

This is the accepted version of a forthcoming article that will be published in *Nordic Journal of African Studies*: <http://www.njas.helsinki.fi/>

Accepted version downloaded from SOAS Research Online: <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24463/>

Patterns and developments in the marking of diminutives in Bantu

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of diminutives in the Bantu language family, with an emphasis on the role of the noun class system in diminutive formation. It charts different processes of language change which have shaped the present-day situation, as well as highlighting instance in which language contact has played a role in the development of diminutive systems. It also addresses semantic and pragmatic processes underlying the change and variation in Bantu diminutives. The comparison is based on a cross-Bantu typology, examining a sample of 48 languages widespread across the linguistic domain.

Keywords: Bantu languages, diminutives, morphology, nominal classification, language change

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Patterns and developments in the marking of diminutives in Bantu*

1. Introduction

There is a long-standing tradition of the study of diminutives (cf. Grandi and Körtvélyessy 2015). Cross-linguistically diminutives can be broadly defined as elements which make a semantic contribution pertaining to size. Whilst numerous accounts have attempted to provide a unified definition of diminutives and their associated meanings, this is most commonly borne out as the meaning ‘small’. However, the semantic and pragmatic functions assumed by diminutives extend well beyond this narrow sense and other widely attested meanings include ‘young’, ‘insignificant/incomplete’, as well as ‘related to’ or ‘descendent from’ (Jurafsky 1996). In a number of languages, 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. There is also variation with respect to the formal expression of diminutives, for example in terms of specific morphosyntactic coding strategies, or in terms of the comparative and diachronic study of specific morphemes involved.

With some 350-500 languages spoken across much of Central, Eastern and South Africa, the Bantu languages provide an ideal lens for the examination of linguistic variation, as well as processes of language contact and language change. Bantu languages exhibit a number of similarities across a wide range of domains. Included in this is a broadly SVO word order with alternate word orders available for pragmatic purposes, a highly agglutinative and dominant head-marking morphology, and an extensive use of noun class systems. Bantu nouns are commonly assigned to noun classes (representative of grammatical genders), which are often associated with noun class prefixes and which trigger agreement across a range of dependent elements including adjectival and other modifiers, as well as on verbs through subject and object markers. Thus, in Swahili the word *mtu* ‘person’ hosts the class 1 nominal prefix *m-* whilst the class 2 noun *watu* ‘people’ hosts the class 2 nominal prefix *wa-*.¹ However, despite the broad typological similarities found across the Bantu family, Bantu languages exhibit a high degree of micro-variation across a number of domains, and diminutives represent an example of exactly such micro-variation.

Diminutives are a well-attested grammatical category in Bantu. In the Namibian Bantu language Herero, for example, the noun *omundu* ‘person’ can appear in a

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 5 at SOAS, at the 5th Southern Africa Microlinguistics Workshop (SAMWOP5), University of the Free State, at the Workshop on Morphological Complexity in Noun Class Systems, SOAS, at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Ghent University. The authors would like to thank the audiences of these events for their comments. Thanks go also to two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions. Parts of the research presented here were supported by a Leverhulme Trust Grant (RPG-2014-208) for the project *Morphosyntactic variation in Bantu: typology, contact and change* and a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (Hannah Gibson) for the project *Pathways of change at the northern Bantu borderlands*, both of which are hereby gratefully acknowledged.

¹ By convention Bantu noun classes are commonly referred to using numbers. In many cases the numbers 1–10 represent singular-plural pairs, with odd numbers representing singular forms and the even numbers representing plural forms.

diminutive form as *okandu* ‘small person’ through the substitution of the class 1 prefix by class 12 prefix.²

(1) Herero (R30, Kavari and Marten 2009: 169–171)

a. o-mu-ndu	‘person’	(class 1)
o-ka-ndu	‘small person’	(class 12)

Diminutives in Bantu have been discussed in a number of previous studies, either with respect to individual languages such as Swahili (Shepardson 1982, Frankl & Omar 1994, Contini-Morava 1995, Herms 1995) or Zulu (Van der Spuy and Mjiyako 2015), or within a wider comparative study of the Bantu nominal system (Maho 1999). However, there has been no systematic study of the form and function of diminutives in Bantu languages. Whilst many languages use, like Herero, noun class 12 for the formation of diminutives, there is variation in this regard, with some languages employing a different class (and associated class morphology) for the formation of either the singular or plural forms. Other languages do not use dedicated diminutive noun classes but instead rely on processes of reduplication, on the addition of a diminutive suffix, or on the formation of diminutives through nominal compounding. In terms of semantics, diminutives in Bantu pattern in broad terms with the cross-linguistic observations pertaining to size and associated meanings made above. Thus, diminutives in Bantu often express physical smallness. However, diminutives can also be used to encode individuating, pejorative or other connotative meaning, e.g. referring to group membership, off-spring, young age and/or deficiency.

This paper provides an overview of diminutive formation and function in Bantu, from a comparative-typological perspective, based on a representative sample of 48 languages spoken across the Bantu domain. The paper highlights the variation found in diminutives across the language family and charts different developments of the diminutive systems, resulting from processes of language contact and change which have given rise to the variation synchronically attested across Bantu.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a brief discussion of the expression of diminutives across the languages of the world. Section 3 provides an overview of the morphology and form associated with diminutives in Bantu, detailing a number of case studies across the language family. Section 4 discusses the semantic interpretations associated with diminutives, whilst Section 5 discusses the development and distribution of diminutive forms. Section 6 constitutes a summary and conclusion.

2. Diminutives in a cross-linguistic perspective

Diminutives belong to the set of word-formation strategies known as ‘evaluative morphology’ meaning that they encode semantic notions that reflect speakers’ attitudes towards entities in the real world. Thus, diminutives and augmentatives are often members of evaluative morphology, as well as markers which express concepts such as appreciation, depreciation and pejorative senses. Diminutives commonly express physical smallness (Schneider 2003: 10). However, in addition to this

² Glossing follows the Leipzig Glossing Rules. The following additional abbreviations are used throughout: 1, 2, 3, etc. = noun class; ADJ = adjective; AUG = augment; CONSC = consecutive; DEM = demonstrative; DIM = diminutive; FV = final vowel; NEG = negative; PASS = passive; PL = plural; POSS = possessive, PRS = present; SM = subject marker.

interpretation, diminutives are also used to express a range of other meanings, including female gender, intensity of force, and exactness and/or initiation. There are also instances in which the diminutive conveys an individuating or deictic exactness. Diminutives may have pragmatic functions and can be used to indicate that something is lesser in size or significance. The use of diminutives for ameliorative or affectionate meanings is also widespread, as is the pejorative use of diminutives. This has resulted in a number of studies which attempt to define diminutive meanings and usage cross-linguistically (see, *inter alia*, Jurafsky 1996; Schneider 2003, 2013).

Wierzbicka (1984) proposes that metaphors from ‘small/child’ are the basis for the affectation and contempt readings associated with Polish diminutives. However, Jurafsky (1996) proposes that whilst ‘small’ and ‘child’ lie at the heart of the account of diminutives, no comprehensive analysis can rely on the single abstract account based on ‘small’ alone. His proposal is based on the observation that without metaphorical, inferential or abstractive extensions, ‘small’ cannot model the individuating or exactness sense, nor the use of the diminutive to mark ‘imitation’ of a natural object. Similarly, Dressler and Merlini Barbersi (1994) note that the diminutive cannot simply be listed in the lexicon/grammar with the single abstract meaning of ‘small’ with all other senses derived from this since if this were the case, we would expect the same inferences from the word for ‘small’ in each language. This, however, is not the case. Thus, Jurafsky (1996) proposes that there are also some additional, complex and lexicalised meanings specific to the diminutive (and this is indeed what is seen also in Bantu, as is discussed in Section 4). However, despite the variation in this domain, many of the same varied and complex senses of diminutives occur time and again across languages.

In their cross-linguistic survey, Štekauer et al. (2012: 237–303) identify four different processes which are employed in the formation of diminutives: suffixation, prefixation, reduplication and compounding. In languages in which the morphology allows, several strategies may also co-exist. Different markers may be found with a particular subset of nouns only, or in relation with the encoding of particular meanings. In languages with gender systems, the encoding of size-related meanings is mentioned in the literature on noun classification as among the possible semantic values (Allan 1977; Corbett 1991). This will be shown to also be the case in Bantu in Section 3 below.

An extremely frequent source of grammaticalised diminutives cross-linguistically is the word for ‘child’. This process commonly starts out life as a classificatory noun to refer to the young age of animate entities before being extended to inanimate nouns where it targets small size with countable nouns and small quantity with non-count nouns (Jurafsky 1996). This is frequently found in Bantu as well, and will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.

3. Diminutives in Bantu: Morphology and form

Bantu languages make extensive use of noun classes, which are often analysed as a form of grammatical gender. Diminutives in Bantu are thought to have been historically expressed as part of the noun class system, and several noun classes have been reconstructed as including diminutive meaning (Maho 1999). The reconstructed class 12 Proto-Bantu prefix **ka-* is centrally associated with diminutives, and a corresponding diminutive plural in class 13, with the prefix **tu-*, has also been proposed (Bleek 1862/9, Meinhof 1910[1899], Meeussen 1967, Maho 1999). Another diminutive prefix, reconstructed for Proto-Bantu as the form **pi-* (class 19), appears

in a more restricted number of languages. In addition, a class 20 prefix **γù-* has been proposed with augmentative and diminutive meanings, and the wide-spread classes 7/8 with prefixes **kì-*/**βì-* has been associated with diminutive meaning, in addition to referring to inanimates, manner and augmentatives. It is not clear from the sources whether these different Proto-Bantu diminutive class prefixes were additive (being prefixed to another noun class prefix) or substitutive (replacing the previous noun class prefix).

