

## Diminutive *-let* in English

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*The diminutive suffix -let is generally considered a peripheral phenomenon in English today. The present study deals with the status of this suffix in present-day language, in comparison to its occurrence over the past two hundred years. Differences between British and American English are also considered. Quantitative methods based on large electronic corpora of English are combined with qualitative methods employed to study the use of diminutives in -let in the context of discourse and the social situation they occur in. A special focus is on the communicative functions of diminutives denoting persons in social roles, e.g. wifelet and princelet.*

**Keywords:** *diminutive suffix, diminutive use, semantic patterns, communicative functions, qualitative and quantitative methods, corpus-based analysis*

### 1. Introduction

English is said to have no diminutives (cf., e.g., Grandi 2011: 7). Yet, this is true only under specific conditions. These are: (a) that diminutives are considered a morphological category, and (b) that they are as frequent in use as diminutives in such languages as Spanish, Italian, Russian and Polish. If, however, condition (a) is rejected and diminutives are regarded not as a morphological, but an onomasiological category (as, we believe, they should be), then English does have diminutives, namely forms which are modified not by adding a suffix, but by adding *little*, as in, e.g., *damn little game* or *nice little garden*. Diminutives of this type are frequent in English (cf. Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994: 114-116, Schneider 2003: 122-137). If, on the other hand, condition (b) is rejected and frequency is not a criterion, then English also has morphological diminutives, i.e. forms derived by suffixation. The most prototypical examples in this category are formations with the suffix *-let* (e.g. *cubelet*, *wifelet*, *princelet*), because they display a number of properties which derivations formed with competing suffixes (including, first and foremost, *-ie* and *-ette*) do not have (cf. section 2, also Schneider 2003: 86-102).

The diminutive suffixes of a language are often dealt with collectively or treated as interchangeable, especially regarding their use (cf., e.g., Böhmerová 2011). By contrast, we would like to emphasize that each suffix merits an in-depth study (cf. also Schneider 2003: 237). In this spirit, the present paper is focused on the English suffix *-let*. While *-let* is generally considered prototypical, it is also considered peripheral (cf. Rotzoll 1910: 30, Grandi 2011: 7, Fn 5). In this paper, we wish to establish how peripheral formations with this prototypical suffix actually are in present-day English, in which contexts they occur and what purposes they are used for.

To illustrate the phenomena examined in this paper, two examples are presented here (unless otherwise stated, formations with *-let* in context are highlighted in bold type).

- (1) “Jane is helping Batty with her pajamas. They’ll be here soon.” Skye shook her head violently, tossing **droplets** of water across the room. “Where’s your Latin dictionary? I need to look up *revenge*.”

(Jeanne Birdsall 2011: *The Penderwicks at Point Mouette*. N.Y.: Knopf, 3; original italics)

- (2) Angry Alan, Sally the **starlet** and a silent lurker  
(*The Guardian*, July 8, 2011)

The first example is an excerpt from a novel for girls aged between approximately ten and fourteen years, written by an author from the United States. The story told is set in contemporary America. The second example is a headline from the British newspaper *The Guardian*. Both publications appeared in 2011.

These purely illustrative examples suggest that formations with *-let* are used in present-day English, that they are used in British as well as in American English, that they occur in different discourse types and genres, e.g. prose fiction and newspaper headlines, that they may have quantifying or qualifying meaning, and that they can be employed for description or for evaluation. Thus, *droplets* is used to denote very small quantities of water in a descriptive passage of the narrative in example (1), whereas *starlet* in example (2) serves to characterize Sally as a would-be star.

The question is, however, whether *droplets* and *starlet* actually count as ‘true’ diminutives. True diminutives are morphologically and semantically transparent. These are forms in which base and suffix can be clearly identified. In this case, the base is a commonly used word whose phonological shape is not (historically or idiosyncratically) changed through suffixation and the word class and the denotation of the base are retained. The suffix supplies only an additional meaning component which could be glossed as [+LITTLE], encompassing the polysemous and ambivalent nature of the adjective *little* (cf. Schneider 2003: 4-5). Both *droplets* and *starlet* meet these criteria. That *starlet* is used metaphorically to refer to a particular kind of person rather than a celestial body is not effected by suffixation but inherited from the base word *star*.

More crucially, the question is whether the component parts of *droplet*, *starlet* and other formations with this same suffix can be identified only by professional linguists (second-order perspective) or also by lay persons (first-order perspective). In other words, the question is whether ordinary language users are able to decompose such forms and have the underlying word formation pattern at their disposal when actively communicating. This can, of course, be tested experimentally, but such experiments do not necessarily permit conclusions as to the everyday use of diminutives with *-let*. At least such experiments should be supplemented by corpus evidence showing that such formations are created on the spur of the moment, which may, however, be hard to prove. Ideally, instances are found in which diminutive forms co-occur with the respective base forms. Obviously, these aspects cannot be established by examining individual forms in isolation. Hence, all diminutive forms must be studied in context. In addition to that, the type and token frequencies of formations with *-let* have to be analyzed. Bearing in mind the difficulties in determining whether or not a form is a true diminutive, alive and kicking, and not a lexicalized item, the best strategy seems to be to consider without prejudice or any preconceived ideas all formations with the suffix *-let*.

Against this background, the questions posed in this paper include the following: What is the status of *let*-formations in present-day English? How peripheral are they today? Were they more frequent in earlier times? In what varieties, genres and contexts do they occur? What are their meanings and functions? In answering these questions, issues are addressed which are discussed in the literature on *-let* in English, which is surveyed in the

next section to outline what we know and what we do not know about this diminutive suffix. The approach adopted in this study and the methods employed in answering the questions posed are briefly described in section 3. Findings are presented and discussed in section 4, before we conclude in section 5.

## 2. What do we know about *let*-diminutives?

The English suffix *-let* is probably among the first diminutive suffixes studied in linguistics. Early accounts date back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (cf., e.g., Coleridge 1857). This suffix has received widespread attention ever since in the literature on English diminutives and, more generally, English word-formation (cf., e.g., Charleston 1960, Marchand 1969, Cannon 1987, Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994, Schneider 2003). In the present section, a summary is provided of the most relevant insights. These concern in particular the formation process and the meaning of the output forms.

