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Emotional valuation in Dalabon diminutives

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1 Introduction¹

1.1 Context

Dalabon is a polysynthetic language of Northern Australia, with only half a dozen remaining speakers. It belongs to the non-Pama-Nyungan Gunwinyguan family. There is as yet no comprehensive reference grammar, but information on various aspects of the language can be found in Evans *et al.* (2001), Evans/Merlan (2004), Evans *et al.* (2003), Ross (2011), Ponsonnet (in prep.) (see Cutfield's (2011, 22) literature review). There are no augmentative devices in Dalabon. Diminutives, on the other hand, are frequent in emotional speech, but have not previously been reported for the language. One reason is that they do not occur with equal frequency in all contexts, and it was the deployment of methods designed to elicit emotion-laden speech in Dalabon as part of the first author's doctoral thesis (Ponsonnet 2013) which brought a much higher proportion of diminutive use – specifically the showing of three emotionally charged films about Aboriginal stories (*Ten Canoes*, *Samson and Delilah*, and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*), for which commentary was sought.

1.2 Diminutive =wurd

=*Wurd* is an enclitic derived from the noun *wurd* 'woman's child', whose reduplicated form *wurdurd*² means 'child'. This matches the etymology postulated by Jurafsky (1996) for diminutives in various languages. Like many diminutives world-wide, Dalabon =*wurd* has three uses: denoting small objects, adding emotional connotations, and pragmatic functions, particularly interactional softening (which we won't present here for reasons of space). Section 2 summarizes the respective distribution of these values of the Dalabon diminutives. Section 3 discusses scalar senses, and Section 4 emotional meanings.

2 *Distributional profile*

=*Wurd* can attach to most word-classes. Nouns are the most common host, especially nouns referring to persons, and less frequently animals or inanimates. =*Wurd* is also not uncommon on verbs. It occurs, much more rarely, on adjectives, adverbs, numerals and demonstratives. We leave these marginal cases aside to focus on the diminutives with nouns and verbs.

The meanings and functions of =*wurd* distribute as follows:

- On nouns and adjectives: low on scale of
 - age ('young') on nouns referring to animates
 - size ('small') on count nouns referring to inanimates, adjectives, or verbs
 - quantity ('a small amount') on mass nouns
 - intensity/completeness (event), with verbs and (at least some) adjectives
- On all word classes where diminutives are attested with some frequency: emotional meanings
 - Compassion and positive empathy, approval
 - Intimacy and daily routines
- On nouns referring to inanimates and on verbs, it may have a softening functions, when reporting a negative event, or mitigating an apology or criticism.

3 *Denotational senses*

Denotational uses of =*wurd* are frequent with nouns, and specify that the denotatum is low on a certain scale, whether of age, size or intensity. It is most commonly encliticized to nouns referring to animates, specifically those referring to persons. These may be kin or subsection terms,³ occasionally proper names or other descriptive nouns, but the most frequent configuration is for =*wurd* to appear on 'human categories'. By this we mean nouns denoting classes of persons based on criteria of age and/or gender, e.g. *biyi* 'man/male person', *kirdikird* 'woman/female person', *yawurrinj* 'young man', *wurdurd* 'child'.

3.1 *Categories not defined by age*

When a human category is defined by criteria other than age, the diminutive specifies that the referent is a member of this category at the lower range of age, i.e. as young considering the age range of the category. This applies to categories defined by gender (*biyi* 'male'; *kirdikird* 'female (1)'), but also to 'subsections', which denote classes of persons based on a socio-centric kinship grid. Animals can pattern like non-age-based human categories: =*wurd* applies to young animals.

[When women get pregnant:]

- (1) *Da-h-yidjnja-n* *wurdurd*, *ka-h-yin*. [...]
 2sg>3-R-have-PRS child 3sg-R-say:PRS

Kardu *kirdikird=wurd*, *kardu* *o* *biyi=wurd*.
 maybe woman=DIM maybe or man=DIM

“You have a child”, she says. “Maybe a baby girl or maybe a baby boy.”

=*Wurd* never refers to adults of small size, only to young individuals. Diminutives are unattested with nouns denoting older persons, such as *nakohbanj* ‘old man’. Diminutives on human terms thus operate on an age scale. Note that in both examples above the speaker could have achieved reference to the same individuals without using a diminutive – the diminutive just makes sentences more precise.

