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Irony behind diminutives: a cognitive linguistic analysis of popular technical terms

1. Introduction

In this article we put forward a proposal for a cognitive linguistic analysis of the ironic meanings of diminutives, illustrated by a corpus of English popular technical terms. Consider the examples below:¹

- (1) Guys, we need to lay hands on Bastian's computer and pray in tongues. It's dead! *NNOOOOOOOOOO* We know you're going through grief and sorrow without dear *computie* working but hope you get through it soon Bastian.

[retrieved April 12, 2010, from <http://forums.techguy.org>]

- (2) How's that oily *drilley* thing workin' out for ya, Mr. President?

[comment on oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico; retrieved April 12, 2010, from <http://www.blogrunner.com>]

¹ Please note that the original spelling was retained in all examples cited, nonetheless, the italics were added to mark the analysed diminutive forms. All examples presented in this article were excerpted from internet user's posts on internet fora which, to our belief, convey best a sense of everyday extemporaneous communication and thus should serve as a rather adequate indicative of how people use diminutive forms.

(3) Boo-rah! The *buttonette* thingy jigger bobber-roo is still broken. I hit “Go directly to the fabulous PX!:GC post!!!” from the main forum page and I get the thread cut off at the top with - ...

[retrieved April 12, 2010, from <http://pxcomic.com>]

(4) Well about a month ago i lost my *enginie*, and didn't take it apart until yesterday. When i took the cylinder off, i got to see the carnage. The ENTIRE piston skirt (stock Polaris piston) smashed like a glass cup into a million small pieces which then distributed themsevles EVERYWHERE. They got all through the base, etc. and now something is jammed and i havent checked what it is yet.

[retrieved April 12, 2010, from <http://forums.atvconnection.com>]

We would like to claim that in order to properly account for the whole gamut of different meanings of diminutives, including their ironic use, one has to assume a cognitive view of meaning and thus to “cross the boundaries” between semantics and pragmatics.

In our analysis of the semantics of the diminutive category (cf. Jurafsky 1996, Tabakowska 2001, Schneider 2003, Taylor 2003), we shall adopt the *Principled Polysemy Theory* (Tyler and Evans 2003) combined with the insights of the *Conceptual Integration Theory* (Fauconnier and Turner 2002) and the theory of the *Current Discourse Space* (Langacker 2008). In particular, we shall claim that the ironic meaning of the diminutive emerges as a result of the clash between the information activated in the process of mental spaces construction and the speaker-hearer’s understanding of the specific context underlying a given usage event.

2. The diminutive category

2.1. The semantics of diminutives

It is generally agreed that the principal meaning the diminutives convey is the meaning of ‘smallness’ (cf. Jurafsky 1996: 534). According to Taylor (2003: 172), the diminutive morphemes, apart from being used to indicate the small size of a given entity, may express additionally, via extension processes involving metaphor and metonymy, various kinds of meaning which, in his view, are linked to

the central sense of the category, namely, 'smallness in physical space'.²

In his analysis of Italian diminutive suffixes, Taylor (2003: 172-176) mentions the following senses of the diminutive category involving the metaphorization processes in which the notion of 'smallness' is transferred from the spatial to non-spatial domain:

- (i) for nouns: short temporal duration, reduced strength, reduced scale;
- (ii) for adjectives: reduced extent, reduced intensity;
- (iii) for verbs: process of intermittent or poor quality.

On the other hand, based on metonymic extension, diminutives may also evoke:

- (i) an attitude of affection or tenderness (originating in the experiential frame since human beings associate smallness with affection);
- (ii) an attitude of depreciation (smallness corresponds with lack of worth);³
- (iii) an attitude of dismissal (small things are of little importance),
- (iv) intensification (denotation of the essence of a particular thing).

Lehrer (2003: 220), in turn, distinguishes two main senses of the category that express the attitude on the part of the speaker, i.e.:

- (i) affectively positive (e.g. endearment, adoration);
- (ii) affectively negative (e.g. pejoration, triviality, worthlessness).

As noted by Taylor (2003: 176), many diminutivized forms, Italian diminitivized expressions included, reveal a tendency to be

² Schneider (2003) acknowledges that diminutives are not an exclusively morphological category. Instead he calls for an integrated analysis of both functional and formal aspects of diminutives embedded in context (combination of two perspectives – the grammatical and the pragmatic one) to account for the specific nature of the diminutive category.

