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The expression of diminutivity in Central Ring Grassfields Bantu[1]

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Abstract:
Studies on the expression of diminutivity in Bantoid languages of the Cameroonian Grassfields have tended to focus on the role that noun class derivation plays within the familiar Bantu paradigm. A closer look at individual branches of Bantoid, however, reveals a more complex picture, which rather suggests a division of labour between derivational strategies and compounding and/or periphrasis. This contribution zooms in on the languages of the Central Ring (CR) branch of Grassfields Bantu, presenting an overview of diminutivisation strategies found here: the notorious transfer to gender 19/6a, which is at times, accompanied by the addition of a semantically bleached suffix –CV, and periphrasis in associative constructions headed by nouns with inherent diminutive meanings such as 'child'.

Keywords: Central Ring Grassfields Bantu languages, diminutivity, diminutives, noun classes, gender

1 Introduction

While diminutives have been studied extensively for their forms and meanings both from a universal perspective (Jurafsky 1996, Bakema & Geeraerts 2000, Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015) and in Bantu specifically (Gibson, Guérois & Marten 2017), they have been largely neglected in studies on Grassfields Bantu languages, beyond the general statement that gender 19/6a is employed for this purpose (Hyman 1979: 24, Hyman 1980: 234, Tamanji 2009: 31, Akumbu

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& Chibaka 2012: 54, Möller 2012: 12, Asohsi 2015: 68, Voll 2017: 90). Diminutives are grammatical "elements which make a semantic contribution pertaining to size" (Gibson et al. 2017: 344) in that they primarily express 'physical smallness' (Schneider 2003: 10). Other – derived – semantic functions include young age, insignificance or incompleteness, as well as relation or descent (Jurafsky 1996). Moreover, "diminutives can also be used to convey perspectives and subjective viewpoints, as well as to encode pejorative meanings along the lines of disdain or contempt, or ameliorative meanings encoding affection and admiration" (Gibson et al. 2017: 344). This study investigates the forms and functions of diminutives in the Central Ring (CR) branch of Grassfields Bantu, drawing primarily on data from six of the seven CR languages, i.e. Babanki, Kom, Kung, Kuk, Men and Oku.[2] After a brief overview of the expression of diminutives in Bantu in section 2, section 3 discusses the morphological strategies of diminutivisation in CR. Section 4 sketches a prominent alternative strategy of diminutivisation attested in CR, i.e. periphrasis by an associative construction headed by the noun 'child' or 'tiny item'. A conclusion is provided in section 5.

2 Diminutives in Bantu

Diminutives in Bantu are "thought to have been historically expressed as part of the noun class system, and several noun classes have been

2 Although closely related to Narrow Bantu, Grassfields Bantu languages show remarkable differences in all parts of their grammar. CR languages themselves have many features in common and a comparison of vocabularies between immediate neighbours, such as Babanki and Kom (Brye 2001) show that they share at least 70% of their vocabulary. Until recently, only five languages (Kom, Oku, Babanki, Men and Bum) have been listed as CR (Dieu & Renaud 1983, Breton & Fohtung 1991, Watters 2003). However, it has now been proposed that Kuk and Kung also belong to this subgroup (Tatang 2016, Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2019). There are nearly 400,000 people who speak these languages, as follows: Kom 233,000, Oku 40,000, Babanki 39,000, Men 35,000, Bum 21,000, Kuk 3,000, and Kung 1,750 (Eberhard et al. 2019). Bum has been left out of this study because we were unable to obtain substantial data from the limited existing literature on the language and also because we did not have access to any Bum speaker at the time we could have collected the necessary data (2018–2019). This was due, in part, to the political crisis in the English-speaking regions of Cameroon that started in October 2016 and significantly prevented movement to the area, as well as led to the displacement of speakers into more remote areas for their safety.

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reconstructed as including diminutive meaning" (Gibson et al. 2017). In this regard, the Proto-Bantu class 12 prefix **ka-* is most often associated with diminutives while the class 13 prefix **tu-* acts as the corresponding diminutive plural class marker (Bleek 1862/9, Meinhof 1910[1899], Meeussen 1967, Maho 1999, Demuth 2000). Synchronic use of gender 12/13 for diminutives in Bantu is seen in Chindamba (1) and Kimbundu (2).

(1) Chindamba (G52, Edelsten & Lijongwa 2010: 36–38, Gibson et al. 2017: 348)

li-piki	'tree'	(class 5)
ma-piki	'trees'	(class 6)
ka-piki	'small tree'	(class 12)
tu-piki	'small trees'	(class 13)

(2) Kimbundu (H21, Quintão 1934: 18, Gibson et al. 2017: 348)

di-tadi	'stone'	(class 5)
ma-tadi	'stones'	(class 6)
ka-di-tadi	'small stone'	(class 12 + class 5)
tu-ma-tadi	'small stones'	(class 13 + class 6)

Nevertheless, as noted by Maho (1999: 252, 262), class 12 is not evenly distributed in the whole Bantu area, as class 20 **ɣù-* (3), gender 7/8 **kì-/*βì-* (4) and class 19 **pì-* (5) compete for diminutive meaning.

(3) Venda (S53, Poulos 1986: 289, 1990: 38, Gibson et al. 2017: 375)

ku-thavha	'small mountain'	(class 20)
ku-thavh-ana	'very small mountain'	(class 20 + -ana)

(4) Tsonga (S53, Poulos 1999: 206, Gibson et al. 2017: 375)

muti	'village'	(class 3)
xi-mut-ana	'small village'	(class 7 + -ana)
swi-mut-ana	'small villages'	(class 8 + -ana)

(5) Nomaánde (A46, Wilkendorf 2001: 15, Gibson et al. 2017: 351)

o-túmbe	'walking cane'	(class 3)
hi-túmbétumbe	'small cane'	(class 19)

In fact, Proto-Bantu **pi-* might have a Proto-Benue-Congo ancestor in **pi-* (de Wolf 1971: 170–1) which is assumed to have been grammaticalised from a prior independent noun *pi* or *bi* 'child', reflexes of

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which are attested in other branches of Niger Congo (Kähler-Meyer 1971: 347–348). The diminutive prefix either replaces the 'original' noun class prefix in most languages or it is added on top of it in a few cases (Maho 1999). Diminutive classes in Bantu are typically used for secondary classification (Meeussen 1967, Maho 1999). For this purpose, "a noun typically found in a different class is used in the diminutive class for a specific semantic effect" (Gibson et al. 2017: 359). However, there are also instances where nouns are primarily members of the diminutive class without necessarily being physically small. While Bantu languages predominantly employ their noun class system for the expression of diminutivity, other strategies such as derivational suffixes and compounding processes are also used (Maho 1999, Gibson et al. 2017: 348).

