Rhesis *International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature*

Diminutives in Syrian Arabic

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Abstract

The analysis of diminutives in Arabic dialects has been addressed by only a few studies. The main focus of the paper is on the analysis of diminutives in Syrian Arabic, not only from a formal and semantic point of view, but also from a pragmatic perspective. After initially illustrating the main patterns of the diminutive in the Syrian dialect, the study focuses on the semantic and pragmatic functions of diminutives. In general, diminutives express the idea of smallness and are also used as terms of endearment and to convey a subjective idea of affection. From the data resulting from this research, it can be observed that diminutives are employed more for pragmatic than semantic purposes.

We find the usage of diminutives in child-centred linguistic situations, but also in other contexts of use. Furthermore, this study shows that diminutives are used equally by both men and women and are mostly related to context rather than gender.

Key Words – diminutives; Syrian Arabic; linguistics; semantic functions; pragmatic functions

L'analisi dei diminutivi nei dialetti arabi è stata affrontata solo da pochi studi. L'obiettivo principale dell'articolo è l'analisi dei diminutivi in arabo siriano non solo da un punto di vista formale e semantico, ma anche pragmatico. Dopo aver illustrato i principali schemi del diminutivo nel dialetto siriano, lo studio si sofferma sulle funzioni semantiche e pragmatiche dei diminutivi. In generale i diminutivi non solo esprimono l'idea di piccolezza, ma sono anche usati come vezzeggiativi e servono a comunicare un'idea soggettiva di affetto. Dai dati risultanti da questa ricerca, i diminutivi sono utilizzati più per scopi pragmatici che semantici. I diminutivi sono impiegati in situazioni linguistiche incentrate sui bambini, ma anche in altri contesti d'uso. Inoltre, questo studio mostra che i diminutivi sono usati allo stesso modo da uomini e donne e sono per lo più legati al contesto piuttosto che al genere.

Parole chiave – diminutivi; arabo siriano; linguistica; funzioni semantiche; funzioni pragmatiche

1. Introduction

Diminutives are linguistic forms used in almost every language[1] (Jurafsky 1996). Although used to denote smallness, diminutives are also employed in some languages as terms of endearment. From a morphological point of view, an invaluable study on evaluative affixes in several languages, including Arabic, is Grandi and Körtvélyessy (2015); the notion of evaluative morphology is linked to that of evaluative affixes, which, in a language such as Italian, serve to form categories including augmentative, diminutive, meliorative, and pejorative.

Some languages – such as Italian, Spanish or Greek – are rich in diminutives, often used with different connotations, whilst in others – English, for instance – diminutives are employed to a much lesser extent (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994). In the case of English, it is very difficult to translate some diminutives, especially when they carry different connotative nuances that do not exist in the English language. A practical example of this difficulty can be found in this very research, where many of the diminutives have been translated into English but fail to capture their original meaning.

In addition to the semantic features, such as smallness, Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (2001) also identify a common pragmatic feature of diminutives, i.e. *non-serious*. They argue that diminutives are frequently used when addressing children and very old people because they are viewed as non-serious partners in interactions. It is important to note that not all pragmatic meanings of diminutives stem from smallness or other morphosemantic features[2].

In Standard Arabic, diminutives primarily denote smallness in size and shortness of distance or time. However, they are also used to express connotative meanings, such as endearment, pity, or sympathy, and even enhancement. Sibawaihi devotes thirty-eight chapters of his treatise *Kitāb* to diminutives, with a focus on general principles in diminutive formation[3]. The prominence of diminutives as a topic in later treatises and in modern texts on grammar has gradually decreased over time.

Nakshbandi (1996) conducted a study that explored and compared the uses and structures of diminutives in Classical Arabic with those found in Urban Hijazi Arabic. One of the most recent studies on the diminutive in Standard Arabic was carried out by Kagan and Qtit (2016), who examined connotations of diminutives, categorising them as follows: minimising size; minimising quantity; minimising quality (humiliation); lightening colour; spatial proximity; temporal proximity; shortening timespan; and expressing affection. Aziz et al. (2020) investigated the various forms and meanings of the diminutive in Classical and Modern Arabic. In spoken Arabic[4], diminutives generally have the same meanings as Italian diminutive-endearments (technically hypocoristics)[5], which usually express a subjective idea of affection, graciousness, or tenderness (Durand 2009). The diminutive is not widely used in Standard Arabic (Masliyah 1997: 68; Durand 2010: 312), however, it is more prevalent in Arabic dialects. While diminutives are present in Mashreq dialects, they are less widespread and less frequent than in North African dialects.

