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► **To cite this version:**

Maïa Ponsonnet. Do Linguistic Properties Influence Expressive Potential? The Case of Two Australian Diminutives (Gunwinyguan Family). *Anthropological Linguistics*, 2019, 60 (2), pp.157-190. <10.1353/anl.2019.0002>. <hal-03807393>

HAL Id: hal-03807393

<https://hal.science/hal-03807393v1>

Submitted on 2 Dec 2022

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Do linguistic properties influence expressive potential? The case of two Australian diminutives (Gunwinyguan family)

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Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2018. Do linguistic properties influence expressive potential? The case of two Australian diminutives (Gunwinyguan family). *Anthropological Linguistics* 60(2):157-190.

Abstract

Although expressivity is indisputably a crucial function of language, expressive features have often been neglected in linguistic descriptions. After discussing how this lack can reflect the gendered structure of language documentation practices, this article addresses the lack in question by discussing the prevalence of emotional values over formal properties in Australian diminutives. The analysis recruits first-hand data from two Australian Aboriginal languages to explore the relationships between grammar and expressivity: how do grammatical properties of linguistic forms shape expressive resources? To shed light upon this question, the study compares the diminutives found in Dalabon and Rembarrnga, two neighboring languages of the Gunwinyguan family that share core grammatical structure and pertain to a “culturally unified” region. The comparison shows that in spite of many mismatching linguistic properties, the emotions that these diminutives can express remain remarkably stable, suggesting strong sociocultural constraints in this semantic domain.

Key words: expressivity, evaluative morphology, Australian Aboriginal languages, gender

1. Introduction

Emotions are a fundamental aspect of human experience, pervading all aspects of communication. Yet, different languages offer very different ways of expressing them, and relatively little is known about this diversity. How much do languages differ in the expressive tools they make available to their speakers? And do these differences impact the way people communicate about emotions?

These questions obviously echo that of linguistic relativity (Whorf 1956) – i.e. the hypothetical influence of language on “thought” (conceptual representations) and “practices” (speakers’ behaviors and habits). This influence has been confirmed for certain domains such as descriptions of space (Levinson 2003), but has not been tested so far with respect to socially complex domains (Enfield 2015). This article deals with emotions as an instance of socially complex domain, but starts with a more approachable question than linguistic relativity as such. Instead, I question the language-internal influence of linguistic properties (the morphology and other grammatical aspects of a language) upon what speakers can express. In other words, do the particular linguistic properties of the expressive resources available in a given language modify what emotions speakers can express?

To shed light upon this question, the article compares expressive linguistic tools in two neighboring languages that share the core of their grammatical structure and pertain to a “culturally unified” region: Dalabon and Rembarrnga, from the Gunwinyguan family (non-Pama-Nyungan) of Australian languages. Based on first-hand data, the study describes expressive tools that are found in both languages, namely postposed diminutives: the Dalabon =*wurd*, and the Rembarrnga (-)*kanja(ng)h*. These diminutives predominantly occur in relatively convergent contexts, mostly – as overwhelmingly common across languages

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(Wierzbicka 1984; Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994; Jurafsky 1996; Grandi and Körtvélyessy 2015a; Ponsonnet 2018a) – on nouns referring to children. However, these two diminutives differ in their etymologies, and a thorough analysis reveals nuances in their morphological status, denotational meanings (size or age), semantic prevalence (i.e. whether they are used primarily to describe size/age, or to express emotions), and morphosyntactic distribution. How do these linguistic differences impact on the expressive functions of these two diminutives?

The main conclusion of the study is that irrespective of other mismatching linguistic properties, the emotions that speakers can express with diminutives are very similar in Dalabon and in Rembarrnga. They are also consistent with the emotions typically encoded by miscellaneous expressive resources in other languages in the same region, and perhaps elsewhere on the Australian continent. Thus, emotional semantic categories seem relatively impervious to variation in linguistic properties such as etymologies, form, denotational semantics and morphosyntactic distribution. We may hypothesize that the sociocultural context shared by Dalabon and Rembarrnga prevails over linguistic differences in this respect. On the other hand, the study also suggests that linguistic properties may impact on the expressive potential of linguistic resources in other ways. In the case at stake, differences in the respective morphological status and morphosyntactic distribution of the two diminutives imply that they are not used in exactly the same situations. This may bring differences in when/what speakers can actually communicate with these tools in their respective languages. To summarize, the emotional semantic categories encoded by expressive tools are relatively independent of the linguistic properties of these tools, but linguistic properties could make a difference as to when and how these semantic categories can be applied in actual communication.

Each section in the article describes and compares the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives with respect to different properties. Etymology and morphological status are discussed together in Section 3. Sections 4 and 5 present denotational meanings and non-denotational functions respectively. Section 6 deals with the morphosyntactic distribution of these diminutives, and Section 7 with their respective semantic prevalence (which is presented after the distribution because it depends upon it in Dalabon).

Before diving into the linguistic analyses of the expressive features, in Section 2 I present the linguistic context of the study and address the methodological issues surrounding the documentation of diminutives and expressive resources in general. I show how gender-related practices and expectations about story-telling and language documentation have historically limited the investigation of the expressive and emotional dimensions of language – in this case, preventing the identification of diminutives and their salient emotional values in a number of Australian languages.

2. Languages and documentation

2.1 Two Gunwinyguan languages: Dalabon and Rembarrnga

Dalabon and Rembarrnga belong to the non-Pama-Nyungan Gunwinyguan family, in the Australian Top End (Northern Territory, see Fig. 1). Both languages are severely endangered: Dalabon probably has less than ten fluent speakers at the time of writing, and Rembarrnga probably less than fifty. Most of these speakers live in Aboriginal remote communities to the east of the town of Katherine (Bulman and Weemol, as well as Barunga and Beswick, closer to town).

languages, with some case-marking nominal morphology mainly targeting adjuncts (see McKay (1975), Saulwick (2003a; 2003b); for Dalabon see Evans, Merlan & Tukumba (2004), Evans & Merlan (2003), Evans, Brown & Corbett (2001), Ponsonnet (2015), Evans (2017), Luk & Ponsonnet (accepted) *inter alia*).

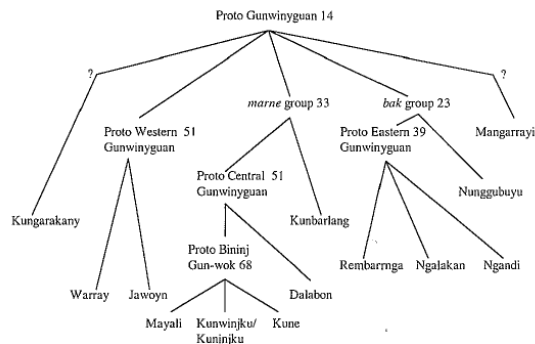


Fig. 2 Structure of the Gunwinyguan family (Evans 2003:33)

Figure 1.8: The Gunwinyguan language family

2.2 Corpora

The analyses presented here rely upon first-hand data comprising audio- and video-recorded speech of various genres: narratives including personal emotional narratives, as well as stimuli-based elicitation designed to collect close-to-spontaneous emotional data (Ponsonnet 2014a). Stimuli-based data-collection relied on a range of methods such as pictures designed for the purpose of elicitation, video clips from Baron-Cohen’s (2004) Mind-Reading Library, as well as a number of mainstream Australian movies with culturally appropriate topics and scenarios.¹ Due to the demographics of remaining speakers as well as local gender dynamics (see 2.3), data was collected almost exclusively from female speakers in both languages (but there is evidence that male speakers can also use diminutives, at least in Dalabon). In the examples used here, the translations combine those collected from speakers in Kriol (the English-based creole that has replaced Dalabon, see Ponsonnet (2017; 2018b; accepted) with interpretations imposed by the context.

For qualitative analyses, I relied upon extensive corpora of different size in each language. My Dalabon corpus taken in its totality is much larger, with about 60 hours mostly collected between 2007 and 2014 from four mature female speakers. The Rembarrnga corpus comprises nearly 9 hours, collected between 2014 and 2016 from three mature female speakers. For quantitative analyses, I used smaller data sets comprising comparable types of data (mostly emotional narratives and comments on movies) in comparable proportions for each language. The Dalabon data set is about 10-hour long and contains 98 tokens of the diminutive. The Rembarrnga data set is a bit more than 4-hour long and contains 41 tokens. In spite of the disproportion in size, the data sets provided comparable figures when brought back to percentages, because their contents are commensurable.