³ It is utmost curious that sometimes the same diminutive form can be ambiguous with respect to both meanings, i.e. affectionate or depreciative sense (cf. Taylor 2003: 174).

lexicalized as independent lexical items, which makes diminutivization an important means of extending the lexical stock of the language. Interestingly, languages exhibit a considerable similarity with respect to the senses that may be conveyed by the diminutive category (p. 173). Polish grammars, for example, generally associate diminutive forms with the expression of “friendliness and generous reception” according to the association principle ‘small is nice’ (cf. Tabakowska 2001: 131-140), although, as noted by Wierzbicka (1984), such ‘affectionate’ usage of diminutives may often lead to ‘contempt’ senses.

In Tabakowska’s (2001) view, the use of the diminutive is connected with emotive language which is associated with stereotypes originating from a given culture or a country, as well as it mirrors the emotional scale of the speaker (cf. Wierzbicka 1990). However, owing to the fact that the speaker’s attitude is subject to vacillation, the diminutive interpretation must rely on a direct context, as illustrated by the following example:

(5) EEEKK!! My evil dinosaur *computie* is screwing up severely tonite. Not happy... but my week seems to be carrying on the way it started.

[retrieved April 12, 2010, from <http://lounge.cwtv.com>]

In this context *computie* does not refer to the size of the device; rather it expresses the speaker’s negative attitude towards the damaged machine. ‘Small’ is no longer associated with ‘something nice and beautiful’ but appears to be linked to an ironic meaning, as documented by the expression *evil dinosaur* uttered in the context in which the same computer problem had occurred a few times that fateful night.

Among a variety of diminutive suffixes in the English language we found the following ones to be the most productive in our corpus examples:⁴

-ette (e.g. *folderette*),

-ey (e.g. *drilley*),

⁴ For a discussion of other diminutive suffixes productive (to a greater or lesser extent) in the English language see, *inter alia*, Wierzbicka 1984/1999, Jurafsky 1996, Blank 2003, Lehrer 2003 and Schneider 2003.

- ie (e.g. *computie*),
- let (e.g. *screwlet*),
- ling (e.g. *loopling*),
- y (e.g. *celly*).

2.2. Principled Polysemy Approach

As already observed, linguists generally acknowledge that the diminutive constitutes a highly polysemous category (cf. Jurafsky 1996, Wierzbicka 1999, Tabakowska 2001, Taylor 2003, Lehrer 2003). At this point we would like to advocate the view of polysemy as advanced by Tyler and Evans (2003: 37-38), namely the so-called *Principled Polysemy Approach*.⁵ The theory makes the following main assumptions:

- (i) a particular lexical form is usually associated with a number of distinct, yet related meanings;
- (ii) not all contextually varying uses of a given lexical form constitute distinct senses;
- (iii) distinct senses compose a semantic network, such that the meanings linked with a particular lexical form constitute a semantic continuum.

Tyler and Evans (2003: 38) maintain that all the inferences and other specific aspects of the context can become associated with a given lexical form, eventually giving rise to a new sense being associated with it, while the context is likely to be apparent and readily recoverable by speakers of the language. Thus, the new usage is motivated and non-arbitrary. Such a usage-based approach to the development of semantic networks points to Tyler and Evans's considerable commitment to pragmatic strengthening, which view we would also like to embrace in the following analysis.

⁵ Tyler and Evans proposed their polysemy theory on the basis of their re-analysis of the meanings conveyed by the spatial particle *over* and they summarise it as follows: "[...] our proposal is that (the vast majority of) distinct meaning components associated with a lexical item are related to each other in a systematic and motivated way" (2003: 38).

2.3. Modelling category extension

In what follows we would like to present a brief account of two main, yet different approaches to polysemous categories developed in the general framework of cognitive linguistics.