The topic of diminutives in Arabic dialects has not received a great deal of attention. While some research has dealt with the formal and morphological aspects of diminutives, few works have taken into consideration the pragmatic functions of the diminutive; as Badarneh (2010: 154) notes, «Pragmatic functions in spoken discourse have not received

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[1] According to Körtvélyessy (2015), evaluative morphology is an euroversal.
[2] The core-meaning of diminutives has been extensively discussed in the literature and is therefore not investigated in this research.
[3] See Lancioni (2012).
[4] On the lexicon of spoken Arabic we point out the valuable atlas by Behnstedt and Woidich (2021).
[5] For further information on hypocoristics in spoken Arabic, see Davis and Zawaydeh (1999).

much attention». Procházka (2019) conducted a study on diminutives in the dialect of Tunis, analysing both their formal aspects and functions. Ritt-Benmimoun (2018) has investigated the diminutives in the southern Tunisian Bedouin of Douz, examining the morphological patterns and focusing on the semantic and pragmatic use of diminutives. Taine-Cheikh (2018) studied the diminutive in the Ḥassāniyya dialect, a variety of Arabic spoken in the West Saharan region of West Africa. In the first part of her article, which focuses on morphology, she analysed the use of the diminutive in two distinct corpora, consisting of tales and poetry, respectively. In the second part, she compared the use of the diminutive in the Ḥassāniyya dialect to those in other Arabic dialects, in order to identify cross-linguistic convergences and the specificities of Arabic. Other in-depth studies on diminutives include a study by Denizeau (1956) on diminutives in the dialect of Southern Tunisia; Masliyah (1997) on Iraqi Arabic; Watson (2006) on Yemeni Arabic; Badarneh (2010) on Jordanian Arabic; and Al-Rojaie (2012) on Najdi Arabic. *The Encyclopaedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* also contains references to the diminutive in spoken Arabic (Zewi 2006). However, there are no specific and in-depth studies on the formal, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of diminutives in Syrian Arabic (henceforth, SA)[6].

The present study focuses on the analysis of diminutives in SA, analysing the formal, semantic, and pragmatic aspects. As the pragmatic usage of diminutives is more prevalent than the semantic, it is vital to explore the pragmatic functions of diminutives in order to understand how this linguistic device is employed in social relations and interactions. As Eshreteh (2017: 46) stresses, «even though the diminutive basically conveys the idea of smallness, it is capable of communicating a variety of pragmatic meanings that extend well beyond the notion of smallness».

Diminutives are most commonly used in informal conversations among peers or family members, and are less frequently employed between strangers. The use of diminutives in these informal situations typically conveys feelings of affection, tenderness, or courtesy.

In her sociolinguistic study on women's language in Tunis, Trabelsi (1991) reflects on the different usage of diminutives in the speech of women and men. She comments that men use the diminutive to express something small, whereas women tend to also use the diminutive with an emotional and affective connotation. Trabelsi asserts that the determining factor in the use of diminutives is not age but gender. According to Rosenhouse (1984: 24), women often use diminutives in their speech. Similarly, Henkin (2010: 179), who studied the Negev dialect, observed that elderly men and women frequently use diminutives in kinship terms.

Although the aforementioned studies support the idea that diminutives are a female prerogative, other scholars (Durand and Ventura 2022: 98; Ritt-Benmimoun 2018: 223) take a different view, emphasising that diminutives generally express a subjective idea of affectivity and that they are also used by men in all the various meanings and connotations.

2. Methodology and aim

The research data was collected from a corpus of spontaneous conversations that took place between 2018 and 2019 with thirty Syrian immigrants (eighteen men and twelve women) residing in Italy. The participants mainly came from Homs and the surrounding areas, belonged to various social classes, and ranged in age from 25 to 65 years old. All of them had fled Syria due to the civil war and are now part of the Syrian immigrant community in Italy.

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[6] References to Syrian diminutives can be found in grammar studies such as those of Kassab (1987: 198) and Cowell (2005: 310). Worthy of mention amongst the most well-known grammar studies are Nakhla (1937) on the Lebanese-Syrian dialects, followed by many others, including Grotzfeld (1965). One of the most thorough contemporary grammatical studies on the Syrian dialect is that of Berlinches (2016).

The first phase of the research consisted of recording the thirty speakers during conversations in informal and formal contexts; each recording lasted roughly two hours and the corpus in total consists of sixty hours of recordings. The talks were recorded in the speakers' homes and workplaces. During the conversations the participants spoke freely about their history, family, and work, occasionally interacting with the researcher or with each other (in some cases the informants were related or belonged to the same circle of friends).

In the second phase of the research the conversations were transcribed[7] and analysed, extrapolating data on diminutives. The total number of diminutives in the corpus is 324. The study of the data also led to some general observations on the occurrences and frequency of the patterns of diminutives, as reported in the conclusions. There were no pre-established questions in order not to invalidate the results inherent in the pragmatic functions that can arise from the interrelations between speakers. The aim of the present study is to provide a preliminary description of the use of the diminutive in SA, through the analysis of semantic and pragmatic functions.