2.3 *Gender, genres*

and the short-comings of language documentation

2.3.1 *Gaps in linguistic descriptions*

As in many languages in the world, diminutives are overwhelmingly frequent in Dalabon and Rembarrnga, at least in female speech.² As an indication, the corpora considered for qualitative analysis in this article contain about one diminutive every six minutes, and comparable figures hold across the rest of my corpora. While this is certainly not representative of every genre or register in either of these languages, the corpora in question are not at all limited to children-oriented speech for instance. Instead, as presented in 2.2, they contain a broader range of narratives and descriptions which are probably somewhat comparable to the contents of every day conversations in this cultural context.

Despite their frequency, diminutives had received very little attention in previous descriptions of Dalabon and Rembarrnga, and this is all the more surprising that these descriptions are extensive and thorough. Prior to Ponsonnet (2014b), the literature on Dalabon (a full dictionary, two PhD theses and half a dozen of articles, see 2.1) made no mention of diminutives, and in fact they were believed to be absent (Evans pers. com. June 2012). As for Rembarrnga, Saulwick did mention the diminutive form in his (2003a) dictionary but labelled it an adjective. He then discussed it among other evaluative tools in a (2015) chapter, with reference to the recently “discovered” Dalabon diminutives. McKay’s (1975) Rembarrnga grammar, in spite of its breadth and precision, only had very cursory mentions of the diminutive (a cell in a table, 1975:92). None of these publications identify emotional functions. Ponsonnet & Evans (2015:406) recognized that diminutives had been omitted for a long time in descriptions of Australian Indigenous languages, and indeed Heath (2015:226) for instance wrote that ‘Aboriginal languages are generally weak in diminutives and other hypocoristics’ (see also Chapter 17 in Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015a).

Given the level of endangerment of Dalabon and Rembarrnga and the demographics of their speakers, I documented these languages mainly with women over sixty years of age (2.2), and Heath (2015) suggested that this may explain why diminutives appear as disproportionately frequent in my data. However, middle-aged female speakers of another neighboring Gunwinyguan language, Bininj Gun-wok (Central branch), also used diminutives with comparable (if not higher) frequency as my Dalabon and Rembarrnga consultants. The Kunwinjku diminutive is the verbal prefix *yaw-*, which is also a diminutive in Dalabon (Ponsonnet 2014b:81). *Yaw* is an incorporable noun that means ‘small one’ (Evans 2003:473), but example (1) shows that the form is also a prefix that expresses compassion about an adult (who is not small) – an emotional extension typical of Gunwinyguan diminutives (Section 5).

(Kunwinjku Bininj Gun-wok) 20160719a_003_MJ 008 [Stim]

[About a wife leaving her husband.]

- (1) *Mmm warde... Ka-yaw-rere... Ngan-bawo-ng...*
INTJ.exclm INTJ.comp 3m-DIM-go:REDUP:NPST 3m>1sg-leave-PPFV

‘Mmm oh dear... She is leaving... She left me, poor me [he is thinking]...’

In the Kune dialect of Bininj Gun-wok, speakers use the form =*wurd*, which is also the most frequent diminutive in Dalabon (see Rose (2018) on diminutives as dialectal markers).

(Kune Bininj Gun-wok) BGW_20170521_002_MM 144 [Stim]

[About an adult woman being hit by her husband (picture task).]

- (2) *Bi-b-om=wurd, bi-keng-d-oy konda.*
3sg>3sg.hP-hit-PPFV=DIM 3sg>3sg.hP-cheek-smash-PPFV DEM

‘He hit her poor thing, he smashed her cheek there.’

In spite of their high frequency in (at least) these dialects, Evans’ (2003) 700+ pages grammar, a model linguistic description in many other respects, makes no mention of diminutives. In the light of their prevalence in four Gunwinyguan languages/dialects across two different branches of the family,³ it is puzzling that these diminutives had received so little attention in previous descriptions of these languages. Even where extensive grammatical discussions may have been deemed unnecessary, it seems that given their frequency diminutives are a significant linguistic feature that should be presented when accounting for the languages’ grammatical resources. In the following sections, I discuss how this “blind-spot” – which reflects a more general lack of attention for expressivity in grammatical descriptions – may result from certain biases in language documentation practices, and in particular some gender biases.

2.3.2 Documentation and gender

It is well known that linguistic elicitation oriented towards grammatical description tends to produce very unnatural linguistic data, likely to exclude spontaneous emotional features.

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Naturally, grammatical elicitation normally combines with the collection of texts (Chelliah 2001), and indeed the appendices of McKay's (1975) grammar of Rembarrnga and of Evans's (2003) grammar of Biniŋ Gun-wok contain sizeable sets of very rich narratives. Why did these narratives fail to reveal the prevalence of diminutives?

In my data, diminutives are used by female speakers when recounting emotionally loaded episodes of their personal lives (including hardships, love stories, deaths, health matters...), commenting on interpersonal relationships and other people's behaviors both in dramatic contexts (e.g. movies) and in ordinary contexts (pictures, clips, everyday life anecdotes), or telling stories for children for instance. Although I have occasionally heard men using diminutives, these contexts are more typical of female speech. Such contexts are probably relatively common themes in everyday conversations, but they rarely feature among the texts appended to grammars. The Rembarrnga and Biniŋ Gun-wok narratives in McKay (1975) and Evans (2003) were mostly recorded from male speakers (only one short narrative by a female speaker, in Evans's volume (2003:712)). This asymmetry has been a prevalent trend in the documentation of Australian languages. Heath's (1980) 550+-page volume of Nunggubuyu/Wubuy (Gunwinyguan) texts (a companion to Heath's (1984) grammar of this language, another master-piece in linguistic description), contains an impressive collection of 170 narratives – authored by seven male speakers; along with a single narrative by a female speaker (Heath 1980).⁴ Australian societies are structured around a strong gender division which makes it difficult for men to record women. However, the reverse is less true: female often record males. For instance, Glass & Hackett (1979), a volume edited by two female authors, contains fifteen Ngaanyatjarra texts (Western Desert Language, Pama-Nyungan): thirteen by a man and two by a woman. Of course, the gender imbalance is not always that marked, and patterns are evolving. The tendency for linguists to collect data from male

speakers (2.3.2) has evolved in recent years. This is both because there are now more female linguists doing fieldwork (like myself); and because female speakers, who are often among the “last speakers” of their language, have been able to express their interest and expertise. For instance, Merlan’s (2016) collection of thirty-six Jawoyn narratives (Gunwinyguan) collected throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s contains twenty-four pieces by three women and only eleven by one male contributor.⁵

2.3.3 *Gender and Australian Aboriginal ‘folk stories’*

Another obstacle to collecting narratives that make use of expressive features such as diminutives is the genre or themes of the stories collected in language documentation. McKay’s (1975) and Evans’s (2003) grammars contain “bush adventures” narratives (about fishing, hunting, mastering cattle etc.) as well as mythological stories (about animal ancestors, spirits, ceremonies...). Among Australian communities, the “etiquette” of language documentation tends to be very codified, so that it is often difficult to record outside of the conventional repertoire of Australian “folk narratives” (Carew 2016; Walsh 2016). Apart from hunting adventures or mythological stories, other common themes are ceremonies, kinship and social rules, arts (songs and paintings), traditional techniques, ethnobiological knowledge, as well as colonial history (Hercus & Sutton 1986; Charola & Meakins 2016). These themes do not necessarily reflect the full spectrum of daily preoccupations and discourse in Australian Indigenous communities, and the corresponding “folk” narratives are also stylistically marked (Carew 2016). While a more extensive and systematic study would be necessary to reveal how the diversity of genres considered in documentation correlates with the grammatical features identified in the resulting linguistic descriptions, the bias in documentation coverage is readily evident even from a relatively cursory survey.

