	1565	Cabin	1400	French
Eaglet	“child”	1572	Eagle	1380	French
Maisonette	“small”	1818	Maison	1570	French
Cigarette	“small”	1842	Cigar	1725	French
Statuette	“small”	1843	Statue	1300	French

TABLE III. FRENCH LOANS WITH NO EXISTING BASES IN ENGLISH (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)

DERIVATIVE	MEANING	REGISTER DATE
Pullet	“child”	1362
Hatchet	“small”	1375
Poppet	“small”	1386
Leveret	“child”	1400
Cygnet	“child”	1430
Coronet	“small”	1494
Coquette	“female”	1611
Brunette	“female”	1713
Grisette	“female”	1723
Sachet	“small”	1838

TABLE IV. ENGLISH CREATIONS NOT REGISTERED IN THE BNC (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)

DERIVATIVE	MEANING	REGISTER DATE	BASE	BASE DATE	BASE ORIGIN
Floweret	“small”	1400	Flower	1225	French
Freshet	“small”	1598	Fresh	1538	French
Muslinette	“imitation”	1787	Muslin	1609	French
Dandizette	“female”	1821	Dandy	1780	Unknown
Demonette	“small” “female”	1854	Demon	1569	Latin
Balconette	“small”	1876	Balcony	1618	Italian
Essayette	“contempt”	1877	Essay	1597	French
Leaderette	“small” “female”	1880	Leader	1837	English
Cashmerette	“imitation”	1886	Cashmere	1822	Indian
Plushette	“imitation”	1887	Plush	1594	French
Storyette	“contempt”	1889	Story	1520	French
Stationette	“small”	1893	Station	1797	French
Vanette	“small”	1921	Van	1829	English
Brickette	“small”	1934	Brick	1440	French
Liette	“unimportant”	1993	Lie	900	Germanic
Gothette	“female”	2003	Goth	1989	English

TABLE V. FRENCH LOANS NOT REGISTERED IN THE BNC (CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER)

DERIVATIVE	MEANING	REGISTER DATE	BASE	BASE DATE	BASE ORIGIN
Bannerette	“small”	1300	Banner	1230	French
Mountainette	“small”	1586	Mountain	1205	French
Collarette	“small”	1690	Collar	1325	French
Baronette	“female”	1861	Baron	1200	French



were taken from Germanic, Scandinavian, Latin, Indian and Italian respectively. This fact seems to be another proof that the English language did not only adopt some French loans ending in “-et/-ette” but it very soon turned this suffix into part of its inventory of diminutive suffixes.

My analysis of the English words ending in “-et/-ette” has shown that the semantics of this diminutive suffix is more complex than what has been traditionally believed. I have approached the study of the semantics of the diminutive concept following Jurafsky’s cognitive model (“Universal” 542). He proposes a radial category in which the different meanings are connected through cognitive mechanisms. The central meanings are both “small” and “child,” which seems to be the original meaning of the synthetic diminutive in many languages, although there is no evidence that this also happened in Indo-European languages (“Universals” 425).

Taking into account Jurafsky’s model, I realised that many words which have been traditionally considered as meaning “small” can better convey a different meaning. For instance, words such as “owlet” or “hogget” make reference to a younger animal than its base, so they better express the meaning “child” instead of “small.” Using the same suffix to convey both “child” and “small” seems to be very frequent among the languages in the world, as Jurafsky himself affirms: “many languages lexically mark the young of animals with the diminutive” (“Universals” 427). This meaning is cognitively related to “affection” through inference because people usually feel tenderness towards children and young animals.

On the other hand, the meaning “contempt” seems to be more predominant than “small” in words such as “essayette,” “novelette,” “storyette,” etc. Not only do these words refer to shorter texts, but they are also considered of lesser quality. See the following example: “*The Sun* made less use of the *News of the World* style of long reports which unfolded the plot of a sex crime in a ‘racy’ style, like a novelette” (*BNC*). People usually show disrespect for the texts that these words refer to, which is even more noticeable in the following instance of “sermonette”: “In 1980, when I told my doctor I was leaving my day job to work wire full time, he gave me a sermonette about the evils of carpal tunnel inflammation” (<<http://www.wirelady.com/berrienwiresafetypage.html>>).

There are many cases in which the meaning “small” does not indicate a reduction in size but in importance, which can also be explained cognitively. The clearest instances of “unimportant” are “flingette” and “fibette.” Despite appearing both in the *BNC*, the searches on the Internet have revealed a very curious use of premodification which serves as an emphasis for the lack of importance: “Just a tiny, teeny, miniscule little fibette, just so that we filled up a tiny amount more space” (<<http://www.mandiapple.com/mavisdream/livedr4.htm>>).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The analytic diminutive is also part of my research on this topic, but for space reasons not part of the present paper.