The first model is based on the idea of *radial categories* as postulated by Lakoff (1987) and elaborated on in Dirven and Verspoor (2004). Dirven and Verspoor's account of the radial category structure rests on the assumption that some elements in a category are far more salient or more frequently used than others and are thus more prototypical or peripheral for a particular lexical form or category. Disparate word senses are linked to one another systematically via several cognitive processes building a radial network (cf. also Jurafsky 1996: 5ff.). According to Dirven and Verspoor (2004: 32-34), there are four main processes⁶ that allow us to focus on one or more components in a particular category and those are respectively:

- (i) *metonymy* – the semantic link between two or more senses of a word is based on a relationship of contiguity;
- (ii) *metaphor* – various category senses are associated with one another based on perceived similarity (particularly through embodied experience);
- (iii) *specialization* – the original meaning is restricted to a smaller group of special referents;
- (iv) *generalization* – the meaning component is augmented to encompass also related concepts.

A different approach to polysemy has been developed by Taylor (2003: 108-111), an approach which is based on the Wittgensteinian idea of *family resemblance*. On this analysis, the discrete senses of a given category are related to each other rather through *meaning*

⁶ Blank's (2003: 268-270) account of polysemization processes is quite convergent with that presented by Dirven and Verspoor (2004), however, he distinguishes additionally between diachronic processes that result in semantic change and synchronic relations of novel senses to these already lexicalised; the latter approach is largely similar to this adopted by Dirven and Verspoor. Of particular interest are Blank's types of "auto-antonymic polysemy" (e.g. *bad* meaning 'not good' and its slang use 'excellent') and "antiphrastic polysemy" (e.g. ital. *brava donna* as 'honourable lady' and in jargon 'prostitute').

chains, whereby meaning A is related to meaning B in virtue of some shared similarities, while meaning B becomes the source for a further extension to meaning C, which is likewise chained to meaning D, etc. Within the category, meaning relations exist primarily between adjacent members, whereas the non-adjacent meanings are related to one another only in virtue of intervening links.

On the basis of our discussion in section 2.1. we depict graphically (see Fig. 1) a generalized conception of possible meaning extensions for the category of diminutives based on Tyler and Evans’s (2003) concept of *semantic network model* arising from their Principled Polysemy Theory.

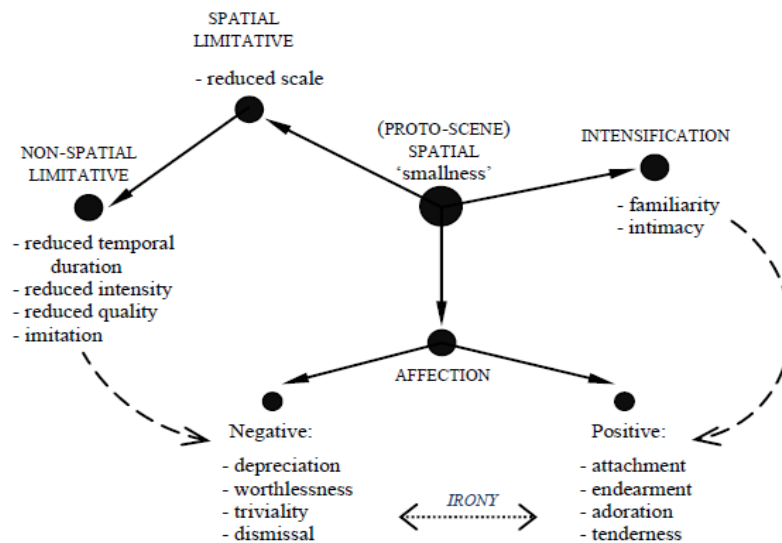


Fig. 1. Partial semantic network for the diminutive category (a working proposal).

To summarize the theoretical considerations in this section, we wish to observe that notwithstanding their valuable insights, both Lakoff and Taylor fail to take cognizance of the fact that not all meanings can be explained without referring to the discourse context and language user's knowledge. Such is the case with the ironic meaning of diminutive forms. The following quotation from Turner (1991) offers a partial answer to the question why the attempts to elucidate the ironic meaning conveyed by diminutives as based on previous theoretical models are inevitably preordained to failure:

[...] expressions do not mean; they are prompts for us to construct meanings by working with processes we already know. In no sense is the meaning of [an] ... utterance "right there in the words". When we understand an utterance, we in no sense are understanding "just what the words say"; the words themselves say nothing independent of the richly detailed knowledge and powerful cognitive processes we bring to bear. (Turner 1991: 206)

3. Irony emerging in discourse

3.1. Conceptual Integration Theory

In order to capture the irony⁷ behind the diminutive category we shall resort to the *Conceptual Integration Theory* and the notion of *Current Discourse Space* and thus embrace a usage-based approach. Before we proceed with our analysis, we have to discuss briefly the main assumptions of the *Conceptual Integration Theory* (*CIT*, also referred to as *Conceptual Blending Theory*) as proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002),⁸ a theory which developed out of the theory of mental spaces as postulated by Fauconnier (1994).