The nature of this “language-documentation repertoire” is in fact not independent of the gender divisions alluded to in 2.3.2. In “traditional” Australian Aboriginal societies, each gender was assigned a fixed specialization in terms of daily tasks, expertise and knowledge – whether mundane or ritual (Berndt 1950; 1974; Merlan 1992; Ponsonnet submitted). For example, hunting was a male task, while gathering vegetable food was a female task. In many parts of the Top End (where Gunwinyguan languages are spoken), men held the most significant ritual and mythological knowledge (Cowlshaw 1979; Keen 1994), as well as prestigious activities such as painting and singing. The female domains of expertise were domestic, including in particular anything related to reproduction and raising children (Cowlshaw 1978). These domains were canonically non-prestigious, even “vulgar”, shameful, and indeed taboo: among the Dalabon and across this region, women were expected to protect men from being exposed to any matters related to sexuality and reproduction (Maddock 1970; Ponsonnet 2014b:216; Ponsonnet submitted). As a result, female matters are not considered adequate topics of discussion with outsiders and are not part of the folk repertoire of narratives that qualifies for recording with researchers. This contributes to explain why it is easier to collect narratives from men in Australian languages: although there are female story-tellers, in general and by default, talking to outsiders often falls within the male domain, because it is prestigious one.

In line with these observations, some women I work with on elicitation tasks have declined recording narratives themselves, deferring to their husband on the account that “he has all the good stories”. When women do record narratives, some of them choose from the male-oriented authorized repertoire: the mythological narratives that they know, female techniques such as basket weaving, or male-like stories such as fishing adventures⁶ (e.g. the female narrative in Evans (2003:712) is entitled “Getting crocodile eggs”). Kinship, ethnobiology and colonial narratives, which are unmarked for gender, are also possible topics. But typically-female

aspects of life such as house-hold organisation, children's education or child-bearing for instance, although indisputably important, are not considered acceptable topics a priori (in fact child-bearing was sometimes explicitly discarded as inappropriate for documentation). This excludes a lot of the contexts where typically-female expressive features such as diminutives are likely to occur. Linguists are thus presented with a dilemma. On the one hand, respecting the established local repertoire has evident ethical benefits such as remaining neutral with respect to local social structure and faithful to speakers' inclinations. On the other hand, encouraging speakers to step out of their repertoires also has several benefits: giving a voice to female speakers among these groups; covering a broader range of themes including some closer to daily domestic life; and documenting additional speech registers.

A final point to consider is that the difficulty to record females and/or female themes does not result uniquely from the local social structures. Instead, several generations of researchers across disciplines have maintained an emphatic interest for male repertoires – mythological and ceremonial matters, as well as painting and singing in particular –, thus reinforcing the local distribution of prestige. In my experience, female speakers in the Gunwinyguan region are quite inclined to incorporate new themes to their repertoire of “appropriate narratives” when given enough time and opportunities to do so (Ponsonnet 2014a).⁷ Independently of linguistic documentation, newly established female genres have also emerged such as personal introspection in the context of Christian Fellowship groups, which speakers are inclined to transfer to the context of language documentation. Finally, several of my female consultants seemed eager to record miscellaneous personal matters, sometimes explicitly describing the documentation context as an opportunity to talk about things that they could not discuss with their family. These observations suggest that the “folk” codified repertoire is actually relatively

flexible, and in turn ask whether its apparent inflexibility may in part reflect the expectations of the white audience.

It is difficult to tease apart the respective roles of local gender structure and narrative practices on the one hand, and of pressures perpetuated by white protagonists (including researchers) on the other hand. In any case, the gender-biased judgements of prestige imposed on genres and themes in language documentation has been a strong impediment to the understanding of many aspects of Australian languages, the encoding of emotions being a typical example. In the case of Gunwinyguan diminutives, this has resulted in incomplete grammatical descriptions. In order to collect data that is more representative of a diversity of semantic domains, linguists should actively seek ways out of the patterns described above (see Ponsonnet (2014a) for practical suggestions). After this methodological preamble, I now turn to the description and comparison of the diminutives in Dalabon and Rembarrnga.

3. Form, etymology and morphological status

3.1 *Dalabon =wurd*

Dalabon diminutives are discussed in detail by Ponsonnet (2014b:81–109) (see also Ponsonnet 2015). The sections below present a summary of this discussion, emphasizing the points that are relevant for the comparison with the Rembarrnga diminutive. The most frequent Dalabon diminutive is *=wurd* [wud],⁸ which is segmentally homophonous with the noun *wurd* ‘woman’s child’ and related to the current noun for child, *wurdurd*.⁹ This conforms with Jurafsky’s (1996:538) findings that ‘child’ is among the most common etymologies for diminutives across languages. As illustrated in (3), *wurdurd* ‘child’ often combines with the diminutive *=wurd*.

(Dalabon) 20120705b_004_MT 086 [Film]¹⁰

[About a toddler who has been taken away from their parents and placed in an institution.]

(3) *Marruh mah nah-no?*
INTERR and mother-3sg.POSS¹¹

*Kanh wurdurd=**wurd** ka-h-ruru-n. Ngarrkun-no.*
DEM child=**DIM** 3sg-R-cry:REDUP-PRES newborn.baby-FILL

‘And where’s his mother? This little child is crying. This newborn baby.’

The form is better qualified as an enclitic¹² given its broad distribution (6.1) and its prosodic and phonological integration with its hosts. The initial consonant in =*wurd* is often pronounced as a voiced pharyngeal approximant (spelt <H> in Dalabon), especially after vowels and nasal consonants:

(Dalabon) 20110526b_000_MT 138 [ConvEI]

[Discussing evening plans.]

(4) *Bim-no=**Hurd** ke kanh wurdurd nula-h-n-iyān.*
picture-FILL=**DIM** EMPH DEM child 2pl-R-see-FUT

‘You will watch a little movie with the children.’

3.2 *Rembarrnga* (-)kanja(ng)h

The diminutives in Dalabon and Rembarrnga are both postposed: they follow their host. However, they vary in form, etymology and morphological status. The Rembarrnga form, (-)kanja(ng)h [gapa(ŋ)?]¹³ (Saulwick 2015) attracts a range of possible realizations, as the final coda can be reduced to a glottal stop, or even deleted altogether. For some speakers, [gapaŋ?] is the most frequent realization, while others predominantly use [gapa?]. Some realizations of the form can be regarded as suffixes (especially when reduced, -kanja(h)) occurring between the host and other modifiers (adjectives, possessives, case markers), with a high degree of

prosodic integration, as in (5). Alternatively, the form can also occasionally be prosodically independent, especially with the longer realization *kanjangh*.¹⁴ However, even when realized as an independent form, the diminutive cannot function alone: it depends syntactically upon the preceding element (Section 7).

(Rembarrnga) REM_20160717_003_NC 056 [Film]

[About toddler presented as cute in the movie.]

(5) *Worde... Dakku-**kanjah**-wurlah. Ngarrkun-na... Langoe-**kanjah**-nawoe.*
 INTJ.comp small-**DIM**-good infant-FILL hand/finger-**DIM**-3sg.POSS

‘Oooh... The nice little one. The infant... Her little hand.’

Dalabon =*wurd* and Rembarrnga (-)*kanja*(ng)*h* differ not only in form but also in etymology. While in Dalabon the transparent etymology of =*wurd* is a noun meaning ‘child’, in Rembarrnga the standard noun for ‘child’ is *dakku*, which is evidently not a candidate etymon for the Rembarrnga diminutive (-)*kanja*(ng)*h*.¹⁵ The etymology of (-)*kanja*(ng)*h* is most probably an adjectival form meaning ‘small’. Indeed, Saulwick (2003a:29) describes *kanjarngh* as an adjective (‘small’), and a cognate adjective *kanjah* [gəɲəʔ]¹⁶ ‘little’ is reported in Ngalakgan, another Eastern Gunwinyguan language to the south-west of Rembarrnga (Merlan 1983:195). On the western side of the Eastern Gunwinyguan branch, a cognate diminutive form is reported in Ngandi (suffix [gəɲəʔ]). Warndarang, of the neighboring Marran family (south-east), and Ritharrngu, a Yolngu language neighboring Rembarrnga and Ngandi also to their east, both have cognate suffixes (respectively [gəɲə] and [gəɲəʔ]/[ŋəɲəʔ]) (Heath 1978:145). The form is thus originally an adjectival root expressing small size that has lost syntactic and morphological independence to become a diminutive suffix in the most eastern languages of this region, and is in the course of doing so in the most western languages of this region.

4. Denotational semantics

Like with many diminutives across the world's languages (see for instance Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994; Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015; Ponsonnet 2014b:81–109), the semantic extensions of Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives can be divided into three broad types: denotational meanings, having to do with quantitative or scalar evaluation; emotional meanings or connotations, when the use of a diminutive relates to the emotional attitude of the speaker at the time of speech; and pragmatic effects, when the diminutive mitigates the negative impact of a statement, for instance with a politeness effect. These three types are not exclusive of one another: emotional connotations are often embedded in denotational senses (see Ponsonnet 2014b:81–109 for a discussion), but they are conceptually distinct, and the present section deals with denotative meanings only.

