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The expression of diminutivity in Central Ring Grassfields Bantu

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The expression of diminutivity in Central Ring Grassfields Bantu¹

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Abstract:

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

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

1 Introduction

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

1 We gratefully acknowledge the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for a Georg Forster Research Fellowship for Experienced Researchers granted to the first author (2019–2021) and which has allowed for greater collaboration and research on this paper.

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

2 Diminutives in Bantu

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

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

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

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

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

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

<i>di-tadi</i>	‘stone’	(class 5)
<i>ma-tadi</i>	‘stones’	(class 6)
<i>ka-di-tadi</i>	‘small stone’	(class 12 + class 5)
<i>tu-ma-tadi</i>	‘small stones’	(class 13 + class 6)

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

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

<i>ku-thavha</i>	‘small mountain’	(class 20)
<i>ku-thavh-ana</i>	‘very small mountain’	(class 20 + -ana)

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

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

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

<i>o-túmbe</i>	‘walking cane’	(class 3)
<i>hì-túmbétumbe</i>	‘small cane’	(class 19)

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

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

3 Diminutives in Central Ring Grassfields Bantu

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

Derived diminutives may undergo semantic specialisations, e.g. Men *ēkyû* (3/6a) ‘bed’ derives the diminutive *fākîā* (19/6a) ‘stool’ and Babanki *kàtí?áí?á* ‘ear’ derives the diminutive *fātí?áí?á* ‘mushroom (sp.)’, as motivated by similarity in form. As seen in (6) diminutive derivation of the concept VEIN from the concept ROOT is recurrently observed in CR, e.g. in Men, Kom and Babanki.

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

(6) CR diminutive derivation of VEIN from ROOT

PR * <i>-yàŋ</i> '	Babanki	Kom	Men	gloss
*5/6	à-yáŋ	ī-yâŋ	ē-yâŋ (5/13)	'root'
*19/6a	fà-yáŋ	fī-yâŋ	fē-yâŋ	'vein, artery'

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

3.1 Shift to gender 19/6a

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

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

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

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

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	<i>wàn</i> (1/2) ‘child’, pl. <i>vúná</i> <i>gè</i> (9/10) ‘voice’, pl. <i>gʰsá</i>	<i>fəwàntâ</i> ‘little child’, pl. <i>məwàntâ</i> <i>fəgètâ</i> ‘tiny voice’, pl. <i>məgètâ</i>
Kom	<i>wáin</i> (1/2) ‘child’, pl. <i>wóindā</i> <i>ŋgvī</i> (9/10) ‘chicken’, pl. <i>ŋgvīsā</i>	<i>fəwáintî</i> ‘little child’, pl. <i>mīwáintî</i> <i>fīŋgvītī</i> ‘small chicken’, pl. <i>mīŋgvītī</i>
Kuk	<i>wāe</i> (1/2) ‘child’, pl. <i>āwāe</i> <i>byī</i> (9/10) ‘goat’, pl. <i>sābyí</i>	<i>fəwāe</i> ‘tiny feeble child’, pl. <i>m̄wāe</i> <i>fābyí</i> ‘smallish goat’, pl. <i>m̄byí</i>
Kung	<i>wāe</i> (1/2) ‘child’, pl. <i>ā(γ)wāe</i> <i>bə°</i> (9/10) ‘goat’, pl. <i>sābā</i>	<i>fəwāe</i> ‘tiny feeble child’, pl. <i>m̄wāe</i> <i>fābəlā</i> ‘small feeble goat’, pl. <i>m̄bəlā</i>
Men	<i>váin</i> (1/2) ‘child’, pl. <i>āγín</i> <i>tsò</i> (9/10) ‘river’, pl. <i>sətsò</i>	<i>fəγín̄tâ</i> ‘little child’, pl. <i>m̄γín̄tâ</i> <i>fātsòtâ</i> ‘brook, small river’, pl. <i>m̄tsòtâ</i>
Oku	<i>wíl</i> (1/2) ‘person’, pl. <i>γīlī</i> <i>ŋgváá</i> (9/10) ‘chicken’, pl. <i>ŋgváasē</i>	<i>fəwíl</i> ‘small person’, pl. <i>məwíl</i> <i>fēŋgváátē</i> ‘small chicken’, pl. <i>mēŋgváátē</i>