⁷ The study of irony has a long tradition. More recent studies in the field include Grice's (1975) view of irony as *violation of the quality maxim*, Raskin's (1985) theory of *incompatible scripts*, Gibbs's (1986) *direct access view*, Sperber and Wilson's (1986) *echoic mention theory*, or Giora's (Giora 1995, 1997; Giora and Gur 2003) *graded salience hypothesis* and *indirect negation view of irony*.

⁸ In the words of Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 18): "Conceptual integration, which we also call *conceptual blending*, is another basic mental operation, highly imaginative but crucial to even the simplest kinds of thought". As Libura (2007: 11) remarks, over the recent years, the theory occupies a privileged position within the cognitive semantics framework.

One may envisage *mental spaces*⁹ as “temporary containers”, evoking relevant information about a particular domain and containing a partial representation of the entities and relations of a given scenario as construed by a conceptualiser. Mental spaces are structured by elements which correspond to each of the discourse entities and simple frames to represent the relationships that exist between them. *Frames* are conceived of as hierarchically structured attribute-value pairs that can either be integrated with perceptual information or used to access generic knowledge about people and objects (cf. Fauconnier 1994, 1997).

In the process of conceptual blending, partial structure from two or more mental spaces is dynamically combined (i.e. selectively projected) in(to) a blended space. Blending processes unfold in an array of mental spaces known as a *Conceptual Integration Network*. A basic integration network model (as presented in Fig. 2.) consists of two *input spaces* that are linked on the basis of the so-called *partial cross-space mappings* (i.e. abstract correspondences between elements and relations in different spaces) connecting respective counterparts from separate inputs, a *generic space* that represents abstract commonalities in the inputs and, finally, a *blended space* that has some structure from each of the inputs as well as novel emergent structure not available in both inputs. To account for the dynamic meaning construction process and to explicate the emergent meaning, such a model exploits the activation of background knowledge and frequently involves the use of mental imagery and mental simulation (cf. Fauconnier 1997, Fauconnier and Turner 2002, Libura 2

⁹ According to Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 40/102), “Mental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action. They are very partial assemblies containing elements, structured by frames and cognitive models” (cf. also Fauconnier 1999: 11).

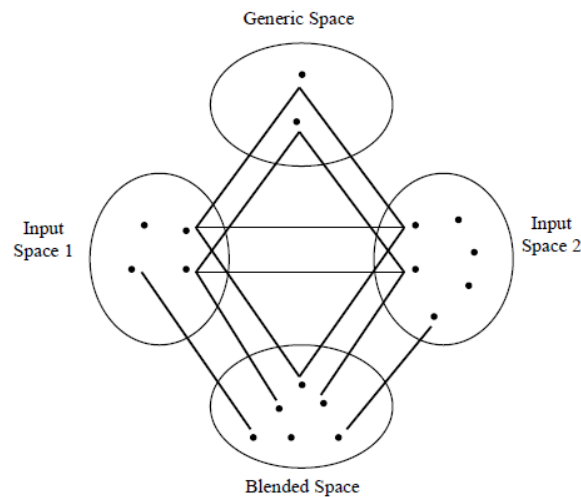


Fig. 2. A basic integration network (cf. Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 46).

