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# The Diminutive in the Arabic Dialect of Tunis

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Hitherto studies on Arabic dialects in general and on Tunisian Arabic in particular have mostly dealt with the formal aspects of diminutives. Thus reference works on the Arabic dialect of Tunis focus almost exclusively on the morphology of diminutives. Their functions beyond smallness and endearment are only marginally mentioned, if at all (Stumme 1896: 67-84, Cohen 1975: 204-208, Singer 1984: 480-496).
- 2 In his introduction to the paragraph on diminutives, Singer (1984: 480) states that diminution may be spatial and temporal and affect both quantity and quality. He adds that diminutives may also carry either a contemptuous or a sympathetic nuance. Trabelsi (1991: 89-90) dedicates a short paragraph to the different usage of diminutives in the speech of women and men. Maalej (2010) analyses some pragmatic functions of diminutives in addressing non-acquaintances.
- 3 The main source for the lexical data here was Singer (1984<sup>2</sup>), which was thoroughly double-checked with informants from Tunis.<sup>3</sup> The examples are either elicited from native speakers or taken from our Viennese TUNICO project and the Tunisiya corpus.

## 1. Forms and patterns

- 4 There are three main diminutive patterns in Tunis Arabic: (1)  $C_1C_2iC_3a$ , (2)  $C_1C_2ayyiC_3$  FEM  $C_1C_2ayyC_3a$ , and (3)  $C_1C_2iC_3iC_4$  FEM  $C_1C_2iC_3C_4a$ .<sup>4</sup> Diminutives are predominantly derived from nouns, never from verbs. Besides nouns, diminutives can be formed from adjectives, one special adverb, and the numbers 'one' and 'two'.

- 5 A few words, all of them adjectives, exhibit the suffix *-ūn*, e.g. *taḥfūn* ‘pretty’. Singer 1984:496 notes that *-ūn* is also attached to the two diminutives *zġayyir* and *qṣayyir*, but our informants used *ṣaġrūn* and *qaṣrūn* instead.<sup>5</sup>
- 6 The pattern  $C_1aC_2C_2\bar{u}C_3$  for which Singer 1984: 496 lists only proper names seems to have become more widespread in contemporary speech, e.g. *nabbūla* instead of *nbayyla* ‘small bladder’.

## 2. Functions of the diminutive

- 7 Following the seminal works of Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994 and Jurafsky 1996, we will differentiate between the semantic and pragmatic functions of diminutives.<sup>6</sup> As will be seen, the latter by far outweigh the purely denotative functions indicating diminution *per se*. It should be emphasized that almost all the semantic senses given in chapter 3.1 can appear with pragmatic connotations as well (cf. Jurafsky 1996: 535).

### 2.1. Semantic (denotative) functions

#### 2.1.1. Smallness

- 8 The basic function of diminutives is the denotative diminution of typically tangible, perceptible, three-dimensional objects. Such diminutives may express nothing more than smallness, without any additional connotative nuance. Particularly when used with the names of domestic animals the diminutive seems to imply both youth and minuteness:

*ḥwīnta* DIM of *ḥānūt* ‘shop’ as in *ʿand-i ḥwīnta* ‘I have a small shop.’

*ḥṣayyira* DIM of *ḥṣīra* ‘small mat’

Animals

*srīdik* DIM of *sardūk* ‘little young cock’

*klayyib* DIM of *kalb* ‘young (and cute) dog’

- 9 The diminution usually relates to visual impression (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 121), although cases based on the other senses also exist:

*ṣwayyit* DIM of *ṣūt* ‘(pleasant) voice’ as in *ṣūt-i māhūš ṭayyāra. – lā famma nās tbār kalla* ‘and-hum *ṣwayyit* fi- ...’My voice is not fantastic. – No, but there are people who really have a pleasant voice-DIM.’ (Tunico: Two schoolgirls).