The formation process can be characterized by describing the formal properties of input and output. The input consists of suffix and base. In present-day English, the suffix *-let* occurs in writing with invariant spelling. Pronunciation can, however, differ. The suffix vowel is pronounced as either schwa, [ə], or the short i-sound [ɪ]. The base words are nouns, and specifically general nouns, but not, as a rule, (first) names. The default case is that these nouns are monosyllabic, consisting of a closed syllable, i.e. ending in a consonant. Typical examples include *book*, *flat*, *pig* and *king*. As word class is retained, the resulting output forms are also nouns, specifically bisyllabic words with trochaic feet. Suffixation does not cause any formal changes in the output, with the exception that forms derived from bases ending in [l] are spelled with only one <l>, cf., e.g. *owlet* < *owl*.

While these properties make *let*-formations typical diminutives, such formal properties are of lesser importance in the context of the present study. Meaning, by contrast, plays a more crucial role. Essentially, three semantic patterns can be identified. These are:

- Pattern 1: N ‘object’ + *-let* > N ‘small object’
- Pattern 2: N ‘animal’ + *-let* > N ‘young animal’
- Pattern 3: N ‘person’ + *-let* > N ‘despicable person’

The first pattern involves base nouns denoting inanimate objects, including artefacts (e.g. cubes) as well as natural phenomena (e.g. streams). The suffixed forms derived from these nouns refer to members of the respective category of objects which are smaller than prototypical members, e.g., *cubelet* ‘small cube’, *streamlet* ‘small stream’, *droplets* ‘small drops’. Thus, in these derivations the suffix modifies the meaning of the base word purely in terms of quantity.

The second pattern involves base nouns denoting animals, e.g. pigs and skunks. In this case, the suffixed forms refer to members of the respective animal category which are younger, and hence smaller, than adult members, e.g. *piglet* ‘young pig’ and *skunklet* ‘young skunk’. In other words, size is implied by age. Corpus data suggest that this second pattern can be extended to also include plants, cf., e.g., *nutlet* ‘small or “young”, i.e. not fully-grown nut, or seed’ and *treelet* ‘small or young tree as seedling or sapling’ (cf. [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary)). Hence, the second pattern can be modified as follows:

Pattern 2.': N 'animal/plant' + *-let* > N 'young animal/plant'

Finally, the input forms in the third pattern are nouns denoting persons, specifically social roles or functions persons may appear in, e.g. *star*, *wife*, *prince*. The output forms derived from these are used to refer to individuals who, in the eyes of the speaker who uses these forms, do not perform adequately or do not live up to the expectations connected to the respective role or function, e.g. *starlet*, *wifelet*, *princelet*. In such forms, the suffix modifies the meaning of the base word in qualitative terms, as an evaluation is expressed.

These are the basic facts concerning the suffixation process and the meaning of the output forms (for more details cf. Schneider 2003: 96-102). The status of these generalizations is, however, not clear as they have, as a rule, been arrived at in purely qualitative studies (which include Schneider 2003). Nor is the lexicological status of these formations clear. Some are fully lexicalized and do not meet the criteria for 'true' diminutives mentioned in section 1. For instance, a *booklet* is not just a small book, but, arguably, a different and more specific kind of publication. Furthermore, some formations are listed in (most) dictionaries, e.g. *droplet* and *piglet*, others are not (as a rule), e.g. *cubelet* and *skunklet*. Although dictionaries are not the most reliable source in this regard, this may mean that those forms which do not have a dictionary entry may be ad-hoc formations. Ultimately, the question for us is whether such distinctions really matter from a first-order perspective, i.e. for the language users. It is, for instance, perfectly conceivable that forms generally classified as lexicalized are used as 'true' diminutives. However, this can only be adequately studied by examining *let*-formations in context (cf. section 4.2).

Further observations about *let*-formations mentioned in previous literature concern their frequencies in time, their distribution across varieties of English and their occurrence in spoken and written discourse. For example, it is claimed that the suffix was particularly productive in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (cf. Marchand 1969: 326, Strang 1970: 90), while it is not clear what this claim is based on. It is furthermore claimed that *let*-formations are particularly frequent in American English (cf. Marchand 1969: 326), while it is not clear whether or how contrastive work was carried out. Finally, it is claimed that *let*-formations are used predominantly in writing and especially in fictional genres (Schneider 2003: 102), which is not surprising because studies are overwhelmingly based on written material, often prose fiction, despite the fact that diminutives are often considered a feature of spoken language (e.g. conversations between parents and their children). These three claims will also be tested in the study reported on in the remainder of this article. The tools which were employed for this purpose are described in the following section.

### 3. Data and method

Previous studies of diminutives are mostly qualitative in nature. Predominantly authors concentrate on structural and semantic aspects and largely neglect the communicative functions of diminutive forms. The material used for analysis is often intuitive data, based on the researchers' own introspection. Overall, such approaches can be summarized as 'armchair methods' (cf., e.g., Clark & Bangeter 2004). The present study differs from these previous studies in a number of significant ways. It is corpus-based and combines qualitative and quantitative methods. Forms are analyzed in context, paying special attention to their functions, but frequencies are also established. The approach is discourse-analytic and, where

dialogue is examined, interactional. This means that the diminutive forms are not only analyzed in the context of the utterance they occur in; the surrounding utterances or turns-at-talk are also taken into consideration. Furthermore, not only the co-text, but also the situational context is included in terms of time, place and occasion, and, more importantly, in terms of participant constellations as determined by social distance and the power relationship which holds between them or is being negotiated. Finally, the approach adopted can be characterized as strictly synchronic in the sense that the focus is on Modern English and present-day usage. Unlike many earlier studies, we are not interested in the origin and historical development of the English suffix *-let*. We do, however, consider the frequencies of *let*-formations over the past two hundred years.