As we will show, many Bantu languages employ noun classes for diminutive purposes, with the use of class 12 being particularly widespread. However, a number of other strategies are also attested, including the use of other noun classes, derivational suffixes and compounding processes. The various strategies employed in the formation of diminutives across Bantu are outlined in further detail below.

3.1 Diminutive noun classes

Morphologically, Bantu diminutives are often formed using nominal derivation, for example through class shift into a (sometimes dedicated) diminutive class. The use of the noun class pairing 12/13 for diminutives, reconstructed for Proto-Bantu as **kà-* and **tù-*, is seen synchronically in several Bantu languages. This is the case in Chindamba (2), and Kimbundu (3), all of which employ the class 12 marker *ka-* in the singular and the class 13 marker *tu-* in the plural.

(2) Chindamba (G52, Edelsten and Lijongwa 2010: 36–38)

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

(3) Kimbundu (H21, Quintão 1934: 18)

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)

As can be seen from these examples, the diminutive prefix is either substitutive and replaces the ‘original’ noun class prefix (in the case of Chindamba), or it can be additive in which case it occurs alongside any other nominal prefix (as is the case in Kimbundu). However, this division is not always straightforward and there is substantial variation in this regard both between and within languages. In Bemba, for example, the original prefix is retained in classes 3/4, class 5/6, and class 11 but is dropped in other classes, although there are lexical exceptions – for example, the prefix is retained in *akamuntu* ‘small person’ in (4b), even though *umuntu* is a class 1 noun (Hoch n.d.: 96-99).

(4) Bemba (M42, Hoch n.d.: 96–99)

a. umw-aice	‘child’	(class 1)
aba-ice	‘children’	(class 2)
aka -ice	‘smal child’	(class 12)
utw -aice	‘small children’	(class 13)
b. umu-ntu	‘person’	(class 1)
aka -mu-ntu	‘small person’	(class 12 + class 1)
c. ici-puna	‘chair’	(class 7)
aka -puna	‘small chair’	(class 12)

In Herero the diminutive prefix is normally added to the original class prefix with nouns from class 3, 11/13, 14 and 15, while it replaces the original prefix with nouns from all other classes (Kavari and Marten 2009). The examples in (5a-b) show the substitutive application of the diminutive prefix, whilst example (5c) shows the additive occurrence of the diminutive prefix.

(5) Herero (R30, Kavari and Marten 2009: 169–171)

a. o-mu-ndu	‘person’	(class 1)
o-ka -ndu	‘small person’	(class 12)
b. o-zo-nyósé	‘stars’	(class 10)
o-u -nyósé	‘little stars’	(class 14)
d. o-ru-vyó	‘knife’	(class 11)
o-ka -rú-vyó	‘small knife’	(class 12 + class 11)

However, here too there are exceptions to this generalisation, which either involve non-derived forms (6c), or are associated with a specific semantic effect (6f).

(6) Herero (R30, Kavari and Marten 2009: 169–171)

a. o-mu-tí	‘tree’	(class 3)
b. o-ka -mu-tí	‘small tree’	(class 12 + class 3)
c. o-ka -tí	‘stick’	(class 12)
d. o-mu-táti	‘mopane tree’	(class 3)
e. o-ka -mu-táti	‘small mopane tree’	(class 12 + class 3)
f. o-ka -táti	‘very small mopane tree’	(class 12)

Rangi is another language where the class 12 diminutive prefix can appear either instead of the original noun class prefix or in addition to another noun class prefix. With class 1, 5 and 9 nouns for example, the original nominal class prefix is replaced by the diminutive prefix *ka-*, as shown in (7a). In other classes, however, the diminutive prefix occurs alongside the noun class prefix. This is illustrated by the examples in (7b).

(7) Rangi (F33, Gibson 2012: 32–33)

a. substitution with <i>ka-</i>					
mw-aana	‘child’	>	ka-ana	‘small child’	(class 1)
mw-iiwi	‘thief’	>	k-iiwi	‘small thief’	(class 1)
mɔ-hiinja	‘girl’	>	ka-hiinja	‘small girl’	(class 1)
i-baanda	‘hut’	>	ka-baanda	‘small hut’	(class 5)
njoka	‘snake’	>	ka-joka	‘small snake’	(class 5)
nyenyeeri	‘star’	>	ka-nyenyeeri	‘small star’	(class 9)
b. addition of <i>ka-</i>					
mw-iiwi	‘arrow’	>	ka-mw-iiwi	‘small arrow’	(class 3)
mɔ-ti	‘tree’	>	ka-mɔ-ti	‘small tree’	(class 3)
kɪ-ntɔ	‘thing’	>	ka-kɪ-ntɔ	‘small thing’	(class 7)
ɔ-loongo	‘lie’	>	ka-ɔ-loongo	‘small lie’	(class 11)
kɔ-lɔ	‘foot’	>	ka-kɔ-lɔ	‘small foot’	(class 15)

Across Bantu, the historical class 12 and 13 prefixes do not always work as an indivisible pair. In several Bantu languages, class 13 is not attested or is not used for diminutives, and so plural diminutives are instead formed in another class. In Herero, for example, while singular diminutives are found in class 12, plural diminutives are in class 14. Class 13 is present in Herero, as a plural class to class 11, but is no longer associated with diminutive meaning (8). In Rangi the plural diminutive is formed in class 19 using the prefix *fi-*, resulting in the diminutive class pairing 12/19 (9). In Rombo the plural diminutive is found in class 8 *fi-*,³ resulting in the diminutive class pairing 12/8 (10).

(8) Herero (R30, Kavari and Marten 2009: 169–171): class 12/14

a. o-ma-we	‘stones’	(class 6)
o- u -we	‘diamonds’	(class 14)
b. o-ru-vyó	‘knife’	(class 11)
o- ka -rú-vyó	‘small knife’	(class 12 + class 11)
o- u -tú-vyó	‘small knives’	(class 14 + class 13)

(9) Rangi (F33, Gibson 2012): classes 12/19

a. va-ana	‘children’	(class 2)
fy -aana	‘small children’	(class 19)
b. kuúti	‘puppies’	(class 10)
fi -kuuti	‘small puppies’	(class 19 + class 10)
c. vi-ryo	‘millet’	(class 8)
fi -vi-ryo	‘small millet’	(class 19 + class 8)

³ The class 8 prefix *fi-* in Rombo originates from Proto-Bantu **βi-* (Maho 1999: 51), whereby the bilabial fricative (pronounced as a labiodental /v/ in a number of present-day Bantu languages) has undergone a process of devoicing. More generally, Rombo as well as other Chaga (or Kilimanjaro Bantu) dialects did not retain voiced fricatives (e.g. **bínà* ‘dance’ > *-fina*, or *-fina* in Central dialects). See Nurse (1979) for a comprehensive account.

(10) Rombo (E623, Shinagawa 2014, p.c.): classes 12/8

- a. ki-du 'ear' (class 9)
- b. **ka**-ki-du 'small ear' (class 12 + class 7)
- c. **fi**-ki-du 'small ears' (class 8 + class 7)

The Rombo examples also show an instance of apparent number mismatch between diminutive class and the original noun class prefix: In (10c), the original class 7 prefix *ki-* is maintained even though the diminutive forms is plural, as shown by the class 8 prefix *fi-*. This might in part be a strategy for avoiding the repetition of two class 8 prefixes, but also shows that in noun class shift typically only the outermost prefix carries morphosyntactic features.

In a number of other languages, it is the historical singular prefix of the diminutive pairing (i.e. class 12) which has been lost. In these cases, (at least) two options for the diminutive system are attested. The first sees the 19/13 class pairing. This combination appears to be primarily attested in the Northwest Bantu area. In Duala for example, the prefixes *i-* (class 19) and *lo-* (class 13) are used to form diminutive nouns (11).

(11) Duala (A24, Gaskin 1927: 12): *i-* (class 19) and *lo-* (class 13)

- a. **i**-dubwan 'key' (class 19)
- lo**-dubwan 'keys' (class 13)
- b. **i**-bombé 'dwarf' (class 19)
- lo**-bombé 'dwarves' (class 13)

In Nomaande, the singular class 19 prefix appears as *hi-/he*, whilst the class 13 plural diminutive prefix takes the form *tu-/tɔ-* (12). Note that diminutive formation in Nomaande involves reduplication in addition to class shift (cf. Section 3.2).

(12) Nomaande (A46, Wilkendorf 2001: 15): *hi-/he-* (class 19) and *tu-/tɔ-* (class 13)

- o-túmbe 'walking cane' (class 3)
- hi**-túmbétumbe 'small cane' (class 19)
- tu**-túmbétumbe 'small canes' (class 13)

The association of the class 19 prefix with a singular diminutive in western Bantu languages contrasts with its plural use in Rangi seen above in (9). Regardless of its singular or plural status however, the widespread occurrence of class 19 as a diminutive class across Bantu has led to its reconstruction for Proto-Bantu as **pì-* (Maho 1999:5, cf. Meinhof 1948: 56, Meeussen 1967: 97).