At first sight, =*wurd* in Dalabon and (-)*kanja(ng)h* in Rembarrnga occur in comparable contexts, namely referring to young humans. These usages are both rendered as *lil* (<Eng. 'little') in speakers' Kriol translations for both languages. However, probably due to the distinct etymologies of these two diminutives, their respective denotational meanings are underlyingly different, with the Dalabon diminutive targeting young referents, and the Rembarrnga diminutive targeting small referents.

4.1 Dalabon =wurd

In many languages, the denotational meaning of diminutives is 'small', but in Dalabon =*wurd* means 'young', at least when it is affixed to a human noun – which is the most frequent case (see 6.1), as illustrated in (6). Indeed, =*wurd* often qualifies humans that are not small as long as they are young, as illustrated in (7) where the referent is a relatively tall and strong young

man in his early twenties (Fig. 3). Conversely, throughout the Dalabon corpus, diminutives were never used on nouns referring to humans who are not young.

(Dalabon) 30037/2007 – 14' (LB) [Narr]

[Explaining what happens when women become pregnant.]

(6) *Da-h-yidjnja-n* *wurdurd,* *ka-h-yin.*
2sg>3-R-have-PRES child 3sg-R-say/do:PRES

Nga-h-bukurribun-inj, *ka-h-yin-inj.*
1sg>3-R-dream-PIPFV 3sg-R-say/do-PPFV

Kardu *kirdikird=**wurd**,* *kardu* *o* *biyi=**wurd**.*
maybe female.human=**DIM** maybe or male.human=**DIM**

‘You have a child, she says. I had a dream, she says. Maybe a baby girl or maybe a baby boy.’

(Dalabon) 20120710b_003_MT 064 [Film]

[Commenting on the movie *Ten Canoes*, De Heer & Djigirr (2006)]

(7) *Kanh* *kirdikird-ngong* *bula-h-dja-na-ng*
DEM female.human-group 3pl>3-R-FOC-see-PPFV

*kanunh yawurrinj=**wurd*** *ka-ye-yu* *nahda.*
DEM young.man=**DIM** 3sg-SUB-lie:PRES there

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



Fig. 3 Dayindi/Yerar/paaril in the movie *Ten Canoes*, photo courtesy of Vertigo Production

On non-human nouns, =*wurd* can mean ‘small’ (with animals, body-parts and inanimate count nouns) or ‘a little bit’ (with mass nouns), as illustrated in (8) and (9). As discussed in 6.1, =*wurd* is overwhelmingly less frequent on non-human nouns though, and therefore the denotational meaning ‘small’ of =*wurd* is secondary compared to the denotational meaning ‘young’.

(Dalabon)

[Unrecorded elicitation during conversation with MT] [ContEI]

[About a car the speaker has been complaining about for a while.]

(8) *Mak* *nga-djare* *kanh* *murdika=**wurd**.*

NEG 1sg-like/want DEM car=**DIM**

‘I don’t like this small car.’

(Dalabon) 20110530_001_MT 26 [Narr]

[Explaining why she was unable to give money to a distant relative who asked for it at the supermarket in town.]

(9) *Kanh-kun* *bula-ye-yang-mama-ng,*
DEM-GEN 3pl>1-SUB-language-get:REDUP-PPFV

*nunh kanh bad=**wurd** bula-h-ngabbu-n*
DEM DEM stone=**DIM** 3pl>1-R-give-PRES

ngey-karn nga-h-dja-koh-nam-urru-n.
1sg-EMPH 1sg-R-FOC-eyes/gaze-put-RR-PRES
manage

‘When they record my language, then they give me a bit of money¹⁷ and I just manage by myself.’

4.2 Rembarrnga -kanja(ng)h

Like =*wurd* in Dalabon, (-)*kanja(ng)h* frequently qualifies human beings that are younger in age. (-)*Kanja(ng)h* applies to children, as in (10) where it qualifies a child who is about twelve years old (Fig. 4).

(Rembarrnga) REM_20160715_003_NC 005 [Film]

(10) *Mmm* *men-wurlahwurlah* *dakku-kanjah...*
INTJ.approb mind/idea-good:REDUP small-**DIM**

Yawkyawk-kanjah.
young.girl-**DIM**

‘Mmm a smart little girl... Little young girl.’



Fig. 4 Molly in Rabbit-Proof Fence, photo courtesy of Jabal Films Pty Ltd.

In Dalabon, the diminutive also very frequently qualifies young adults, even if they are not small in stature – the denotational meaning is ‘young’ (4.1). But this does not occur in Rembarrnga: in my corpus, (-)*kanja(ng)h* is never attested on nouns referring to young adults, although speakers had many opportunities to use it in this way. On the other hand, it is attested with adults who are small in stature.¹⁸ Given that (-)*kanja(ng)h* etymologically means ‘small’,

it is expected that this is also what the diminutive enclitic means denotationally. This explains why it applies to children as opposed to young adults, as they are actually small in size, while young adults are not usually smaller than older adults.

When *(-)kanja(ng)h* is encliticized to non-human referents, the meaning is also ‘small’, or ‘a little bit’ on mass nouns, just like in Dalabon:

(Rembarrnga) 20150826_000_DC 122 [Narr]
[About a man providing food to two hungry children.]
(11) *Me-kanjah* *badjdjan* *narra-bba-ngu-na*.
 food-DIM first 2a-du-eat-FUT

‘You two eat a bit of food first.’

4.3 *Intermediate summary*

Although the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives occur most frequently in contexts that appear very similar at first sight, the two items have subtly different denotational meanings: the Dalabon *=wurd* means ‘young’; the Rembarrnga *(-)kanja(ng)h* means ‘small’ – a nuance that could reflect the respective etymologies of these forms. Thus, in these two closely related languages spoken within a unified cultural context, two comparable linguistic tools can differ semantically because they do not share the exact same etymological origin.

5. Non-denotational functions: emotional and pragmatic values

Emotional meanings and pragmatic functions (see Section 4) are grouped together under this section as “non-denotational” usage: they are both less referential, more subjective, and pragmatic usages are usually tinted with emotions (affection in particular). Non-denotational semantics is very consistent across the two languages, with Dalabon and Rembarrnga

diminutives essentially expressing the same emotional values. Pragmatic functions are less frequent in my Rembarrnga data than in my Dalabon data, but this may be a bias of my corpora.

5.1 Emotional meanings of =*wurd*

As is the case for many diminutives across the world (Ponsonnet 2018a), Dalabon =*wurd* is used to express emotional states of speakers, mostly with respect to three types of positive emotions, which can be summarized as follows:

- Compassion and related: expressing compassion for someone or expressing approval and endearment when witnessing compassion (“second-degree compassion”).
- Affection.
- Endearment when witnessing personal, intimate routines.

These emotions are not mutually exclusive, and they often apply at the same time for a single occurrence of the Dalabon diminutive. However, they are conceptually distinct and worth stating as such because each of them can, of itself and independently of the others, trigger the use of a diminutive. In many cases, emotional values also co-exist with denotational meanings (as discussed in Section 7).

Expressing compassion, or approval/endearament when witnessing compassion, was the most frequent non-denotational function of =*wurd* in the corpus I used for this study (on the expression of compassion by diminutives across the world’s languages, see Ponsonnet (2018a:27)). The Dalabon diminutive can express compassion for someone going through hardship (see example (3) in 3.1), or the speaker’s approval and endearment when witnessing people being compassionate with each other. This applies in particular when witnessing people expressing attachment or grief for others, taking care of each other as in (12) and/or sharing material goods (which in this cultural context is an expression of affection, see Ponsonnet (2014b:196–199), Myers (1979)). In these contexts, diminutives (in Dalabon as in Rembarrnga,

see 5.3) are often translated in Kriol using the compassionate interjection *bobala* (<Eng. ‘poor fellow’). Self-compassion, on the other hand, is not clearly attested with =*wurd*.

(Dalabon) 20120719a_001_MT 205 [Film]

[About the heroine of a movie providing daily care for her grandmother.]

(12) *Kanh kirdikird=wurd*
DEM female.human=**DIM**

<i>buka-h-naHna-n</i>	<i>kakkak-no.</i>
3sg>3sg.h-R-see:REDUP-PRES	parallel.grandparent-3sg.POSS
look.after	

‘This little young women looks after her grandmother.’