For the quantitative part of this paper (cf. section 4.1), three large electronic corpora were used. These are the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), the Internet and Google Books. COCA is a 425 million word corpus which includes spoken and written language samples from the USA. The data were collected by Mark Davies at Brigham Young University between 1990 and 2011 (cf. <http://corpus.byu.edu/coca/>). This corpus was searched to establish the relative frequencies of selected *let*-formations (cf. section 4.1) in one fairly homogeneous dataset covering twenty years in one national variety of the English language. Secondly, the English pages of the Internet were used for Google searches to determine the raw overall frequencies of the same selection of *let*-formations. Finally, Google Books provided the data for much more specific analyses, in which the Google NGram Viewer was employed as a search tool. Google Books results from the scanning of published books, which was started in 2009 and is still continuing. Currently, this corpus includes 500 billion words from seven languages, of which 361 billion alone (i.e. 72.2 %) are English words (the other six languages are Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Russian and Spanish). The collection of scanned books in English consists of two data sets. These are books published in the United States (“American English”) and books published in the United Kingdom (“British English”). It is thus possible to compare these two varieties, even though place of publication alone is not a very reliable parameter. All books were published between the year 1800 and today so that this corpus covers the past two hundred years. The two English data sets were searched with the Google NGram Viewer, which can be employed to visualize in graphs the frequencies of occurrence of up to five words (or, more precisely, ‘strings of letters preceded and followed by a space’). Sequences of five words are called 5-grams, individual words accordingly 1-grams, but the term n-grams also applies to the graphs now. For the present study, only a selection of 1-grams, i.e. individual *let*-formations, were searched for. As today many more books are published than a hundred or two hundred years ago, the search results are normalized (cf. <http://ngrams.googlelabs.com>).

For the qualitative part of this paper (cf. section 4.2), the so-called philological method was employed (cf. Jucker 2009). This way a relatively small number of *let*-formations could be identified in a range of materials, including TV series, drama, prose and newspapers. One advantage of this method is that for each form the complete context is available for analysis and interpretation. Searches were carried out manually, i.e. through reading, but also supported by Internet searches.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Some quantitative findings

For the quantitative part of this study, ten *let*-formations were selected which are often mentioned in the literature dealing with the suffix *-let*. These ten forms are (in alphabetical order): *booklet*, *bosslet*, *droplet*, *froglet*, *leaflet*, *piglet*, *playlet*, *starlet*, *streamlet*, *wifelet*. These forms also represent the three semantic patterns discussed in section 2. Five forms represent the first pattern, here symbolized by the letter ‘O’ for ‘object’, viz. *booklet*, *droplet*, *leaflet*, *playlet* and *streamlet*. Two forms represent the second pattern, viz. *piglet* and *froglet*, and the remaining three the third semantic pattern, viz. *bosslet*, *starlet* and *wifelet*. These two patterns are abbreviated respectively by the letters ‘A’ for ‘animal’ and ‘P’ for ‘person’. In table 1, the ten forms appear in the left-hand column in order of decreasing frequency (in COCA). After each form, the letter is given which stands for the semantic pattern this form belongs to. The middle column shows the frequency of each of the ten forms in COCA, while the right-hand column shows the frequencies of these forms on the English pages of the Internet, for comparison.

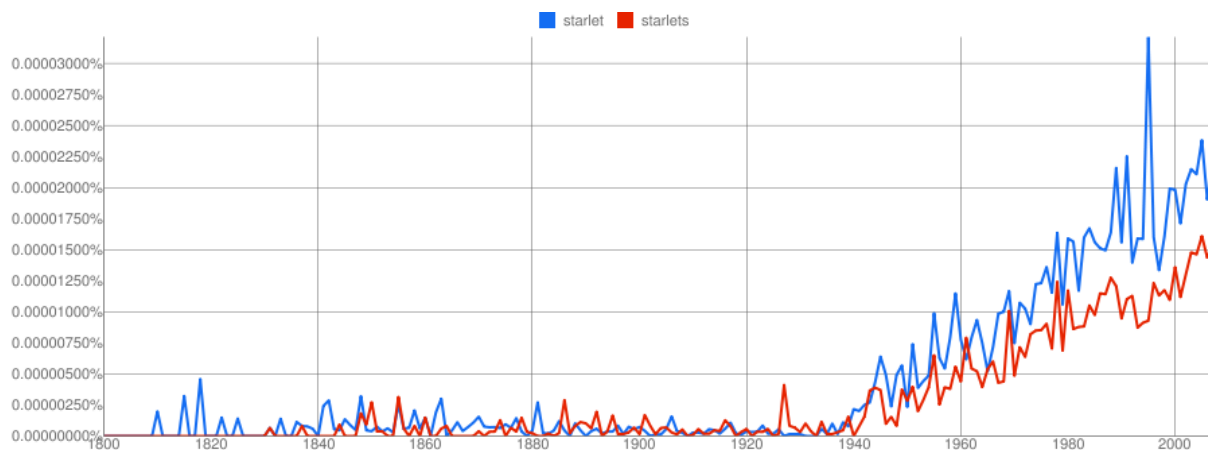
Form (SEM)	COCA	Internet (Eng)
<i>booklet</i> (O)	1,437	100,800,000
<i>droplet</i> (O)	1,037	23,730,000
<i>leaflet</i> (O)	954	34,700,000
<i>starlet</i> (P)	446	53,720,000
<i>piglet</i> (A)	263	16,450,000
<i>playlet</i> (O)	17	536,000
<i>streamlet</i> (O)	14	307,800
<i>froglet</i> (A)	13	279,000
<i>bosslet</i> (P)	7	88,036
<i>wifelet</i> (P)	0	76,500