Creations like “liette” in the example “It was a little white fib, or ‘fibette’, as he sometimes called them (or ‘fi’, or ‘liette’, or ‘sidetruth’... a friend once joked ‘you have more words for a lie than the eskimos have for snow’” (<[http://www.idler.co.uk/archives/?page\\_id=132](http://www.idler.co.uk/archives/?page_id=132)>) are the result of spontaneity, which makes clear that English speakers have internalised the meanings of this suffix. Therefore, there is enough evidence to affirm that “-et/-ette” is completely alive in the English language.

The productivity of this suffix becomes stronger in relation to its behaviour with the meaning ‘female’. Contrary to some authors’ opinions (Quirk et al. 1549; Schneider 96; Peters s.v.) English speakers do use the suffix “-et/-ette” with the meaning “female” quite frequently. Several new words I have discovered in my research turn their bases into feminine referents. Such a meaning has always played a very important role in English, even contributing to its strengthening in the French language through the use of “suffragette” or “majorette,” as I have said in previous pages. These words originated in English and were taken as loans into French at the beginning and half of the 20th century respectively with exactly the same meaning they have in the English language (Dubois s.v.).

On the one hand, I have found out some derivatives in “-et/-ette” of very recent creation which only convey the meaning “female.” Such is the case of “gothette,” which appears neither in the *BNC*, the *OED* nor in jargon dictionaries, such as Tulloch’s *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words*. Its “female” meaning is more than evident in an example as “Meeting Place For Those Goth Boyz And Goth Lordz Who Adore These Unique Gothette Girrls And Mistresses & The Darkish Abyss World They Inhabit!” (<<http://gothettevampyria.tribe.net/>>), taken from a webpage created in the year 2003.

On the other hand, there are some other words that can convey both “unimportant” and “female” or “small” and “female,” such as “flingette” and “leaderette” respectively. However, both of them seem to be specialising their meaning to the second one. “Flingette” can indicate both “an unimportant fling” and “the woman with whom somebody commits infidelity” (my own definitions). Take the following example:

It started with 30somethings’s ex-flingette posting a video on the net. No, not that type of video. it was shot by her g/f and it was about her search for a decent gym in her home town [...] Anyway, I then went upstairs in our house to find ex-flingette in our spare room, still snivelling whilst telling me that she has now developed a large crush on me (<<http://whatwoulddanado.blogspot.com/2005/12/these-dreams-go-on-when-i-close-my-ey.html>>).

While “flingette” still seems to express both meanings, other words may have already got specialised into “female.” For instance, “demonette” is defined by the *OED* as “a little demon” but I have not found any example either in the *BNC* or on the Internet with such a meaning. On the contrary, there are quite many instances in which “female” becomes apparent:

While Jim and Rick continued their discussion, a mousy (literally) female demon carrying a clipboard approached them. ‘Okay, right. You two are Jim and Rick,

correct?' 'That's right,' said Jim. 'Are you our punishment?' The demonette gave him a cold stare (<<http://www.bearchive.com/-adventure/game1/docs/118/118987.html>>).

The most remarkable change has taken place in the derivative "leaderette" because, not only has it turned into indicating two different meanings, but it has also taken the base "leader" with different senses. On the one hand, the *OED* defines it as "A short editorial paragraph, printed in the same type as the 'leaders' in a newspaper," so its base "leader" refers to a type of paragraph. On the other hand, examples found on the net have revealed its use as a feminine word:

*Centerville Church of Christ* has been involved with the Lads to Leaders program since 1987. Lads to Leaders & Leaderettes has a proven methodology for developing young people into leaders" (<[http://www.centervillechurchofchrist.org/leader\\_leaderette.htm](http://www.centervillechurchofchrist.org/leader_leaderette.htm)>).

The derivative in this case has taken the base "leader" with the meaning "one who leads" (*OED*), turning it into a feminine referent. Although there are some examples in which certain contempt seems to accompany the feminine derivative, cases such as this one seem to respond women's need to become visible.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

My research has shown that the diminutive suffix "-et/-ette" is productive in the English language since it has been used to form new derivatives from the 14th century to the current 21st century. Contrary to the traditional belief that English diminutives cannot express as many values as other languages, such as the romance ones, my analysis has proved that only this suffix is able to express at least six meanings: "child," "contempt," "unimportant," "small," "female" and "imitation," all of them connected through cognitive mechanisms. The meaning "female" has recently become very important and has given place to singular changes in some words, such as "flingette," "demonette" and "leaderette." Far from being obsolete, "female" seems to be more alive than ever. The appearance of words like the previously mentioned and "gothette" may be explained as women's wish to be acknowledged both in the world and in the language.

Although its diminutive nature has never been denied, there are no systematic works about the suffix "-et/-ette," so a first serious research on specific English diminutive constructions was needed. Besides, none of the few studies on the English diminutive has made use of electronic corpora to draw its data, not even the latest research, as Schneider himself admits: "So far, large electronic corpora have not been used in diminutive research to any significant extent" (70). Therefore, the use of the *BNC* as my tool for analysis both to draw up the list of words ending in "-et/-ette" and to check their existence in the English language is a further step on the linguistic research on the diminutive.