- 10 Diminution occurs not only with reference to size but also concerning other assayable features, particularly quality and importance. In such cases the boundaries between semantic and pragmatic functions are often blurred. Only the context, including intonation, determines the meaning of the diminutive, which may denote either poor quality and unpleasant physical appearance or prettiness and small size. The word *ḥwīza* DIM of *ḥāza* may, for instance, denote a ‘small thing’ but also an unimportant matter. Singer’s translation of *xwītim* as ‘cheap and miserable ring’ is only appropriate in a context like the following, in which a woman whose fiancé left her says:

*ṣūf ḥāk il-xwītim illi žāb-u!* ‘Look at that cheap little ring which he bought (for me!)’

- 11 But coming home from shopping she may say:

*il-yūm šrīt xwītim maḥlā-h!* ‘Today I bought a little ring: it’s so nice!’

- 12 Singer’s examples suggest that the diminutives of words denoting buildings usually are pejorative. In contemporary speech practically all of these words are no longer in use;

but at least until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a *fnīdiq*, DIM of *funduq* ‘hostel’ (Singer 1984: 492), was usually a ‘miserable hostel’ and not necessarily just small.

### 2.1.2 Intensity and exactness

- 13 Particularly with adjectives that express small size, diminutives have an intensifying meaning which can be termed *minimizing*. Adjectives that denote poor quality or stupidity also fall in this category.

*zǧayyir / ṣǧayyir* ‘very small, tiny, very young’, DIM of *zǧīr / ṣǧīr*<sup>7</sup>

*xfayyif* ‘very light’, DIM of *xfif*

*ḍrayyif* ‘cute and tiny’, DIM of *ḍrif*

*blayyid* ‘rather stupid’, DIM of *blīd*

*xṣayyiṣ* ‘narrow-minded’, without synchronic simplex

- 14 There is evidence of only one diminutive that is likely derived from a noun that already denotes something small. This is the adverb *tṣayša / tṣīša / dṣīša* ‘a little bit’, which is apparently the DIM of *tṣīṣ* ‘semolina’.
- 15 The diminutive of *waqt* ‘time’ may carry the notion of exactness, i.e. ‘the right time’ or even ‘appointment’.

*wqayyit il-ḥākem ya žmā’a!* ‘Hey guys, curfew has come!’ (Singer 1984: 485, fn. 32)

- 16 To this category belongs the only adverb with a diminutive, *qbīla* and its extension *qbīlika* ‘recently; just’ DIM of *qbal* ‘before’.

### 2.1.3 Approximation

- 17 Diminutive formation is not restricted to countable and concrete nouns but also occurs with words whose denotative meaning does not logically admit diminution.<sup>8</sup> Besides their pragmatic functions discussed below, such diminutives express approximation or fuzziness. Thus *drayyiz*, DIM of *draž* ‘five minutes’, may indicate an interval of more-or-less five minutes. The same holds true for *wayyim*, DIM of *ām* ‘year’, which does not necessarily mean less than 365 days.
- 18 Another class of adjectives have a semantic content virtually opposite to diminution but fit this category because their diminutives merely downgrade the actual meaning: *kbīr* ‘large, big’ is a good example. The English equivalent of these diminutives can be roughly translated by adverbs like ‘rather, quite, fairly’.

*kbayyir* ‘rather big, not very big, kind of big’, DIM of *kbīr*<sup>9</sup>

*rzayyin* ‘rather cumbersome’, DIM of *rzīn*

### 2.1.4 Lexicalized diminutives

- 19 Lexicalized diminutives are those which are usually not bound to specific speech situations. They are often semantically no longer linked to their simple forms, which may have become obsolete or even never existed, as in the first example below:

*lwīza* ‘gold coin’, labelled as DIM in Singer (1984: 489), but derived from the French coin called *Louis d’or*.

*taḥfūn* ‘pretty, cute, charming, lovely’ has no apparent simplex; etymologically it is likely related to *tuhfa* ‘bijou, jewel, masterpiece’.

*dwīda* ‘Capellini, a very thin variety of pasta’, actually DIM of *dūda* ‘worm’. Noodles of the *dwīda* type are a very popular garnish in Tunisian cuisine.

- 20 One of the universal features of diminutives is that they often denote a small object that resembles a larger object in shape or use (Jurafsky 1996: 535-536). The few forms found in Tunis Arabic do not carry any connotative meaning, but constitute separate semantic items. This is indirectly proved by the fact that at least one can be combined with the adjective ‘big’, which completely contradicts the real diminutive meaning.