Table 1 *Frequencies of ten selected let-formations in two corpora of English*

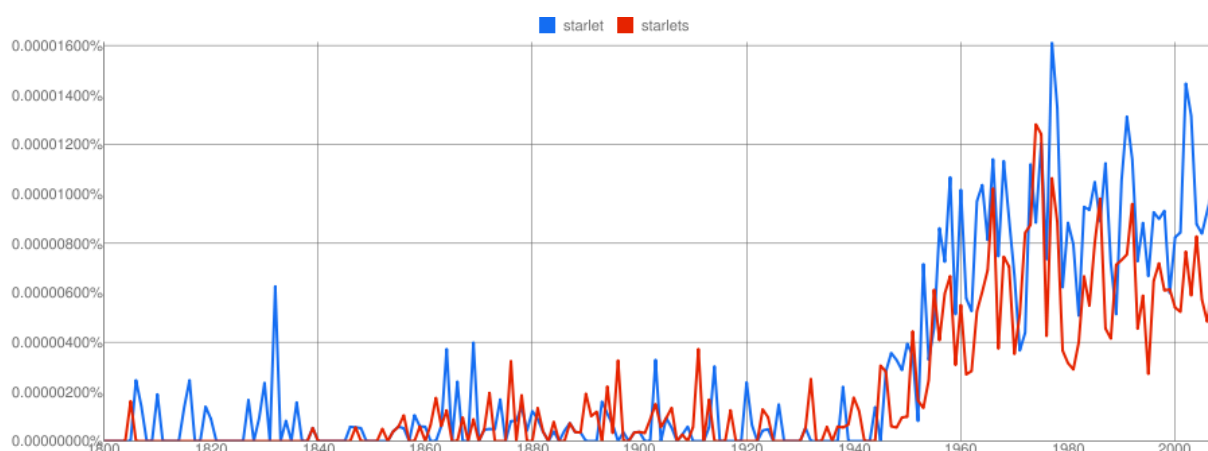
In eight of the ten cases, the frequencies of the formations correspond across corpora. *Droplet* and *starlet* are the only exceptions. In COCA, these two forms appear in second and fourth position respectively, but in the Internet corpus in fourth and second position. Overall, *booklet* is by far the most frequent of the ten items, with more than 100 million occurrences on the English Internet pages. This high frequency may be interpreted as reflecting a high degree of lexicalization. The last five forms occur with much lower frequencies than the first five. While *piglet*, in position 5, has over 16 million occurrences on the Internet, *playlet*, in position 6, has only about 500,000. In COCA, *playlet*, *streamlet*, *froglet* and *bosslet* have very low frequencies, and *wifelet* does not occur at all in this corpus. Yet, in the Internet corpus this particular form has more than 75,000 occurrences (cf. section 4.2 for examples of *wifelet* in context).

These numbers have to be treated with great caution. They merely show general trends and a rough picture. A more adequate and differentiated picture can only be achieved by inspecting the contexts in which these forms are used. Often, frequencies are deceptive as they result from the repeated use of forms referring to one and the same specific entity. For instance, the high frequency of *piglet* can in part be accounted for by references to the fictional character Piglet in A.A. Milne's "Winnie-the-Pooh" books and the films based on these books. Similar cases include *kinglet* and *princelet*. Kinglets are a small family of birds (zool.: *Regulidae*), and there is a street in London called Princelet Street (Spitalfields, London E1), which is relatively well-known for its history. At the same time, the same formations are also used as 'true' diminutives (cf. section 4.2 for such an example of *princelet*). Genuine diminutive use is, thus, not blocked even by generic names such as *kinglets* for birds, let alone by famous proper names.

It is not per se clear how to rate the frequencies presented above for present-day English. If Marchand (1969) and Strang (1970) were right in saying that *let*-suffixation was most productive in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (cf. section 2) and if it is true that *let*-formations are peripheral today (cf. section 1), then the frequencies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century should be considerably higher than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Graphs generated with the Google NGram Viewer can be used to examine whether this is the case, bearing in mind that the numbers included in these graphs have been normalized as regards the number of publications (cf. section 3). Furthermore, these graphs can be employed to compare frequencies in British and American English (BrE and AmE), which helps to answer the question whether *let*-formations are more frequent in American English (cf. section 2). Graph 1 (AmE) and graph 2 (BrE) show the frequencies of *starlet* in the past two hundred years. The frequencies of the singular form appear in blue, those of the plural *starlets* appear in red.



Graph 1 *Frequencies of starlet and starlets in American English*



Graph 2 *Frequencies of starlet and starlets in British English*

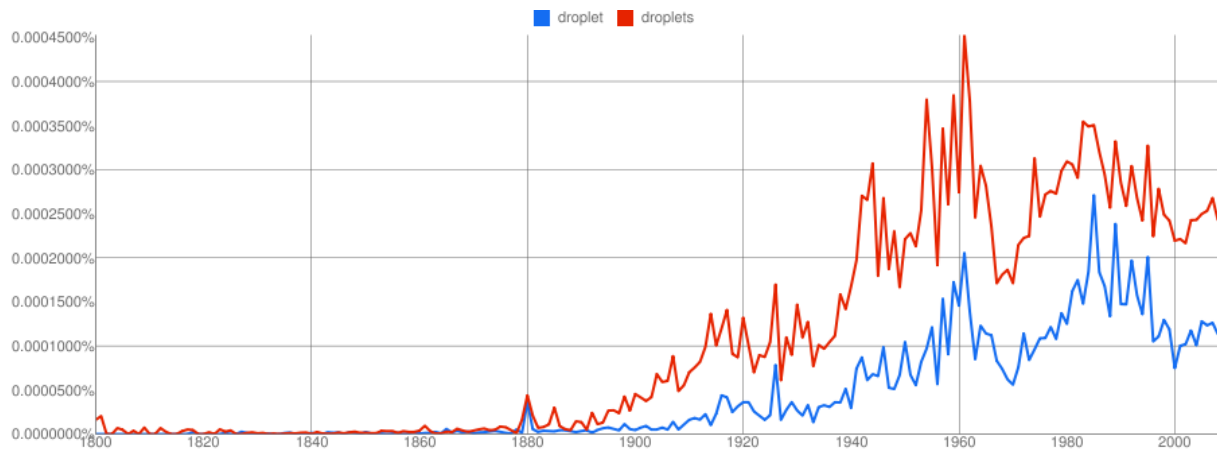
Note that the graphs are not directly comparable. While the x-axis, which shows the time line from the year 1800 until 2000+, is the same in all graphs, the y-axis is variable. In graph 1 (AmE), the highest value is 0.00003%, in graph 2 (BrE) it is 0.000016%. Thus, frequencies after 1940 are considerably higher in AmE, supporting the idea that *let*-formations are more typical of this variety by comparison to BrE. In either case, the singular forms outnumber the plural forms.

In AmE, *starlet* starts to be used in about 1810, in BrE only a few years earlier. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century frequencies are, however, equally low. Then, there is a sudden step increase in both varieties, starting in 1940. This increase may have been caused by the increasing success of the cinema, i.e. the context in which *starlet* has been used referring to young female actors. Before that time, and especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the meaning of *starlet* was ‘a starfish’ (cf. Strang 1970: 90). However, the historical development of *starlet* in the past two hundred years merits further investigation.