3 Diminutives in Central Ring Grassfields Bantu

Diminutives in Central Ring (CR) primarily express physical smallness, but can also encode an offspring relationship, young age, inferiority and/or deficiency. As in other Bantu languages, a shift from one class to the diminutive class in CR also results in an interpretation of the noun concerned as physically small, that is, as falling short of the prototypical size of the referent class member. Therefore, the entities referred to by diminutives are regarded as smaller members of the category. Thus, *fə̄tsôtə̀* (19/6a) in Men refers to a brook, creek or rivulet which is smaller in size than what is perceived as standard for its derivative source noun, i.e. *tsò* (9/10) 'river'.[3] This is not to say that the referents of diminutive forms are small by an absolute standard. Speakers represent a referent as small for a particular communicative purpose, i.e. "smallness is not necessarily perceived, but in fact ascribed" (Schneider 2003: 11).

Derived diminutives may undergo semantic specialisations, e.g. Men *ēkyû* (3/6a) 'bed' derives the diminutive *fə̄kîə* (19/6a) 'stool' and Babanki *kə̀tí?ə́tí?ə́* 'ear' derives the diminutive *fə̀tí?ə́tí?ə́* 'mushroom (sp.)', as motivated by similarity in form. As seen in (6) diminutive derivation of the concept VEIN from the concept ROOT is recurrently observed in CR, e.g. in Men, Kom and Babanki.

3 The morphological derivation of diminutives such as this will be dealt with in sections 3.1 and 3.2 in more detail.

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(6) CR diminutive derivation of VEIN from ROOT

PR *-ɣàŋ́	Babanki	Kom	Men	gloss
*5/6	*ə-ɣáŋ*	*ī-ɣâŋ*	*ē-ɣâŋ* (5/13)	‘root’
*19/6a	*fə-ɣáŋ*	*fī-ɣâŋ*	*fə̄-ɣâŋ*	‘vein, artery’

Diminutives may also entail pejorative or derogatory meanings. Thus, *fəŋgəŋtə̂* ‘small house’ (< *əŋgəŋ* (3~5/6) ‘house’), to a Babanki speaker, can express a negative attitude toward the referent, reflecting the view that the owner could have built a much bigger house. It could also mean that someone else will eventually build a bigger house than the diminutivised one. Linked to pejorative connotations is the notion of inability or incapability of a person or group of people and things. For example, Babanki *fəwìʔtə̂* (< *wìʔ* (1/2) ‘person’) normally means ‘small person’, but can also be used to designate someone who has not achieved much, be they physically small or big. Such pejorative connotations can be adduced for the rest of CR, e.g. in Kung *fə̄fûɔ* ‘small and feeble thing’ (< *kə̄fúɔ* (7/8) ‘thing’) (Kießling 2019: 149). When used on body parts, diminutives can also be a form of insult, e.g. Babanki *fəʃɨlə̀* ‘small eye’ (< *əʃɨ́* (5/6) ‘eye’) does not really mean that the eye is physically small but could be a way to simply humiliate the person concerned. In the next two subsections we focus on the morphological strategies of diminutivisation in CR, i.e. the transfer to gender 19/6a (3.1), and concomitant suffixation (3.2).

3.1 Shift to gender 19/6a

The most common strategy of diminutive formation in CR is derivation by which a noun is shifted to gender 19/6a, as described for Babanki (Akumbu & Chibaka 2012), Oku (Yensi 1996), Men (Möller 2012), Kuk (Kießling 2016) and Kung (Kießling 2019: 149).[4] Class prefixes of gender 19/6a which are used for diminutivisation might

4 The data used in this study have mostly been taken from the following sources: Babanki (Akumbu & Chibaka 2012), Kom (Jones 2001), Oku (Yensi 1996, Blood & Davis 1999), Men (Chiatoh 1993, Mua 2015, Möller 2012, Björkestedt 2011, Bangha 2003), Kuk (Kießling 2016, Pleus 2015) and Kung (Kießling 2019: 149; Schlenker 2012). Babanki data have been supplemented by the first author. Men, Kuk and Kung data have been supplemented based on fieldnotes by the second author. Surprisingly, published sources on Kom and Oku do not seem to provide any information on diminutives and we had to collect supplementary data to fill the gap. Proto-Ring reconstructions are taken from Hyman (2007).

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attach to nouns of class 1 or 9 which come without a class prefix as shown in (7) or they replace a pre-existent class prefix as in (8).[5] Remarkably, stem alternations which characterize the base forms of gender 1/2 and 9/10, e.g. consonant alternations such as *v* ~*ɣ* and *w* ~ *ɣ*, are absent in their diminutive counterparts.

(7) CR diminutive derivation in 19/6a of nouns without a class prefix

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	*wàn* (1/2) 'child', pl. *vúnə́* *gɨ̀* (9/10) 'voice', pl. *gɨ̀ˢsə́*	*fəwàntə̂* 'little child', pl. *məwàntə̂* *fəgɨ̀tə̂* 'tiny voice', pl. *məgɨ̀tə̂*
Kom	*wáin* (1/2) 'child', pl. *wɔ́indā* *ŋgvɨ̄* (9/10) 'chicken', pl. *ŋgvɨ̄sə̄*	*fɨ̄wáintɨ̀* 'little child', pl. *mɨ̄wáintɨ̀* *fɨ̄ŋgvɨ̄tɨ̂* 'small chicken', pl. *mɨ̄ŋgvɨ̄tɨ̂*
Kuk	*wāe* (1/2) 'child', pl. *ʌ̄wáe* *byī* (9/10) 'goat', pl. *sə̄byí*	*fəwáe* 'tiny feeble child', pl. *mwáe* *fəbyí* 'smallish goat', pl. *mbyí*
Kung	*wāe* (1/2) 'child', pl. *ʌ̄(ɣ)wáe* *вə̀*° (9/10) 'goat', pl. *sə̄вə̄*	*fəwáe* 'tiny feeble child', pl. *mwáe* *fəвə̂lə̀* 'small feeble goat', pl. *mвə̂lə̀*
Men	*váin* (1/2) 'child', pl. *ʌ̄ɣɔ́in* *tsò* (9/10) 'river', pl. *sētsò*	*fēɣɔ́intə̂* 'little child', pl. *mɨ̄ɣɔ́intə̂* *fətsôtə̀* 'brook, small river', pl. *mɨ̄tsôtə̀*
Oku	*wîl* (1/2) 'person', pl. *ɣílī* *ŋgvə́ə* (9/10) 'chicken', pl. *ŋgvə́əsē*	*fəwîl* 'small person', pl. *məwîl* *fēŋgvə́ətè* 'small chicken', pl. *mēŋgvə́ətè*

(8) CR Diminutive derivation in 19/6a of nouns with class prefixes

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	*àtó* (5/13) 'hut', pl. *tàtó* *kəwʉ́* (7/6) 'foot', pl. *àwʉ́*	*fətótə̀* 'tiny hut', pl. *mətótə̀* *fəwʉ́tə̀* 'small foot', pl. *məwʉ́tə̀*

5 All CR languages employ a noun class system of the Bantu type with either 12 (Babanki, Bum, Kuk, Kung) or 13 (Kom, Men, Oku) agreement classes (Akumbu 2019: 2). All of them distinguish class 19 marked by *fV-* and its corresponding plural class 6a (also the class for liquids) marked by *m(V)-*.