3. The diminutive in Standard Arabic

The diminutive in Standard Arabic (*at-taṣġīr* and *al-ʾism al-muṣaġġar*) is used mainly with a function of diminution (*taqlīl*) but is also employed with an endearment value (*taḥabbub*) or with a derogatory value (*taḥqīr*) (Mion and D'Anna 2021). The array of derived expressive forms in Standard Arabic has been covered extensively (see, for example, Fleisch 1961: 365). Most diminutives are formed by applying the following patterns:

- *CuCayC(a)* / *fuʿayl(a)* for a noun composed of three consonants:
qulaym 'little pen' < *qalam* 'pen'
ruǧayl 'little man' < *raǧul* 'man'
ǧubayl 'little mountain' < *ǧabal* 'mountain'
burayka 'little puddle' < *birka* 'puddle'

- *CuCayyiC* / *fuʿayyil* from stems with a long vowel:
kutayyib 'little book' < *kitāb* 'book'
quṭayyir 'little train' < *qiṭār* 'train'

- *CuCayCiC(a)* / *fuʿaylil(a)* for a noun composed of four or more consonants:
ṣunaydiq 'little box' < *ṣundūq* 'box'
ʿuṣayfir 'little bird' < *ʿuṣfūr* 'bird'
mudayrisa 'little school' < *madrasa* 'school'

Diminutives are also formed from adjectives:
ṣuġayyir 'very little' < *ṣaġīr* 'little'

In some cases the diminutive appears lexicalized:
buḥayra 'lake' < *baḥr* 'sea'

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[7] In the examples in SA, /q/ is transcribed ʾ to represent the voiceless laryngeal occlusive [ʔ]; in Standard Arabic, this phoneme is realized as a uvular [q] and is transcribed *q*. In Eastern dialects, the initial *hamza* appears optional. In this work, it is omitted from the transcription according to the pronunciation.

4. Forms and patterns of diminutives in Syrian Arabic

Most diminutive forms in Standard Arabic have survived to differing degrees in the various dialects. In the Syrian variety, diminutives are predominately derived from nouns and adjectives, and – as in other Arabic dialects – are formed only from singulars. Regardless of gender, the plural of noun diminutives is formed by adding the suffix -*āt*[8], such as in these examples:

> *la''ūmāt* 'small bites' < *la''ūme* 'small mouthful'
> *kallūbāt* 'little dogs' < *kallūb* 'little dog'

4.1. Diminutives resulting from internal vowel and consonant changes

For common nouns composed of triconsonant roots the patterns are:
   - *fˁēl* pattern[9] (*fuˁayl* in CA[10]):
wlēd 'little boy, little son' < *walad* 'boy, son'
šžēra 'little tree' < *šažara* 'a tree'

For nouns with a long vowel:
   - *fˁayyel* (*fuˁayyil* in CA):
šwayye 'a little' < *šī* 'thing'
ktayyeb 'little book' < *ktēb* 'book'
šbayyeb 'little boy' < *šābb* 'boy'

Diminutive patterns are also used with adjectives:
   zġayyer 'very small' < *zġīr* 'small'
   kwayyes 'good' < *kayyes* 'nice'

The adjective *kwayyes* 'good' (*CCayyeC* pattern) is considered a diminutive of the unusual adjective *kayyes* 'nice'. As in other Mashreq dialects, the *CaCCūC* pattern, applied to proper nouns to form nicknames and to common nouns, connotes endearment[11]. In addition to *CaCCūC*, the *CaCCūCe* pattern also occurs:

> Personal names:
> - *faˁˁūl*
> *Ḥammūd* < *'Aḥmad*
> *Žabbūr* < *Žəbrān*
> *Farrūs* < *Fāris*
>
> - *faˁˁūle*
> *ˁAbbūde* < *ˁAbd*
> *Sammūra* < *Sāmir*
>
> Common nouns:
> - *faˁˁūl*
> *kallūb* 'little dog' < *kalb* 'dog'
> *bannūt* 'little girl' < *bənt* 'girl'

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[8] On the diminutives and the plural, see Lahrouchi and Ridouane (2016) and Brustad (2008).
[9] The pattern *fˁēl* is rarely used in this corpus.
[10] CA = Classical Arabic.
[11] See Mion (2012).

- faʿʿūle
laʾʾūme 'little mouthful' *< lə'me* 'mouthful'
šammūse 'little sun' *< samᵊs* 'sun'

For nouns composed of quadriconsonant roots (which occur rarely in this corpus) the pattern is:

- fuʿaylila
Qunayṭira < qanṭara 'bridge, viaduct'

From a morphological point of view, the corpus shows that in some cases different patterns apply to the same noun, sometimes with different connotations of meaning:

šbayyeb, šbēb 'little boy' *< šābb* 'boy'
klēb 'little dog' *< kalb* 'dog'
kallūb 'doggie' *< kalb* 'dog'

4.2. Diminutives resulting from suffixation

- Suffix *-ūš* with proper nouns
In SA, this suffix is used in the following way to denote an affectionate form of personal names:

Kindūš < Kindā
Mayyūš < Mayy
Rannūš < Rāniyā
The addition of the suffix *-ūš* is used when the names end with a long vowel.

- Suffix *-ūn*
This suffix is especially prevalent for proper nouns to denote affection:
Ḫaldūn < Ḫāled
ʿAmrūn < ʿAmr
Aḥmadūn < Aḥmad
Zēdūn < Zayd

Apart from its use in forming diminutives of personal names, the suffix *-ūn* appears only once in the data collected in this study, in the adjective *zġīr* 'small', where it takes the form *zġayyrūn*. In this instance, the diminutive pattern used is *fʿayyel* + suffix *-ūn*. Holes (2016: 127) mentions the diminutive *zġayyrūn* in his study, with it meaning 'trivial, unimportant' in the Eastern Arabian dialects, and he considers it to possibly be an Aramaic influence. Regarding the suffix *-ūn*, Masliyah (1997: 72), when looking at Iraqi Arabic, states that it is originally an Aramaic suffix and gives examples where the suffix is attached to the unmarked form and examples where it is attached to the diminutive form, such as *gṣayyrūn* 'very short', *ṣġayyrūn* 'very little', and *šwayyūna* 'very few'.