*mġirfa* ‘teaspoon’, DIM of *mġarfa* ‘spoon’; the phrase *mġirfa kbira* is often used in recipes.

*wriqa* ‘slip (of paper)’, DIM of *warqa* ‘sheet (of paper)’

Most probably *žnina* ‘garden’, which is no longer perceived as the DIM of *žnān* ‘orchard’, also belongs to this category (cf. Singer 1984: 495).

Words that denote children’s garments which are the small counterparts of similar adult garments are treated here as a subcategory of words expressing smallness.

*srīwil* ‘children’s trousers’, DIM of *sirwāl*

*ksīwa* ‘children’s dress’, DIM of *kiswa*.

- 21 Lexicalized diminutives may also denote objects that are in a metaphorical way similar to those expressed by their simplica:

*ʔffayyim* (< *fwayyim*) ‘nibble, snack’, DIM of *fumm* ‘mouth’, e.g. *kūl ʔffayyim!* ‘Take a nibble!’

*rwayyiq* ‘gibberish’, DIM of *rīq* ‘spittle’, e.g. *malla rwayyiq!* ‘What gibberish!’

*ħwīta*, DIM of *ħūta* ‘fish’, is used in the sense of ‘pretty girl’; thus young men may say to each other: *šuft ħāk il-ħwīta?* ‘Have you seen the pretty girl?’

*glībāt* ‘seeds for snacking’, plural of the DIM of *qalb* ‘seed; heart’

## 2.2 Pragmatic (connotative) functions

### 2.2.1 Child-centred speech situations

- 22 Most linguistic studies agree that the origin of diminutives is in speech for children (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994, Jurafsky 1996). Child-directed speech is ideal for diminutives because they project a sense of endearment and emotional closeness. Typical of child-centred speech are diminutives of body parts, such as.

*wḍayyna* ‘ear-DIM’

*trīma* ‘bum, botty-DIM’

*baššūla* ‘penis-DIM’<sup>10</sup>

- 23 Another domain of speech for children is the use of diminutives for food and beverages to encourage a child to eat and drink:

*šrib il-ħlayyba!* ‘Drink the milk-DIM!’<sup>11</sup>

*kūl il-ħḥayma!* ‘Eat the meat-DIM!’<sup>12</sup>

- 24 Insulting words like *šīṭān* ‘devil’ can be turned into their opposite by using the diminutive, e.g. for a very active, mischievous child:

*ha-l-wlid šwiṭin* ‘This boy is a devil-DIM.’

### 2.2.2 Forms of address

- 25 Situations where people are directly addressed require politeness or affection or both. Diminutives are of course less employed in very formal speech and thus occur most often in conversations among kin and peers. Interestingly, in Tunis, the diminutives of kinship terms such as *yā bnayya* and *yā wlayyid* are regarded as derogative or are used by parents when displeased with their children.

### 2.2.3 Affective evaluation

- 26 Diminutives modify a proposition in the sense that they express emotions in the broadest sense (Ponsonnet 2018: 2.8). The emotion may be positive or negative, although the latter use is rare in the Arabic of Tunis. Thus, the speaker's choice of the diminutive is often related to his or her subjective joy or pleasure.

*maḥlā-ha is-smīša!* 'How nice the sun-DIM (is today)!'  
*nrawwah l-dwīrt-i* 'I go to my (much-loved) house-DIM.'

- 27 This usage seems to be especially frequent with beverages and tobacco:

*šribt kwayyis tāy* 'I drank a cup-DIM of tea.'  
*žüst yilzmu il fō fāǧ lā syāst °mtāf ǒ kāǧ d-ǒǧ bāš tšidd rūḥik mba<sup>d</sup> °qhīwa sīnō... vwalā.* 'To recharge yourself, you just have to take a siesta for a quarter of an hour. Then a coffee-DIM, and that's it!' (Tunico: Talking about Tunis)

- 28 Particularly with words belonging to this semantic field, the diminutive of the cardinal number 'one', *whayyid* FEM *whayyda*, is used as a kind of analytic diminutive:

*nžibu whayyda šiša!* 'Let us bring a hookah-DIM!'  
*šrabt whayyda kūka.* 'I drank a Coke-DIM.'