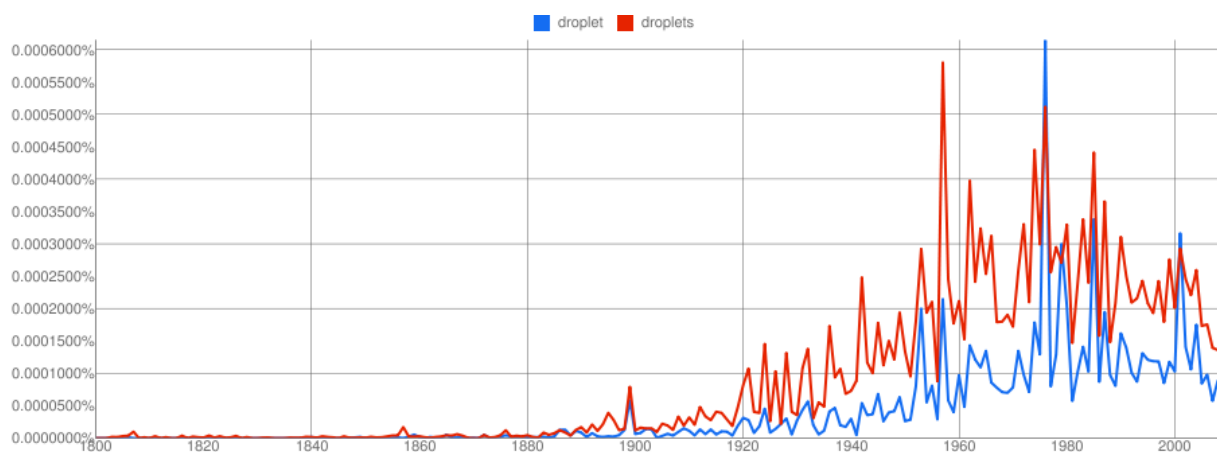
It could be argued that *starlet* is not a typical example of *let*-diminutives because its development and current use are more particular than in other cases. While we do believe that progress can be made in the study of diminutives by considering individual formations in their various contexts instead of generalizing across all *let*-formations, we do not believe that *starlet* is radically different from other formations. For comparison, we would like contrast



the development of *starlet* with that of *droplet* (for basic differences between *starlet* and *droplet* cf. section 1). Graph 3 (AmE) and graph 4 (BrE) show the frequencies of *droplet* in the past two hundred years. In these graphs, too, the frequencies of the singular form appear in blue, those of the plural appear in red. Again, it must be remembered that the frequencies are normalized.



Graph 3 *Frequencies of droplet and droplets in American English*

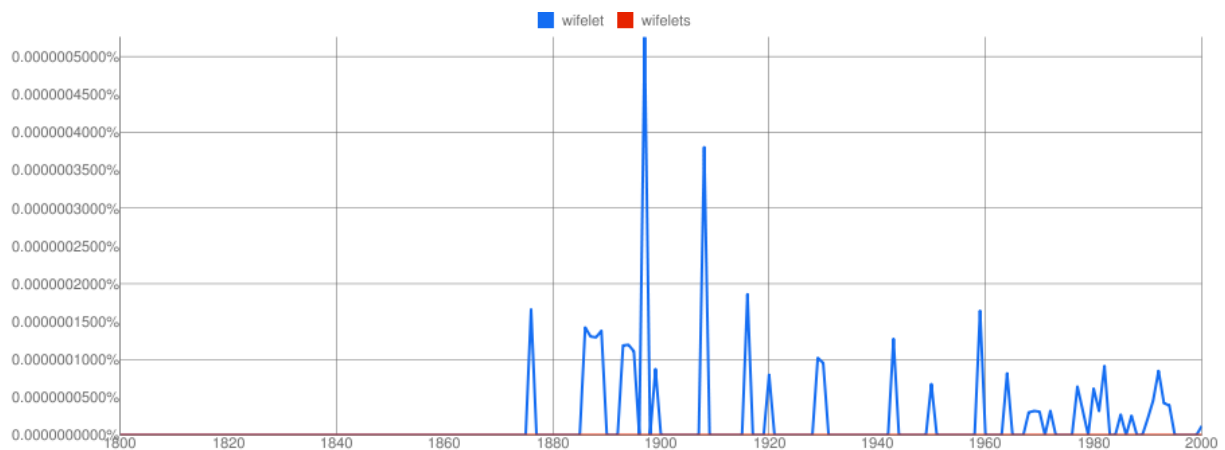


Graph 4 *Frequencies of droplet and droplets in British English*

In these two graphs, as in graphs 1 and 2, the y-axes do not have the same frequency range. The highest value for AmE is 0.00045% (graph 3), for BrE it is 0.0006% (graph 4). However, these differences only concern the highest peaks. By and large, the frequencies are rather similar, at an estimated 0.0003% on average in the past fifty years (needless to say, more precise calculations can and should be made, but are not relevant here). This means that *droplet* is considerably more frequent than *starlet* (cf. also graph 5). This finding correlates with the different frequencies of *droplet* and *starlet* observed in COCA, but not, interestingly, on the Internet (cf. table 1). A further difference between *droplet* and *starlet* concerns the relative frequencies of singular and plural forms. In the case of *starlet*, the singular forms outnumber the plural forms, whereas in the case of *droplet* the plural forms clearly outnumber the singular forms, especially in AmE. This is not surprising as speakers are more

likely to use *starlet* to refer to an individual person (as in example 2), whereas droplets are likely not to occur alone and hence be referred to collectively (as in example 1). In both varieties of English under inspection, *droplet* has been in use since 1800 (and before), with low frequencies in the better part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and a slow increase beginning in the 1880s. The increase becomes steeper after 1920 and reaches a high peak in the late 1950s and another peak around 1980. There is a decrease in the new millennium, especially in BrE, which, incidentally, is also true for the frequency of *starlet* in BrE, but not in AmE. While the curves for *droplet* and *starlet* are not identical, they show a very similar pattern which suggests that *let*-formations are much more frequent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly in the past fifty years or so, than in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reasons for these developments and specifically the (steep) increases can probably be found in in-depths studies of these formations in context. Such analyses are, however, outside the scope of the present paper.