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

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	<i>ətó</i> (5/13) ‘hut’, pl. <i>tətó</i> <i>kəwú</i> (7/6) ‘foot’, pl. <i>əwú</i>	<i>fətótâ</i> ‘tiny hut’, pl. <i>mətótâ</i> <i>fəwútâ</i> ‘small foot’, pl. <i>məwútâ</i>

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

Kom	<i>ātú</i> (7/8) ‘head’, pl. <i>ītú</i> <i>isáj</i> (5/6) ‘corn’, pl. <i>āsáj</i>	<i>fitúni</i> ‘small head’, pl. <i>mītúni</i> <i>fisájŋl̩</i> ‘small corn’, pl. <i>mīsájŋl̩</i>
Kuk	<i>isáb</i> (5/6) ‘maize cob’, pl. <i>āsáb</i> <i>kākóí</i> (7/8) ‘chair’, pl. <i>ūkóí</i>	<i>fāsáb(là)</i> ‘smallish maize cob’, pl. <i>māsáblà</i> <i>fākóí</i> ‘small chair’, pl. <i>mókóí</i>
Kung	<i>kābē</i> (7/4) ‘thigh’, pl. <i>ibē</i> <i>kāfúo</i> (7/8) ‘thing’, pl. <i>ūfúo</i>	<i>fābē(là)</i> ‘tiny feeble thigh’, pl. <i>mābē(là)</i> <i>fāfúo</i> ‘tiny thing’, pl. <i>māfúo</i>
Men	<i>ētíí</i> (5/6~13) ‘stone’, pl. <i>ātíí~tētíí</i> <i>āfiá</i> (7/8) ‘thing’, pl. <i>ēfiá</i>	<i>fāfíllā</i> ‘small stone’, pl. <i>māfíllā</i> <i>fāfiá</i> ‘small thing’, pl. <i>māfiá</i>
Oku	<i>ābkún</i> (3/6a) ‘bed’, pl. <i>āmkún</i> <i>ēfáj</i> (5/6) ‘corn’, pl. <i>ēyfáj</i>	<i>fēkúntè</i> ‘small bed’, pl. <i>mēkúntè</i> <i>fēfájntè</i> ‘small corn’, pl. <i>mēfájntè</i>

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

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

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

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

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

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	<i>bwótè</i> (1/2) ‘bottle’, pl. <i>və̀bwótè</i> <i>bùfí</i> (1/2) ‘cat’, pl. <i>və̀bùfí</i> <i>tʃɔ̀s</i> (1/2) ‘church’, pl. <i>və̀tʃɔ̀s</i>	<i>fə̀bwótè</i> ‘small bottle’, pl. <i>mə̀bwótè</i> <i>fə̀bùfí</i> ‘small cat’, pl. <i>mə̀bùfí</i> <i>fə̀tʃɔ̀tè</i> ‘tiny church’, pl. <i>mə̀tʃɔ̀tè</i>
Kom	<i>lám̄bās</i> (9/10) ‘orange’, pl. <i>lám̄bāysī</i> <i>bés</i> (9/10) ‘cat’, pl. <i>béysī</i> <i>tʃɔ̀s</i> (9/10) ‘church’, pl. <i>tʃɔ̀ysī</i>	<i>fílám̄bās</i> ‘small orange’, pl. <i>mílám̄bās</i> <i>fíbés</i> ‘small cats’, pl. <i>mībés</i> <i>fítʃɔ̀s</i> ‘tiny church’, pl. <i>mítʃɔ̀s</i>
Kuk	<i>lám̄âs</i> (9/10) ‘orange’, pl. <i>sə̀lám̄âs</i> <i>bùsí</i> (9/10) ‘cat’, pl. <i>sə̀bùsí</i>	<i>fə̀lám̄âs</i> ‘small orange’, pl. <i>m̄lám̄âs</i> <i>fə̀bùsí</i> ‘small cats’, pl. <i>m̄bùsí</i>
Kung	<i>lám̄âs</i> (9/10) ‘orange’, pl. <i>sə̀lám̄âs</i> <i>bùsí</i> (9/10) ‘cat’, pl. <i>sə̀bùsí</i> <i>tsɔ̀s</i> (9/10) ‘church’, pl. <i>sə̀tsɔ̀s</i>	<i>fə̀lám̄âs</i> ‘small orange’, pl. <i>m̄lám̄âs</i> <i>fə̀bùsí</i> ‘small cat’, pl. <i>m̄bùsí</i> <i>fə̀tsɔ̀s</i> ‘tiny church’, pl. <i>m̄tsɔ̀s</i>
Oku	<i>bwótè</i> (1/10) ‘bottle’, pl. <i>bwótèsè</i> <i>bùsé</i> (1/10) ‘cat’, pl. <i>bùsésé</i> <i>tsɔ̀s</i> (1/10) ‘church’, pl. <i>tsɔ̀sé</i>	<i>fə̀bwótè</i> ‘small bottle’, pl. <i>mə̀bwótè</i> <i>fə̀bùsé</i> ‘small cats’, pl. <i>mə̀bùsé</i> <i>fə̀tsɔ̀stè</i> ‘small church’, pl. <i>mə̀tsɔ̀stè</i>