In the case of South Tunisian Bedouin Arabic, Ritt-Benmimoun (2018: 187) finds the suffix *-ūn* attached to the diminutive of certain words and comments, «diminution is marked twice, i.e. by internal change and by external suffixation. *ᵓṣġayyrūn*, for instance, is even smaller than *ᵓṣġayyir*». In his study of the Arabic dialect of the Marāzîg, Denizeau (1956) does not mention this suffix while Caubet (1993) mentions *-ūn* in Moroccan Arabic as a diminutive suffix of nouns, adjectives, and personal names, added to the unmarked form.

4.4. Diminutives resulting from reduplication

Diminutives can be formed through reduplication[12]. In the collected corpus there are examples of diminutives formed through the repetition of root letters of the base word, often using the *faʿlūl* pattern.

Examples of proper nouns:
Katkūt < Kātiyā
Salsūle < Sālī

Examples of common nouns:
ʾaṭʾūṭ 'little cat' < *ʾaṭṭ* 'cat'
farfūra 'little mouse' < *faʿra* 'mouse'
zaʿrūr 'little scoundrel' < *azʿar* 'scoundrel'

There are several examples of this phenomenon in the corpus, implying that this is a frequently used manner for forming diminutives in SA, Moreover, as we can also see below, reduplication has a more strictly pragmatic function.

5. Functions of the diminutives

The classifications of Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994) and of Jurafsky (1996) allow us to distinguish between the semantic and pragmatic functions of diminutives. Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 116) divide the function of diminutives into morphosemantic denotation, morphosemantic connotation and morphopragmatics. They identify a non-serious usage as the basic feature of diminutives, meaning that diminutives are primarily used by non-serious partners in interactions, such as children and elderly people. They also suggest that children first acquire a pragmatic understanding of diminutives to express endearment and emotions, rather than their meaning of smallness. Jurafsky (1996) argues that all semantic and pragmatic meanings of diminutives can ultimately be traced back to the core meanings of 'child' and 'small'. Until now, this kind of approach has rarely been applied to diminutives in Arabic dialects[13]. As demonstrated later in this study, the boundaries between pragmatic and semantic functions are often blurred, with only context and intonation determining the meaning of the diminutive.

5.1. Semantic functions

The principal semantic category of diminutives expresses that something or someone is smaller in size than the meaning of the unmarked form. As in other studies (Taine-Cheikh 2018; Ritt-Benmimoun, 2018), the diminutives in the corpus of this study also have other denotative functions, such as approximation or the accentuation of the meaning of certain words.

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[12] For studies on this linguistic phenomenon in Arabic, see Miller (2003), Avram (2011), Procházka (1995), and De Murtas (2019).

[13] This research perspective was mainly followed by Procházka (2019) and Ritt-Benmimoun (2018), but also by Bardaneh (2010) for Jordanian Arabic, Taine Cheikh (1988) for Ḥassānīya Arabic, and al-Rojaie (2012) for Najdi Arabic.

5.1.1. *Smallness*

The main semantic function of diminutives is to express smallness, i.e. the denotative diminution of tangible three-dimensional objects (Procházka 2019: 223). The speaker can employ this denotative function to express not only that something or someone is small in dimension, size, or age, but also in amount or importance.

Here are a selected few of the many examples of this semantic function present in the corpus:

(1) *ᵊštarēt*   *ktayyeb*   *məstaʿmal*
     I bought   small book   used
     'I bought a small used book'.

     ktayyeb 'small book' < *kitāb* 'book'

(2) *žōz-ī*   *byəštəġel*   *bi-maktab*   *zġayyer*
     Husband-my   works   in-office   very small
     'My husband works in a very small office'.

     zġayyer 'very little' < *zġīr* 'little'

(3) *əš-šbayyeb*   *byākol*   *būẓa*
     The small boy   eats   ice cream
     'The small boy eats ice cream'.

     šbayyeb 'small boy' < *šābb* 'boy'

When the diminutive is used with names of domestic animals, it can imply the meaning of minuteness or youth:

(4) *ʿand-ī*   *kallūb*
     To-me   young dog
     'I have a young dog (a pet)'.

     kallūb 'small, young dog' < *kalb* 'dog'

5.1.2. *Approximation*

Diminutive formation is not restricted to countable and concrete nouns but also occurs in the case of words whose denotative meaning does not logically suggest diminution. One example of approximation[14] is that of adjectives used to express colour. In this case, the diminutive which expresses approximation and inexactness in SA is formed by applying the scheme *faʿʿūl* to the adjective of colour. Some examples from the corpus include:

aḥmar 'red' → *ḥammūr* 'reddish'
aḫḍar 'green' → *ḫaḍḍūr* 'greenish'

Maghrebi dialects are notably rich in this semantic aspect, with also various reported instances of diminutives of expressions of time intervals, featuring an inexact and

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[14] On this issue, see a recent work by Brucale and Mocciaro (2023).

approximate value. For example, in Tunisian Arabic (Procházka 2019: 224; Ritt-Benmimoun 2018: 196) we find: *ᵊswēˈa* 'about one hour' (< *sāˈa* 'hour'), *drayyiž* 'about five minutes' (< *draž* 'five minutes'), *ˈwayyim* 'about one year' (< *ˈām* 'year'), and *ᵊnhayyir* 'about one day' (< *nⁱḫār* 'day').