- 29 There is a wide array of domains where diminutives can be employed to elicit sympathy, affection, and harmony. In Tunis Arabic, familiarity or informality are not always a precondition for use of the diminutive, i.e. its pragmatic function cannot only be described as [non-serious]. Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 239) pointed out that here Arabic differs from European languages because diminutives are universally accepted in business transactions in bazars and many shops.<sup>13</sup> According to our informants, the diminutive is frequently used when one starts negotiating price in a shop. Its use creates a light atmosphere of mutual sympathy that helps to smooth the subsequent bargaining.<sup>14</sup>

*qaddāš ha-š-šlayyka* 'How much are these slippers-DIM?'

- 30 Diminutives occasionally, but not frequently, may express negative feelings like distaste and contempt.

*w-hāk il-xdīma lli lqīt-ha* 'This (damned) job-DIM I have!'

- 31 Singer (1984: 489) noted *xdīma* with only its negative meaning of 'miserable job'. However, it may also be used with a positive connotation, as in:

*ʔana nḥibb °xdīmt-i.* 'As for me, I love my job-DIM!'

### 2.2.4 Hedging and mitigation

- 32 In this section a variety of speech situations will be discussed in which the diminutive is used as a politeness strategy in its widest sense. This includes expressions of modesty and so-called pragmatic hedges for mitigation and attenuation (see Jurafsky 1996: 558).

#### 2.2.4.1 Attenuation of unpleasant or boastful statements

- 33 Diminutives are used for mitigation in situations where the speaker tries to avoid harshness, seriousness, or precision, the latter particularly with measures.<sup>15</sup>

*niržis tistannā-ni drayyīž nbaddil ḥwāyž-i w-nuxržu nit<sup>f</sup>aššāw* 'Niržis, wait for me just five minutes. I will change my clothes and then we'll go out for dinner.' (Tunisiya)

- 34 If one knows that the hearer is a person who does not like walking, the use of the diminutive in the following example suggests that the distance is less than it really is.

*barra imši y<sup>ʿ</sup>ayyšik il-ḥānūt qrayyib mūš b<sup>ʿ</sup>id!* ‘Come on, go on please: the shop is very near, not far!’<sup>16</sup>

- 35 The diminutive may also serve to soften a proposition which contradicts ethical or religious norms. When a man tells his wife that last night *šribt ḥwīra bīra* ‘I drank a four-pack-DIM of beer’, the use of the diminutive makes the drinking of large quantities of alcohol sound less reprehensible.

- 36 Diminutives are also used to diminish the perceived seriousness of negative situations. In the next example *qlayyib* is intended as a kind of euphemism to lessen the anxiety of a person who suffers from a heart disease.

*kifim-ik? ʿāšniya šahḥt-ik? ʿāšnūwa qlayyib-ik Brāhīm?* ‘How are you? How is your health? How is your heart-DIM, Ibrahim? (Tunisiya)

- 37 A person who was unemployed for a long time might say:

*q<sup>ʿ</sup>adt ʿwayyim fi-d-dār ma-nixdim-š* ‘I stayed a year-DIM at home and did not work.’

- 38 The last example again shows that the interpretation of the diminutive is often context-based, because the same sentence can be uttered by a young mother who was happy to stay a year at home with her child.

#### 2.2.4.2 Softening of commands and requests

- 39 Diminutives as hedging devices are widely used. When asking a favour of someone, the diminutive implies that it is a trifling, unimportant thing that the speaker needs. A diminutive emphasizes the modesty of the request and adds a polite touch that makes it more likely that the request will be successful.<sup>17</sup> The use of diminutives to soften commands and requests is particularly important as Arabic in general lacks politeness strategies expressed by conditional terms like the English ‘may, could, would’ etc.