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

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

Babanki	Kom	Kuk	Kung	Men	Oku	gloss
<i>fə̀nín</i>	<i>fɪ̀núin</i>	<i>fə̀nín</i>	<i>fə̀nīm</i>	<i>fənín</i>	<i>fənán</i>	‘bird’
<i>fə̀kà?</i>	<i>fíkà?</i>	<i>fə̀kà?</i>	<i>fə̀kà?</i>	<i>fəkà?</i>	<i>fəkà?</i>	‘tree’
<i>fə̀nì</i>	<i>fɪ̀nù</i>	<i>fə̀nì</i>	<i>fə̀nìə</i>	<i>fə̀nì</i>	<i>fə̀fiak</i>	‘knife’
<i>fə̀kù</i>	<i>fíkù</i>	<i>fə̀kùə</i>	<i>fə̀kô</i>	<i>fəkù</i>	<i>fəkóo</i>	‘belt’

Babanki	Kom	Kuk	Kung	Men	Oku	gloss
<i>f̄ambv́án̄</i>	<i>f̄iŋgẃán̄</i>	<i>f̄āŋgb́án̄</i>	<i>f̄āmbǵán̄</i>	<i>f̄ēŋgẃán̄</i>	<i>f̄ēŋgẃán̄</i>	‘salt’
<i>f̄əl̄é?</i>	<i>f̄il̄é?</i>	<i>[k̄āŋí?]</i>	<i>[k̄āŋí?]</i>	<i>f̄ēndá?</i>	<i>f̄ēl̄ik</i>	‘smoke’
<i>f̄əl̄àm</i>	<i>f̄il̄àm</i>	?	<i>f̄āw̄ô</i>	<i>f̄èl̄àm</i>	<i>f̄èl̄àm</i>	‘net’

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

3.2 Suffixation

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

(11) Overview of CR suffixation

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

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

(12) CR diminutive derivation in 19/6a and suffixation⁸

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	<i>wàn</i> (1/2) ‘child’, pl. <i>vúná</i> <i>àfwín</i> (5/6) ‘leg’, pl. <i>àfwín</i> <i>kàfí</i> (7/8) ‘piece’, pl. <i>àfí</i>	<i>fāwàntâ</i> ‘little child’, pl. <i>màwàntâ</i> <i>fāfwíntâ</i> ‘small leg’, pl. <i>màfwíntâ</i> <i>fāfílâ~fāfínâ</i> ‘tiny piece’, pl. <i>màfílâ~màfínâ</i>
Kom	<i>wáin</i> (1/2) ‘child’, pl. <i>wóindā</i> <i>ísáj</i> (5/6) ‘corn’, pl. <i>āsáj</i> <i>átú</i> (7/8) ‘head’, pl. <i>ātú</i>	<i>fēwáin(tì)</i> ‘little child’, pl. <i>mēwáin(tì)</i> <i>fīsáj(lê)</i> ‘small corn’, pl. <i>mīsáj(lê)</i> <i>fītú(nì)</i> ‘small head’, pl. <i>mītú(nì)</i>
Kung	<i>iyāŋ</i> (5/10) ‘root’, pl. <i>sāyāŋ</i> <i>kābê</i> (7/4) ‘thigh’, pl. <i>ibê</i> <i>sāf</i> (9/10) ‘maize’, pl. <i>sāsāf</i>	<i>fāyāŋâ</i> ‘small root’, pl. <i>māyāŋâ</i> <i>fābê(là)</i> ‘tiny feeble thigh’, pl. <i>m̄bêlâ</i> <i>fāsāblâ</i> ‘tiny feeble maize plant’, pl. <i>m̄sāblâ</i>

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

⁸ Bracketing of the suffix indicates its optional presence.