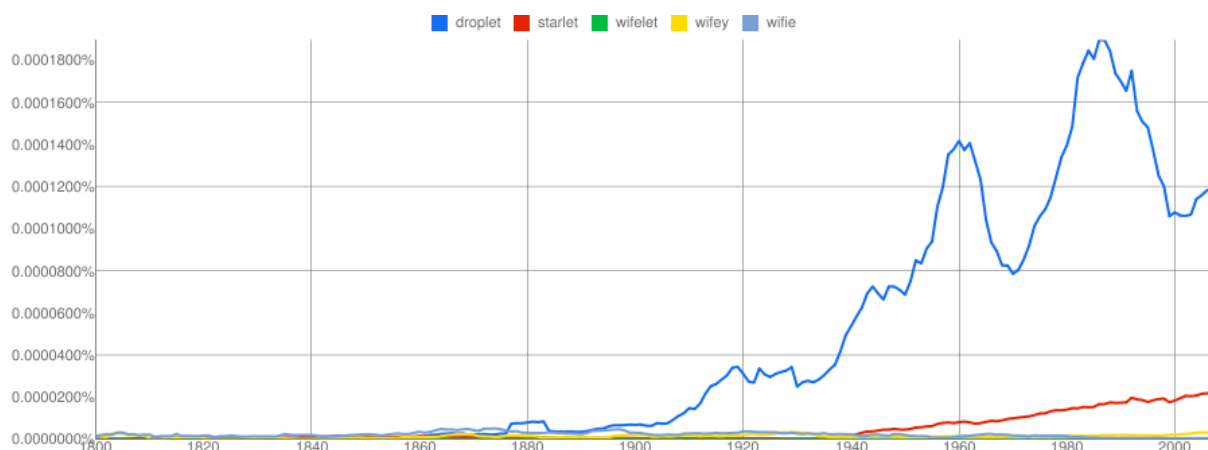
The last two graphs included in this paper concern the form *wifelet*, which will be examined in more detail in section 4.2 below. Graph 5 shows the frequencies of the singular and plural forms (in blue and red respectively) in AmE.



Graph 5 *Frequencies of wifelet and wifelets in American English*

As can be seen immediately, the plural form *wifelets* is so rare that it does not appear in the graph at all. In this graph, the highest value on the y-axis is 0.0000005%, which means that *wifelet* is very much less frequent than *starlet* and *droplet*, which is in keeping with the frequencies shown in table 1 where *wifelet* has the lowest occurrence of all ten formations in the Internet corpus and no occurrence in COCA. Between 1800 and 2000+, *wifelet* appears for the first time in the 1870s. Its use reaches its highest peak (just beyond the highest value on the y-axis) shortly before 1900 and another high peak around 1910. The curve suggests that it has been used continuously only after 1960, albeit at a very low frequency.

Graph 6 compares the frequency of *wifelet* (in green) with the frequencies of *droplet* (blue) and *starlet* (red) and also displays the frequencies of a competing diminutive form in two alternative spellings, viz. *wifey* (yellow) and *wifie* (light blue) (cf. Schneider 2003: 119). Plural forms are not considered here. The language variety is AmE.



Graph 6 *Frequencies of droplet, starlet, wifelet, wifey and wifie in American English*

Although its plural form *droplets* is much more frequent (cf. graph 3), even the singular *droplet* is clearly the dominant formation in this comparison. Next in frequency is *starlet*, whose curve, in contrast to that of *droplet*, is on a continuous increase ever since 1940. Both *wifey* and *wifie* have been in use for much longer than *starlet*, at a constantly low frequency, while *wifelet* is so infrequent that it is not visible in this graph. It seems that *wifie* was slightly more frequent than *wifey* until 1980, but since then *wifey* has been the preferred spelling. However, at these low frequencies such observations should not be overinterpreted.

Despite its comparative invisibility in graph 6, the fact remains that *wifelet* occurs on the English pages of the Internet more than 76,000 times (cf. table 1), which we do not consider a peripheral number of occurrences. Hence we wish to probe into its uses in context to shed more light on the situations *wifelet* appears in and the communicative functions it has. These and related issues are addressed in section 4.2.

#### 4.2 Some qualitative findings

In the present section, the quantitative results presented and discussed in 4.1 are supplemented with some qualitative findings which, in our opinion, contribute to a deeper understanding of *let*-diminutives in particular and perhaps also of diminutives in general. The focus is on who uses *let*-diminutives vis-à-vis whom and for which purpose. Special attention is paid to the contexts and functions the form *wifelet* is used in.

In recent years, in British media, this formation has been employed repeatedly in the same context, namely in connection with Lord Bath. Lord Bath, or, more properly, Alexander George Thynn, 7th Marquess of Bath (born 1932), is an eccentric British politician, artist and author. During his marriage he has had more than seventy mistresses, who he prefers to call *wifelets*. So in this context, unlike in other contexts (cf. graph 5), the plural form is often used, but the singular form also occurs, as in example (3).

##### (3) The Wifelet of Bath

At 79, Lord Bath still provokes passionate feelings, as a recent fight between two of his mistresses proves. 'It's been a nightmare,' Amanda Doyle tells Julia Llewellyn Smith

The headline *The Wifelet of Bath*, alluding to Chaucer's "Wife of Bath", appeared in the British newspaper *The Telegraph* on June 26, 2011. The lead paragraph of the accompanying article illustrates that in this context *wifelet* is synonymous with *mistress*. More precisely, *wifelet* is a less conventional and, hence, marked and less frequent alternative expression.

The following example is taken from an article by Petronella Wyatt in the *Daily Mail*, published on March 30, 2007. This excerpt, which includes a singular form as well as plural forms, demonstrates Lord Bath's condescending attitude towards his "wifelets".

- (4) The Marquess of Bath – on the prowl for "wifelet 76"

The grounds of Longleat House in Wiltshire, home of the Marquess of Bath, Britain's most infamous aristocrat, are looking bleak in the cold light of a chilly day. The outlook is looking bleak for me, too. The Marquess, now 74, who is best known for his remarkably unorthodox dress sense, his pornographic murals and his series of **wifelets**, is fixing me with a priapic eye while slurping wine from a beer glass. "I need some more," he declares loudly. "Wine?" I inquire. "No, **wifelets**, of course."