3.2 Categories defined by age

=*Wurd* can apply to life-stage nouns, i.e. human categories defined by age, provided that these categories themselves denote a relatively young life-phase, e.g. *yawurrinj* ‘young man’ (2), *yawk* ‘young woman’, or *wurdurd* ‘child’.

20120710b_003_MT 064 [TC]

- (2) *Kanh kirdikird-ngong* *bula-h-dja-na-ng*
 DEM woman-many 3pl>3-R-FOC-see-PFV
- kanunh* *yawurrinj=wurd* *ka-ye-yu* *nahda*.
 DEM young.man=DIM 3sg-SUB-lie:PRS there

‘The women have seen the young man who’s over there.’

As with diminutives cross-linguistically, this use is frequent with *wurdurd* ‘child’. *Wurdurd=wurd* is a common alternative to *wurdurd*, used to refer to children of any age up to adolescence.

With age-based human categories the diminutive does not restrict the denotation to a younger member of the category: in (2) it does not mean ‘young for a young man’. Rather, it confirms that the denotatum is young, on an absolute scale. That the denotational sense ‘young’ is still present is shown by the incompatibility of =*wurd* with nouns denoting older persons, like *nakohbanj* ‘old man’. Nonetheless, with age-defined categories the denotational input of diminutives is redundant, since youth is already part of the meaning of the host noun.

3.3 Nouns referring to inanimates

When =*wurd* is encliticized to nouns referring to inanimates, it indicates that the referent is low on a scale of size (count nouns, 3), or quantity (mass nouns, 4) – not age. Terms for animals can also attract this sense. However, with inanimate nouns the scalar sense is not obligatory: =*wurd* can also be found on nouns denoting large things in positive emotional contexts, such as in (5).

20111208_001_MT 006 [ContEI]

- (3) *Bad-dulum-no=wurd* *kanidjah* *ka-h-di*.
stone-hill-FILL=DIM there 3sg-R-stand/be:PRS

‘There is a small stone hill there.’

20110530_001_MT 26 [Narr]

[The speaker wishes to justify not giving money to a relative who had made a request.]

- (4) *Nunh kanh bad=wurd* *bula-h-ngabbu-n* *ngey-karn* *nga-h-dja-koh-nam-urru-n*.
DEM DEM stone=DIM 3pl>1-R-give-PRS 1sg-emph 1sg-R-FOC-eyes/gaze-put-REFL-PRS

‘Then they give me just a bit of money and I manage by myself.’

20120705b_006_MT 54 [RPF]

[Three children being chased hide together under a large blanket.]

- (5) *Bulu ka-h-barrkb-ong* *kardu blankid=wurd*.
3pl 3sg>3-R-cover-PFV maybe blanket=DIM

‘It’s like covering them, the good old blanket.’

3.4 Verbs

=*Wurd* can also encliticize to verbs, after the TAM inflection.⁵ The only other clitics that occur in this position are possessive/oblique pronouns, which typically modify incorporated nouns.⁶ Most occurrences of =*wurd* on verbs may be interpreted under one of the following scalar senses:

- One of the arguments is young⁷ (6).
- The event is incomplete (do x incompletely, 7), or less intense.

20120705b_004_MT 025 [RPF]

- (6) *Woywoy* *bulu ka-h-naHna-n=wurd* *bulu ka-h-djukko-djukko-n*.
interj.compassion 3pl 3sg>3-R-see:RDP-PRS=DIM 3pl 3sg>3-R-ITER.R-wash-PRS

‘Oh, she looks after [the children], she gives them a shower.’

20110530_004_MT 57 [ConvEI]

[A police car looped towards us but turned away before reaching us.]

- (7) *Kardu ngorr* *bula-h-kurth-kurhka=wurd*,
maybe 1pl.incl 3pl>1-R-INCEP.R-visit:PRS=DIM

kardu bala-h-men-yin djehneng kardu ngungurru-kolhngu-n wah.
maybe 3pl-R-ideas-say:PRS looks.like maybe 1pl.incl>3:APPR-drink-PRS liquid

‘It seems that [the police patrol] is coming to pay us a bit of a visit, maybe they believe that we might be drinking alcohol.’