The expression of affection for someone is also a common emotional sense of =*wurd*. Affection is the most commonly attested emotional extension for diminutives across the world (Ponsonnet 2018a:23–24), but in Dalabon affection is less frequent than compassion. In (7) in 4.1 above, the speaker is commenting on the movie *Ten Canoes* (De Heer and Djigirr 2006), and she refers to a character that she is particularly fond of. Along the recording sessions, she referred to this character using a diminutive by default, by contrast with other characters that she was more critical of (see Ponsonnet 2014a:87–92 for a detailed discussion).

The last type of emotional contexts where diminutives are typically used is when talking about intimate routines (see Ponsonnet 2018a:32–33 about the typological status of this context), i.e. daily habits that one enjoys on one’s own such as listening to music before going to sleep, combing one’s hair softly and with care, or sitting by a fire alone in the dark as in (13) – a comment on the scene of the movie *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton 2009) presented in Fig. 5.

(Dalabon) 20120720_003_LB 075 [Film]
 (13) *Mimal ka-h-marnu-rurung...*¹⁹
 fire 3sg>3-BEN-burn:REDUP:PRES

Kanh kirdikird=wurd...
 DEM female.human=DIM

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



Fig. 5 Delilah watching her fire in the night
 © Scarlett Pictures Pty Ltd

All these three types of emotional contexts are attested for diminutives in other languages in the world (Ponsonnet 2018a), but affection is often more frequent than compassion, whereas as mentioned above, in Dalabon it is compassion that is more frequent. Unlike many diminutives around the world, Dalabon diminutives do not express negative emotions such as contempt (Ponsonnet 2018a:25). Data recently collected on other languages in the same geographical area suggest that this particular three-fold combination of emotional meanings – compassion, affection, intimacy in personal routines – is characteristic of expressive resources in this part of Australia. That is, expressive features such as interjections or prosodic contours typically display this three-fold set of values, in Dalabon as well as in other languages spoken in this area (Rembarrnga, Bininj Gun-wok dialects, as well as Kriol (Ponsonnet accepted)). Given the degree of resemblances between social groups in Aboriginal Australia with respect to emotions (Ponsonnet 2016; accepted), as well as with respect to other domains such as cosmologies or kinship (Dousset 2012) for instance, it seems plausible that the semantic convergence of expressive categories may in fact extend beyond the Gunwinyguan region.

5.2 Pragmatic functions of =wurd

Finally, and again like many diminutives across the world (see for instance Dressler and Merlini Barbaresi 1994), the Dalabon diminutive =wurd can be used for pragmatic attenuation.

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Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2018. Do linguistic properties influence expressive potential? The case of two Australian diminutives (Gunwinyguan family). *Anthropological Linguistics* 60(2):157-190.

(16) *Karda ngan-bak-riya, nakanh-kanjah...*
 INTJ.exclm 3m>1m-BEN-go:PST DEM-DIM

[...] *nga-bak-kanga-wurlah* [...].
 1m>3m-BEN-belly-good
 feel.good

‘Oh yeah, he came for me, this dear one [my beloved deceased husband]... [...] I’m happy about him [being here] [...].’

(Rembarrnga) 20150826_000_DC 192 [Narr]

[Living alone after the rest of the family has left the station camp.]

(17) *Yarra-bba-balmang-inj*
 1.excl.a-du-pick.up.wood-PPCT

yarra-bba-boilemh-moen di-kanjah
 1.excl.a-du-boil-PCONT tea-DIM

me yarra-bba-rniya-nginj yarra-bbarrah.
 food 1.excl.a-du-cook-PPCT 1.excl.a-du

‘Us two went to pick up wood, we boiled our little tea, cooked our food.’

5.4 Pragmatic effects of (-)kanja(ng)h

Like the Dalabon diminutive =*wurd*, (-)*kanja(ng)h* can be used to minimize the negative impact of a situation. In (18), the speaker is rectifying the description of a stimulus by an older and more qualified speaker who is her classificatory aunt. Given the tone of deference and respect that the author of (18) used with the senior speaker all along our language sessions, endearment is not a likely interpretation for the diminutive in this example. Instead, and as confirmed by the intonation, the diminutive attenuates the potential impoliteness of the junior speaker’s rectification. Such pragmatic usage of the diminutive was rarer in my Rembarrnga corpus than in my Dalabon corpus.²¹

(Rembarrnga) REM_20160727a_002_DC_JF 089 (JF) [ConvEI]

(18) *Gulaj noenda larrhka-ba indid djongok-kanjah?*
 glass DEM break.open-PPCT INTJ.quest aunt-DIM

‘He broke the glass [jar] indeed dear/little auntie?’

5.5 *Intermediate summary*

Although Dalabon =*wurd* and Rembarrnga (-)*kanja(ng)h* differ in their denotational semantics (Section 4), the contrasts are not carried over to the emotional values of these diminutives. Thus, the respective etymologies of these linguistic devices seem to impact on their denotational meanings, but not on their expressive values.

6. Morphosyntactic distribution

6.1 *Dalabon =wurd*

In Dalabon, =*wurd* affords a very large range of hosts including at least nouns, verb complexes, adjectives, pronouns, demonstratives, numerals, adverbs and interjections. In other words, it seems that most word classes can receive a diminutive given an adequate semantic context. However, nominals (including adjectives and demonstratives) and verbal compounds are by far the most frequent bases for the diminutive: between them, they account for 98% of all occurrences in the corpus under consideration.

Nouns (excluding other nominals) account for 75% of all occurrences, and among them nouns with a human referent represent 92% of occurrences on nouns (or 69% of all occurrences). Diminutivized nouns are typically nouns denoting gender and stages of life (e.g. *kirdikird* ‘woman (female human)’, *yawurrinj* ‘young man’), as in (6) and (7) above (4.1) as well as kin terms as in (19). Other nouns referring to humans such as *nes=wurd* ‘the young nurse’ also occur, albeit more rarely.

(Dalabon) 250909_83OK 334 (MT) [ContEI]

[How children with delayed speech are given egg yolk as a cure.]

(19) *Korreh ka-h-dja-Ing-yenjdu-ng,*

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Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2018. Do linguistic properties influence expressive potential? The case of two Australian diminutives (Gunwinyguan family). *Anthropological Linguistics* 60(2):157-190.

before 3sg-R-FOC-SEQ-talk-PRES
wanj kanh Belinj=wurd ka-h-yin.
 CONJ DEM subsection.name=**DIM** 3sg-R-say/do:PRES

‘Now she will talk, like this little Belinj, she says.’

Verb complexes are the next most frequent category, as illustrated for instance in (14) in 5.2 above, and in (20). The proportion of occurrences of =*wurd* on verbs complex is much smaller than on nouns, but nevertheless significant: 17% of all occurrences. The respective prevalence of each of the meanings discussed in previous sections (denotational vs non-denotational meanings) varies with the nature of the base, and this is further discussed in Section 7.

(Dalabon) 20120705b_004_MT 025 [Film]

[A child is taking a shower with the help of one of her carers.]

(20) *Woywoy bulu ka-h-naHna-n=wurd bulu ka-h-djukkodjukko-n.*
 INTJ.compass 3pl 3sg>3-R-see:REDUP=**DIM** 3pl 3sg>3-R-wash:REDUP-PRES
 look.after

‘Good on her, she (kindly) looks after them [after the children], she washes them [she gives them a shower].’

6.2 Rembarrnga (-)kanja(ng)h

An important difference between the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives is that in Rembarrnga, occurrences on verbs are marginal (3 occurrences, 7%), and in fact not attested with a clearly suffixed form. In (21) for instance, the intensity drastically decreases at the end of the second verb complex, giving the impression of a pause before *kanjangh*, which bears clear primary stress on its first syllable (and lengthening on the second syllable).

(Rembarrnga) 20150826_000_DC 356 [Narr]

[Living alone after the rest of the family has left the station camp.]

(21) *'Yarra-bba-'buddan-nanoena-ninj 'yarra-bba-nini 'kanja:nggh.*
 1.excl.a-du-night-see:REDUP-PCONT 1.excl.a-du-sit/be:PRES:REDUP **DIM**
 decreasing intensity

~ 27 ~

‘Us two used to stay in the dark throughout the night, poor things.’