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Kom	*ātú* (7/8) ‘head’, pl. *ītú* *īsáŋ* (5/6) ‘corn’, pl. *āsáŋ*	*fɨ̄túnɨ̀* ‘small head’, pl. *mītúnɨ̀* *fɨ̄sáŋlɨ̂* ‘small corn’, pl. *mīsáŋlɨ̂*
Kuk	*īsʌ̂b* (5/6) ‘maize cob’, pl. *ʌ̄sʌ̂b* *kəkɔ́i* (7/8) ‘chair’, pl. *ūkɔ́i*	*fəsʌ̂b(là)* ‘smallish maize cob’, pl. *m̄sʌ̂blə̀* *fəkɔ́i* ‘small chair’, pl. *m̄kɔ́i*
Kung	*kəbê* (7/4) ‘thigh’, pl. *ībê* *kəfúɔ* (7/8) ‘thing’, pl. *ūfúɔ*	*fəbê(là)* ‘tiny feeble thigh’, pl. *m̄bê(là)* *fəfûɔ* ‘tiny thing’, pl. *m̄fûɔ*
Men	*ētʃí* (5/6~13) ‘stone’, pl. *ətʃí~tētʃí* *āfɨá* (7/8) ‘thing’, pl. *ēfɨá*	*fətʃílə̂* ‘small stone’, pl. *m̄tʃílə̂* *fəfɨ̂ə ‘small thing’, pl. m̄fɨ̂ə*
Oku	*əbkún* (3/6a) ‘bed’, pl. *əmkún* *ɛ̄ʃáŋ* (5/6) ‘corn’, pl. *ɛyʃáŋ*	*fēkúntè* ‘small bed’, pl. *mēkúntè* *fēʃáŋtè* ‘small corn’, pl. *mēʃáŋtè*

The addition of noun class prefixes of 19/6a in diminutive function on top of the original ones, establishing a secondary layer of class prefixes, seems to be restricted to instances where the original noun class prefix has started to merge with the root.

A possible candidate is Men *fēɣɔ́intə̂* ‘small children’ where the diminutive prefix is added onto an alleged class 2 prefix *ɣ-* (Möller 2012: 12).[6]

Nouns borrowed into CR can also be diminutivised by being shifted to gender 19/6a, as shown in (9), which proves that this strategy is indeed very productive in CR.

6 Even more remarkable is the fact that this diminutive is derived from the plural form *ʌ̄ɣɔ́in*, not the singular *váin*. From this perspective, however, it is dubious whether the segment *ɣ* is actually to be analysed as plural prefix, since the prefix in the plural form *ʌ̄-ɣɔ́in* ‘children’ is *ʌ̄-*, while the segment *ɣ* seems to belong to the root. This is probably due to the special nature of the noun ‘child’ – not only in Men, but in a number of Ring languages – in that number distinction is not only expressed by change in NPx but also by suppletion of roots or rather by two distinct forms of one and the same root whose allomorphic relation has become intransparent by idiosyncratic fusions.

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(9) CR Diminutive derivation in 19/6a of borrowed words

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	*bwɔ́tə̀* (1/2) 'bottle', pl. *və̀bwɔ́tə̀* *bùʃi* (1/2) 'cat', pl. *və̀bùʃí* *tʃɔ̂s* (1/2) 'church', pl. *və̀tʃɔ̂s*	*fə̀bwɔ́tə̀* 'small bottle', pl. *mə̀bwɔ́tə̀* *fə̀bùʃí* 'small cat', pl. *mə̀bùʃí* *fə̀tʃɔ̂ytə̀* 'tiny church', pl. *mə̀tʃɔ̂ytə̀*
Kom	*lámbās* (9/10) 'orange', pl. *lámbāysɨ̄* *bés* (9/10) 'cat', pl. *béysɨ̄* *tʃɔ̄s* (9/10) 'church', pl. *tʃɔ̄ysɨ̄*	*fɨ̄lámbās* 'small orange', pl. *mɨ̄lámbās* *fɨ̄bés* 'small cats', pl. *mɨ̄bés* *fɨ̄tʃɔ̄s* 'tiny church', pl. *mɨ̄tʃɔ̄s*
Kuk	*lámâs* (9/10) 'orange', pl. *sə̀lámâs* *bùsí* (9/10) 'cat', pl. *sə̀bùsí*	*fə̀lámâs* 'small orange', pl. *m̄lámâs* *fə̀bùsí* 'small cats', pl. *m̄bùsí*
Kung	*lámâs* (9/10) 'orange', pl. *sə̀lámâs* *bùsí* (9/10) 'cat', pl. *sə̀bùsí* *tsɔ̄s* (9/10) 'church', pl. *sə̄tsɔ̄s*	*fə̀lámâs* 'small orange', pl. *m̄lámâs* *fə̀bùsí* 'small cat', pl. *m̄bùsí* *fə̀tsɔ̄s* 'tiny church', pl. *m̄tsɔ̄*
Oku	*bwɔ́tè* (1/10) 'bottle', pl. *bwɔ́tèsè* *bùsé* (1/10) 'cat', pl. *bùsésé* *tsɔ́s* (1/10) 'church', pl. *tsɔ́sé*	*fēbwɔ́tè* 'small bottle', pl. *mēbwɔ́tè* *fēbùsé* 'small cats', pl. *mēbùsé* *fētsɔ́stè* 'small church', pl. *mētsɔ́stè*

While 19/6a is employed for secondary diminutive classification, there are nouns that are primarily members of this gender in CR, without necessarily being physically small. Even those 19/6a nouns whose referents might be regarded as physically small in comparison to some absolute standard do not appear to be derived from any other non-diminutive class, as pointed out for other Bantu languages (Gibson et al. 2017: 359).