The second alternative diminutive pairing attested is classes 5/13. This is illustrated below with examples from Bembe where diminutive nouns host the class 5 prefix *i-* in the singular and the class 13 prefix *tɔ-* in the plural (13).

(13) Bembe (D54, Iorio 2011: 50): *i-* (class 5) and *to-* (class 13)

- | | | |
|------------|---------------|----------------------|
| a. m-tfwe | ‘head’ | (class 3) |
| i-tfwe | ‘small head’ | (class 5) |
| b. mi-tfwe | ‘heads’ | (class 4) |
| to-mi-tfwe | ‘small heads’ | (class 13 + class 4) |

There are also a number of Bantu languages which do not employ either class 12 or class 13 in the formation of diminutives. For instance, in Standard Swahili diminutive meaning is expressed by a class shift into classes 7/8 and the associated prefixes *ki-/vi-* (14).⁴ A similar situation is seen in Kagulu where classes 7/8 are also used to form diminutives (15).

(14) Standard Swahili (G42, Kihore et al. 2001)

- | | | |
|------------|------------------|-----------|
| a. m-toto | ‘child’ | (class 1) |
| ki-toto | ‘small child’ | (class 7) |
| b. wa-toto | ‘children’ | (class 2) |
| vi-toto | ‘small children’ | (class 8) |

(15) Kagulu (G12, Petzell 2008: 73)

- | | | |
|----------|--------------|-----------|
| m-hene | ‘goat’ | (class 9) |
| chi-pene | ‘small goat’ | (class 7) |

It is also possible for more than one class pairing to be used to form diminutives. In Sena (N44), diminutivisation is achieved by the addition of the prefix *ci-* (class 7) in the singular and *pi-* (class 8) in the plural.⁵ However, singular diminutives can also be formed using the class 12 prefix *ka-*. In both cases, the original noun class prefix is maintained.

(16) Sena (N44, Mozambique)

- | | | | |
|------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| a. m-peni | ‘knife’ | (class 3) | (Anderson 1897: 13) |
| ci-m-peni | ‘small knife’ | (class 7 + class 3) | |
| pi-mi-peni | ‘small knives’ | (class 8 + class 4) | |
| ka-m-peni | ‘small knife’ | (class 12 + class 3) | |

⁴ In some (primarily monosyllabic) nouns in Swahili an additional diminutive strategy is employed in which the prefix *kiji-* is added to the noun stem; e.g. *mto* ‘river’ becomes *kijito* ‘small river’ *mkahawa* ‘restaurant’ is *kijimkahawa* ‘small restaurant’. The particle *ji-* is considered by some to be the class 5 prefix (which commonly has an augmentative function) (Herms 1995: 82). For the purposes of the current discussion, we consider *kiji-* to be a variant of the class 7 prefix *ki-* and do not consider it to be an instantiation of the use of a different noun class for the formation of diminutives in Swahili.

⁵ The class 8 prefix *pi-* in Sena may appear to originate from the diminutive Proto-Bantu class 19 **pi-*. However, the singular counterparts of the nouns marked with *pi-* are found in class 7, as can be seen with words such as *ci-ntu* ‘thing’ (> *pi-ntu* ‘things’), *ci-sapulo* ‘comb’ (> *pi-sapulo* ‘combs’), *ci-tseko* ‘door’ (> *pi-tseko* ‘doors’) (see Torrend 1900 or Moreira 1924 for additional examples), indicating that *pi-* does in fact mark class 8 nouns.

b. m-buzi	‘goat’	(class 9)	(Torrend 1900: 66)
ci -m-buzi	‘goat kid’	(class 7 + class 9)	
pi -m-buzi	‘goat kids’	(class 8 + class 10)	
ka -m-buzi	‘goat kid’	(class 12 + class 9)	(Moreira 1924: 22)

Another example of the use of more than one diminutive class pairing can be seen in Chindamba, which employs either the classes 12/13 with the prefixes *ka-/tu-* (16a), or classes 7/8 with the prefixes *chi-/fi-* (with the variants *ky-* and *fy-* before vowel-initial stems) (16c).

(17) Chindamba (G52, Edelsten and Lijongwa 2010: 36–38)

a. li-piki	‘tree’	(class 5)
ka -piki	‘small tree’	(class 12)
tu -piki	‘small trees’	(class 13)
b. mu-sale	‘arrow’	(class 3)
chi -sale	‘small arrow’	(class 7)
fi -sale	‘small arrow’	(class 8)
c. ly-ato	‘canoe’	(class 5)
ky -ato	‘small canoe’	(class 7)
fy -ato	‘small canoes’	(class 8)

Similarly, in Luganda there are more than two diminutive classes. Singular diminutives are regularly formed by the addition of the class 12 prefix *ka-*, whilst plural diminutives are formed through the addition of the class 14 prefix *bu-*.

(18) Luganda (JE15, Ashton 1947: 210–213)

a. eki-ntu	‘thing’	(class 7)
aka -ntu	‘small thing, trifle’	(class 12)
b. eki-tuli	‘hole’	(class 7)
aka -tuli	‘hole in pocket’	(class 12)
c. omw-ana	‘child’	(class 1)
aka -ana	‘baby’	(class 12)
obw -ana	‘babies’	(class 14)
d. enn-yumba	‘house’	(class 9)
aka -yumba	‘small house’	(class 12)
obu -yumba	‘small houses’	(class 14)

However, there is a third diminutive class in Luganda, class 13 which is formed with the prefix *tu-*, which has an individuating function with mass and non-count nouns (see also Section 4.2).

(19) Luganda (JE15, Ashton 1947: 210–213)

a. ama-zzi	‘water’	(class 6)
otu -zzi	‘drop of water’	(class 13)

Across Bantu, diminutivised nouns usually also trigger agreement on nominal modifiers and verbs. This can be seen in examples (20)-(22). The Bembe examples in

(23) show that even in the case of double prefixation (as occurs in the plural diminutive forms), agreement with the ‘inner’ class prefix is prohibited.

(20) Rangi (F33, Dunham, p.c. 2011)

Maa a-ka-túúb-a **ka-ra** **ka-chihi**
Then SM1-CONSC-follow-FV 12-DEM 12-bird
‘Then she followed that little bird.’

(21) Kagulu (G12, Petzell 2008: 74)

chi-pene **chi-no** **chi-swanu**
7-9.goat 7-DEM 7-beautiful
‘This small goat is beautiful.’

(22) Kimbundu (H21, Quintão 1934: 19)

ka-di-tadi **ka-moxi**
12-5-stone 12-one
‘One stone’

(23) Bembe (D54, Iorio 2011: 50)

a. **tō-mi-tfwe** **tw-enu**
13-4-head 13-POSS2PL
‘Your small heads’

b. * **tō-mi-tfwe** **y-enu**
13-4-head 4-POSS2PL
Intd: ‘Your small heads’

3.2 Reduplication for diminutive formation

In a number of languages, reduplication is involved in the formation of diminutive nouns. This is the case in Mongo (C60), where, in addition to class shift (i.e. the use of classes 19/13), reduplication is also often involved in the formation of diminutive nouns. Monosyllabic stems of diminutivised nouns usually require total reduplication (24a-b), whilst disyllabic stems undergo partial reduplication (24c-d).

(24) Mongo (C60, Hulstaert 1965: 134–5): *i-* (class 19) and *to-* (class 13)

a. bo-nto	‘person’	(class 1)
i-nto-nto	‘small person’	(class 19)
to-nto-nto	‘small people’	(class 13)
b. mbwá	‘dog’	(class 9)
i-mbwâ-mbwa	‘small dog’	(class 19)
to-mbwâ-mbwa	‘small dogs’	(class 13)
c. li-káká	‘foot’	(class 5)
i-ká-káká	‘small foot’	(class 19)
to-ká-káká	‘small feet’	(class 13)
d. lo-kánga	‘guinea-fowl’	(class 11)
i-kâ-kanga	‘small guinea-fowl’	(class 19)
to-kâ-kanga	‘small guinea-fowls’	(class 13)

As noted above, Nomaande (A46) also employs reduplication in diminutive formation, in addition to class shift into class 19/13.

(25) Nomaande (A46, Wilkendorf 2001: 15): *hi-/he-* (class 19) and *tu-/tɔ-* (class 13)

a. o-túmbe	‘walking cane’	(class 3)
hi-túmbétumbe	‘small cane’	(class 19)
tu-túmbétumbe	‘small canes’	(class 13)
b. hi-sínge	‘cat’	(class 19)
hi-síngeésínge	‘kitten’	(class 19)
tu-síngeésínge	‘kittens’	(class 13)
c. he-nósé	‘child’	(class 19)
he-nósénósé	‘small child’	(class 19)
tɔ-nósénósé	‘small children’	(class 13)

The examples in (25b-c) show that for nouns which belong the class 19/13 to begin with, reduplication is the only formal means to express reduplication, since class shift remains ‘invisible’. However, reduplication is typically used in addition to class shift, and we have not found a system in Bantu in which reduplication is the sole means of expressing diminutives, without accompanying class shift.