The meaning of all three post-verbal occurrences is emotional (see 7.5), and overall the free post-verbal diminutive *kanja(ng)h* is evocative of a type of compassionate interjection found in many Australian languages (which originate etymologically in nominals and are often translated as ‘poor fellow’). In the Gunwinyguan region, Dalabon for instance has *weh-no*, illustrated in (22)), which is also an adjective meaning ‘bad’; and Kriol has *bobala* (<Eng. ‘poor fellow’), which often serves to translate diminutives (see Ponsonnet accepted:Chap 6). While it is not uncommon for these interjections to follow a verb, they can also occur anywhere else in the clause (typically clause initially), or alone in single word utterances. Diminutives do not offer these possibilities, but one may wonder if *kanja(ng)h* may evolve in this direction, given its morphological autonomy when following verb complexes.

(Dalabon) 20120705b_004_MT 003 [Film]

[About children sleeping in an unfriendly dormitory.]

(22) *Kenh bala-h-njenguyu weh-no. [...]*
HESIT 3pl-R-sleep:PRES INTJ.compass

Mele-bulng bula-h-bawo-ng weh-no.
swags-3pl.POSS 3pl>3-R-leave-PPFV INTJ.compass

‘I mean, they are sleeping poor things. They left their swags behind too bad.’

As illustrated in (10) in 3.2, (15) in 5.3, or (18) in 5.4, nouns referring to humans (gender, stages of life, kin terms) are the most common hosts in Rembarrnga, like in Dalabon. Yet, the proportions differ. In Dalabon, nouns with a human referent represent 92% of the occurrences of =*wurd* on nouns, but this figure only amounts to 79% for (-)*kanja(ng)h* in Rembarrnga, where 21% of the nouns refer to inanimate entities (only 5% in Dalabon). This could be explained by the fact that the Rembarrnga (-)*kanja(ng)h* targets ‘small’ referents and essentially applies denotationally to children, while the Dalabon =*wurd* applies to children *and* young adults. The sense ‘small’ also implies that (-)*kanja(ng)h* can qualify adults who are small in

stature albeit not young, but this is rare – perhaps because adults are not usually endearing. The Rembarrnga diminutive is also proportionally more frequent on parts of speech that refer to humans but are not nouns, such as numerals or demonstratives for instance (as illustrated in (16) in 5.3 above). Such alternative parts of speech represent 16% of the occurrences of (-)kanja(ng)h on noun phrases, while in Dalabon this only amounts to 7%. To summarize, the predominance of nouns referring to humans is less clear in Rembarrnga, where the diminutive more often occurs on nouns that refer to non-humans, as well as on parts of speech other than nouns.

6.3 *Intermediate summary*

In Dalabon like in Rembarrnga, diminutives are fairly ubiquitous on nominals and most frequent on nouns. However, while the prevalence of human nouns is overwhelming with =wurd in Dalabon, in Rembarrnga (-)kanja(ng)h displays a more balanced profile. The languages also differ with respect to verb complexes: while these are common hosts for the Dalabon diminutives, they are only marginal in Rembarrnga, where verbal occurrences appear to be free forms akin to interjections. Thus, in spite of the grammatical resemblances between the two languages, the morphosyntactic behaviors of the diminutives diverge.

7. **Semantic prevalence**

It is a well-attested property of diminutives that their semantics is modulated by the morphosyntactic class of their host (Bauer 1997). This is certainly the case in Dalabon, as investigated in 7.1 to 7.4; but does not apply in Rembarrnga, where diminutives are always primarily emotional (7.5).

7.1 *Dalabon* =wurd on nouns referring to humans

I explained in 4.1 that the denotational sense of =wurd when encliticized on a noun referring to a human being is ‘young’ (not ‘small’). This meaning is always active: in my corpus, =wurd does not occur on nouns referring to humans that are not young. As will be presented in 7.3, compassion for older persons is often expressed with a diminutive on the verb complex heading the clause.

Subsequently, with human nouns, emotional extensions are better treated as connotations, since they do not occur independently of a denotational sense. The evidence for these emotional values is then quantitative: the diminutive may occur in emotionally neutral contexts, but the quantitative analysis of its distribution shows that the emotional contexts listed in Section 5 (compassion, affection, and endearment when witnessing intimate routines) strongly favour the use of diminutives on nouns referring to young humans (Ponsonnet 2014b:81–109).

7.2 *Dalabon* =wurd on other nouns

As also pointed out in 4.1, the denotational meaning of =wurd can be ‘small’ (as opposed to ‘young’) when the base noun refers to non-human entities: animals, body parts, inanimate things (count or mass nouns). With inanimate nouns, the denotational sense can sometimes be barred in favor of a purely emotional meaning. In (23) for instance, =wurd modifies *blankid* ‘blanket’. The sentence is a comment on the movie *Rabbit-proof Fence* (Thornton 2009), where three children heroines are being chased by nasty people. In this scene, they hide under a blanket to escape their pursuers. Here the denotational sense ‘small’ is inactive. The blanket can hardly be described as small, since it is large enough to cover the three children entirely. In spite of the construction, the blanket is not topical in this statement: the speaker does not

actually intend to say something about the blanket, since she is in fact talking about the children's dire situation. As confirmed by the intonation, =*wurd* only has emotional functions here: to index the speaker's compassion for the children who are at risk of being caught, as well as her endearment at their solidarity as they hide together.

(Dalabon) 20120705b_006_MT 54 [Film]

(23) *Bulu ka-h-barrkbo-ng kardu blankid=wurd.*
 3pl 3sg>3-R-cover-PPFV maybe blanket=**DIM**

'It's like covering them, the good old blanket.'

Hence with inanimate nouns, contrary to nouns referring to humans, the denotational sense is optional, and the emotional sense can occur alone. However, occurrences of the diminutive on nouns referring to non-human nouns are a minority: only about 5% of the total number of occurrences in the corpus under consideration (6.1).

7.3 Dalabon =wurd on verb complexes

With verb complexes also, the order of prevalence of the different types of meanings is inverted compared to human nouns: denotational meanings are optional, and emotional meanings are always active and can occur alone. Many occurrences may be interpreted under one of the denotational senses:

- one of the arguments is young or small, as in (20), repeated below;
- the event is incomplete (as in (14) in 5.2 above) or lacks intensity.

(Dalabon) 20120705b_004_MT 025 [Film]

[A child is taking a shower with the help of one of her carers.]

(20) *Woywoy bulu ka-h-naHna-n=wurd bulu ka-h-djukkodjukko-n.*
 INTJ.compass 3pl 3sg>3-R-see:REDUP=**DIM** 3pl 3sg>3-R-wash:REDUP-PRES
 look.after

'Good on her, she (kindly) looks after them [after the children], she washes them [she gives them a shower].'

However, there are occurrences where none of these denotational meanings applies. In (24), the speaker comments on the movie *Ten Canoes* (De Heer and Djigirr 2006) where the hero falls over, badly wounded. The hero (Fig. 6) is a brave, mature man who can hardly be described as young or small in stature. The fall cannot be described as incomplete (the man is lying down) or lacking in intensity, as it is quite brutal. Here, the diminutive =*wurd* solely encodes the speaker’s compassion about the hero of the movie, independent of any age or size assessment, or incompleteness of the event. Hence there is no denotational meaning, but only an emotional meaning.

Fig. 6 *Ridjimaril* in *Ten Canoes*, photo courtesy of *Vertigo Production*.

(Dalabon) 20120713a_002_MT 174 [Film]

(24) *Wa:h ka-h-rakka-ng=wurd.*
INTJ.surprise 3sg-R-fall-PPFV=**DIM**

‘Oh, he fell over poor thing.’

Speaker’s Kriol trans.: ‘*Bobala imin boldan.*’
(Kriol *bobala*, <Eng. ‘poor fellow’)



7.4 *Dalabon* =*wurd*: summary

The semantic prevalence of the Dalabon diminutive =*wurd* shifts when it is encliticized on a non-human noun or a verb complex, as opposed to a human noun. With human nouns, the denotational meaning is prevalent: it is always present, and non-denotational values (emotional or pragmatic) are better described as connotations. With non-human nouns and verb complexes, non-denotational meanings are prevalent: they are always present, while denotational meanings are optional. Hence in Dalabon like in many languages, the productivity and the semantic prevalence of diminutives is influenced by the morphosyntactic status and the semantics of the base (see Bauer (1997:540) following Nieuwenhuis (1985:221–223)²²).