These human interest stories from the media provide examples of the use of *wifelet* in a particular genre of written discourse (reporting on the use of *wifelets* in spoken discourse, but evidence from other genres is also available, as the following excerpts demonstrate. Examples (5)-(8) are listed as evidence in the entry for *wifelet* in Wiktionary, where *wifelet* is defined as "diminutive form of wife" (cf. [en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Citations:wifelet](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Citations:wifelet)). There is also a sub-entry for the more specific meaning "a mistress". In this sub-entry, the newspaper excerpt quoted above in example (4) is given as an illustration. Interestingly, however, this specific meaning also seems to be the meaning of *wifelet* in example (5), which is taken from *The Little Lady Agency*, a novel by the British author Hester Browne, originally published in 2005. In the same passage from which Wiktionary quotes, Allegra is also referred to as "... a mistress". In the other three examples, on the other hand, *wifelet* is not used in this sense.

- (5) "[...] Allegra, the largely ignored trophy **wifelet**?" Allegra had been married to Lars, an Anglo-Swedish art dealer who collected prehistoric arrowheads,  
(Hester Browne 2006: *The Little Lady Agency*)
- (6) 'My own little **wifelet**.' Harriet hung her head. 'Why not Sally-Anne? Why me?' Why indeed, he wondered, looking at the big blonde child who fate had ...  
(Miranda Seymour 1990: *The Reluctant Devil*)
- (7) "... Give me a kiss, **wifelet**." She gave him one. She would have given him a dozen of the trivial things had he asked for them! Then she laid her hand on his. ...  
(Flora Annie Webster Steel 1906: *A Sovereign Remedy*)
- (8) Annie, **wifelet**, let me tell you of one of my foreign flirtations—one that I have never yet even hinted to you.  
If I had dared to guess the meaning of that ...  
(*Putnam's Monthly* 1857)

In examples (6), (7) and (8), *wifelet* is employed as a term of address by the respective husband. In all three cases a patronizing attitude and a sense of condescension are conveyed,

which is maybe most explicit in example (6), the most recent of these three. In this example, which is included the 1990 novel *The Reluctant Devil* by British writer Miranda Seymour, Harriet, the addressee of *wifelet* (which is intensified here by *little*), is also called a child. In general, adult – child interaction and caretaker speech are considered prototypical domains for the use of diminutives (cf., e.g., Schneider 2003: 233-234). In the two older examples (7) and (8), taken from a novel by Webster Steel published in 1906 and an issue of the magazine *Putnam's Monthly*, published in 1857, both written in AmE, the bare form *wifelet* is used in direct address. In these two cases, this particular use seems more common and more neutral, while condescension is still communicated. However, we would like to argue that this attitude results from the general conventionalized relationship between the genders in the USA (and elsewhere) at that time. Needless to say, this historical dimension requires further investigation as do the details of the respective contexts and specific relationships.

While in examples (5)-(8) *wifelet* occurs in spoken dialogue, this dialogue is fictional and, thus, a written representation of spoken interaction by one particular writer, based on his or her own communicative experience and pragmatic competence (cf. Schneider 2011). The next two examples are also taken from fictional sources. They are, however, not included in prose fiction, but in drama. This means that in these cases the dialogue is actually written-to-be-spoken and it is all the audience (or readership) has to go by. Unlike in a novel, there are no accompanying narrative passages which may offer further details, comments or interpretations. Examples (9) and (10) are both taken from the same play, which is Edward Albee's famous *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962).

(9) George (to Nick): *You; you ... uh ... you; your little wifelet isn't here.*

(10) George (to Nick): *Well, speak to your little wifelet, your little bunny, for God's sake.*

In these two examples, *wifelet* refers to the same person and is used by the same speaker vis-à-vis the same addressee. The speaker is George, the host in this situation. The addressee is Nick and the referent of *wifelet* his wife Honey. They are guests at George's house. George is a lecturer of history at a small provincial U.S. college, frustrated by his job and his childless marriage to Martha, the college president's daughter. George is also frustrated with having those guests late at night, who Martha invited over after a college party with lots of alcohol. He is particularly annoyed with the fact that his guest Nick, who is new in the college, is a biologist, considerably younger, not objecting to Martha's attempts to seduce him and married to Honey, who is a naïve young woman Nick only got married to because he thought she was pregnant and who has now thrown up after too much drinking. George, as a historian, seems to feel inferior to natural scientists in general, but superior to Nick, who he attacks on several occasions during that night. In the situations represented in examples (9) and (10), *wifelet*, aggravated in either case by *little* (and, additionally, *your little bunny* in example 10), is employed as an abusive term. It is part of the attacking strategies in which George not only expresses that he despises Honey, but by doing this also insults Nick.

The communicative functions of *wifelet* in the dialogue examples (6)-(10) can be summarized as follows. In examples (6), (7) and (8), a male speaker talks condescendingly to his wife, whereas in examples (9) and (10) a male speaker talks contemptuously about his addressee's wife, thus insulting the addressee. In all of these cases the referent of *wifelet* is a married woman, unlike in those cases where *wifelet* is employed to refer to a mistress (cf. examples 3, 4 and 5). In all cases a male speaker uses the *let*-formation in an act of

positioning. Specifically, this means that the speaker claims superiority vis-à-vis the referent who may be the addressee or somebody closely related to the addressee. Superiority is claimed by belittling the referent, thus expressing a negative attitude towards this person and attacking this person's, i.e. the referent's and/or the addressee's, positive face.

The final example which will be discussed in this paper serves to show that other *let*-formations can also be used with essentially the same communicative function, namely for expressing contempt and thus insulting the referent. This final example is an excerpt from the first season of *Falling Skies*, an American TV series which was started in 2011 (cf. www.fallingskies.com). In *Falling Skies*, which is a science fiction series, the world has suffered a severe attack from aliens, against whom the few surviving humans try to organize an insurrection. The scene transcribed in example (11) is taken from a conversation between Pope (P) and Matt (M). John Pope is the somewhat opportunistic leader of a band of marauders, who is considered unreliable and not trustworthy, not least by Matt's father. Matt is the youngest of Tom Mason's three sons. While Mason has left the group of survivors to fight the alien intruders, young Matt, who wants to help and be taken seriously, is working with weapons, although his father had forbidden him to do so.