*šidd-li blayyša y<sup>ʿ</sup>ayyš-ik!* ‘Please reserve a nice place for me!’  
*ʿa<sup>ʿ</sup>ṭī-ni šṭayyir dillāʿ!* ‘Give me a half-DIM melon.’<sup>18</sup>

- 40 To a waiter in the restaurant one can say:

*žīb-li šḥayyin baṭāṭal!* ‘Bring me a plate-DIM of potatoes!’

- 41 The use of a diminutive can also be based on the speaker’s assumption that the addressee might refuse the request because of lack of time, as in the following:

*sāmaḥ-ni nnažžim naḥki m<sup>ʿ</sup>ā-k drayyīž?* ‘Excuse me; can I talk five-minutes-DIM with you?’ (Tunisiya)  
*ma-txāf-š mā-nī-š bāš nṭawwil ʿand-i klīmīn* ‘Don’t be afraid; I will not detain you long. I only have (to tell you) two words-DIM.’ (Tunisiya)

- 42 Diminutives are also used to express modesty by downplaying the speaker’s possessions or deeds.<sup>19</sup> In Arab culture this is linked to the belief in the evil eye, which is mostly regarded as the consequence of a grudge. When somebody says *šrit dwīra* ‘I have bought a house-DIM’, the house can be, but is not necessarily, small in size: it is more likely that the person wants to belittle the value of the house, first, to seem modest, and second, for fear of arousing envy. The person who sees this large house for the first time may say:

*waḥḥa kbayyira mašalla!* ‘By God, it’s (rather) big-DIM, what God wills.’

- 43 The use of the phrase *mašalla* reinforced by the diminutive of the word ‘big’ reassures the owner of the house that the speaker does not begrudge it.

### 2.2.6 Compassion and empathy

- 44 A major pragmatic function of the diminutive is expressing pity or empathy with the listener or addressee, or for a third person (Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 206-212, Ponsonnet 2018: 2.4).

*flīsāt-u dāʿi l-msīkin!* ‘His money-DIM has been lost, the poor chap!’

*sākna fi-bbīta šǧayyira fi-dār hmāt-ha* ‘She lives in a very tiny room in the house of her mother-in-law.’

## Conclusion

- 45 In Tunis Arabic, the use of diminutives serves primarily pragmatic functions and less often denotes smallness on a purely semantic level. Diminutives are more often associated with positive feelings and emotional attachment to a person or an object than with disdain or contempt. In contrast to most European languages, there are fewer constraints for the use of the diminutive because it is not restricted to the domains of familiarity and intimacy but can also be used in conversations related to business, particularly in shops or restaurants.
- 46 Although the diminutive is certainly a productive morphological category in the Arabic of Tunis, the number of actually used diminutives is decreasing. Singer remarked in the 1980s that many of the forms collected by Stumme (1896: 67-84) more than half a century earlier were no longer known. A similar tendency is mentioned by Cohen (1975: 204), who wrote that “le diminutif n’est véritablement en usage que dans le langage des femmes (et de moins en moins parmi les générations les plus jeunes).” And “Il existe chez les hommes un emploi ironique du diminutif, mais il est beaucoup plus rare, à ce qu’il me paraît, que chez les hommes musulmans.” Data from recent fieldwork suggests that the number of diminutives has continued decreasing during the past few decades. About 30 per cent of the 251 diminutives listed by Singer (1984: 480-496)<sup>20</sup> were not known to our informants.<sup>21</sup> This tendency is corroborated by our corpus of Tunis Arabic, which contains almost 100,000 words but only five different diminutive forms.
- 47 A large percentage of the words for which the diminutives presented by Singer were not familiar to our informants denote objects such as tools and buildings, and words related to nature (like ‘mountain’ and ‘tree’). Therefore we may assume that in the contemporary dialect the pragmatic functions of diminutives have gained even more importance compared to the pure diminution which had been previously applied mainly to such objects. Our corpus and the examples from informants suggest that in these cases there is a tendency towards analytic diminution by adding *šǧayyir* ~ *zǧayyir* to a noun. Such diminutives are particularly frequent with loanwords, e.g. *minibūs* <sup>ʔ</sup>*zǧayyira* ‘a small minibus’, but also found with nouns that still form an internal diminutive like *karhba* *zǧayyira* ‘little car’ besides *krihba*.