(10) CR nouns primarily affiliated to gender 19/6a

Babanki	Kom	Kuk	Kung	Men	Oku	gloss
fə̀ɲín	*fɨ̄ŋúin*	*fə̀ɲɨ́n*	*fə̀ɲɨ́m*	*fēnʌ́ŋ*	*fēnə́n*	'bird'
fə̀kɔ̀ʔ	*fɨ̄kâʔ*	*fə̀kâʔ*	*fə̀kâʔ*	*fēkâʔ*	*fēkâʔ*	'tree'
fə̀ɲì	*fɨ̄ŋù*	*fə̀ɲí*	*fə̀ɲíə*	*fēɲí*	*fèfiak*	'knife'
fə̀kù	*fɨ̄kû*	*fə̀kûɔ*	*fə̀kô*	*fēkû*	*fēkóo*	'belt'

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Babanki	Kom	Kuk	Kung	Men	Oku	gloss
fəmbváŋ	*fɨ̄ŋgwáŋ*	*fə̄ŋgbáŋ*	*fə̄mgbáŋ*	*fē̄ŋgwáŋ*	*fē̄ŋgwáŋ*	‘salt’
fəlí?	*fɨ̄lé?*	*[kə̄ɲɨ?]*	*[kə̄ɲɨ?]*	*fēndá?*	*fē̄lík*	‘smoke’
fəlàm	*fɨ̄làm*	*?*	*fə̄wô*	*fèlə̀m*	*fèlàm*	‘net’

The nouns in (10) are primarily members of gender 19/6a since there is no evidence of their derivational shift from another source gender on the synchronic level. Note that the absolute size of referents of primary 19/6a nouns such as ‘bird’, ‘tree’, or ‘knife’ is, in principle, no argument against their potential historical origin in derived diminutives, since the contemporarily productive derivational process is also not guided by orientation towards any absolute standard of size, but rather depends on the size which is perceived as prototypical of a given class member. Therefore, it might be that these nouns which are today – and most probably already in proto-(C)R times – primarily affiliated to gender 19/6a actually represent historical diminutives derived at pre-Ring times from a non-diminutive root which has disappeared from (C)R.

3.2 Suffixation

Shifting nouns to gender 19/6a for diminutivisation is, at times, accompanied by the addition of a *-CV* suffix. CR languages differ with respect to the scope of application of the *-CV* suffix across the lexicon (lexical coverage), the optionality of its presence in diminutives, the available forms of its (lexically conditioned) allomorphs (*-t*, *-l*, or *-n*) and the degree to which they undergo phonological reduction, as briefly summarized in table (11).

(11) Overview of CR suffixation

	Babanki	Kom	Oku	Men	Kuk	Kung
lexical coverage	total	total	total	partial	partial	partial
presence of suffix:	oblig.	option.	option.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
number of allomorphs:	3	3	3	2 *(tə, lə)*	1 *(lə)*	1 *(lə)*
full vs. reduced shape:	full	full	full	reduced	reduced	reduced

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The suffix is obligatorily present in derived diminutives in Babanki but lexically conditioned in Kom, Kung, Kuk, Men, and Oku such that some nouns take a suffix in forming the diminutive while others do not, e.g. Kuk *fəbyí* 'smallish goat', Oku *fəwîl* 'small person'. In Kung there is also variation with respect to application of the suffix, e.g. *kəbê* 'thigh' derives the diminutive singular *fəbê-lə̀* which varies freely with *fəbê,* whereas the diminutive plural *m̄bê-lə̀* does not allow for omission of the suffix in **m̄bê.*[7] Concomitant suffixation for diminutive derivation in CR is exemplified in (12).

(12) CR diminutive derivation in 19/6a and suffixation[8]

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	*wàn* (1/2) 'child', pl. *vúnó* *àfwín* (5/6) 'leg', pl. *àfwín* *kàʃí* (7/8) 'piece', pl. *àʃí*	*fəwàntə̂* 'little child', pl. *məwàntə̂* *fəfwíntə̀* 'small leg', pl. *məfwíntə̀* *fəʃílə̀~fəʃínə̀* 'tiny piece', pl. *məʃílə̀~məʃínə̀*
Kom	*wáin* (1/2) 'child', pl. *wɔ́indā* *īsáŋ* (5/6) 'corn', pl. *āsáŋ* *ātú* (7/8) 'head', pl. *ātú*	*fɪ̄wáin(tɪ̀)* 'little child', pl. *mīwáin(tɪ̀)* *fɪ̄sáŋ(lɪ̂)* 'small corn', pl. *mīsáŋ(lɪ̂)* *fɪ̄tú(nɪ̀)* 'small head', pl. *mītú(nɪ̀)*
Kung	*ɪɣáŋ* (5/10) 'root', pl. *səɣáŋ* *kəbê* (7/4) 'thigh', pl. *ībê* *sʌ̀f* (9/10) 'maize', pl. *səsʌ̀f*	*fəɣáŋə̂* 'small root', pl. *m̄ɣáŋə̂* *fəbê(lə̀)* 'tiny feeble thigh', pl. *m̄bêlə̀* *fəsʌ̂blə̀* 'tiny feeble maize plant', pl. *m̄sʌ̂blə̀*

7 The datasets on which these claims are based vary with respect to individual languages. The datasets for Kuk and Kung are quite limited comprising some 20 diminutives which have been checked with two consultants, respectively. Regarding Kom and Oku, 25 items were taken from secondary sources and checked systematically with two consultants each. The Men dataset is a bit larger including some 40 items from various sources. While the Kuk dataset stems from elicitation exclusively, Kung and Men data are based on elicitation and narrative discourse. 80 Babanki items were provided by the first author and checked by two other native speakers. In all cases diminutives have not been checked for their potential range of variation across different individuals.

8 Bracketing of the suffix indicates its optional presence.

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Kuk	*zùɣù* (9/10) ‘snake’, pl. *sə́zûɣù*	*fəʒúglə̀* ‘smallish snake’, pl. *m̄zúglə̀*
	ɲə̀m (9/10) ‘animal’, pl. *sə̄ɲə̂m*	*fə̀ɲàmə̀* ‘small animal’, pl. *m̀ɲàmə̀*
	īsʌ́b (5/6) ‘maize cob’, pl. *ʌ̄sʌ́b*	*fəsʌ́b(lə̀)* ‘smallish maize cob’, pl. *m̄sʌ́blə̀*
Men	*āfɨá* (7/8) ‘thing’, pl. *ēfɨá*	*fēfɨâ* ‘little thing’, pl. *m̄fɨâ*
	váin (1/2) ‘child’, pl. *ʌ̄ɣɔ́in*	*fēɣɔ́intə̂* ‘little child’, pl. *m̄ɣɔ́intə̂*
	tsə̀m (9/10) ‘dream’, pl. *sētsə̀m*	*fətsə́mtə̀* ‘small dream’, pl. *m̄tsə́mtə̀*
Oku	*ə̄bkún* (3/6a) ‘bed’, pl. *ə̄mkún*	*fēkún(tè)* ‘small bed’, pl. *mēkún(tè)*
	kētíɛ (7/8) ‘chair’, pl. *ə̄btíɛ*	*fētíɛ(lé)* ‘small chair’, pl. *mētíɛ(lé)*
	ntɔ̀n (9/10) ‘pot’, pl. *ntɔ̀nsè*	*fèntɔ̀n(nè)* ‘small pot’, pl. *mèntɔ̀n(nè)*

In Babanki, Kom, and Oku, all three suffix allomorphs can occur in both the singular and plural and it is possible for some words to take *-lə̀* or *-nə̀* in Babanki without any semantic difference. In Kom and Oku, it is possible to leave out a suffix and still obtain the diminutive meaning only by transfer to gender 19/6a. In Kung and Kuk suffixation for diminutivity is more restrictive than in Babanki, Kom and Oku in two respects. First, only one suffix allomorph, i.e. *-(l)ə* (along with various types of reduction) has been observed so far. Second, the distribution of this suffix is constrained by semantically intransparent lexical criteria, i.e. some diminutives require the suffix obligatorily, others apply it optionally, while some lack it altogether.