3.3 The derivational diminutive suffix *-ana*

Many of the southern Bantu languages have developed a diminutive suffix of (a variant of) the form *-ana* (see e.g. Engelbrecht 1925). In many cases, the suffix has replaced the older diminutive system based on noun class prefixation and their use of the historical classes 12 and 13 (the classes most likely to have historically been employed for diminutive purposes in these languages), although in some southern Bantu languages, both class shift – typically into class 7/8 – and the suffix *-ana* can be employed to mark diminutives.

In Zulu, for example, there is no dedicated diminutive noun class. However, the diminutive suffix *-ana* can be added to a range of nouns (and adjectives) where it can be used to express simple diminution in size or when used with a plural noun, it can encode diminution in quantity (26).

(26) Zulu (S42, Doke 1930: 73–8, Poulos and Msimang 1998: 101–9)

a. imbuzi	‘goat’	imbuz- ana	‘small goat’
b. idolo	‘knee’	idolw- ana	‘small knee’
c. ifu	‘cloud’	if(w)- ana	‘small cloud’
d. umakoti	‘bride’	umakotsh- ana	‘lit.: little bride’
e. iphupho	‘dream’	iphush- ana	‘insignificant dream’
f. isikhathi	‘time’	isikhash- ana	‘a little while’
g. abafana	‘boys’	abafany- ana	‘small/few boys’
h. amazwi	‘words’	amazw- ana	‘a few words’
i. izinsuku	‘days’	izinsukw- ana	‘a few days’

In many cases the suffixation of *-ana* triggers phonological changes in the final consonant of the root which becomes palatalised or labialised, e.g. /p^h/ becomes /f/, or /k/ becomes /k^w/ (cf. Poulos 1986, 1999: 205, Doke 1954).

The suffix *-ana* also occurs in a number of other southern Bantu languages, including Northern Sotho (27), Venda (28), Tswana (29), and Tsonga (30) either as a sole marker of diminutive meaning (in the first three languages), or in addition to class shift (as in Tsonga):

(27) Northern Sotho (S32, Poulos 1999: 209)

a. <i>taba</i>	‘matter’	(class 9)
<i>tab-ana</i>	‘small matter’	(class 9)
b. <i>kôlôî</i>	‘wagon’	(class 9)
<i>kôlôy-ana</i>	‘small wagon’	(class 9)

(28) Venda (S21, Poulos 1990: 87)

<i>thava</i>	‘mountain’	(class 9)
<i>thav-ana</i>	‘small mountain’	(class 9)

(29) Tswana (S31, Creissels 1999)

<i>tau</i>	‘lion’	(class 9)
<i>taw-ana</i>	‘young lion’	(class 9)
<i>molapo</i>	‘river’	(class 3)
<i>molatsw-ana</i>	‘stream’	(class 3)

(30) Tsonga (S53, Poulos 1999: 209)

<i>muti</i>	‘village’	(class 3)
<i>xi-mut-ana</i>	‘small village’	(class 7)
<i>swi-mut-ana</i>	‘small villages’	(class 8)

It has been proposed that such forms are the result of grammaticalisation processes related to a lexical form **-jánà* (BLR3, Series 3203) (e.g. Poulos 1999), as well as of contact influence from head-final Khoisan languages (e.g. Engelbrecht 1925, Güldemann 1999). This discussion is developed further in Section 5.

3.4 Nominal compounding

A number of languages which do not have a dedicated diminutive affix employ a system of nominal compounding, whereby two nouns combine to form a new word. Similarly to the diminutive expressed by means of the derivational suffix *-ana* (cf. Section 3.3 above), diminutive compounding also resorts to the word for ‘child’, although this word appears in its full form (i.e. with its noun class prefix) and as the first element in the compound. Cuwabo, for example, employs the lexical item *mwáaná* ‘child’ which retains its nominal class 1 prefix along with a second element in the compound which also retains its nominal prefix.⁶

⁶ Note that when assuming this function, the lexical item *mwáaná* ‘child’ and its plural counterpart *áaná* ‘children’ are systematically reduced to *mwána-* and *ána-* respectively (Guérois 2016: 184/5).

(31) Cuwabo (P34, Guérois 2015: 184/5)

a. mú-yaná	‘woman’	(class 1)
mwáná -múyaná	‘young woman’	(class 1)
áná -múyaná	‘young women’	(class 2)
b. páaká	‘cat’	(class 9a)
mwáná -páaká	‘little cat’	(class 1)
áná -páaká	‘little cats’	(class 2)
c. ṃ-páddo	‘bench’	(class 3)
mwáná -ṃpáddo	‘small bench’	(class 1)
áná -ṃpáddo	‘small benches’	(class 2)

Diminutives in Nzadi (B865) employ a similar strategy for compounding, with the first element of the compound appearing as *mwǎ̀n/bǎ̀n* ‘child/children’ (with frequent deletion of the final *-n* for the singular form) which is followed by the noun in question. Thus *ibaa* ‘man’ becomes *mwa ibaa* ‘boy’.

(32) Nzadi (B865, Crane et al. 2011: 73)⁷

a. ibaa	‘man’	>	mwa íbaa	‘boy’
abaa	‘men’	>	bàán abáà	‘boys’
b. okààr	‘woman’	>	mwa okáàr	‘girl’
akáàr	‘women’	>	bàán àkáàr	‘girls’
c. mbyě	‘bushknife’	>	mwàá mbyě	‘knife’
mbyě	‘bushknives’	>	bàán ↓é mbyě	‘knives’

Similarly, in Eton (A71), van der Velde (2008: 207) describes the diminutive marker as a proclitic which can appear in front of any full noun in order to form a diminutive or singulative reading. This diminutive proclitic, which appears as *m̀* (with the variant *m̀n* and the plural counterpart *b̀*), has its origin in the noun *m-òṃó* ‘child’ (plural *b-òṃó*).

(33) Eton (A71, van de Velde 2008: 207)

a. ílé	‘a tree’	>	m̀ ílé	‘a small tree’
b. bílé	‘trees’	>	b̀ bílé	‘small trees’

The same strategy is found in Bafia where diminutives are marked by *máá* in the singular and *bóó* in the plural (34). Although Guarisma (2000) does not propose a possible origin for these forms, their link with the word *mán* ‘child’ (plural *bón*), seems likely (with deletion of the final *-n*, similar to what was seen in Eton and Nzadi above).

(34) Bafia (A50, Guarisma 2000: 77–8)

a. m-áá	kì-zén	b. b-óó	bí-'zén
1-DIM	7-fish	2-DIM	8-fish
	‘a small fish’		‘small fish’

⁷ The genitive linker /é/ is present between the two nouns when they are plural and when the second noun is consonant-initial.

c. m-áá	c-ā?	d. m-áá	(n-)’bwíí
1-DIM	7-hand	1-DIM	9-goat
‘small hand’		‘small goat’	

The use of a word for ‘child’ to mark diminutives is cross-linguistically common. However, it is interesting to note that in the examples above (or, at least in Cuwabo, Nzadi and Eton) the form can also be used with inanimate nouns, which suggests that the ‘child’ formative has undergone semantic bleaching as part of its grammaticalisation process⁸.

3.5 Primary classification in diminutive classes

The examples discussed so far show the use of diminutive classes as part of processes of nominal derivation, where a noun typically found in a different class is used in the diminutive class for a specific semantic effect (e.g. to encode small size). Meeussen (1967) and Maho (1999) use the terms ‘secondary’ vs ‘primary’ classification to distinguish examples of nominal derivation (secondary classification) from cases where a noun is found in a particular class without a derivational process (primary classification), i.e. when a noun is found only in that class. While diminutive classes are typically used for secondary classification, there are also instances where nouns are primary members of what is otherwise considered as a diminutive class. In Duala, for example, diminutives are regularly formed in class 19 (with the prefix *i-*) and class 13. However, classes 19 and 13 also host a number of non-derived nouns, as shown in (35). Although some of these words refer to physically small entities, the crucial observation is that they do not synchronically also appear in a non-derived form in a corresponding non-diminutive class.

(35) Duala (A24, Gaskin 1927: 12)

a. i-non	‘bird’	(class 19)
lo-non	‘birds’	(class 13)
b. i-dubwan	‘key’	(class 19)
lo-dubwan	‘keys’	(class 13)
c. i-bombé	‘dwarf’	(class 19)
lo-bombé	‘dwarves’	(class 13)
d. yoló	‘scorpion’	(class 19)
loló	‘scorpions’	(class 13)
e. yungu	‘mosquito’	(class 19)
lungu	‘mosquitos’	(class 13)

In Nomaande, the items *hisínge* ‘cat’ and *henósé* ‘child’ are also primary (i.e. non-derived) members of class 19, with no apparent diminutive class shift having taken place (in contrast to the examples shown in (25) above).

⁸ A similar, and possibly related use of compounds with *mwana-* derives nouns showing ‘group membership’, found for example in Cuwabo and Swahili. For example, Swahili *mwanachama* ‘party member’ from *mwana-* and *chama* ‘political party’.