7.5 Rembarrnga (-)kanja(ng)h

Contrary to Dalabon, in Rembarrnga the denotational meaning ‘small’ of (-)kanja(ng)h is always optional, including when the host is a human noun. Indeed, (-)kanja(ng)h can occur on nouns referring to persons who are not small (or young).²³ In (16) above (5.3) for instance, the referent is the speaker’s deceased husband, a relatively tall and strong man who passed away in his eighties. In this case, the diminutive only has an emotional meaning, expressing affection tinted with compassion. Like in Dalabon (7.1), the denotational meaning can also be absent when the base refers to a non-human.

As for verb complexes, the three occurrences of kanja(ng)h as a post-verbal free form are clearly emotional, expressing compassion for the main participant of the event, as in (21), repeated below.

(Rembarrnga) 20150826_000_DC 356 [Narr]

[Living alone after the rest of the family has left the station camp.]

(21) 'Yarra-bba-'buddan-nanoena-ninj 'yarra-bba-nini 'kanja:ngħ.
1.excl.a-du-night-see:REDUP-PCONT 1.excl.a-du-sit/be:PRES:REDUP DIM

decreasing intensity

‘Us two used to stay in the dark throughout the night, poor things.’

The denotational meanings are secondary on verbs. In (21), the context rules out the ‘little bit’ interpretation (since the speaker is in fact complaining that they had to stay alone for a long time). Denotational interpretations of post-verbal kanja(ng)h – ‘do x a little bit’ – never surfaced in spontaneous occurrences, and were only very marginally accepted in elicitation. In (25), the meaning ‘small’ is absent: the 80+ year-old speaker is talking about herself, and she can hardly be described as short, small or young. Hence the prevalent meaning in these post-verbal occurrences is emotional, and the denotation meaning is backgrounded.

(Rembarrnga) 20150815_001_NC 055 [Narr]

[About an old tree that was cut and removed near the speaker's home.]

(25) *Nga-bak-ru-nj, kanjargh, nga-bak-moemoe-malakka-yurd-minj.*
 1sg>3-BEN-cry-PPCT DIM 1sg>3-BEN-eyes-tears-flow-PPCT

‘I cried about it, poor me, I shed tears about it.’

To conclude, the denotational meaning ‘small’ of the Rembarrnga diminutive is always optional: it can be inactive whether the item follows a nominal or a verb complex. That is, whether with nouns or with verbs, non-denotational values (emotional and/or pragmatic) can always be the only functions of the Rembarrnga diminutive.

7.6 *Intermediate summary*

As summarized in Table 1, the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives differ in the relative prevalence of denotational vs emotional and pragmatic values, and in how this combines with morphosyntactic distribution. In Dalabon, denotational meanings are prevalent with human nouns, while emotional (and pragmatic) values are prevalent with verbs and non-human nouns. In Rembarrnga there is no clear variation in this respect, as emotional values are always prevalent.

Table 1. Correlations between morphosyntactic distribution and semantic prevalence of the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives =wurd and (-)kanja(ng)h²⁴

		freq.	denotational	non-denotational	dominant
(human) nouns	DAL	70%	always	connotation	denotational
	REM	63%	optional	always	emotional
(non-human) nouns	DAL	5%	optional	always	emotional
	REM	21%	optional	always	emotional
verb complexes	DAL	17%	optional	always	emotional
	REM	7%	optional	always	emotional

8. Same emotional meanings, different expressive tools?

8.1 *The persistence of emotional values*

The diminutives =*wurd* in Dalabon and (-)*kanja(ng)h* in Rembarrnga both follow their hosts and occur frequently on nouns referring to children. At first sight, a large number of tokens appear in similar contexts and with comparable meanings in both languages. However, in spite of significant grammatical and semantic convergences between Dalabon and Rembarrnga, the diminutives have developed from different roots. They are effectively different linguistic tools and display morphosyntactic as well as semantic nuances. As shown in Table 2, they differ in form, etymology, morphological status, denotational semantics, distribution, and semantic prevalence – but the emotional meanings, on the other hand, remain the same.

Table 2. Divergences and convergence between Dalabon =*wurd* and Rembarrnga (-)*kanja(ng)h* (following order of presentation in above sections).

feature	divergent	convergent
form	✓	
etymology	✓	
morphological status	✓	
denotational semantics	✓	
non-denotational semantics		✓
morphosyntactic distribution	✓	
semantic prevalence	✓	

The Dalabon diminutive =*wurd* relates etymologically to nouns that mean ‘child’, and its denotational meaning is ‘young’. The form is better described as an enclitic and occurs on most parts of speech including verb complexes. Which type of meaning is prevalent depends on the base to which =*wurd* is encliticized. In the most frequent case where the base is a noun referring to a human being, denotational meanings are prevalent; on other parts of speech including verb complexes, the non-denotational meanings – emotional and pragmatic – are prevalent. In

Rembarrnga, the diminutive (-)*kanja(ng)h* can be a prosodically free word, but when it is bound it is better described as a suffix rather than an enclitic. The form relates etymologically to what has been qualified as an adjective meaning ‘small’, and indeed the denotational meaning of the diminutive is ‘small’, rather than ‘young’ like in Dalabon. The Rembarrnga diminutive occurs mostly on nouns and its value is predominantly emotional irrespective of the morphosyntactic status of the host.

Remarkably, the non-denotational meanings of the two enclitics, and in particular their emotional values, coincide in spite of all other differences. Perhaps because Dalabon and Rembarrnga are spoken in the same cultural context, the emotional values in particular display remarkable consistency, with diminutives in both languages expressing compassion, affection and endearment when witnessing intimate routines.

8.2 Distribution and expressive potential

While the emotional meanings of the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives remain the same in the sense that both tools can express the same emotions, differences in their respective distribution and semantic prevalence could correlate with differences in the way speakers use these tools. Dalabon speakers can encliticize =*wurd* to a verb complex, so as to express an emotion about an entire event. When Rembarrnga speakers produce comparable descriptions, the form *kanja(ng)h* is a free word. This makes it more likely to move around the sentence and become, for instance, a free-standing interjection – which could, unlike an enclitic, express emotions independent of the linguistic description of a fact.

Importantly, as a result of non-denotational meaning and semantic prevalence combined, Rembarrnga speakers can use (-)*kanja(ng)h* to express affection for people who are old and not

small. This is both because (-)kanja(ng)h means ‘small’ rather than ‘young’, and because (-)kanja(ng)h is primarily emotional even when the base is a noun. Therefore, the denotational sense can be left inactive. This is illustrated in (16) above (5.3), and in (18), repeated here for convenience, where the speaker minimizes the potentially negative effect of her statement contradicting a senior relative she has respect for.

(Rembarrnga) REM_20160727a_002_DC_JF 089 (JF) [ConvEI]
 (18) *Gulaj noenda larrhka-ba* *indid* *djongok-kanjah?*
 glass DEM break.open-PPCT INTJ.quest aunt-DIM

‘He broke the glass [jar] indeed dear/little auntie?’

This interpersonally significant usage does not occur in Dalabon. Although minimizing functions are available in Dalabon, the diminutive =*wurd* is primarily denotational when the base is a noun. Therefore, the denotational meaning ‘young’ always applies, and =*wurd* does not occur on nouns referring to older people. Thus, in spite of comparable non-denotational categories and dominant contexts of usage, the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives may also occasionally carry out relatively different discourse and interpersonal functions, due to their respective distribution. In this case, both denotational semantics and formal properties governing distribution have an impact on what speakers can or cannot say and do with their respective expressive tools, even though the emotional semantic categories expressed by these tools are essentially identical.

8.3 *Linguistic properties impacting expressive resources*

The respective etymologies of the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives and their forms may account for some of the differences between the resulting tools, an in particular between their expressive functions. With respect to semantics, the difference in denotational meanings

matches the semantics of the etymon, namely *wurd* ‘child’ extending to ‘young’ in Dalabon, and *kanja(ng)h* ‘small’ remaining ‘small’ in Rembarrnga. With respect to morphosyntactic distribution, the occurrence of Dalabon =*wurd* on verb complexes may have been facilitated by its form, being a single syllable starting with an approximant. This approximant sometimes merges phonologically with the final vowel or nasal consonant of the host (3.1) – and indeed, most verb complexes in Dalabon end with a nasal consonant. By contrast, the Rembarrnga (-)*kanja(ng)h* has two syllables and an initial occlusive. While this clearly did not prevent it from binding with nouns, which are rarely more than three syllables, this may be an obstacle with verb complexes, which are rarely less than four syllables.²⁵ This may contribute to explain why following verb complexes, *kanja(ng)h* is a free form comparable to an interjection. To that extent, the particular linguistic properties of these diminutives impacts their semantics, their distribution, and therefore their expressive potential. In future research, the effects of these differences in terms of expressive potential could be explored experimentally, for instance using communication chains (Sidnell and Enfield 2012; Bebbington et al. 2017). This would shed a new and very interesting light onto the role of language in determining communication, and onto the linguistic relativity hypothesis more generally.