5.1.3. *Intensity*

The diminutives of adjectives that express smallness in size, weight, distance, or amount are particularly suited to expressing a sense of intensification. In this regard the studies by Procházka (2019: 224) and Ritt-Benmimoun (2018: 195) are very interesting and contain examples from Tunis and Southern Tunisia: *xafīf > ᵊxfayyif* 'very light'; *ṣⁱġīr > ᵊṣġayyir* 'very small; very young' *ḏⁱrīf > ᵊḏrayyif* 'very tiny'; *gⁱlīl > ᵊglayyil* 'very few'; *gⁱṣīr > ᵊgṣayyir* 'very short', and *gⁱrīb > ᵊgrayyib* 'very close'. Also according to Denizeau (1956: 66), adjectives that imply an idea of smallness or scarcity in the diminutive form have a superlative meaning[15].

In the data that emerged from this study there is only one case of the adjective *zġīr*, which produces *zġayyer* 'very small'. In SA, this form of diminutive is generally widely used. In addition to *zġayyer*, the corpus also contains *zġayyrūn*, which is composed of the diminutive form and the suffix *-ūn*. Other forms with the meaning of 'very small' are also frequently used: *zaġrūr*, *zaġnūn* and *zaġnūṯ*. These forms are not recorded in Barthélemy (1935), while Denizeau (1960: 221) only reports *zaġrūr*.

5.1.4. *Lexicalization of diminutives*

In SA, we find lexicalized diminutives[16], that are not linked to a specific speech situation. As Ritt-Benmimoun (2018: 212) also stresses, a distinction must be made between productive diminutives whose use depends mainly on contextual and discursive factors, and lexicalized diminutives, which are used by all dialect speakers and not bound to specific speech situations or socio-linguistic factors such as gender and age. The corpus contains the following examples:

> *mayy(a)* o *mʷayy(a)* diminutive lexicalized from *māʾ* 'water'
> *šwayye* from the diminutive in Standard Arabic *šuwayʾ* / *šuwayya* from *šayʾ* 'thing'

Some toponyms are forms of lexicalized diminutives. In the collected data some place names, including those of Syrian villages and districts, feature the diminutive pattern:

> *Suwaydāʾ < sawdāʾ* (f.) 'black'
> *Qunayṭira < qanṭara* 'bridge, viaduct'
> *Dwēlˈa < dalᵖˈ* 'flattering'
> *Ždēdet ˈArṭūz < ždīd* 'new'

5.2. Pragmatic functions

Interrelations between participants are an area explored by pragmatics. Participants may exhibit many characteristics that play an important role in interactions, such as cognitive

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[15] Concerning the Arabic dialect of Marāzîg, Denizeau (1956: 66 f) gives the following examples: *glīl* 'rare' > 'very rare' and *grīb* 'close' > 'very close'.

[16] For the lexicalization of diminutives (but also for *faʿʿūl* pattern), see Procházka (2004).

ability, beliefs, attitudes, motives, emotions, sympathy, and antipathy (Dressler and Merlini-Barbaresi, 1994: 19). In everyday speech, diminutives are more frequently used for pragmatic reasons than for purely denotative diminution.

Badarneh (2010) distinguishes five functions in Jordanian Arabic: 1. reference to children; 2. pejorative function; 3. intensifying function; 4. hedging function; 5. ludic function (in joking or humorous contexts). Ritt-Benmimoun (2018) identifies the following categories of pragmatic functions of diminutives: 1. child-centred speech situations (*diminutivum puerile*); 2. diminutives as a tool to minimize distance and create a positive atmosphere; 3. affective evaluation and enhancement; 4. hedging and mitigation; 5. diminutives as a jocular tool (*diminutivum acerba*); 6. diminutives to express compassion and empathy. In her paper about the diminutives in Ḥassānīya tales, Taine-Cheikh (2018) detects pejorative diminutives and caritative diminutives, adding an interesting function: «Diminutives thus appear to serve to single elements out, both to facilitate their identification and to stress their special role in the narrative» (Taine-Cheikh 2018: 12). Denizeau (1956: 66) summarizes the connotations of diminutives in the dialect of Douz, attributing sentimental-emotional values to the diminutives: anger, repulsion, contempt, and irony but also commiseration, tenderness, familiarity, and admiration.

Building upon the insights provided by the aforementioned studies, the present research identifies six primary pragmatic functions in the corpus. These functions are elaborated upon in the following paragraphs. To identify pragmatic functions it is important to clarify the context in which diminutives are used and to specify the role of the speaker. Therefore the speaker or the situation in which the analysed diminutive is employed is sometimes specified and included together with the examples taken from the corpus. In fact, a single diminutive can have different meanings depending on the context of the exchange or the tone of voice of the speaker.