Apart from the *BNC*, it has been essential to use other resources such as dictionaries, grammars and, especially, the Internet in order to cover the deficiencies that the corpus presents. Dictionaries such as Muthmann's have been very useful to draw up the list of words, while the Internet has played a relevant role in the verification of their use in English.

Unquestionably, the Internet has been a very important source in which the existence of certain words in the English language has been stated. Searches on the net have enriched my study in a very remarkable way and my findings on words such as "gothette," "leaderette," "flingette" and "demonette" would not have been possible if I had restricted my corpus to the *BNC*. The Internet opens a wide world of possibilities for research in any scientific field and even wider in linguistics. Blogs, chat rooms and personal websites mean an unlimited source of data for linguistic research. Examples taken from the Internet present typical features of spoken language, a factor that has been very helpful for my analysis since diminutives seem to be more frequent in daily speech. People are increasingly communicating through this means and linguists should consider its value as an intermediate field between the written and the oral language.

## WORKS CITED

- AYTO, John. *Dictionary of Word Origins*. London: Bloomsbury, 1990.
- British National Corpus*. : "What Is the BNC?" 2005. 18 January 2006. <<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/corpus/index.xml>>.
- British National Corpus*. "BNC Workshop in Paris." 1998. (February 2007). <<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/archive/reports/paris.html>>.
- British National Corpus World Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Computing Services, The BNC Consortium, 2000.
- Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary*. London: Harper Collins, 1992.
- "Demonette." 2001. 20 March 2007. <<http://www.bearchive.com/-adventure/game1/docs/118/118987.html>>.
- DRESSLER, Wolfgang Ulrich and Lavinia Merlini Barbaresi. *Morphopragmatics: Diminutives and Intensifiers in Italian, German and Other Languages*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.
- DUBOIS, Jean. *Larousse de la langue française*. Paris: Lexis, 1979.
- "Fibette." 2000. 18 April 2007. <<http://www.mandiapple.com/mavidream/livedr4.htm>>.
- "Flingette." 2005. 18 April 2007. <<http://whatwoulddanado.blogspot.com/2005/12/these-dreams-go-on-hen-i-close-my-ey.html>>.
- FOWLER, Henry Watson and Francis George FOWLER. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*. London: Oxford UP, 1992.
- "Gothette." 2003. 15 February 2007. <<http://gothettevampyria.tribe.net/>>.
- HASSELROT, Bengt. "Etude sur la vitalité de la formation diminutive française au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle." *Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis* 8 (1979): 1-112.



- HOAD, Terence Frederick. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.
- HORNBY, Albert Sydney. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. London: Oxford UP, 1974.
- HUDDLESTON, Rodney and Geoffrey K. PULLUM. *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- JURAFSKY, Daniel. "Universal Tendencies in the Semantics of the Diminutive." *Language* 72.3 (1996): 533-578.
- . "Universals in the Semantics of the Diminutive." *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 19 (1993): 423-436.
- "Leaderette." 18 April 2007. <[http://www.centervillechurchofchrist.org/leader\\_leaderette.htm](http://www.centervillechurchofchrist.org/leader_leaderette.htm)>.
- "Liette." 22 February 2007. <[http://www.idler.co.uk/archives/?page\\_id=132](http://www.idler.co.uk/archives/?page_id=132)>.
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. London: Longman, 1987.
- Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. London: Longman, 1990.
- MARCHAND, Hans. *The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word Formation: A Synchronic-Diachronic Approach*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1969.
- MUTHMANN, Gustav. *Reverse English Dictionary*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. London: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. CD-ROM. 1994. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.
- PETERS, Pam. *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.
- QUIRK, Randolph, Sidney GREENBAUM, Geoffrey LEECH, and Jan SVARTVIK. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman, 1985.
- SCHNEIDER, Klaus. *Diminutives in English*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2003.
- "Sermonette." 20 March 2007. <<http://www.wirelady.com/berrienwiresafetypage.html>>.
- SIFIANOU, Maria. "The Use of Diminutives in Expressing Politeness: Modern Greek versus English." *Journal of Pragmatics* 17.2 (1992) 155-173.
- SOLER ESPILUBA, Dolores. "Españolitos, curritos, amiguetes, coleguillas y demás gente de mal vivir (o la expresividad en el sistema español de sufijación)." *Cuadernos Cervantes* 8 (1996): 28-34.
- TRASK, Robert Lawrence. *A Dictionary of Grammatical Terms in Linguistics*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- TULLOCH, Sara. *The Oxford Dictionary of New Words: A Popular Guide to Words in the News*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.
- ZANDVOORT, Reinard Willem. *A Handbook of English Grammar*. London: Longman, 1975.