Of all CR languages Kuk is the one with the most limited use of the suffix. In all 10 examples given in Kießling (2016), only one, *fəʒúglə̀* ‘smallish snake’, requires the suffix *-lə*. Another one, *fə̀ɲàmə̀* ‘small animal’, contains the reduced form of the suffix, i.e. *-ə*, and in a third one, *fəsʌ́b(lə̀)* ‘smallish maize cob’, it is optionally present.

In Kung the suffix *-lə* seems to be reduced to schwa, as soon as it appears with a velar nasal, e.g. in *fēɣáŋ-ə̀* ‘small root’ (< **fēɣáŋ-lə̀*) and *fə̀pfə̀ndúŋ-ə̀* ‘small pig, piglet’ (< **fə̀pfə̀ndúŋ-lə̀*). Occasional alternations in root final consonants, as in *fə̄-sʌ́b-lə̀* ‘small maize plant’ (< *sʌ̀f* ‘maize cob’), suggest that suffixation of *-lə* must have protected a prior root final plosive **b* from lenition to *f* (Kießling 2019: 149).

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The surface tones of some nouns are also realized differently as compared to their derivational base, e.g. *fəɣɨ̂ə* 'tiny feeble person' (< *ɣùɔ* (1/2) 'person', pl. *ʌ̄ɣɨ́(ə)*). Some nouns, e.g. *ɪ̄ɣáŋ* (5/10) 'root' derive two distinct forms in gender 19/6a in which the presence vs. absence of the suffix produces a difference in meaning, i.e. *fəɣáŋ-ə̂* 'small root' (< **fəɣáŋ-lə̂*) vs. *fəɣáŋ* 'edible root'.

In Men there are instances where it looks as if the diminutive is derived exclusively by suffixation. This is the case for a few nouns which are primarily affiliated to 19/6a, e.g. *fēnɨ́ŋ-tə̂* 'small bird' (< *fēnɨ́ŋ* 'bird'), *fēsɨ́y-lə̀* ~ *fēsɨ́y-tə̀* 'small pepper' (< *fəsɨ́s* 'pepper'), *fəɲí-tə̂* 'small knife' (< *fəɲí* 'knife'). Derived diminutives in this language may retain only tonal traces of prior suffixation, e.g. the final L component in *fēfɪə̂* 'small thing' (< *āfɪá* (7/8) 'thing').

As mentioned above, suffixation in the course of diminutive derivation triggers morphophonological effects in some root terminal consonants, though it is difficult to generalize on these, since in some cases suffixation seems to block lenition which otherwise affects terminal consonants in non-suffixed forms, e.g. Kung *fēsʌ̂b-lə̀* 'small maize plant' (< *sʌ̀f* (9/10) 'maize cob'), Kuk *fəʒúg-lə̀* 'smallish snake'(< *zùɣù* (9/10) 'snake'), while in other cases it is just the other way round, i.e. suffixation causing lenition, e.g. Men *fēsɨ́y-lə́* ~ *fēsɨ́y-tə́* 'small pepper' (< *fəsɨ́s* (19/6a) 'pepper'), Babanki *fəsáy-lə̀* ~ *fəsáy-tə̀* 'small buttock' (< *ə̀sás* (5/6) 'buttock').

The tone in the suffix seems to be lexically determined in that some diminutives apply a low tone and others a high tone e.g. Oku *fē-tú-lɛ̀* 'small head' (< *kē-tú* (7/8) 'head') vs. *fē-tíɛ-lɛ́* 'small chair' (< *kē-tíɛ* (7/8) 'chair').[9] Falling contour tones might be a result of two tones merging to one in a single tone bearing unit, either a high root tone spreading on a low suffix tone, e.g. Kom *fɪ̄ŋgví-tɪ̂* 'small chicken' (<*ŋgví* (9/10) 'chicken') and Men *fəɲí-tə̂* 'small knife' (< *fəɲí* (19/6a) 'knife'), or a low suffix tone docking to a high root tone, e.g. Kung *fəfûɔ* 'tiny thing' (< *kəfúɔ* (7/8) 'thing'). In Babanki, however, the tendency is for H tone roots to take a L tone suffix, e.g. *fə̀tó-tə̀* 'small

9 These tonal variations in the suffix might reflect a contrast of different final floating tones associated to the root as reconstructed for Proto-Grassfields (Hyman 2007). Thus, the low tone suffixes in Oku *fē-tú-lɛ̀*, Men *fə-tú-ə̀*, and Babanki *fē-tú-lə̀* 'small head' might reflect the final floating low tone of the Proto-Grassfields root **tú*̀ 'head', whereas the high tone suffix in Men *fə-fó-lə́* 'very small rat' (< *āfól* (7/8) 'rat') rather reflects the terminal floating high tone of the Proto-Grassfields root **fól*́ 'rat'.

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hut' (< *àtó* (5/13) 'hut'), *fəmbvú-lə̀* 'small chicken' (< *mbvú* (9/10) 'chicken'), while L tone roots take a falling tone suffix, e.g. *fə̀wì?-tə̂* 'small person' (< *wì?* (1/2) 'person'), *fə̀ɲàm-tə̂* 'small animal' (< *ɲàm* (9/10) 'animal'). This suggests that the diminutive suffix in Babanki must be low-toned with a preceding floating high tone which is absorbed by final high tones in the nominal root, but creates a contour tone in the suffix when preceded by a low tone in the nominal root.

Borrowed nouns do not accept suffixation of *-CV* along with transfer to gender 19/6a for diminutive formation, as seen in (4) above. The exceptions found so far are in Babanki and Oku where monosyllabic bases can also receive a suffix, e.g. Babanki *fə̀tʃə̂ytə̀* 'tiny church' (< *tʃə̂s* 'church'), and Oku *fētsə́stè* 'tiny church' (< *tsə́s* 'church').

Remarkably, two of these suffixes, namely *-tV* and *-lV*, which accompany diminutive derivation of nouns in CR resemble the verbal extensions *-tV*, and *-lV* commonly found in Bantoid and in Grassfields (Watters 2003: 245, Hyman 2018: 180) to derive attenuative meanings in verbs (Akumbu & Chibaka 2012: 137, Tamanji & Mba 2003, Mba & Chiatoh 2003, Harro 1989, Mba 1997), i.e. a reduced degree of quality in states and intensity in actions and events. Semantically, the effect is parallel to diminutivisation with nouns. While the suffix *-nV* serves diminutive function, it is not attested in the attenuative. On the other hand, *-kV* is attested in the attenuative but has not been found in diminutives. In Babanki, for example, *-tə* and *-kə* function as attenuative suffixes often combined with a frequentative or iterative function, as shown in (13).