- (11) 1 P: [...] Sure your old man was talkin' about me?  
2 M: He said stay away from Pope.  
3 P: Grea'. So suddenly I'm a beneficiary of some pre-adolescent rebellious streak.  
4 M: He keeps treating me like a little kid. Like I can't do anything. But I wanna help, too. Besides, I am stayin' away from you, just not that far.  
5 P: You sound like one of my attorneys [...] Ah [...] I guess, what's the big deal, I mean, it's not like your pop's gonna do anythin' to the **little prince** of the Second Mass.  
[metal noise]  
6 M: I'm not a **prince!** [...]  
7 P: You're not the only one. He has two other **little princelets**. But you're the youngest. That makes you special. So what's it like walkin' around with that sweet Mason brand?  
8 M: What's it like havin' hair like a girl? [...]  
9 P: [sneers] You're gonna have t' work on your insults kid.  
[Scene changes]

This conversation includes conflict talk. Pope talks down to Matt. He provokes and attacks him, but Matt is not prepared to accept a victim role. At the end of the above sequence, Matt effectively retaliates by countering Pope's challenge, uttered at the end of turn 7, with an equally offensive question, referring to Pope's long hair, in turn 8. In the film, the impact of Matt's counter question can actually be seen on Pope's face, and it takes a moment before he sneeringly produces the utterance in turn 9 to regain his claimed superiority.

Directly before the exchange of challenges in turns 7 and 8, Pope calls Matt *little prince* (turn 5), thus expressing his view that Matt is spoiled and pampered by his father. Matt immediately rejects being called a prince (turn 6), but Pope insists and refers to Matt's brothers as *two other little princelets* (turn 7), upgrading his initial *little prince* in turn 5 by adding the suffix *-let* and including Matt in the target of his disdain by calling his brothers *two other little princelets*.

Example (11) demonstrates that it can be useful, if not indispensable, in the analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of diminutives to consider the broader context in which a diminutive occurs. This entails considering not only the utterance in which the diminutive is used, but also the sequence of turns-at-talk which this utterance is part of. In example (11) it is, thus, possible to trace the development from *little prince* to *prince* to *little princelets* across three adjacent turns. Furthermore, it is necessary to take into consideration the social situation, which involves, first and foremost, the speaker who uses the diminutive, the addressee and the relationship between them in terms of distance and, more importantly, power. What is also relevant is the relation between the addressee and the referent of the diminutive form (unless addressee and referent are identical), particularly when the diminutive refers to a person.

Using fictional material such as dialogue in film, drama and prose in the study of spoken discourse has obvious disadvantages, which include e.g. the absence of ‘normal non-fluency’, i.e. simultaneous speech, hesitations, incomplete sentences, etc. (cf. Short 1996: 176). However, such phenomena are not, as a rule, directly relevant to the study of diminutives. At the same time, using fictional dialogue also has a number of relevant advantages. One is that without the aforementioned performance features fictional dialogue represents a tidied-up model of patterns underlying actual performance, which Lakoff & Tannen (1984: 323), in their analysis of the TV series *Scenes from a Marriage*, call “a competence model”. Another advantage is that fictional material usually includes much more explicit information about the social situation and especially the participant constellation than is open to observation or available in electronic corpora of naturally occurring spoken discourse. This information is crucial for an adequate interpretation of the meaning and functions of diminutives in communication.

## 5. Conclusion

The results presented and discussed in section 4 can be summarized as follows. *Let*-diminutives exist in present-day English. They are being used not only as lexicalized formations with an opaque structure and specific non-composite meaning, but also as morphologically and semantically transparent (quasi) ad-hoc formations, as used e.g. in examples (9), (10) and (11). With even *wifelet*, the least frequent of all forms analyzed in this study, occurring over 76,000 times on the English pages of the Internet, *let*-formations cannot really be regarded as peripheral. Comparing normalized numbers across the past two hundred years, *let*-formations have been found to be, as a rule, much more frequent in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than before. This finding does not support earlier claims and assumptions.

*Let*-formations seem, indeed, to be more widely used in American English than in the British variety. This finding is in keeping with previous observations. All formations discussed in the present paper appeared in written sources. These were newspaper texts and fictional material, including not only monologue, but also dialogue and specifically written representations of spoken language in interaction to be performed on stage or screen. These data suggest that *let*-formations in present-day English tend to be employed in particular by educated speakers in carefully planned journalistic and artistic genres, elaborated styles and non-colloquial registers.

From an interactional point of view, diminutives referring to persons are more interesting than diminutives referring to objects or animals. While, overwhelmingly, the latter are used for quantification in description, the former are used for evaluative purposes. More

often than not, these evaluations are negative. Speakers use diminutives in acts of positioning by which they aim at achieving superiority and express condescension, contempt or similar attitudes and emotions. Diminutives can, thus, be employed as strategic ‘weapons’ in the discursive struggle for power.

Due to the purely exploratory nature of this paper, some of the questions addressed have not received a full answer. Therefore, many of the aspects dealt with require further investigation.

To arrive at a fuller picture, more corpora should be used, more varieties should be included, more genres should be considered, more formations should be studied and more contexts analyzed in more detail.

Regarding the methodological foundations of the present study, at least the following seven principles can be formulated which may be suitable not only for the examination on *let*-formations in English, but also for the examination of all diminutives in all languages.

Principle 1: The analysis should be empirical, i.e. based on authentic data and not solely on intuitive (‘armchair’) data.

Principle 2: Qualitative analysis should be combined with quantitative analysis.

Principle 3: Quantitative analysis should be based on large electronic corpora.

Principle 4: In qualitative analysis, diminutives should be examined in the context of the discourse unit they occur in.

Principle 5: Sweeping generalizations are not helpful. As diminutives are subject to variation, differences across medium, language variety, genre, style and situation should be taken into consideration. This applies in particular to the examination of semantic and pragmatic aspects.

Principle 6: Each suffix (e.g. *-let*) merits an analysis in its own right.

Principle 7: Each formation (e.g. *wifelet*) merits an analysis in its own right.

All aspects studied in this paper have been studied from a second-order perspective, which is the perspective of the analysts that involves only their own observations and interpretations. This type of analysis should be supplemented by experimental work aimed at establishing a first-order perspective. Perception tasks, rating tasks, translation tasks and so on could be employed to investigate how lay persons understand and use *let*-formations and to what extent they are aware of the morphological structure, the meaning and the communicative functions of these formations. This complementary type of diminutive analysis could be termed first-order morphology.

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