Kuk	<i>zùyù</i> (9/10) ‘snake’, pl. <i>sázùyù</i>	<i>fǎzùglà</i> ‘smallish snake’, pl. <i>m̄zùglà</i>
	<i>jàm</i> (9/10) ‘animal’, pl. <i>sǎjám</i>	<i>fǎjàmà</i> ‘small animal’, pl. <i>m̄jàmà</i>
	<i>isáǎ</i> (5/6) ‘maize cob’, pl. <i>ásáǎ</i>	<i>fǎsáǎ(là)</i> ‘smallish maize cob’, pl. <i>m̄sáǎlè</i>
Men	<i>áfíá</i> (7/8) ‘thing’, pl. <i>éfíá</i>	<i>fǎfíá</i> ‘little thing’, pl. <i>m̄fíá</i>
	<i>váin</i> (1/2) ‘child’, pl. <i>áyóin</i>	<i>fǎyóintà</i> ‘little child’, pl. <i>m̄yóintà</i>
	<i>tsám</i> (9/10) ‘dream’, pl. <i>sétám</i>	<i>fǎtsámtà</i> ‘small dream’, pl. <i>m̄tsámtà</i>
Oku	<i>ǎbkún</i> (3/6a) ‘bed’, pl. <i>ámkún</i>	<i>fǎkún(tè)</i> ‘small bed’, pl. <i>m̄kún(tè)</i>
	<i>kétíé</i> (7/8) ‘chair’, pl. <i>ǎbtíé</i>	<i>fǎtíé(lé)</i> ‘small chair’, pl. <i>m̄tíé(lé)</i>
	<i>ntòn</i> (9/10) ‘pot’, pl. <i>ntònsè</i>	<i>fǎntòn(nè)</i> ‘small pot’, pl. <i>m̄ntòn(nè)</i>

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

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

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

The surface tones of some nouns are also realized differently as compared to their derivational base, e.g. *fāyê* ‘tiny feeble person’ (< *yù* (1/2) ‘person’, pl. *āyī(ə)*). Some nouns, e.g. *īyāŋ* (5/10) ‘root’ derive two distinct forms in gender 19/6a in which the presence vs. absence of the suffix produces a difference in meaning, i.e. *fāyāŋ-â* ‘small root’ (< **fāyāŋ-lâ*) vs. *fāyāŋ* ‘edible root’.

In Men there are instances where it looks as if the diminutive is derived exclusively by suffixation. This is the case for a few nouns which are primarily affiliated to 19/6a, e.g. *fēnīŋ-tâ* ‘small bird’ (< *fēnīŋ* ‘bird’), *fēsīy-lâ* ~ *fēsīy-tâ* ‘small pepper’ (< *fāsīs* ‘pepper’), *fāŋī-tâ* ‘small knife’ (< *fāŋī* ‘knife’). Derived diminutives in this language may retain only tonal traces of prior suffixation, e.g. the final L component in *fēfīâ* ‘small thing’ (< *āfīâ* (7/8) ‘thing’).

As mentioned above, suffixation in the course of diminutive derivation triggers morphophonological effects in some root terminal consonants, though it is difficult to generalize on these, since in some cases suffixation seems to block lenition which otherwise affects terminal consonants in non-suffixed forms, e.g. Kung *fēsāb-lâ* ‘small maize plant’ (< *sāf* (9/10) ‘maize cob’), Kuk *fāzūg-lâ* ‘smallish snake’ (< *zūyù* (9/10) ‘snake’), while in other cases it is just the other way round, i.e. suffixation causing lenition, e.g. Men *fēsīy-lâ* ~ *fēsīy-tâ* ‘small pepper’ (< *fāsīs* (19/6a) ‘pepper’), Babanki *fāsāy-lâ* ~ *fāsāy-tâ* ‘small buttock’ (< *āsās* (5/6) ‘buttock’).