Conceptual blending is a powerful tool within the cognitive semantics framework. Following Langacker's (2005: 147) suggestion that all grammatical constructions are to some extent the instances of blending processes, the CIT may be principally transferred onto the ground of grammar research to account for a variety of distinct grammatical phenomena, including derivation processes. If we combine Langacker's assumption with Taylor's (2002: 270-271) observation that "affixes (generally) head [and are schematic for] the complex words which they derive" and transplant these findings to the analysed category of diminutive, the conclusion follows that it is primarily the diminutive affixes that give the stems the particular kind of meaning. The practical use of the theoretical assumptions presented thus far can be illustrated by the following example from our corpus:

- (6) I always assumed it would be human stupidity that gave me the fatal stroke. I may have underestimated our computer friends. [...] Another day, another computer, another burst blood vessel. I am following the step-by-step instructions on the way to compile electronically and thus save myself approximately 60% of the time I spend on compiling articles. Everything appears to have gone well, until I notice that some of the footnotes have been re-numbered. [...] Apparently, I have

done this exactly the way I was instructed to and not one other person's computer did this. It's settled, *Computie* has some sort of vendetta against me. At this point, even my stubborn ass has to concede the contest to *Computie* and buckle down to manually compile this article, knowing full well that I've already wasted enough time to have finished it already.

[retrieved April 12, 2010, from <http://penalgallery.blogspot.com>]

The diminutive form *computie* is an instance of the blending process in which two input spaces, a space which contains the verb stem COMPUT- as in the noun *computer* and the second space which contains the diminutive noun suffix -IE, are merged together based on their generic commonalities (both being bound morphemes) to produce the new lexical form and meaning in the blended space (see the integration network in Fig. 3). While construing these mental spaces, the conceptualiser activates, with the first input space, the frame that stores his general knowledge about computers and IT-environment, whereas the second input space stores the information about the small size the suffix *-ie* designates together with other meanings that may be associated with the diminutive category (e.g. affection or dismissal). The result of this conflation is the diminutive *computie* which designates a particular personal computer that is, seemingly, both appreciated and hated by its owner. The new additional information that appears in the blend is the ironic 'love-hate relationship' interpretation of the diminutive form in question.

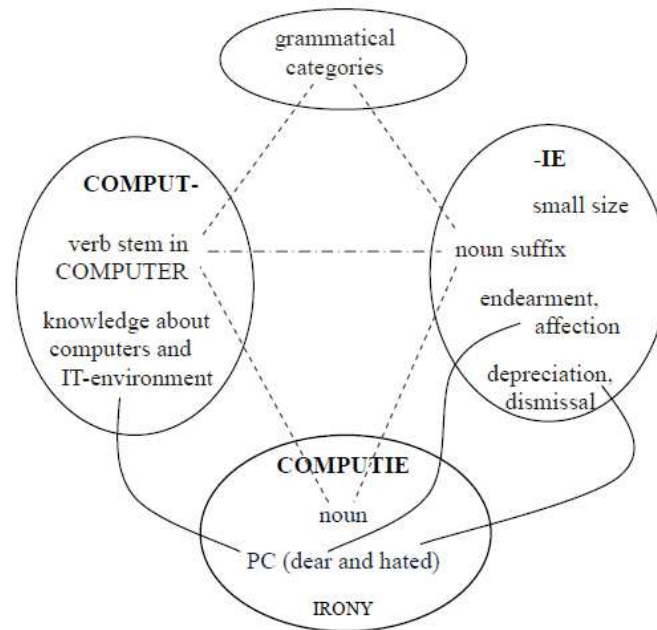


Fig. 3. Conceptual integration network for the diminutive COMPUTIE.

At this point it should be rather obvious that in order to properly account for the new structure emerging in the blend the analysis of the ongoing discourse must be incorporated into our investigation of the irony behind diminutives in technical jargon, and, generally, in diminutive forms as such.

3.2. On-line meaning construction in discourse

Generally speaking, cognitive linguists argue that the meaning is not given in the text directly, but is rather construed on-line on the basis of hints coming from linguistic expressions used as well as from the discourse context¹⁰ (cf. Libura 2007: 15). According to Langacker

¹⁰ The role of discourse context in the processes of meaning construction is emphasized by Fauconnier (1999: 37) in the following way: “A language expression does not have meaning in itself, rather it has a meaning potential, and it is only within

(2008: 457ff.), a discourse comprises a series of *usage events*, i.e. “the instances of language use in all their complexity and specificity.” In particular, a discourse is a highly interactive process on the part of at least two interlocutors, a speaker and a hearer, in which the speaker exerts some influence on an actual or imagined hearer. A particular usage event is never absolutely identical for both speaker and hearer, but still, for the communication to be successful, substantial overlap is just sufficient.