However, since other readings are available when =*wurd* attaches to verbs (see below), it would be possible to analyse (7) and (8) in a way that obviates the scalar readings, e.g. by interpreting the =*wurd* in (7) as expressing approval for the subject’s care for the children (see 4.2). Note, though, that such ambiguities are precisely what one would expect in contexts furnishing a semantic bridge for the transition from diminutive to compassion, namely talking lovingly about activities involving children. In fact, there are no clear cases of verb+DIM attracting scalar interpretations outside emotional contexts. By contrast, as will be show in 4.2, some occurrences fall under none of the senses above and must be explained solely with respect to an emotional context.

4 Emotional senses

The above account suggests that denotational contributions of =*wurd* are not always very salient. They are obligatory for animate nouns (no spontaneous use of diminutives when the referent is not young), but also often redundant. With inanimate nouns, the denotational sense is not obligatory, and on verbs it is scantily attested: diminutives do not occur independent of an emotional or pragmatic contribution, and some examples attract no denotational interpretation at all. In fact, with all word classes, the use of diminutives is primarily determined by the emotional colouring of the context, which may be of one of the three types described below, or by some softening effects (which we can’t discuss here for reasons of space).

4.1 Endearment

The expression of endearment or sympathy is a common use of diminutives cross-linguistically. In Dalabon, this connotation became particularly clear when it was possible to compare a significant number of diminutive uses in commensurable contexts, namely when two speakers were asked to comment on movies. They used far more diminutives on animate nouns referring to young characters they felt sympathy for, than with the characters that they did not approve of.

4.2 Compassion

As described by Myers (1986, 113-17) for the Pintupi, compassion is a morally central, socially structuring value among Aboriginal groups. This is also the case among the Dalabon. Diminutives are abundantly used to express compassion, i.e. feeling bad because something bad happens to someone else. In (8), the speaker expresses her compassion for the hero of one of the movies, a mature man of impressive stature, when he collapses after being badly wounded. Here the diminutive is placed at the end of the verb, thus avoiding a diminutive on a noun referring to someone who is not young. Note the revealing Kriol translation given by the speaker, Maggie Tukumba: *bobala imin boldan*, lit. ‘poor fellow he fell down’. The word *bobala*, from

English ‘poor fellow’, is widely used in north Australian creole to express compassion in the same way as =*wurd* here.

20120713a_002_MT 174 [TC]

(8) *Wa:h ka-h-rakka-ng=wurd.*
interj 3sg-R-fall-PFV=DIM

‘Oh, he fell over poor fellow.’

At other times, speakers use diminutives to express satisfaction when something good happens to someone. =*Wurd* also express ‘secondary compassion’ – speaker’s approval and satisfaction when they witness someone else being compassionate, for instance people sharing with, or taking care of someone else. In (10), the speaker comments on the heroine of one of the movies taking care of her grand-mother. The speaker was not fond of this protagonist, but did use a diminutive to refer to her in this particular occasion.

20120719a_001_MT 205 [SD]

(10) *Kanh kirdikird=wurd* *buka-h-naHna-n* *kakkak-no.*
DEM woman=DIM 3sg>3sg.h-R-look.after-PRS grand.mother-3sgPOSS

‘This young woman looks after her grand-mother.’

These occurrences are important, because they show that speakers do not simply use =*wurd* to express their own emotions, but also to express their desires and assessment as to how people should relate to each other emotionally. In these cases, diminutives express their moral appraisal of emotions rather than simply their own emotions.

4.3 Intimacy and familiarity

Diminutives can also depict intimacy or familiar events. Dalabon diminutives occur when speakers witness an intimate scene of someone’s daily life, typically when it corresponds to a routine that is familiar to all, and that the speaker can thus identify with: making fire (11), waking up in the morning, combing one’s hair.

20120720_003_LB 075 [SD]

(11) *Mimal ka-h-marnu-ruru-n...* *Kanh kirdikird=wurd...*
fire 3sg>3-R-BEN-burn:RDP-PRS DEM woman=DIM

‘Her fire is burning for her... The young woman...’