The tone in the suffix seems to be lexically determined in that some diminutives apply a low tone and others a high tone e.g. Oku *fē-tū-lè* ‘small head’ (< *kē-tū* (7/8) ‘head’) vs. *fē-té-lé* ‘small chair’ (< *kē-té* (7/8) ‘chair’).⁹ Falling contour tones might be a result of two tones merging to one in a single tone bearing unit, either a high root tone spreading on a low suffix tone, e.g. Kom *fūŋgví-tî* ‘small chicken’ (< *ŋgví* (9/10) ‘chicken’) and Men *fāŋī-tâ* ‘small knife’ (< *fāŋī* (19/6a) ‘knife’), or a low suffix tone docking to a high root tone, e.g. Kung *fāfū* ‘tiny thing’ (< *kāfū* (7/8) ‘thing’). In Babanki, however, the tendency is for H tone roots to take a L tone suffix, e.g. *fâtó-tâ* ‘small

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

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

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

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

(13) Babanki verbal diminutive suffixes -tâ and -kâ

Base	diminutive in -tâ	Base	diminutive in -kâ
<i>nú</i> 'drink'	<i>nútâ</i> 'drink a bit'	<i>pfí</i> 'die'	<i>pfíkâ</i> 'die bit by bit'
<i>wyé</i> 'pour'	<i>wyé-tâ</i> 'pour a little'	<i>sá?</i> 'scatter'	<i>sá?kâ</i> 'scatter in bits'
<i>ló</i> 'lick'	<i>lótâ</i> 'lick a bit'	<i>ká?</i> 'turn'	<i>ká?kâ</i> 'turn a bit'
<i>dì</i> 'cry'	<i>dítâ</i> 'cry a little'	<i>bàs</i> 'tear'	<i>bây-kâ</i> 'tear into pieces'
<i>tʃò</i> 'pass'	<i>tʃò-tâ</i> 'pass a little'	<i>fwàs</i> 'fart'	<i>fwây-kâ</i> 'fart little by little'
<i>bvù</i> 'grind'	<i>bvù-tâ</i> 'grind a little'	<i>fwè</i> 'rot'	<i>fwè-kâ</i> 'rot bit by bit'

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

(14) Kom verbal diminutive suffixes *-tì* and *-lì*

Base	diminutive in <i>-tì</i>	Base	diminutive in <i>-lì</i>
<i>kàf</i> ‘scratch’	<i>kàbtì</i> ‘scratch a bit’	<i>tàs</i> ‘push down’	<i>tàylì</i> ‘push down a bit’
<i>séf</i> ‘carry’	<i>sébtì</i> ‘carry a bit’	<i>tás</i> ‘sharpen’	<i>táyìlì</i> ‘sharpen a bit’
<i>nyíŋ</i> ‘run’	<i>nyítì</i> ‘run a bit’	<i>tjé?</i> ‘rob’	<i>tjé?lì</i> ‘rob a bit’
<i>káj</i> ‘fry’	<i>kájtì</i> ‘fry a bit’	<i>káj</i> ‘fry’	<i>kájlì</i> ‘fry a bit’

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

(15) Men verbal diminutive suffix *-te*

Base	diminutive
<i>kó?</i> ‘climb, go up’	<i>kó?té</i> ‘climb up a little’
<i>m[á]</i> ‘drink’	<i>máté</i> ‘take sips’
<i>ŋgó?</i> ‘give one knock’	<i>ŋgó?té</i> ‘knock slightly several times’
<i>ndzì</i> ‘take’	<i>ndzítè</i> ‘take a little, take bit by bit’
<i>tím</i> ‘shoot; dig’	<i>tímté</i> ‘dig in a disorderly fashion (flinging up earth here and there)’

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

In Kung, the suffixes *-nə* and *-lə* are marginally attested in attenuative function: *mwəe-nə* ‘twinkle’ (< *mwəe* ‘shine’), *ɲò?-lə* ‘roast a bit’ (< *ɲò?* ‘roast’), *zú?-lə* ‘make warm’ (< *zú?* ‘heat’). In Kuk, the widespread pluractional suffix *-kə* is marginally attested in *lím-kə* ‘wait for a long time’ (< *límə* ‘wait for’).