5.2.1. *Conversations with and about children*

As Procházka (2019: 225) states, «Child-directed speech is ideal for diminutives because they project a sense of endearment and emotional closeness.» Some linguistic studies agree that the very origin of diminutives is to be found in speech directed at children (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994; Jurafsky 1996). Ritt-Benmimoun (2018) stresses that child-centred speech situations include talking to and about children. As diminutives in child-directed speech express both smallness and affection, they can be defined as denotative as well as pragmatic (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994). Diminutives occur in different categories related to young children, including their names, body parts, food, toys, and animals. Here are some examples from conversations with children:

> *nattūfe* 'a little piece' < *nətfe* 'piece'
> *la''ūme* 'a little bite' < *lə'me* 'bite'
> *ṭaztūz* 'little ass' < *ṭīz* 'ass'
> *ḫarḫūra* 'little poop' < *ḫarā* 'poop'
> *'annūbe* 'raisins' < *'inab* 'grape'
> *mənḫūr*[17] < *mənḫār* 'nose'

In the last case the prefixed consonants of the unmarked word are retained in the diminutive.

When talking to children, diminutives of animal names are sometimes used:

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[17] The diminutive *mənḫūr* is attested by only one source.

ġazzūl 'little gazelle' < *ġazāl* 'gazelle'
farfūra 'little mouse' < *fāra* 'mouse'
dabdūb 'little bear', 'teddy' < *dəbb* 'bear'

In SA, many of these diminutives are created through the combination of reduplication and the *faʿūl* scheme (*faʿlūl* pattern), and they take on a pragmatic value.

5.2.2. *Form of address*

Names or kinship are often provided with the pronominal suffix and are frequently preceded by *yā*. Morphologically, the diminutive of personal names is derived from the *faʿʿūl* pattern. Affective diminutive forms of names for children are very common. According to Maalej (2010: 150), «the diminutive of the name is usually associated with endearment». Some examples from the corpus include:

yā Marrūm < *Maryam*
yā ʿAbbūd < *ʿAbd*
Ḥaddūž-ī < *Ḥadīža*
Faṭṭūm-ī < *Fāṭima*

In the following examples, the speakers and the context are specified to understand more clearly the pragmatic use of the diminutive. In the next case, a girl addressing her boyfriend gives the diminutive a playful meaning:

yā zaʿrūr 'Oh little scoundrel' < *azʿar* 'scoundrel'

In the next example a grandmother is talking to her little granddaughter:

(5)   *šlōn*   *arnūbet-ī?*
       Color   little bunny-my
       'How is my little bunny?'.

       arnūbe 'little bunny' < *arnab* 'bunny'

(6)   *hādī*   *l-bənt*   *ḥabbūbet*   *sətt-hā*
       This   the girl   little love   grandmother-her
       'This child is the little love of her grandmother'.

       ḥabbūbe 'little love' < *ḥabīb* 'love'

The use of the diminutive in kinship terms expresses «positively oriented feelings of affection and love […]; the diminutive acts to stress the emotional bond between the participants» (Badarneh 2010: 159). This emotional relationship can sometimes be created through the use of fictive kinship terms that are even employed in instances in which two people do not really know each other. Diminutives of kinship terms are given below:

bnayy < *əbˀn* 'son'
bnayye and also *bannūt-ī* < *bənt* 'daughter'
ḥayye < *əḫˀt* 'sister'
ḥayy < *aḫ* 'brother'
bayy 'daddy' as a pet name from *ab* 'father' (< CA diminutive *ʾubayy*)

mēme 'mum' as a pet name from *əmm* 'mother' (< CA diminutive *'umayma*)

5.2.3. *Expressions of affection and positive emotions*

Diminutives are used with an emotional connotation. According to Ponsonnet (2018), they modify a proposition because they express emotions. The speaker's choice to use the diminutive is often related to the desire to convey a positive perception and attitude towards another person, thing, or situation. Badarneh (2010: 161) states, «The diminutive can be used to refer to non-human entities to communicate the speaker's particularly good disposition or positive psychological state at the moment of speaking». In the corpus, we find examples such as:

(7) *bḥebb*   *bētūt-ī*
     I love   little house-my
     'I love my little house'.

     bētūt 'little house' < *bēt* 'house'

(8) *birūḥ*   *lə-ġərfet-ō*   *z-zġayyūra*
     He goes   to-room-his   the very little
     'He goes to his little room'.

     zġayyūra 'very little' < *zġīr* 'little'

     The adjective *zġayyūra* is a feminine from the pattern *fᵊayyūla.*

(9) *ʾand-ī*   *ʾaṭʾūṭ*   *ḥəlu*   *ktīr*
     To-me   kitten   cheerful   very
     'I have a very cheerful kitten'.

     ʾaṭʾūṭ 'kitten' < *ʾaṭṭ*

(10) *ha-l-bənt*   *ammūra*
     This-the-girl   little princess
     'This girl is cute'.

     ammūra < *amīra* 'princess'

     In this expression the term *ammūra* refers to a girl who has good manners.