(13) Babanki verbal diminutive suffixes *-tə* and *-kə*

Base	diminutive in *-tə*	Base	diminutive in *-kə*
ɲʉ́ 'drink'	*ɲʉ́tə́* 'drink a bit'	*pfɨ́* 'die'	*pfɨ́kə́* 'die bit by bit'
wyé 'pour'	*wyétə́* 'pour a little'	*sə́?* 'scatter'	*sə́?kə́* 'scatter in bits'
ló 'lick'	*lótə́* 'lick a bit'	*kə́?* 'turn'	*kə́?kə́* 'turn a bit'
dì 'cry'	*dìtə̀* 'cry a little'	*bàs* 'tear'	*bàykə̀* 'tear into pieces'
tʃò 'pass'	*tʃòtə̀* 'pass a little'	*fwɔ̀s* 'fart'	*fwɔ̀ykə̀* 'fart little by little'
bvù 'grind'	*bvùtə̀* 'grind a little'	*fwè* 'rot'	*fwèkə̀* 'rot bit by bit'

Mba and Chiatoh (2003: 94, 98) demonstrate that *-tɨ* and *-lɨ* function as diminutive suffixes in Kom (14).

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(14) Kom verbal diminutive suffixes *-tɨ́* and *-lɨ́*

Base	diminutive in *-tɨ́*	Base	diminutive in *-lɨ́*
kàf 'scratch'	*kàbtɨ́* 'scratch a bit'	*tàs* 'push down'	*tàylɨ́* 'push down a bit'
séf 'carry'	*sébtɨ́* 'carry a bit'	*tás* 'sharpen'	*táylɨ́* 'sharpen a bit'
nyíŋ 'run'	*nyíŋtɨ́* 'run a bit'	*tʃé?* 'rob'	*tʃé?lɨ́* 'rob a bit'
káŋ 'fry'	*káŋtɨ́* 'fry a bit'	*káŋ* 'fry'	*káŋlɨ́* 'fry a bit'

Depending on the situation in individual CR languages, attenuation is often also linked to repetitive and frequentative notions, due to the common experience that distributive repetition and parcellation tends to entail a diminution of intensity. Thus, in Men, the cognate suffix *-te* has attenuative function which is often combined with a frequentative, iterative, distributive or pluractional notion, as shown in (15).

(15) Men verbal diminutive suffix *-te*

Base	diminutive
kɔ́? 'climb, go up'	*kɔ́?té* 'climb up a little'
ḿ[á] 'drink'	*máté* 'take sips'
ŋgɔ́? 'give one knock'	*ŋgɔ́?té* 'knock slightly several times'
ndʒì 'take'	*ndʒìtè* 'take a little, take bit by bit'
tɨ́m 'shoot; dig'	*tɨ́mté* 'dig in a disorderly fashion (flinging up earth here and there)'

In Kom some lexemes seem to distinguish frequentative and attenuative, e.g. *tʃʲá* 'kick' allows for a contrast of the frequentative *tʃʲá-lɨ́* 'kick repeatedly' vs. the attenuative *tʃʲá-tɨ́* 'kick a little', whereas others derive polysemous stems with *-tɨ̀*, e.g. *mzì-tɨ̀* (< *mzì* 'swallow') 'swallow a bit; swallow repeatedly' (Jones 2001).

In Kung, the suffixes *-nə* and *-lə* are marginally attested in attenuative function: *mwàe-nə̀* 'twinkle' (< *mwàe* 'shine'), *ɲɔ̀?-lə̀* 'roast a bit' (< *ɲɔ̀?* 'roast'), *zʊ́?-lə́* 'make warm' (< *zʊ́?* 'heat'). In Kuk, the widespread pluractional suffix *-kə* is marginally attested in *lɨ́m-kə́* 'wait for a long time' (< *lɨ́mə́* 'wait for').

The application of these verbal extensions to nominal bases, obviously motivated by the functional parallelism of diminution and attenuation, thus represents an instance of morphological strategies

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crossing word class boundaries. In a diachronic perspective, this might be analysed as a spillover of verbal derivational morphology into the nominal domain which could have been triggered or promoted by nominalisation of verbs extended by the attenuative, as is suggested by examples such as the Men diminutive *fətsə́mtə̀* 'small dream' (< *tsə̀m* (9/10) 'dream') which coexists with a verb *tsə̀mtè* 'dream' obviously including the attenuative suffix *-tə*.

Kuk presents another strand of derivational morphology where the suffix *-lə̀* which occasionally accompanies diminutive derivation is also involved in other types of denominal noun derivation, e.g. in deriving *ī*ɣ*âʔlə̀* (5/10) 'wing' (pl. *sə̄*ɣ*âʔlə̀*) from *ī*ɣ*âʔà* (5/10) 'upper arm' (pl. *sə̄*ɣ*âʔà*).

4 Associative construction for diminutive formation

Diminution is also achieved in CR by periphrasis in associative constructions headed by various nouns of gender 19/6a which encode a diminutive notion either in their lexical meaning as with nouns meaning 'tiny item' or by a combination of their lexical meaning with a diminutive derivation as in the case of *fə̀wán* (Babanki), *fə̀wáe* (Kung) and *fēwán* (Oku), all meaning 'little child'. Other nominals that can be used in head position are *fə̀ndéʔ* (Babanki) and *fɨ̄fúin* (Kom) both meaning 'tiny item'. In Babanki both *fə̀wán* 'little child' and *fə̀ndéʔ* 'tiny item' can be used interchangeably for the same diminutive function. While Kuk and Men also have distinct lexical items for this meaning, i.e. *fə̄fwâtə̀* (Kuk) and *fə̄ɲâŋ* (Men), it is not clear to which extent they are also used in constructions such as the ones in (16) and which type of division of semantic labour pertains with respect to the usage of 'child'.