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

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

Kuk presents another strand of derivational morphology where the suffix *-lə* which occasionally accompanies diminutive derivation is also involved in other types of denominal noun derivation, e.g. in deriving *iyá?lə* (5/10) ‘wing’ (pl. *sāyá?lə*) from *iyá?à* (5/10) ‘upper arm’ (pl. *sāyá?à*).

4 Associative construction for diminutive formation

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

(16) CR diminutive derivation using associative constructions

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	<i>àyám</i> (5/13) ‘mat’, pl. <i>tàyám</i>	<i>fāwán</i> ~ <i>fāndé?</i> <i>fá yám</i> ‘small mat’
	<i>kàŋù</i> (7/8) ‘thing’, pl. <i>àŋù</i>	<i>fāwán</i> ~ <i>fāndé?</i> <i>fá kàŋù</i> ‘small thing’
	<i>fū</i> (9/10) ‘fish’, pl. <i>fú’sá</i>	<i>fāwán</i> ~ <i>fāndé?</i> <i>fá fū</i> ‘tiny fish’

Kom	<i>ŋgvī</i> (9/10) ‘chicken’, pl. <i>ŋgvīsā</i> <i>īsáj</i> (5/6) ‘corn’, pl. <i>āsáj</i> <i>ātú</i> (7/8) ‘head’, pl. <i>ūtú</i>	<i>fīfūin fī ŋgvī</i> ‘tiny chicken’ <i>fīfūin fī sáj</i> ‘small corn’ <i>fīfūin fā tū</i> ‘small head’
Kung	<i>mbvā</i> (9/10) ‘chicken’, pl. <i>sāmbvā</i> <i>tsàʔ</i> (9/10) ‘trap’, pl. <i>sàtsàʔ</i> <i>kāpfāndúŋ</i> (7/8) ‘pig’ pl. <i>ūpfāndúŋ</i>	<i>wāe fā mbvā fā</i> ‘small feeble chicken’ <i>wāe fā tsàʔ fā</i> ‘small trap’ <i>wāe fā fāpfāndúŋ fā</i> ‘small feeble pig’
Oku	<i>ābkún</i> (3/6a) ‘bed’, pl. <i>āmkún</i> <i>kētíe</i> (7/8) ‘chair’, pl. <i>ābtíe</i> <i>ntòn</i> (9/10) ‘pot’, pl. <i>ntònsè</i>	<i>fēwán é ābkún</i> ‘small bed’ <i>fēwán é kētíe</i> ‘small chair’ <i>fēwán é ntòn</i> ‘small pot’

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

(17) CR Formula of associative constructions

$$[NP_x - R]_{N_1} AM_{N_1} [NP_x - R]_{N_2} ENCL_{N_1}$$

(18) Kung associative construction

<i>wāe</i>	<i>fā</i>	<i>mbvā</i>	<i>fā</i>
19.little.child	19	9.chicken	19
‘small feeble chicken’			

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

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

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

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

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

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Baban-ki	<i>bwótà</i> (1/2) ‘bottle’, pl. <i>vàbwótà</i> <i>bùfí</i> (1/2) ‘cat’, pl. <i>vàbùfí</i>	<i>fəwán ~ fəndé? fə bwótà</i> ‘small bottle’ <i>fəwán ~ fəndé? fə bùfí</i> ‘small cat’
Kom	<i>bés</i> (9/10) ‘cat’, pl. <i>béysí</i> <i>tʃɔs</i> (9/10) ‘church’, pl. <i>tʃɔysí</i>	<i>fífuín fí bás</i> ‘small cat’ <i>fífuín fí tʃɔs</i> ‘tiny church’
Kung	<i>lámâs</i> (9/10) ‘orange’, pl. <i>sàlámâs</i> <i>bùsí</i> (9/10) ‘cat’, pl. <i>sàbùsí</i>	<i>wāe fə lámâs fə</i> ‘small orange’ <i>wāe fə bùsí fə</i> ‘small cat’
Oku	<i>tsʊs</i> (1/10) ‘bed’, pl. <i>tsʊsé</i> <i>bùsé</i> (1/10) ‘cat’, pl. <i>bùsésé</i>	<i>fəwán é tsʊs</i> ‘tiny church’ <i>fəwán é bùsé</i> ‘small cat’