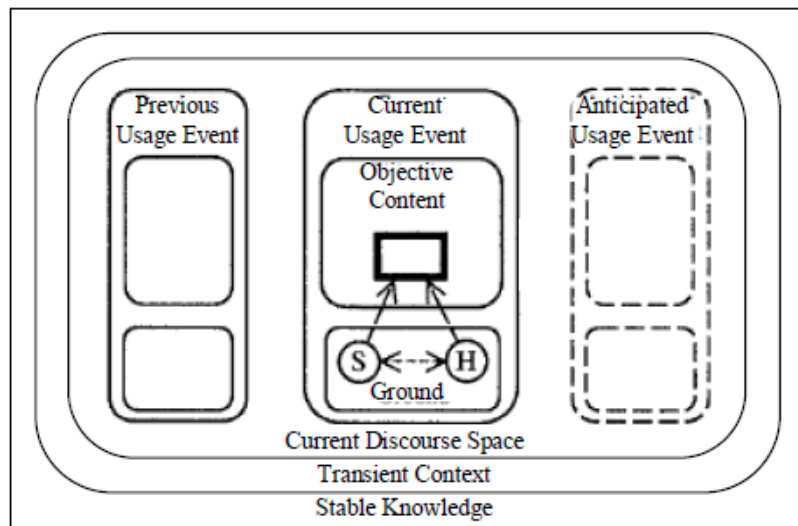


Fig. 4. Standard model of *Current Discourse Space* (cf. Langacker 2008: 466).

In his attempt to provide a common ground for discourse interpretation for its interlocutors, Langacker introduces the notion of *Current Discourse Space* (CDS):

It [CDS] comprises everything presumed to be shared by the speaker and hearer as the basis for communication at a given moment. Part of the CDS, of course, is

a complete discourse and in context that the meaning (concrete sense) will actually be produced.”

the current discourse itself, including both previous usage events and any that might be anticipated. Also part of the CDS are other mutually evident aspects of the transient context, as well as any stable knowledge required for their apprehension or otherwise invoked. (Langacker 2008: 466)

Current Discourse Space, coded by linguistic structure is presented schematically in Fig. 4. Note that the key factor in establishing the linguistic meaning in this model is the interaction between the speaker and the hearer, both of whom actively evaluate the other's knowledge and intentions (Langacker 2008: 464f.).

3.3. Irony as interaction between speaker and hearer

The foregoing theoretical considerations led us to an integrated cognitive analysis of the form COMPUTIE, incorporating both CIT and CDS (see Fig. 5.).

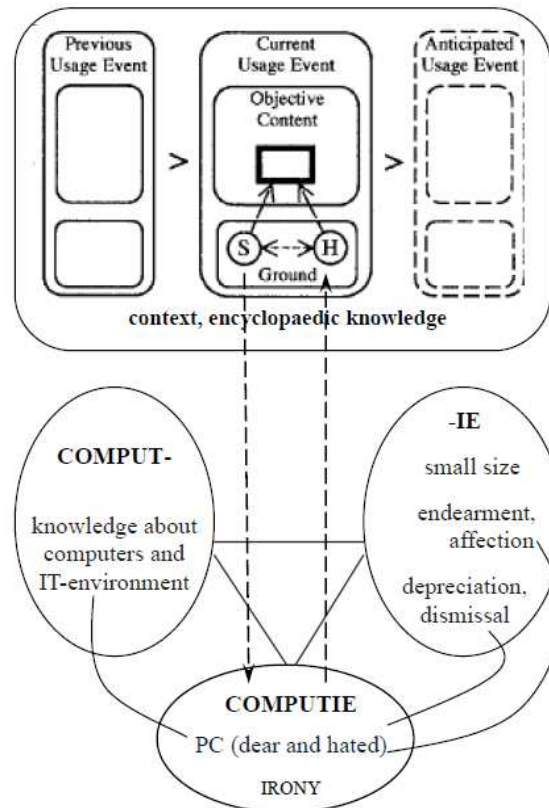


Fig. 5. Integrated analysis of the diminutive COMPUTIE.