(16) CR diminutive derivation using associative constructions

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	*ə̀*ɣ*àm* (5/13) 'mat', pl. *tə̀*ɣ*àm*	*fə̀wán* ~ *fə̀ndéʔ fə́* ɣ*àm* 'small mat'
	kə̀ɲù (7/8) 'thing', pl. *ə̀ɲù*	*fə̀wán* ~ *fə̀ndéʔ fə́ kə́ɲù* 'small thing'
	ʃʉ̀ (9/10) 'fish', pl. *ʃʉ́ˈsə́*	*fə̀wán* ~ *fə̀ndéʔ fə́ ʃʉ̂* 'tiny fish'

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Kom	*ŋgvɨ̄* (9/10) 'chicken', pl. *ŋgvɨ̄sə̄* *ɨsáŋ* (5/6) 'corn', pl. *āsáŋ* *ātú* (7/8) 'head', pl. *ɨ̄tú*	*fɨ̄fúin fɨ ŋgvɨ̄* 'tiny chicken' *fɨ̄fúin fɨ sáŋ* 'small corn' *fɨ̄fúin fā tú* 'small head'
Kung	*mbvə̄* (9/10) 'chicken', pl. *sə̄mbvə̄* *tsàʔ°* (9/10) 'trap', pl. *sətsàʔ°* *kāpfəndúŋ* (7/8) 'pig' pl. *ūpfəndúŋ*	*wāe fə̄ mbvə̄ fə̄* 'small feeble chicken' *wāe fə̄ tsàʔ fə̄* 'small trap' *wāe fə̄ fəpfəndúŋ fə̄* 'small feeble pig'
Oku	*ə̄bkún* (3/6a) 'bed', pl. *ə̄mkún* *kētíɛ* (7/8) 'chair', pl. *ə̄btíɛ* *ntɔ̀n* (9/10) 'pot', pl. *ntɔ̀nsè*	*fēwán é ə̄bkún* 'small bed' *fēwán é kētíɛ* 'small chair' *fēwán é ntɔ̀n* 'small pot'

The syntax of the examples presented above follows the pattern of CR associative constructions, i.e. the preceding head noun (N_1) is linked to the following modifier noun (N_2) by an associative marker (AM) which agrees with the class of the head noun according to the formula given in (17) and illustrated by the Kung example in (18).

(17) CR Formula of associative constructions

$[NPx - R]_{N1}\ AM_{N1}\ [NPx - R]_{N2}\ ENCL_{N1}$

(18) Kung associative construction

wāe	*fə̄*	*mbvə̄*	*fə̄*
19.little.child	19	9.chicken	19

'small feeble chicken'

In some CR languages such as Kung and Kuk, the prefix of the head noun (NPx) is dropped, as soon as a modifier follows (Kießling 2016, 2019). Thus in (18), the head noun *fə̄wāe* 'little child' loses its noun class prefix *fə-* due to the fact that it is modified by the noun *mbvə̄* 'chicken' which is linked to the head noun by the associative concord of class 19 *fə̄*. Under certain conditions, some CR languages such as Kung require an additional noun phrase terminal enclitic (ENCL) which indexes the class of the head noun and which is reminiscent of the determiner enclitic in the West Ring languages Aghem (Hyman 2010) and Isu (Kießling 2010). While the West Ring determiner enclitic largely serves to mark the non-focalised status of nouns, the morphosynactic and pragmatic conditions of its distribution in Central Ring, however, remain completely unclear so far.

From a wider comparative perspective, lexical items meaning 'child' are quite commonly employed for diminutive functions, even-

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tually following a universal path of grammaticalisation (Heine & Kuteva 2002: 65–7). In various Bantu languages such as Cuwabo, Nzadi, Eton and Bafia (Gibson et al. 2017: 358–359), in Kikongo (Huth 1992) and in Sotho-Tswana and Nguni (Güldemann 1999), reflexes of Proto-Bantu **jánà* 'child' seem to have been developed to diminutive markers, probably independently of each other. Beyond Bantu, the same process operates in various branches of Niger-Congo, e.g. on Susu *díí* 'child' (Anderson, Green & Obeng 2018) and on Ewe *ví* 'child' (Heine & Hünnemeyer 1988, Heine, Claudi & Hünnemeyer 1991: 79–89), reflex of a Niger-Congo root **bi* 'child' (Kähler-Meyer 1971: 347–348) which is assumed to be the ultimate source of Proto-Benue-Congo **pi-* (de Wolf 1971: 170–1), the ancestor of Proto-Bantu class 19 **pi-*. A remarkable detail about the CR situation is that in none of the CR languages it is simply the noun 'child' which is employed for periphrastic diminution purposes in associative constructions, but rather its diminutive stem in 19/6a.

Borrowed words can also be diminutivised in CR by means of the associative construction (19).

(19) CR diminutive derivation of borrowed words using associative constructions

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	*bwɔ́tə̀* (1/2) 'bottle', pl. *və̀bwɔ́tə̀* *bùʃí* (1/2) 'cat', pl. *və̀bùʃí*	*fə̀wán ~ fə̀ndɛ́? fə́ bwɔ́tə̀* 'small bottle' *fə̀wán ~ fə̀ndɛ́? fə́ bùʃí* 'small cat'
Kom	*bés* (9/10) 'cat', pl. *béysɨ̄* *tʃɔ̄s* (9/10) 'church', pl. *tʃɔ̄ysɨ̄*	*fɨ̄fúin fɨ́ bés* 'small cat' *fɨ̄fúin fɨ́ tʃɔ̄s* 'tiny church'
Kung	*lámâs* (9/10) 'orange', pl. *sə̀lámâs* *bùsí* (9/10) 'cat', pl. *sə̀bùsí*	*wāe fə̄ lámâs fə̄* 'small orange' *wāe fə̄ bùsí fə̄* 'small cat'
Oku	*tsɔ́s* (1/10) 'bed', pl. *tsɔ́sē* *bùsé* (1/10) 'cat', pl. *bùsésē*	*fēwán é tsɔ́s* 'tiny church' *fēwán é bùsé* 'small cat'

Nouns primarily assigned to gender 19/6a form diminutives preferably by means of such associative constructions headed by nouns which include the diminutive notion in their lexical meaning, as illustrated in (20).

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(20) CR diminutive derivation of 19/6a nouns using associative constructions

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	*fəkɔ̀ʔ* (19/6a) 'tree', pl. *ŋkɔ̀ʔ*	*fəwán ~ fəndéʔ fə́ fə́kɔ̀ʔ* 'small tree'
	fəɲín (19/6a) 'bird', pl. *màɲín*	*fəwán ~ fəndéʔ fə́ fəɲìn* 'small bird'
	fəsés (19/6a) 'pepper', pl. *məsés*	*fəwán ~ fəndéʔ fə́ fə́sés* 'small pepper'
Kom	*fɨ̄ŋúin* (19/6a) 'bird', pl. *mɨ̄ŋúin*	*fɨ̄fúin fɨ̄ fɨ̄ŋùin* 'small bird'
	fɨ̄kâʔ (19/6a) 'tree', pl. *mɨ̄kâʔ*	*fɨ̄fúin fɨ̄ fɨ̄kàʔ* 'small tree'
	fɨŋù (19/6a) 'knife', pl. *mɨŋù*	*fɨ̄fúin fɨ̄ fɨŋù* 'small knife'
Kung	*fəɲɨ́m* (19/6a) 'bird', pl. *mɲɨ́m*	*wāe fə ɲɨ́m fə* 'small bird'
	fēkâʔ (19/6a) 'tree', pl. *mkâʔ*	*wāe fə ká? fə* 'small tree'
	fəɲíə (19/6a) 'knife', pl. *mɲíə*	*wāe fə ɲíə fə* 'small knife'