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### Online sources

Tunisiya – Tunisian Arabic Corpus: <http://www.tunisiya.org/>

TUNICO – <https://tunico.acdh.oeaw.ac.at>

## NOTES

1. At the conference in Marseille the paper was presented in association with Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun. Her findings, that also include remarks on the differences between bedouin and urban dialects, are published under the title “Diminutives in South Tunisian Bedouin Dialects: A Formal and Pragmatic Analysis” in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 108 (2018), 181-228.
2. Occasionally information from other sources was added, particularly from Stumme 1896, Marçais & Guïga 1958-1961, and Cohen 1975.
3. Special thanks goes to our lecturer on Tunisian Arabic at the Department of Oriental Studies, Mag. Ines Mannoubi, who patiently answered my numerous questions on the diminutives.
4. A typical feature is the lack of any reflexes of the CA pattern *fuʿayl*. For more details cf. Singer 1984: 481-484.
5. This suffix is also attested for several Eastern dialects, e.g. in Iraq and Khuzestan (Masliyah 1997: 72; Leitner 2018 in this volume). It probably has an Aramaic origin.
6. These approaches have yet been rarely applied to Arabic dialects. Among the few exceptions are M.A. Badarneh 2010, Y.I. al-Rojaie 2012, and C. Taine-Cheikh 2018 who have made use of these methods in their articles on diminutives in Jordan, Najd, and Mauritania, respectively.
7. Cf. Latin *parvus* and *parvulus*, Italian *piccolo* and *piccolino*.
8. See also Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 122.
9. Cf. the Italian *grandottino*. Marçais & Guïga (1958-1961: 3362) mention that *kbayyir* is used for children and animals in the sense of ‘grandelet’.
10. The DIM *zbayyib*, however, is not used for addressing children, but euphemistically to avoid the word *zibb* ‘penis’, which is regarded as vulgar.
11. Cf. the use of *ḥlibāt* ‘(literally) milks’ in Syrian Arabic in Brustad 2008.
12. The equivalent of ‘Eat your foodie!’ is expressed by the verb *maḥma!*
13. However, this is not the case in South Tunisian dialects, cf. Ritt-Benmimoun 2018: 202-205.
14. The informants did not confirm the statement in Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 239) that the use by the buyer of the diminutive of the object under price negotiation is meant to indicate the object’s inferior value and that it therefore should have a lower price.
15. Cf. Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 238.
16. The same sentence may be used when the speaker only wants to emphasize that the shop is very close.
17. For a detailed discussion of the topic cf. Chapter 3.5.10 in Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994.
18. Singer (1984: 484) claims that the diminutive *ṣṭayyir* means something like ‘the smaller half of’. This was not corroborated by our informants.
19. Cf. Badarneh (2010: 163): “The use of the diminutive as a minimizing hedge extends to its use to minimize one’s good deeds or gestures toward others when talking about these acts in front of others, as a way of showing one’s modesty and avoiding self-praise or bragging.”
20. The complete list can be generated from our TUNICO dictionary by searching for “diminutive.\*” in the “subc” category (<https://vicav.acdh.oeaw.ac.at>).
21. The female informant (aged 41) did not recognize 81 forms, the male informant (aged 23) 69 forms.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper presents a short overview of the formal aspects of diminutive forms used in the dialect of Tunis and discusses whether or not the diminutive can still be regarded a productive morphological category. Based on the approach of comprehensive studies on the topic, such as Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994, Jurafsky 1996, and Badarneh 2007, both the semantic and the pragmatic functions of diminutives are discussed in detail. It was found that the number of diminutives actually used has decreased during the past century. Moreover, it seems that diminutives serve primarily pragmatic functions and less often denote smallness on a purely semantic level. Our data further suggests that in Tunis diminutives are more often associated with positive feelings than with contempt and ridicule. The use of the diminutive is not restricted to the domains of familiarity and intimacy but is also appropriate in more formal settings, such as conversations in shops or restaurants.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** diminutive, Tunisian Arabic, pragmatics, semantics

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