(36) Nomaande (A46, Wilkendorf 2001: 15)

a. hi-sínge	‘cat’	(class 19)
hi-síngeésínge	‘kitten’	(class 19)
tu-síngeésínge	‘kittens’	(class 13)
b. he-nósé	‘child’	(class 19)
he-nósénósé	‘small child’	(class 19)
to-nósénósé	‘small children’	(class 13)

Diachronically some of these members of diminutive classes may reflect a process of change, where a historical process of secondary classification has been reanalysed as primary classification (cf. e.g. Amfo and Appah 2016 for a discussion of this process in Akan). Other instances may result from loanword adaptation. For example, the Herero class 12 noun *okamausa* comes from the English word ‘mouse (used with a computer)’. However, like other noun classes, diminutive classes are, and probably always have been, used as a means for both primary and secondary classification, and not all primary classified nouns are necessarily associated with specific diminutive semantics. For example, in Luganda there are a number of nouns which are members of class 12 or class 13 but which do not refer to entities which are inherently small in physical size.

(37) Luganda (Ashton 1947: 210)

a. aka-mwa	‘mouth’	(class 12)
b. aka-saale	‘arrow’	(class 12)
c. aka-mbe	‘knife’	(class 12)
d. aka-loolo	‘kind of cockroach’	(class 12)
e. aka-tale	‘market’	(class 12)
f. aka-zoole	‘viciousness’	(class 12)
g. aka-bi	‘danger’	(class 12)
h. aka-saamalo	‘riot’	(class 12)
i. otu-lo	‘sleep’	(class 13)

There are also instances in which diminutive classes contain nouns that refer to physically large entities. This is the case with the mountain name *kilimanjaro* which refers to a very large entity despite the diminutive class prefix *ki-*. Similarly, *okakambe* ‘horse’ and *okaposandjombo* ‘(a kind of) big frog’ in Herero (Nguaiko 2011).

When analysing nouns in diminutive classes – both derived and non-derived ones – it should be noted that the discussion presented in the current paper is, in many cases, dependent on the descriptions and translations provided for the examples in a given language. However, these may not always indicate whether the noun in question is associated with a diminutive reading. For example, if the word for ‘knife’ appears to be a primary member of a diminutive class, the translation may not indicate that this is because such a knife can indeed be distinguished from a larger knife which is present in the language and the associated environment. More detailed analysis of the relevant lexical semantics is needed to understand these cases better. However, like with other noun classes, diminutive classes are semantically coherent only up to a point, and allow for members whose semantics does not fall within diminutive meaning.

3.6 Summary

In summary, this section has presented an overview of the different strategies used in the formation of diminutives. Diminutives in Bantu are formed through class shift processes, with nouns assigned to (sometimes dedicated) diminutive classes (indicated by the presence of the appropriate noun class prefix), reduplication, the addition of the diminutive derivational suffix *-ana*, or nominal compounding employing a variant of the lexical item *mwana* ‘child’.

The different strategies employed for expressing diminutives in Bantu are not equally widespread or evenly distributed geographically. Based on Maho’s (1999) survey of Bantu noun classes, two particular broader distributional patterns of diminutive formation in Bantu can be seen. First, the addition or substitution of noun classes is by far the most frequent strategy used to form diminutives in Bantu. Class 12 is the most widespread diminutive class prefix, covering the northeastern, central, and southwestern areas. On the other hand, class 19 is confined to the rainforest area, and the pairing 7/8 is more sporadically distributed across the whole Bantu area, albeit with a greater concentration in the northeast. Second, diminutive formation based on the word ‘child’ is mostly attested in the peripheral areas, with a rather neat distinction between compounding found in northwestern languages and languages of the P zone and derivational suffixes found in southern languages. As noted above, the diminutive suffix *-ana* is found predominantly in Southern Bantu, and only sporadically in other areas. Productive compounding with a form based on ‘child’ was illustrated from Cuwabo. On the other hand, in other P languages, including Lomwe and Makhuwa, the process seems to be more limited. For example, in Makhuwa there seems to be only one compound word with ‘child’ as the first element, namely *mwanámwáne* ‘child’ (van der Wal 2009: 33) which is a synonymous with *mwaána* ‘child’. Similarly, in Swahili, even though there are numerous examples, *mwana*-derivation is not fully productive and is semantically restricted to membership. These languages thus lie at the periphery of diminutive derivations based on ‘child’.

Having presented an overview of the processes involved in the formation of diminutives across the Bantu region, the next section examines the semantics and function of diminutives.

4. Diminutives: Semantics and function

Cross-linguistically, diminutives are often used to convey semantics relating to smallness in physical size. This is a semantic association which is also seen across Bantu languages. However, there is a range of other meanings associated with diminutives, including pejorative uses, to encode group membership, as well as individuation.

4.1 Smallness

The dominant or prototypical semantics associated with Bantu diminutives appears to be that of small physical size, as most of the examples so far presented have shown. However, the use of diminutives to encode smallness in quantity (e.g. in Zulu (26)) or smallness in age – and thereby linked to youth (see example (30a) in Cuwabo) – is also widespread.

Recall that Rangi makes use of dedicated diminutive classes (specifically 12/19). These can be used to express smallness in physical size as in *kachihi* ‘small bird’ as

well as smallness in terms of quantity or amount in the case of a mass noun, or an entity which is comprised of many smaller individual units, as is the case in *fi-vi-ryo* ‘small amount of millet’ which conveys the sense of a small amount of millet, rather than types of millet which are physically small.

(38) Rangi (Dunham p.c.)

ka-chihi maa ka-ka-héé-w-a fi-vi-ryo
 12-bird then SM12-CONSC-give-PASS-FV 19-8-millet
 ‘Then the little bird was given a tiny amount of millet.’

Smallness in quantity is also achieved with class 12 *ka-* in Kimbundu, which is otherwise used to express small physical size, as example (39) illustrates.

(39) Kimbundu (H21, Quintão 1934: 128)

Ban-a o-ka-di-bengu ka-ku-di-a
 give-FV AUG-12-5-rat 12-15-eat-FV
 ‘Give the small rat a bit of food.’

Individuative uses of diminutive markers are also seen in a number of other languages, as discussed below.

4.2 Individuation

In some cases, the diminutivised form turns a mass noun into a count noun. For instance, Luganda has a dedicated individuating noun class prefix *tu-* (class 13) which is used with mass nouns to form individuated nouns (otherwise diminutives are formed by classes 12/14), as can be seen in example (40).

(40) Luganda (JE15, Ashton 1947: 210–213)

a. otu-zzi	‘drop of water’	(class 13)
ama-zzi	‘water’	(class 6)
b. otu-nnyu	‘pinch of salt’	(class 13)
omu-nnyu	‘salt’	(class 3)
c. otw-enge	‘drop of beer’	(class 13)
omw-enge	‘beer’	(class 6)

In other languages, the diminutive marking indicates a mass or plural subpart of a mass quantity. In Shona, for example, class shift of a mass noun into the diminutive class 13 results in a small amount of the mass (41), while in Zulu the diminutive suffix *-ana* results in diminution in quantity when used with a plural noun (42).

(41) Individuated diminutives in Shona (Jurafsky 1996: 555)

mvura ‘water’ > **tu-mvura** ‘a little water’

(42) Individuated diminutives in Zulu (van der Spuy & Mjiyako 2015)

amazwi ‘words’ > amazw-**ana** ‘a few words’
 amasokisi ‘socks’ > amasokis-**ana** ‘a few socks’

In Nzadi, diminutivisation can also be used to express part of an entity. Thus, the words for ‘finger’ (42a) and ‘branch’ (42b) correspond to the diminutivised form of the words for ‘hand’ and ‘tree’, respectively.

(43) Nzadi (B865, Crane et al. 2011: 73)

a. lwö`	‘hand(s), arm(s)’
mwàá lwö`	‘finger’
bàán ↓é lwô	‘fingers’
b. oté / eté	‘tree(s)’
mwa oté	‘branch’
bàán ↓étê	‘branches’

4.3 Connotational use

A third key aspect of the semantics of diminutives is to encode connotative or evaluational meaning, in particular pejorative and ameliorative meaning, but also the related use with humans with specific characteristics which are seen as a special skill or as deficiency.

In Venda, class 7/8, one of the language’s four means of expressing diminutives, can also be used to convey pejorative or derogative meanings. This sense can be applied to both human and non-human nouns.

(44) Venda (Poulos 1990: 36–8)

a. tshi -kegulu	‘useless old woman’	(< mukegulu ‘woman’)
b. tshi -kalaha	‘useless old man’	(< mukalaha ‘old man’)
c. tshi -qaela	‘stupid person’	
d. tshi -teto	‘worn-out piece of basket’	
e. tshi -tahala	‘worn-out piece of material, rag’	
f. tshi -toma	‘something small, tiny, insignificant’	
g. tshi -dayo	‘small, insignificant law’	(< mulayo ‘law’)

However, there are also nouns in class 7/8 which refer to people who have some special ability or skill (seemingly in contradiction to the pejorative associations of nouns in this class).

(45) Venda (Poulos 1990: 36)

a. tshi -imbi	‘good singer’
b. tshi -biki	‘good cook’
c. tshi -ambi	‘good speaker’
d. tshi -shumi	‘good worker’

Personal nouns derived from some of these verb roots may appear in other classes, but their special abilities may not be apparent in these other classes (Poulos 1990: 36), as can be seen in the examples in (46).