5.2.4. *Pragmatic hedges for mitigation*

The diminutive can be employed as a strategy in certain contexts of speech to mitigate or modify an unpleasant, inappropriate, or undesirable context. Jurafsky (1996) includes expressions of modesty and so-called pragmatic hedges for mitigation in this category. In SA the diminutive can also be used out of modesty or to avoid boastful statements. In this case the pragmatic use of the diminutive is intelligible from the speaker's intonation and the context. Some examples include:

(11) *lammā*   *kənt*   *walad*   *kənt*   *šaṭṭūr*   *bə-l-madrase*
     When   I was   kid   I was   good   in-the-school
     'When I was a kid I was good at school'.

šaṭṭūr little good < *šāṭer* 'good'

> Here the diminutive is used as a sign of modesty: the speaker does not want to boast that he did well in school.

(12) *bwētāt-nā*   *ḫārəž*   *əl-medīne*
      Houses-our   outside   the city
      'Our little houses are outside the city'.

bwētāt 'little houses' < *bēt*, *byūt* 'house'

> In this example the speaker wants to underplay the fact he has more than one house, so he resorts to a diminutive for modesty.

Diminutives are sometimes employed to weaken the illocutionary force of an utterance, especially in the case of speech acts such as requests and commands. Since Arabic in general lacks politeness strategies such as the English conditional terms 'may', 'could', and would', the choice to use diminutives to soften commands is particularly important. According to Procházka (2019: 227), «a diminutive emphasizes the modesty of the request and adds a polite touch that makes it more likely that the request will be successful». Badarneh describes how diminutives in Jordanian Arabic can have a double function, «to express affection, i.e. as a positive politeness marker, and in their use to minimize imposition in requests, i.e. as a negative politeness marker» (Badarneh 2010: 166)[18]. As Ritt-Benmimoun (2018) stresses, diminutives create a familiar atmosphere, emphasising the modesty of the request and showing that the requesting person is not impudent.

In the following examples we find diminutives in SA that serve to minimise the extent of the requests:

(13) *məmken*   *tʿīrī-nī*   *naṭṭūfet*   *'ahwe*
      Maybe   you lend-me   piece   coffee
      'Could you lend me some coffee?'.

naṭṭūfe 'a little piece' < *nəṭfe* 'piece'

> The diminutive *naṭṭūfe* is used by a woman towards her neighbour to reduce the request and increase the likelihood of achieving her goal.

(14) *yaḷḷā*   *ʿṭī-nī*   *laʾʾūmet*   *ḥalāwe*
      Come on   give-me   bite   halva
      'Come on, give me a little bite of *halva*'.

laʾʾūme 'a little bite' < *ləʾme* 'bite'

> In this case a girl addresses her brother, using the diminutive *laʾʾūme* to minimise the request, and thus more easily reach her goal of obtaining some sweets.

The lexicalized diminutive *šwayye* is sometimes employed to express politeness and mitigate the sense of a request:

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[18] See also Brown and Levinson (1987).

(15)   *sāʿed-nī*   *šwayye?*
      Help-me   a little
      'Could you help me (a little)?'.

      šwayye 'a little' < *šī* 'thing'

5.2.5. *Derogatory value*

Although not very frequent, diminutives can also express negative feelings such as contempt or distaste. In this case the diminutive denotes the speaker's negative evaluation or opinion of the person being addressed or referred to. This includes the use of diminutive forms of common nouns and adjectives that describe the person or their name, shape, or belongings. Some examples in this corpus include:

(16)   *mažnūn*   *ǝnte*   *aw*   *habbūl?*
      Crazy   you   or   fool
      'Are you crazy or a little fool?'.

      habbūl 'little fool' < *ablah* 'fool'

      In this case a woman is criticising her teenage son.

(17)   *huwwe*   *šabb*   *žaddūb*
      He   boy   little dumb
      'He is a little dumb boy'.

      žaddūb 'little dumb' < a*ždab* 'dumb'

      Here a mother expressing her dissatisfaction with her son's academic performance.

(18)   *šūf*   *hadīk*   *ǝl-bǝnt*   *ǝl-laʿʿūbe*
      Look   that   the girl   the player
      'Look at that player girl'.

      laʿʿūbe 'player' < *lǝʿᵊb* 'game'

      In this instance the diminutive is used with the negative connotation of 'manipulator', lit. 'gamer, player'.

5.2.6. *Expressions of compassion and empathy*

In SA, another important pragmatic function of the diminutive is to express empathy, solidarity, and pity towards the person being addressed or towards a third person. In this case the intonation of the speaker and the context are also decisive for the pragmatic function of the diminutive. The corpus provides examples such as:

(19)   *ǝl-bannūte*   *ḥaṭṭat*   *šwayyet*   *maṣariyyāt*   *ʿala*   *žanᵊb*
      The little girl   has put   some   money   on   aside
      'The little girl has put some money aside'.

      bannūt 'little girl' < *bǝnt* 'girl'

(20) *bištā'*   *bētūt-ō*   *bə-Dimašq*
He misses   little house-his   in-Damascus
'He misses his little house in Damascus'.

    bētūt 'little house' < *bēt* 'house'

In these two statements, the speaker feels empathy and solidarity towards the person they are talking about.