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

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

	Base	diminutive 19/6a
Babanki	<i>f̄k̄k̄?</i> (19/6a) ‘tree’, pl. <i>ŋk̄k̄?</i>	<i>f̄wán</i> ~ <i>f̄ndé?</i> <i>f̄ f̄k̄k̄?</i> ‘small tree’
	<i>f̄ŋún</i> (19/6a) ‘bird’, pl. <i>m̄ŋún</i>	<i>f̄wán</i> ~ <i>f̄ndé?</i> <i>f̄ f̄ŋún</i> ‘small bird’
	<i>f̄sés</i> (19/6a) ‘pepper’, pl. <i>m̄sés</i>	<i>f̄wán</i> ~ <i>f̄ndé?</i> <i>f̄ f̄sés</i> ‘small pepper’
Kom	<i>f̄ŋúin</i> (19/6a) ‘bird’, pl. <i>m̄ŋúin</i>	<i>f̄f̄úin</i> <i>f̄i</i> <i>f̄ŋúin</i> ‘small bird’
	<i>f̄k̄á?</i> (19/6a) ‘tree’, pl. <i>m̄k̄á?</i>	<i>f̄f̄úin</i> <i>f̄i</i> <i>f̄k̄á?</i> ‘small tree’
	<i>f̄ŋù</i> (19/6a) ‘knife’, pl. <i>m̄ŋù</i>	<i>f̄f̄úin</i> <i>f̄i</i> <i>f̄ŋù</i> ‘small knife’
Kung	<i>f̄ŋúm</i> (19/6a) ‘bird’, pl. <i>m̄ŋúm</i>	<i>wāe</i> <i>f̄</i> <i>ŋúm</i> <i>f̄</i> ‘small bird’
	<i>f̄k̄á?</i> (19/6a) ‘tree’, pl. <i>m̄k̄á?</i>	<i>wāe</i> <i>f̄</i> <i>k̄á?</i> <i>f̄</i> ‘small tree’
	<i>f̄ŋítá</i> (19/6a) ‘knife’, pl. <i>m̄ŋítá</i>	<i>wāe</i> <i>f̄</i> <i>ŋítá</i> <i>f̄</i> ‘small knife’

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

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

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

Base	diminutive
<i>kàntsì</i> (7/8) ‘cricket’	<i>fāwán~ fāndé? fā kàntsì</i> ‘small cricket’ * <i>fāntsì</i>
<i>kàntfí?</i> (7/8) ‘lid’	<i>fāwán~ fāndé? fā kántfí?</i> ‘small lid’ * <i>fāntfí?</i>
<i>kàfí</i> (7/8) ‘place’	<i>fāwán~ fāndé? fā káfí</i> ‘small place’ * <i>fāfí</i>
<i>kàtsó?</i> (7/8) ‘mud’	<i>fāndé?~ fāndé? fā kátsó?</i> ‘small mud’ * <i>fātsó?</i>
<i>àkwén</i> (5/6) ‘bean’	<i>fāwán~ fāndé? fā kwén</i> ‘small bean’ * <i>fākwén</i>
<i>kàtí?áí?á</i> (7/8) ‘ear’	<i>fāwán~ fāndé? fā ká’tí?áí?á</i> ‘small ear’ * <i>fā’tí?áí?á</i>

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

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

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

Base	Augmentative
<i>bú</i> (9/10) ‘dog’, pl. <i>bú’sá</i>	<i>bú āyó?ó</i> ‘big dog’, pl. <i>bú’sá yó?ká sá</i>
<i>kàkí</i> (7/8) ‘chair’, pl. <i>àkí</i>	<i>kàkí kāyó?ó ká</i> ‘big chair’, pl. <i>àkí āyó?ká vá</i>
<i>àlém</i> (5/6) ‘yam’, pl. <i>àlém</i>	<i>àlém āyó?ó yá</i> ‘big yam’, pl. <i>àlém āyó?ká yá</i>

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

(23) Babanki augmentative periphrasis with *kàmpfí* ‘huge thing’

Base	Augmentative
àyàm (5/13) ‘mat’, pl. tàyàm	kàmpfí ká yàm ‘big mat’
fî (9/10) ‘fish’, pl. fî́sá	kàmpfí ká fî ‘big fish’

5 Conclusion

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

Abbreviations

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

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