(46) Venda (Poulos 1990: 36)

a. mu -shumi	‘a worker (in the ordinary sense)’
b. mu -biki	‘a cook (in the ordinary sense)’

In this context, it is also worth noting that in Swahili a number of nouns referring to humans are, rather than in class 1/2 which is typically used for human nouns, found in class 7/8, which is also used as diminutive class.

(47) Swahili (cf. Ashton 1947: 14)

ki-pofu	‘a blind person’
ki-lima	‘a disabled person’
ki-ziwi	‘a deaf person’

These nouns refer to humans which are seen as in some way as different or deviant. However, even though they are class 7/8 nouns in terms of nominal morphology, they show animate (class 1/2) agreement (Ashton 1947: 89, Mohammed 2001: 47-49).

In Zulu, in addition to encoding small physical size, the diminutive can also be used to convey connotative meaning. This can be either pejorative or ameliorative meaning as the contrast between (48a) and (48b) shows, where in both cases the diminutive form of the noun *umfana* ‘boy’ is used, and where the interpretation depends on the context.

(48) Zulu (Poulos & Msimang 1998: 103, Van der Spuy & Mjiyako 2015: 3/4)

a. lowo	m-fany-ana		
that	1-boy-DIM		
	‘That good-for-nothing boy’		
b. bheka nje	a-ka-se-mu-hle	u-m-fany-ana	ami
look	just NEG-SM1-now-ADJ1-handsome	AUG1-1-boy-DIM	my
	‘Look how handsome my dear little boy is.’		

Finally, in Mongo, the diminutive prefix *i-* (singular) can also be used for the expression of superlative meaning, as can be seen in the examples in (49).

(49) Mongo (C60, Ruskin and Ruskin 1934: 156)

impampaka	‘a very old person’
inganganyu	‘very old, worn-out article’
intuntuku	‘an exceedingly foolish person’
itatuka	‘a very beautiful person’

5. Development, distribution and comparative perspectives

For the present study we constructed a sample of 48 Bantu languages and used information from published grammars to provide a comparative overview of diminutive marking in Bantu. Our results build on and largely confirm Maho’s (1999) findings, and show overall tendencies of diminutive marking across the family, as well as particular geographical distributions of specific coding strategies. Our sample includes at least one language from each of Guthrie’s 26 Bantu zones. Zones A and S are particularly well represented with seven languages each. The study is part of a wider research project on parametric morphosyntactic variation in Bantu (Guérois et al. forthcoming). A table with all languages and their diminutive marking strategies is provided in Appendix 1.

In the current section, we provide a short comparative overview, and then focus on developments involving the grammaticalisation of a word meaning ‘child’, and on particular patterns which can be observed in the data.

5.1 Comparative overview

A common strategy for the formation of diminutives in Bantu involves class shift, with diminutive formation closely linked to the noun class systems which predominate across Bantu. In many Bantu languages, diminutives are found in classes 12/13 (encoding singular and plural respectively). These are also the main historical diminutive classes that have been reconstructed for Proto-Bantu, with the proposed reconstructions **ka-* and **tu-* respectively. However, different grammaticalisation processes have also resulted in the variation seen in the Bantu diminutive systems. For example, the singular diminutive form **ka-* appears to be more widespread than the plural diminutive. Similarly, a number of Bantu languages have lost one or both of these historical diminutive classes. There are therefore a number of other class pairings in which diminutives are formed. Classes 12/8 (e.g. in Rombo) and classes 12/19 (e.g. in Rangi) are found in languages which have lost the historical plural class 13, whilst other languages have lost the historical singular diminutive class resulting in pairings such as 19/13 (e.g. in Duala) and 5/13 (as in Bembe). Standard Swahili represents an example of yet another deviation from this system, employing neither of the historical diminutive noun classes and forming diminutives instead in classes 7/8. Furthermore, it is possible for diminutives to be formed in more than one class pairing: For example, Sena uses classes 7/8 and 12 whilst Chindamba employs 7/8 and 12/13, and Luganda 12/13/14 (See Map 2 in Appendix 2).

In addition to the use of class shift into (sometimes dedicated) noun classes, Bantu languages also make recourse to a number of other strategies to form diminutives. Reduplication is used in the formation of diminutives (in Mongo and Nomaande). Similarly, the use of the diminutive derivational suffix *-ana* (ultimately from a word meaning ‘child’) is a common diminutive formation strategy across much of the southern Bantu region. Another option sees the formation of diminutivised nouns through nominal compounding involving some variant of the lexical item meaning ‘child’. We will turn to the importance of the grammaticalisation of a form with the meaning ‘child’ for diminutives in the next section.

Whilst there is variation across the Bantu area, some observations can also be made in terms of the geographic distribution of these forms based on our sample. With respect to diminutive strategies involving class shift, while the use of cases 12 and 13 – although often in combination with other classes – are found in languages of the sample from across the Bantu area, the use of class 19, and in particular the class pairing 19/13 is found predominantly in the northwest. Inversely, the use of class 7/8 is largely found in the southeast of the Bantu area, although there are examples in the northwest and west. The three strategies not involving class shift also have geographic restrictions in the languages of our sample. The use of compounding with a root meaning ‘child’ is almost exclusively found in the northwest – the only exception being the Mozambican languages Cuwabo, and similarly, reduplication is only found in the northwest. In contrast, the presence of the suffix *-ana* as a diminutive strategy is characteristic of the southern Bantu area (See Map 1 in Appendix 2).

5.2 ‘Child’ as a source for diminutive formation

Cross-linguistically, a large number of diminutive morphemes developed historically from a word meaning ‘child’ or ‘son’ (Jurafsky 1996: 562) and Wierzbicka (1984) proposes that ‘child’ lies at the heart of many pragmatic uses of the diminutive. Heine et al. (1991: 79-97) propose a detailed account of diminutive expression in Ewe, that is based on *ví* ‘child, son (of)’ (associated with offspring) which is used as a derivational suffix. The authors postulate that a range of different values developed from the original meaning of *ví*, namely ‘young’, ‘small’ and ‘member’, which in turn developed into related sub-meanings, such as ‘inexperienced’ or ‘unsuccessful’ (associated with ‘young’), ‘insignificant’ or ‘delineated part of a mass’ (associated with ‘small’), ‘typical behaviour’ (associated with ‘member’).

As has been seen in the preceding section, the use of the word for ‘child’ as a diminutive strategy is also attested in a number of Bantu languages, through suffixation (Section 3.3) and compounding (Section 3.4). The second case was illustrated above with three northwestern languages (Nzadi, Eton and Bafia), and the eastern language Cuwabo. As can be seen in (50), these languages often have two different words for ‘child’ with the meaning of ‘young person’ on the one hand and ‘offspring, descendent of’ on the other hand.

(50) Language	‘young person’	‘offspring, descendent of’
Eton	mùṅà	mwán (/m-ḁṅó/)
Bafia	mɔp'tí	mán
Cuwabo	miima	mwáaná

In the same ways as described by Heine et al. (1991) for Ewe, the lexeme for ‘child’ (in the sense of ‘offspring, descendent of’) is used as a diminutive in these Bantu languages, and developed several semantically associated meanings as seen in Section 4. In contrast, the forms with the meaning ‘young person’ have not given rise to diminutive markers.

Whilst the compound-initial position of the diminutive marker is consistent with the canonical head-initial morphology in Bantu, the suffixation of diminutive markers is much less expected, and would be a marked language-internal development. Against this background, several studies have attempted to account for the possible historical origin of the suffix *-ana* in southern Bantu languages (see, *inter alia*, Engelbrecht (1925), Meeussen (1967), Poulos (1986, 1999), and Güldemann (1999)). Engelbrecht (1925) proposes that the diminutive suffix results from language contact with Khoisan languages, where a similar derivational process is found. This development would have taken as a starting point existing Bantu formations with ‘child’, as seen in the distribution of (lexicalised) forms of diminutives in *-ana* throughout the wider Bantu area (e.g. Swahili *msichana* ‘girl’ and *mvulana* ‘boy’, Konde *undumyana* ‘boy’), which then developed into a fully productive diminutive suffix under influence from Khoisan languages in Southern Bantu.⁹ Meeussen (1967: 95-6) reconstructs a number of ‘compound stems’, i.e. nominal stems which consist of two otherwise independent stems. The first stem of the compound is usually a verbal stem (e.g. Swahili *mw-uza-samaki*, ‘fishmonger’, lit.: 1-sell-fish). In those compounds

⁹ Güldemann (1999) in a more recent contact-based analysis of head-final morphology in Bantu (further discussed below), notes that the presence of suffixes like *-ana* in Eastern Bantu might also be related to contact with Cushitic, rather than, or in addition to, contact with Khoisan.

with a nominal first stem, the second stem is usually restricted to a handful of forms, which in present-day Bantu languages are used more or less as suffixes. Among these stems are *-dúme*, ‘man’, *-kúdí*, ‘grown up’, and indeed *-ana*, ‘child’. Meeussen (1967) thus reconstructs *-ana* as derivational suffix in Proto-Bantu. The problem with this analysis is that head-final, right-headed structures such as the proposed noun-noun compounding are rarely found in Bantu, and – in the case of *-ana* – that this analysis does not explain the phonological effects of palatalization or labialisation observed, for example, in Zulu (cf. Section 3.3, above).