(21) *ha-š-šbayyeb*   *ʿāyeš*   *bə-bēt*   *zaġrūr*
This-the-little boy   are living   in house   very small
'This little boy lives in a very small house'.

    šbayyeb 'little boy' < *šābb* 'boy'

In this case the speaker feels compassion towards the young boy.

(22) *ʿməlᵊt*   *kwayyes*[19]
You did   well
 'You did well'.

    kwayyes 'good' < *kayyes* 'nice'

In this example a man refers to the decision made by his friend.

6. Conclusion

In SA, as in other Arabic dialects, diminutives are used both with their semantic value to denote smallness and as speech strategies through different pragmatic functions. Regarding the semantic and pragmatic analysis it is possible to conclude:
    - semantic and pragmatic connotations are not mutually exclusive;
    - in the corpus, there are diminutives of nouns or adjectives with more than one pragmatic function. As also emphasised by Taine-Cheikh (1988), the context of the dialogue and the relationships between the interlocutors play a crucial role in identifying the pragmatic function of the diminutives. The use of diminutives is a means for the speakers to express their subjectivity. A single diminutive can have several connotations or meanings depending on the framework, on the occurrence of discourse politeness or impoliteness markers in the speech act, and on the intonation (Holes: 2016);
    - the data suggests that diminutives are used more for pragmatic purposes than for semantic ones, with diminutives serving a pragmatic function in 75% of cases. These pragmatic functions reflect the role of diminutives in colloquial discourse, where they are used as a device to mark, establish, or assert social relationships.
Regarding the main pragmatic functions found in the data of the corpus, in SA diminutives are used:
    - in child-centred speech situations;
    - as a tool to create a positive atmosphere (forms of address);
    - as a strategy to hedge and mitigate. Similar to usages found in a number of languages, in SA diminutives mitigate orders, requests, questions and reproaches. When asking a

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[19] In this case the diminutive *kwayyes* has an adverbial function.

favour of someone, diminutives emphasize that the required object (or amount of that object) is negligible and not of great importance. By minimizing a request that might otherwise seem burdensome to the listener, the request is more likely to be answered positively than a request without a diminutive. The use of diminutives as a covering device extends into SA in order to show modesty and avoid self-praise and boasting;
- as a means of eliciting affection or sympathy;
- as a means of expressing a derogatory value. In some cases, they can also be used as a jocular tool, as pointed out by Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 349): «Diminutivization is a sufficient device for creating an ironic effect».
It is also possible to observe that:
- diminutives are common for both personal names and for common nouns and adjectives;
- out of the total of 324 diminutives, we find 151 cases of the *faʿʿūle, faʿʿūl, fʿayyel* pattern; 9 diminutives with the *fʿēl* pattern; 132 diminutives characterised by reduplications; and 32 diminutives formed with suffixes, occurring mostly in the case of personal names;
- the frequency with which single diminutives are used is highly variable. However, it is apparent from the data that the most widely used diminutive, both semantically and pragmatically, is that of the adjective *zġīr* (or 'small'), in conjunction with a noun. It occurs 182 times (more than 50%). In this case, an interesting phenomenon that can be observed is the use of different forms of this diminutive: besides *zġayyer*, we find *zġayyrūn* (formed by the pattern *fʿayyel* + suffix *-ūn*), *zaġrūr*, *zaġnūn*, and *zaġnūṭ*.

The prevalence of diminutives among women is described in many languages and is highlighted in the case of Arabic by authors such as Henkin (2010), Hejaiej (1996), and Holes (2004). These studies consistently indicate that the use of diminutives is primarily a feature of women's speech and is largely independent of geographical or socio-economic factors. Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi (1994: 413) posit a series of interesting reasons for the prevailing use of diminutives amongst women in many languages around the world: women are more contact-oriented (rather than status-oriented or task-oriented); they are more exposed to children's language; and they are more inclined to express emotions than men. However, in accordance with the study of Ritt-Benmimoun (2018), this research shows that diminutives are not a prerogative of female language, partially contradicting some of the studies previously mentioned. In fact, from the collected data it emerges that both men and women use diminutives: 13 of the 18 men and 9 of the 12 women used diminutives. Moreover, there is no significant difference in the frequency of use of diminutives between the sexes.

The use of diminutives occurs mostly in informal contexts (87%), among family and friends and in exchanges with small children. However, they are used much more rarely by strangers in formal contexts (13%). The contexts of familiarity, informality, intimacy, and closeness, implying «a low degree of psychological distance» (Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 216), favour the use of diminutives. The data from the corpus supports this interpretation, with the recorded use of diminutives most often a sign of reduced psychological distance and of the playful character of the exchange.

The present study is a preliminary examination of the broad topic of diminutives and further research on the pragmatic functions of the diminutive in SA remains to be conducted. It would also be interesting to observe if there is a difference in the use of diminutives in different Syrian regional dialects. Another potential field of investigation could be a deeper comparison of the denotative and connotative functions of the diminutive in the various Arabic dialects.

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