As Kardela (2010) rightly points out in his study of so-called “hypothetical facts”, the question of ironic attitude is by no means a trivial one, since it is ultimately the question of the role both speaker and hearer play in the understanding of irony. Since the hearer interprets the meanings conveyed to him by the speaking entity, we wish to claim, following Kardela,¹¹ that the proper understanding of

¹¹ According to Kardela (forthcoming) the mechanism for the ironic attitude may be explained based on Langacker’s (2000, 2005: 43ff., 2008: 528ff.) notions of *subjectification* as well as *actual and virtual plane*, as irony places the description of a

an ironic utterance requires the hearer to adopt an ironic attitude and thus the information included in the text may be confronted with his vast repository of encyclopaedic knowledge. Should the effect of this confrontation be substantial discord or incongruity between the information from the activated domains, or more generally mental spaces, which have been conflated in the conceptual integration process based on the discourse context and conceptualiser's encyclopaedic knowledge, this may imply the additional ironic meaning of a given diminutive form has to be assumed by the hearer. Put differently, the discourse contains clues or signals (linguistic expressions and context) that facilitate or help to structure the mental spaces, which are subsequently used in the process of unfolding the conceptual blend which combines the cognitive structure (conceptualizations) with the semantic structure (meaning) and allows for the emergence of additional information – in our case the irony (cf. Fauconnier and Turner 2002, Libura 2007, Kardela 2010). Based on our analysis of examples found on Internet fora, in written discourse these clues or hints may involve the following:

- certain graphical means of expression, e.g.: bold, italicized or underlined fonts, first or all capital letters, spaced-out words, punctuation marks (particularly exclamation marks and inverted commas), emoticons;
- implicit context, inferences (e.g. co-occurrence of other diminutive forms in the text), register.

The foregoing cognitive analysis, as performed on the example COMPUTIE and presented in sections 3.1-3.3, may be principally applied to other diminutive forms with ironic meaning, which in our study included, *inter alia*, the following terms:

given event on the virtual plane, manages mental spaces and “supervises” the process of conceptual blending.

<i>browserette</i>	(internet browser)	<i>loopling</i>	(tiny loop)
<i>buttonette</i>	(switch)	<i>mousie</i>	(computer mouse)
<i>celly</i>	(mobile phone)	<i>pluette</i>	(connecting device)
<i>devicey</i>	(instrument, gadget)	<i>screenie</i>	(screenshot)
<i>drilley</i>	(drill bit)	<i>screwlet</i>	(little screw)
<i>enginie</i>	(motor)	<i>sheathlet</i>	(knife case)
<i>folderette</i>	(computer folder)	<i>spannerette</i>	(wrench)
<i>hooklet</i>	(little hook)	<i>switchlet</i>	(switching device)
<i>keylet</i>	(tiny key)	<i>systemlet</i>	(operating system)

4. Conclusion

In an attempt to analyse the problem of ironic meaning conveyed by diminutives in technical jargon, we adopted the received view that the diminutive category is highly polysemous, i.e. the basic sense of 'smallness in physical dimension' extends beyond the spatial domain by means of, *inter alia*, metaphorization or metonymization. Thus, the notion of 'smallness' refers not only to a short length, a short duration or a diminished scale, but also to something having bad quality or appealing to sentiment. However, our analysis based on the Conceptual Integration Theory indicates that conceptual blending can also be regarded as a highly productive mechanism of semantic change (in addition to metaphor and metonymy) and it serves as an instrument to model and predict the hypotheses concerning potential meaning, including ironic interpretation, of a given utterance.

Further, the arguments adduced in this article support the cognitive dogma that semantic and pragmatic aspects of a word meaning cannot be analysed separately from each other (for instance, cf. Langacker 1987). On the one hand, we deal with the meaning of a given lexical form which is contextually dependant, while on the other hand, we cannot ignore the vital role of both the speaker and hearer play in the construction of meaning when engaged in the communication process. On the basis of this assumption, we assert that the ironic meaning of the diminutive emerges as a result of the speaker-hearer interaction within the current discourse space. In the process, the hearer assumes an "ironic attitude" towards the content of the information conveyed through the text by the speaker as well as confronts it with the encyclopaedic knowledge he or she has about the world. This

additional ironic meaning can be “read-off” not only from the linguistic or graphical means of expressions used, but also from the context itself in which these expressions appear.

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