Poulos (1986, 1999) proposes that *-ana*, in addition to a number of other grammatical formatives of Southern Bantu, results from a grammaticalisation process whereby an independent noun with the nominal stem **-jánà* ‘child’ has become grammaticalised as a diminutive suffix. This process would therefore involve the loss of phonological material and morphological independence, as well as a semantic change from ‘child’ to ‘off-spring’ and ‘smallness’.

Güldemann (1999) rejects the hypothesis that the genesis of this unexpected diminutive suffix in southern Bantu is the result of a grammaticalisation process, whereby a syntactic construction would have developed into a polymorphemic word form. Instead, he supports Engelbrecht’s (1925) analysis about Khoisan interference, and provides additional evidence, by expanding the analysis to include feminine suffixes such as Zulu *-kazi*, and the wide-spread locative suffix *-ni*. He proposes that the emergence of the derivational suffixes in southern Bantu, including the diminutive *-ana* (and its variants), is explained by contact with Southern African Khoisan languages during the first Bantu migration waves, i.e. at a stage when Khoisan languages had a strong influence on southern Bantu languages (contact between Khoekhoe varieties and southern Nguni is historically and linguistically attested), and were not associated with the low social prestige with which they later became associated. The parallelism between southern Bantu and Khoisan diminutive constructions can be exemplified by examples from !Xam (51) and Hiecho (52), showing head-final structures and the use of the same lexical source for the diminutive marker, i.e. the world for ‘child’.

(51) !Xam (Khoisan, Bleek 1928-30: 95f, 96 via Güldemann 1999: 72)

||ho Opwa
bag child
‘little bag’

(52) Hiecho (Khoisan - Khoe, Dornan 1917: 99, 97, 93 via Güldemann 1999: 68)

- a. ju |kwa
sheep child
‘a lamb’
- b. hi |kwa
tree child
‘a bush or shrub’
- c. ||gaiehe |kwa
chief child
‘prince’

However, as noted above, the distribution of Bantu suffixal morphology extends beyond the area where contact with Khoisan is clearly attested (cf. e.g. Samsom and

Schadeberg 1994 for the locative suffix **-ni*), and derivational suffixes have been reconstructed for Proto-Bantu (Meeussen 1967). Furthermore, as e.g. Poulos (1999) points out, the use of a word for child to form diminutives is cross-linguistically widespread and semantically well-attested, and so could easily have arisen through language internal grammaticalisation processes. The historical development of the diminutive suffix *-ana* in Southern Bantu thus appears to combine elements of both contact and grammaticalisation, and this impression is further supported by evidence from intermediate stages of this process, discussed in the next section.

5.3 Diminutive systems in flux

We have seen above that many Bantu languages employ classes 12 and 13 for the expression of diminutives, and that these classes have been reconstructed as diminutive classes for Proto-Bantu. However, of our sample of 48 languages, only 18 maintain the class pairing 12/13 as diminutive classes, and a further 10 use either class 12 or class 13 alone or in some other combination, while 20 languages have lost classes 12/13. Standard Swahili, for example, uses classes 7/8. Historically, this means that there have been process of loss and innovation, and we would expect further evidence for these processes from diminutive systems in flux. This is indeed found in a number of languages which appear to show various stages in the transition from one system to the other. For example, Sena uses classes 7/8 and 12, whilst Chindamba employs classes 7/8 and classes 12/13. In both cases, we assume that the use of classes 12/13 is the older pattern, and that the use of classes 7/8 is an innovation. Under this assumption Sena would have progressed further in the process, and lost class 13, which is still retained in Chindamba. A slightly different situation is found in Luganda. Here classes 12/14 are used as the standard diminutive classes, while class 13 is reserved for ‘small quantities’. Historically, it seems that the use of class 13 has become semantically restricted, and its original function – as plural of class of class 12 – has been taken over by class 14.

In the examples discussed so far, we have assumed that the use of classes 12/13 was the historically older system, and the use of other classes an innovation. While this is supported by evidence across the language family overall, there are local cases which show a more complex situation. One of these cases is Swahili, where class 12/13 has largely been replaced by class 7/8 as diminutive class (for detailed discussion, see Nurse and Hinnebusch 1993: 346-348).

(53) Standard Swahili (Mohamed 2001: 43)

- | | | |
|------------|------------------|-----------|
| a. m-toto | ‘child’ | (class 1) |
| b. wa-toto | ‘children’ | (class 2) |
| c. ki-toto | ‘small child’ | (class 7) |
| d. vi-toto | ‘small children’ | (class 8) |
| e. meza | ‘table’ | (class 9) |
| f. ki-meza | ‘small table’ | (class 7) |

However, in colloquial mainland varieties of Swahili, diminutives with class 12, and to a lesser extent class 13, are found (Kihore et al. 2001, King’ei 2000: 85/86).

(54) Colloquial Swahili (King’ei 2000: 86)

- | | | |
|------------|------------------|------------|
| a. m-toto | ‘child’ | (class 1) |
| b. wa-toto | ‘children’ | (class 2) |
| c. ka-toto | ‘small child’ | (class 12) |
| d. tu-toto | ‘small children’ | (class 13) |

In many cases, these colloquial varieties of Swahili spoken in the mainland of Tanzania and Kenya are in contact with other Bantu languages, many of which still have the class 12/13 pairing for the formation of diminutives. The majority of Swahili speakers use Swahili not as a first language, but as an additional language, and so the use of class 12/13 in mainland Swahili can be related to contact influence from East African community languages, reintroducing an erstwhile lost morphosyntactic feature (Kihore et al. 2001, Marten 2013). This ‘reintroduction’ extends beyond the formation of the nominals themselves, and includes dependent elements such as possessive, i.e. *kake* ‘his/her’, which exhibits a class 12 prefix in (55).

(55) Colloquial Swahili (King’ei 2000: 86)

- | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------|--------------|-----------|----------|
| Kila | m-tu | a-na-hitaji | ka-shamba | k-ake. |
| every | 1-person | SM1-PRS-need | 12-field | 12-POSS1 |
| ‘Everyone needs his own small field.’ | | | | |

The situation in Swahili shows that the use of classes 12/13 is a local innovation, even though in the wider comparative Bantu context, it is the historically older pattern.

Another situation of systems in flux can be observed in Southern Bantu, with respect to the innovative diminutive suffix *-ana*. As seen in the preceding discussion, most Southern Bantu languages form their diminutives by means of this suffix. However, in some languages, in addition to the diminutive suffix, class shift into a diminutive noun class is used. This is exemplified in (56) with Ronga, and in (57) with Tsonga, which use class 7/8 diminutive prefixes.¹⁰

(56) Ronga (S54, Bachetti 2006: 63–64)

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| a. yi-ndlu | ‘house’ | (class 9) |
| xi-yi-ndlw-ana | ‘small house’ | (class 7 + class 9 + -ana) |
| swi-yi-ndlw-ana | ‘small houses’ | (class 8 + class 9 + -ana) |
| b. mu-lungu/va-lungu | ‘European(s)’ | (class 1/2) |
| xi-lungw-ana | ‘small European’ | (class 7 + -ana) |
| swi-lungw-tana | ‘small Europeans’ | (class 8 + -ana) |

(57) Tsonga (S53, Poulos 1999: 206)

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

¹⁰ In Ronga, diminutivised monosyllabic stems retain their original prefix as in (56a), whilst dissyllabic stems lose their nominal prefixes (56b).

The situation in Venda is even more complex, since in addition to the diminutive suffix *-ana*, classes 7/8 as well as class 20 have diminutive functions:¹¹

(58) Venda (S53, Poulos 1986: 289, 1990: 38)

lu-fhanga	‘knife’	(class 11)
tshi-panga	‘small knife’	(class 7)
thavha	‘mountain’	(class 9)
thavh-ana	‘small mountain’	(class 9 + <i>-ana</i>)
ku-thavha	‘small mountain’	(class 20)
ku-thavh-ana	‘very small mountain’	(class 20 + <i>-ana</i>)

These examples show that diminutive formation in Ronga, Tsonga and Venda is a transitory system where the suffix *-ana* represents a more recent addition to the diminutive system, resulting in the co-occurrence of both diminutive (noun class) prefixes and a diminutive derivational suffix. The system represents an intermediate state in a process in which the inherited diminutive nominal prefixes are being replaced by the diminutive suffix.

Historical evidence from Herero sheds further light on this development. In older Herero sources from the 19th and early 20th centuries, example like (59) are found, in which class 12 diminutive noun class derivation is combined with the diminutive suffix *-ona* (following Engelbrecht (1925), we assume this to be a variant of the more widespread *-ana*):

(59) Herero (R30, Engelbrecht 1925: 96)

a. om-bahu	‘locust’	(class 9)
oka-pah-ona	‘small locust’	(class 12)
b. e-puku	‘mouse’	(class 5)
oka-puk-ona	‘small mouse’	(class 12)

However, it seems that the co-occurrence of diminutive markers is no longer attested in present-day Herero. The present-day diminutive strategy in Herero is not based on the more recent suffix *-ana*, but on the older system of nominal class shift: Only this latter strategy is found in Möhlig and Kavari (2008) ((60), partially repeated from (5) above).