9. Conclusion

The Dalabon and Rembarrnga Gunwinyguan languages share much of their grammar and semantics and are spoken in very comparable sociocultural context. Both languages have postposed diminutives which, at first glance, occur in similar contexts – namely qualifying children. However, closer analysis reveals that the two linguistic tools differ in many ways. The Dalabon diminutive enclitic =*wurd* is a morphologically flexible all-purpose diminutive with predominantly denotational semantics on human nouns and predominantly non-

denotational semantics on all other parts of speech. The Rembarrnga diminutive (-)kanja(ng)h, on the other hand, is primarily a nominal suffix with predominantly emotional semantics. It rarely occurs on verbs, and when it does, it is not a bound but a free form.

An important observation is that in spite of notable differences in their formal properties and denotational semantics, the emotional meanings of these two morphological tools are remarkably similar. The Dalabon diminutive and the Rembarrnga diminutive occur in a very comparable range of quite specific emotional contexts, expressing compassion, affection, and endearment when witnessing intimate routines. As shown by Ponsonnet (2014b:Chapter 4) for Dalabon, and by more recent data in Rembarrnga, Bininj Gun-wok and Kriol, the local English-based creole, this threefold combination of emotions is typical of expressive resources in this culturally unified part of the Gunwinyguan region. In this respect, emotional semantics seems relatively impervious to formal variation. Regardless of the type of resources (evaluative morphology, interjections, prosody), and of languages, expressive resources in this region consistently express compassion, affection and endearment when witnessing intimate routines. While these three semantic categories are attested emotional extensions of diminutives across the world (Ponsonnet 2018a), their systematic association is not particularly widespread, and may in fact be an areal feature. Further research will be necessary to confirm whether it is specific to the Gunwinyguan region, or applies to some other language families on the Australian continent.

In spite of major resemblances in their non-denotational meanings, the formal linguistic properties of the Dalabon and Rembarrnga diminutives seem to impose differences in what speakers can express with their respective tool in each language. Namely, differences in distributional properties constrain the contexts in which the diminutives can be used, and

therefore when and with respect to who they can express emotions. What differences such linguistic nuances imply in terms of communication potential, how this impacts interactions between speakers in each language, and whether speakers' attitudes towards emotions may be modified in consequence, are questions for future research.

The above conclusions about the nature of emotional semantic categories and the impact of linguistic properties upon the expression of emotions are based on “expressively rich” data collected among female speakers using non-standard documentation methods. With respect to Gunwinyguan diminutives in particular, traditional methods of language documentation had failed: previous linguistic descriptions had largely overlooked diminutives and their emotional values. This failure may be explained by an asymmetry in the gender of speakers from whom the data is collected, as well as by an (equally gendered) imbalance in the genres privileged in language documentation. As a result of the biases, standard data-collection methods in field linguistics are not particularly well tailored to capture expressive features, which typically flourish in female speech. For our understanding of expressivity across languages to progress, linguists need to update their methods in this respect.

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Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to the language communities and consultants who helped me throughout this project, in particular Nellie Camfoo and Dorothy Cameron. Data collection was funded by a fellowship (2014-2015) under the ASLAN project (ANR-10-LABX-0081) of Université de Lyon within the program “Investissements d’Avenir” (ANR-11-IDEX-0007) of the French government (National Research Agency, ANR) and by the Australian Research Council (DECRA160100216).

¹ *Jedda* (Chauvel 1955), *Rabbit-proof Fence* (Noyce 2002), *Ten Canoes* (De Heer and Djigirr 2006), *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton 2009).

² Diminutives are attested in male's speech at least in Dalabon, but due to lack of data collected with male speakers (2.2) I cannot evaluate their frequency.

³ Diminutive forms are also attested in several other Gunwinyguan languages – Western branch: Waray (Harvey n.d.); Eastern branch: Ngalakgan (Merlan 1983:195) and Ngandi (Heath 1978:145); Nunggubuyu/Wubuy (Heath 1984:492). However, diminutives are hardly discussed in much detail and their emotional values are never acknowledged.

⁴ Heath's dictionary (1982:233) and grammar (1984:492) clearly identify the diminutive in Nunggubuyu/Wubuy, and the grammar has a whole paragraph about them. However, the paragraph states that the diminutive is infrequent, did not occur in texts (but only in unrecorded sessions) and does not have emotional values.

⁵ In line with these observations, Merlan & Jacq's (2005) dictionary of Jawoyn is very detailed in the emotional domain, and clearly identifies an expressive affix. (There is no published grammar of Jawoyn to date.)

⁶ Which are a well-established and much-appreciated genre for both genders.

⁷ Roger Hart's autobiographic Guugu Yimidhirr (Pama-Nyungan, Cape York) narrative discussed in Haviland (Haviland 1991) suggests that diversification may also occur with men, given adequate opportunities.

⁸ There is also a less frequent diminutive verbal prefix, *yaw-*, which occurs in the Kunwinjku Bininj Gun-wok dialect as well (see 2.3.1).

⁹ Related forms (*wurdurd* and *wurdyaw*) also mean 'child' in neighboring Bininj Gun-wok dialects (Garde 2011).

¹⁰ Data types: [ContEI]: contextualized elicitation; [ConvEI]: conversation in the course of elicitation; [EI]: standard elicitation; [Film]: comment on movie; [Narr]: narratives; [Stim]: response to elicitation stimuli.

¹¹ Abbreviations not listed in the Leipzig glossing rules – a: augmented; APPR: apprehensive; approb: approbation; compass: compassion; DIM: diminutive; EMPH: emphasis; exclm: exclamative; FILL: morphological filler; h: higher animate; HESIT: hesitation; INCH: inchoative; INTERR: interrogative; m: minimal; PCONT: past continuous; P: past; PIPFV: past imperfective; PPCT: past punctual; PPFV: past perfective; quest: question; R: realis mood; REDUP: reduplication; RR: reflexive/reciprocal; SEQ: sequential; SUB: subordinate marker.

¹² The notions of words, clitics and affixes are difficult to apply in the Gunwinyguan family (Bickel & Zúñiga 2017; Evans 2017).

¹³ There are no phonemic voicing contrasts in Gunwinyguan languages. In the orthography, <k> represents velar plosives irrespective of this contrast.

¹⁴ One may prefer to analyze the bound and free forms as two different linguistic items. This would also be a valid analysis, but given the semantic coherence between the forms and in the context of this article, this distinction brings no gain.

¹⁵ The diminutivized compound *dakku-kanjah* 'little child' is frequent, like *wurdurd-wurd* is in Dalabon, but without the reduplication "effect".

¹⁶ In Merlan's orthography: *ganyah*.

¹⁷ Words for 'stone' commonly extend to 'money' in Aboriginal Australian languages.

¹⁸ And/or when the diminutive has emotional or pragmatic value, as further discussed in 7.5.

¹⁹ In this example, the use of the person prefix *buka-*, indexing an agent lower in animacy than its patient, would be expected, but the speaker used *ka-*.

²⁰ As mentioned above, these contexts are not mutually exclusive, and examples (16) and (17) are both tinted with compassion.

²¹ This may partly be explained by the more frequent usage of spontaneous conversation during elicitation sessions in Dalabon compared to Rembarrnga.

²² These correlations between morphosyntactic distribution and semantic prevalence are consistent with the hierarchy postulated by Bauer (1997:540) following Nieuwenhuis (1985:221–223), albeit with some nuances. In particular, in Dalabon the productivity and semantic prevalence of diminutives depends on lexical semantics (human vs non-human) as well as by the purely morphosyntactic status of the base.

²³ The number of occurrences is low, so that this does not make *(-)kanja(ng)h* significantly more frequent on human nouns (6.2).

²⁴ The totals in the frequency column do not amount to 100% because not all parts of speech are listed.

²⁵ The role of time-depth is unclear, because neither the semantics nor the forms of the two enclitics gives us a consistent idea of which one is older than the other.