This preference is probably due to the fact that the ordinary diminutivisation strategy by transfer to gender 19/6a would create no visible effect in contrast to the base form which is already assigned to 19/6a. Alternatively, the simple addition of one of the diminutive suffixes *-tV*, *-lV* or *-nV* is not sufficient in most cases. Thus, diminutives such as **fəɲín-tə̀* 'small bird' or **fəkɔ̀ʔ-tə̀* 'small tree' which are simply formed by adding the suffix to the basic 19/6a noun forms (as elaborated in section 3.1), are not acceptable in Babanki. However, precisely this case is attested in Men where nouns primarily affiliated to gender 19/6a such as fēnɨ́ŋ 'bird', *fəsɨ́s* 'pepper' and *fəɲí* 'knife' derive their diminutives, i.e. *fēnɨ́ŋ-tə̂* 'small bird', *fēsɨ́y-lə́ ~ fēsɨ́y-tə́* 'small pepper' and *fəɲí-tə̂* 'small knife', respectively, only by additional suffixation.

So far, it has been assumed that every noun can be diminutivised through nominal affixation, but this is not always the case. In Babanki, for instance, the nouns in (21) can only be diminutivised by means of the associative construction with *fəwán* 'little child' or *fəndéʔ* 'tiny item' as head noun, since a morphologically derived diminutive in gender 19/6a is not available for them. So, the associative construction appears as a compensatory strategy here.

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(21) Babanki associative constructions as compensation for absence of morphologically derived diminutives

Base	diminutive	
kàntsì (7/8) ‘cricket’	*fəwán~ fəndɛ́? fə́ kàntsì* ‘small cricket’	**fəntsì*
kàntʃí? (7/8) ‘lid’	*fəwán~ fəndɛ́? fə́ kántʃí?* ‘small lid’	**fəntʃí?*
kàʃí (7/8) ‘place’	*fəwán~ fəndɛ́? fə́ kə́ˡʃí* ‘small place’	**fəʃí*
kàtsɔ́? (7/8) ‘mud’	*fəndɛ́?~ fəndɛ́? fə́ kə́ˡtsɔ́?* ‘small mud’	**fətsɔ́?*
àkwén (5/6) ‘bean’	*fəwán~ fəndɛ́? fə́ ˡkwén* ‘small bean’	**fəkwén*
kàtí?ətí?ə́ (7/8) ‘ear’	*fəwán~ fəndɛ́? fə́ kə́ˡtí?ətí?ə́* ‘small ear’	**fətí?ətí?ə́*

The range of nouns that do not lend themselves to morphological diminutivisation by transfer to gender 19/6a in Babanki is varied, including, but not limited to insects, household items and body parts. While the motivations for these restrictions are still unclear, instances such as *kàtí?ətí?ə́* ‘ear’ suggest that morphological diminu-tivisation might be blocked by the presence of semantic specialisations of parallel forms in gender 19/6a such as *fətí?ətí?ə́* ‘mushroom (sp.)’.

While diminutives are formed by the morphological and morphosyntactic operations outlined above, it appears that augmentatives do not receive a similar treatment in CR. In Babanki, for example, augmentatives are expressed by an attributive usage of inchoative-stative verbs such as *ɣɔ́?* ‘be(come) big’ (*ɣɔ́?kə́* pl.) illustrated in (22).

(22) Babanki augmentative periphrasis with *ɣɔ́?* ‘be(come) big’ (*ɣɔ́?kə́* pl.)

Base	Augmentative
вʉ́ (9/10) ‘dog’, pl. *вʉ́ˡsə́*	*вʉ́ ə̄ɣɔ́?ɔ́* ‘big dog’, pl. *вʉ́ˡsə́ ɣɔ́?kə́ sə́*
kàkɨ́ (7/8) ‘chair’, pl. *àkɨ́*	*kàkɨ́ kə̄ɣɔ́?ɔ́ kə́* ‘big chair’, pl. *àkɨ́ ə̄ɣɔ́?kə́ və́*
àlém (5/6) ‘yam’, pl. *àlém*	*àlém ə̄ɣɔ́?ɔ́ ɣə́* ‘big yam’, pl. *àlém ā̄ɣɔ́?kə́ ɣə́*

Augmentation is also achieved in Babanki by the alternative strategy of periphrasis in associative constructions headed by nouns with inherent augmentative meanings such as *kàmpfɨ́* ‘huge thing’, illustrated in (23) – which is parallel to the periphrastic diminutivization strategy with *fəwán* ‘little child’ and *fəndɛ́?* ‘tiny item’, exemplified above in (19–20).

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(23) Babanki augmentative periphrasis with *kə̀mpfɨ́* 'huge thing'

Base	Augmentative
ə̀ɣàm (5/13) 'mat', pl. *tə̀ɣàm*	*kə̀mpfɨ́ ká ɣàm* 'big mat'
ʃʉ̀ (9/10) 'fish', pl. *ʃʉ́ˈsá*	*kə̀mpfɨ́ ká ʃʉ̀* 'big fish'

5 Conclusion

Diminutivisation in Central Ring languages is generally achieved by a widely attested shift of nouns from various genders to gender 19/6a marked by prefixes *fV-/m(V)-* which replace the original noun class prefixes. The productivity of this strategy is manifested in its recurrent application to borrowed nouns. Sometimes, diminutivisation in gender 19/6a is accompanied by the addition of a semantically bleached suffix CV. Remarkably, some of the allomorphs of this suffix, i.e. *-tV*, *-lV*, resemble the verbal extensions *-tV*, and *-lV* commonly used in Bantoid and in Grassfields to derive attenuative meanings in verbs. From a diachronic perspective, this might be analysed as a spillover of verbal derivational morphology into the nominal domain which could have been promoted by nominalisation of verbs extended by the attenuative. Another diminutivisation strategy discussed is periphrasis in associative constructions headed by various nouns of gender 19/6a which encode a diminutive notion either in their lexical meaning as with nouns meaning 'tiny item' such as *fə̀ndɛ́?* (Babanki) and *fɪ̄fúin* (Kom) or by a combination of their lexical meaning with a diminutive derivation as in the case of *fə̀wán* (Babanki), *fə̄wáe* (Kung) and *fēwán* (Oku), all meaning 'little child'. More finegrained generalisations about the limits of morphological diminutivisation in CR and regularities regarding its division of labour with syntactic strategies will only be possible on the basis of a much more extensive corpus of diminutives which includes data from all under-researched CR varieties, especially from Bum for which diminutive data have not been available at all so far.

Abbreviations

AM associative marker, CR Central Ring, ENCL enclitic, N noun, NPx noun class prefix, pl. plural, PR Proto-Ring, sg. singular. Numbers refer to noun classes/genders.

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