(60) Herero (R30, Kavari and Marten 2009: 169)

a. o-mu-ndu	‘person’	(class 1)
o-ka-ndu	‘small person’	(class 12)
b. o-ma-we	‘stones’	(class 6)
o-u-we	‘diamonds’	(class 13)
c. o-zo-nyósé	‘stars’	(class 10)
o-u-nyósé	‘little stars’	(class 13)

¹¹ The analysis of diminutive *ku-* in Venda as class 20 follows Poulos (1986, 1990). It is not clear what, if any, relation there exists to classes 15 or 17.

The data show that while Old Herero was similar to Ronga and Tsonga in using two simultaneous marking strategies for diminutives, modern Herero does no longer use a diminutive suffix. It appears that Herero started on a path of change – the introduction of the diminutive suffix *-ana* – but then reverted back to the older system of using classes 12/13. The completed change can now be seen in Southern Bantu, where only *-ana* is used. Based on this comparative evidence, three paths of future development of a diminutive system as found in languages like Ronga and Tsonga, which resembles the one of Old Herero, seem likely: The system may remain as it is, or one of the two forms may become the only diminutive marker – either the suffix *-ana*, similar to what must have happened in most Southern Bantu, or a diminutive noun class marker, following the steps of Herero. However, language change is not predictable and the only concrete conclusion we can draw from the synchronic and diachronic observations in this regard is that similar patterns seem to be attested, at different historical points.

The examples discussed in this section show different dynamics and transitions in Bantu diminutive systems. They involve processes of morphosyntactic as well as semantic change, and in many cases also involve language contact – e.g. in the introduction of the diminutive suffix *-ana*, and in the reintroduction of classes 12/13 in mainland Swahili. What we have provided in this section is a broad overview of some processes, but more data and more detailed analyses are needed to come to a better understanding of these processes, for example with respect to the variation encountered within the different systems, the semantic and pragmatic functions and restrictions of different forms, and the exact role of contact and grammaticalisation in the different processes.

6. Summary and conclusions

This paper has presented an overview of a number of strategies involved in the marking of diminutives across the Bantu language family, as well as some of the ongoing and dynamic developments involved in this process.

We have shown how the complex Bantu noun class system is used for diminutive marking through derivation and secondary classification. In many Bantu languages one class pair functions to express diminutives, and in a number of Bantu languages, more than one class pair is involved in the marking of diminutives. In addition to noun class shift, diminutives are also formed in different Bantu languages by reduplication of the noun root, the use of a diminutive suffix (e.g. *-ana* in Zulu), or through the use of compounding with a form historically meaning ‘child’. A final note was made on nouns which are primary members of diminutive classes. This also includes nouns which are members of what are otherwise diminutive classes but which do not appear to convey any inherently diminutive properties.

In terms of semantics, it has been observed from a cross-linguistic perspective that diminutives are commonly used to encode notions pertaining to physical smallness. This is also the case in many Bantu languages in which shift to a diminutive class results in an association of small physical size with the noun in question. However, diminutives also encode a broader range of meanings than that captured simply by the notion of physical ‘smallness’. Interpretations that are encountered in Bantu and which are discussed in the present paper include individuating and connotative meanings.

The final section explores the development and distribution of diminutive constructions from a comparative Bantu perspective, and highlights different

developments involving a lexical source ‘child’. The section also presented a number of case studies of diminutive systems which seem to be in flux to a greater or lesser extent. In some languages, this appears to have resulted in the co-occurrence of diminutive strategies – i.e. the use of both a diminutive prefix and a diminutivising suffix. In other languages (i.e. in Swahili) this has resulted in the co-occurrence of different diminutive systems in different varieties of a language, with colloquial Swahili showing the effects of greater pressure from other Bantu languages with different diminutive systems, further showing the susceptibility of the system of the influence of the effects of language contact.

A number of avenues remain for future research. These include the extension of the study to a wider range of languages, thereby being able to make more robust observations in terms of the geographic distribution and no doubt adding new patterns to the inventory of diminutive formation strategies. Furthermore, since our aim was to develop a comparative-typological overview of diminutive marking in Bantu, we have in many cases not been able to provide detailed discussion of the semantics associated with diminutives – in particular with respect to pragmatic and context-dependent meaning (as briefly noted with respect to Zulu in Section 4.3), and with respect to languages which have several formal diminutive strategies, as in the case, for example, in Venda. These areas remain a rich field for future research.

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Appendix 1: Diminutive marking in the languages of the sample

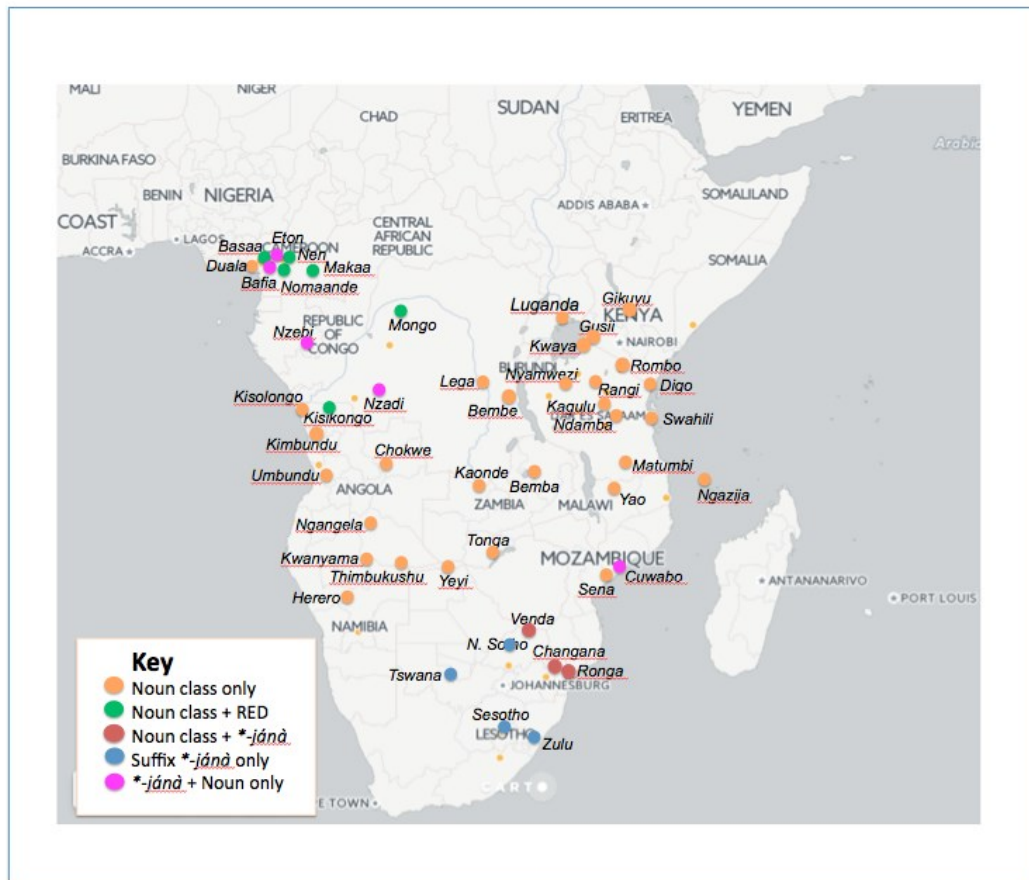
The diminutive strategies of the 48 languages of the sample are summarised in the table below. The assignment to geographic zones follows the phylogenetic classification of Grollemund et al. (2015).

Language	12/13	12	13	12/14	12/8	12/19	5/13	19/13	19	7/8	*- jána + N	N + *- jána	Red
North-Western													
Duala A42								×					
Basaá A43								×					×
Nen A44								×					×
Nomaande A46								×					×
Bafia A50											×		
Eton A71											×		
Makaa A83										×			×
Central-Western													
Mongo C60								×					×
Lega D25	×							×					
West-Western													
Nzebi B52											×		
Nzadi B865											×		
Kisolongo H16a									×				
Kisikongo H16a									×	×			×
South-Western													
Kimbudu H21	×												
Cokwe K11	×												
Ngangela K12b	×												
Thimbukushu K333	×												
Umbundu R11	×												
Kwanyama R21				×									
Herero R30				×									
Yeyi R41	×												
Kaonde L41	×												
Eastern													
Bembe D54							×						
Gikuyu E51	×												
Rombo E623			×	×									
Digo E73										×			
Nyamwezi F22					×								
Rangi F33	×												
Luganda JE15			×			×							
Kwaya JE25	×				×								
Gusii JE40					×								
Kagulu G12										×			
Swahili G42	×									×			
Ngazija G44a	×									×			

Patterns and developments in the marking of diminutives in Bantu

Chindamba G52	×									×			
Bemba M42	×												
Tonga M64	×												
Sena N44		×								×			
Matuumbi P13	×												
Yao P20	×												
Cuwabo P34											×		
Venda S21										×		×	
Tswana S31												×	
N. Sotho S32												×	
Sesotho S33												×	
Zulu S42												×	
Changana S53										×		×	
Ronga S54										×		×	

Appendix 2



Map 1: Distribution of diminutive strategies