Diminutives, or other expressive features such as intonation, are also used when referring to a well-known animal species, or when noting the familiar sound of an identified bird singing in the morning.

5 Conclusion

The clustering of diminutive and evaluative meanings found in Dalabon is not unusual cross-linguistically. Once one looks in more detail, however, more culture-specific factors emerge – such as the range of evaluative semantics spanning affection for small things (e.g. children), endearment generally, compassion for those suffering but equally satisfaction at something good happening to someone else, and the expression of approval for witnessed compassion in others. In other words, the evaluative uses span a wide range of empathetic contexts, holding both between the speaker and some element of the represented event, and between the speaker and someone in the represented event who is themselves exhibiting empathy, respect or compassion.

Perhaps surprisingly for cultures where the expression of empathy and compassion has been reported to be a core value, there has been little research so far on diminutives, evaluatives and other comparable expressions in other Australian languages. Notable exceptions are Wilkins (1989, 358), who reports a special ‘pity’ suffix *-penhe* for Mparntwe Arrernte, Donaldson (1980, 195-95) who describes a verbal derivational suffix *-guwa-y* in Ngiyambaa which ‘indicates that the event referred to by the verb to which it is attached is emotionally affecting’ in a wide range of ways from pity through outrage to remonstrance, apology and affection, Bininj Gun-wok (Evans 2003, 473-9), where incorporation of the noun root *yaw* ‘(woman’s) child’ into verbs can express the smallness of one of the event participants, and Ngalakgan (Merlan 1983, 66) which has a special ‘compassion prefix’ marking the speaker’s empathy for the absolutive argument of the verb, roughly along the lines expressed by *bobala* in Kriol and *poor feller* in Aboriginal English. The Ngiyambaa and Ngalakgan verbal affixes, in particular, are semantically close to the emotional uses of Dalabon =*wurd*, though in contrast to Dalabon neither Donaldson or Merlan suggest any link either to diminutives or to an etymology related to ‘child’. It thus appears that, although the use of verbal markers for expressing generalised empathy are not unusual in Australian languages, diminutives and words for child are only one pathway by which this meaning gets grammaticalized. It must be stressed, though, that more thorough descriptive attention to this semantic dimension is needed for Australian languages, and it may well be that diminutives have often slipped under the radar for the reasons described in the introduction, namely that it is only in a limited set of contexts that speakers express emotion by grammatical means.

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² *Wurdurd* is derived from the fully reduplicated *wurd-wurd*.

³ Subsections, or 'skin-names', are a set of 16 names (8 males, 8 females) assigned to people by birth, based on the subsection of their parents. They determine someone's position in a socio-centric 'kin-space'. Skin-names are a very common way to address or refer to people in Dalabon.

⁴ The codes refer to recording labels, allowing to locate the files in the AIATSIS audio-visual archive or in the Endangered Languages Archive (ELDP). Abbreviations between brackets refer to types of data: [ConEl]: contextualized elicitation; [ConvEl]: conversation during elicitation; [Narr]: narrative; [RPF]: comment on *Rabbit-Proof Fence*; [SD]: comment on *Samson and Delilah*; [TC]: comment on *Ten Canoes*.

⁵ Though we lack the space for a thorough comparison, it is worth noting that the semantic effects found here overlap only partially with those reported for Italian verbal evaluatives by Grandi (2009).

⁶ E.g. *Kardû ko ngayh-mele-monwoyan=ngan* 'I better make up my swag', where encliticized =ngan 'my' modifies the incorporated nominal *mele-* 'swag, bedding'.

⁷ Presumably 'small' if the argument was inanimate, but there is no example.

1. List of abbreviations

Glosses not included in Leipzig Glossing Rules or in the list provided with the style guidelines :

APPR: apprehensive

FILL: filler (bound nouns)

INCEP.R: inceptive reduplication

ITER.R: iterative reduplication

SEQ: sequential

2. *Languages mentioned*

Bininj Gun-wok (Gunwinyguan)

Kriol (Australian creole=

Mparntwe Arrernte (Arandic)

Ngalakgan (=Ngalakan) (Gunwinyguan)

Ngiyambaa (Pama-Nyungan)

[2963 words including lists]